

The Greenstone Garden

by
Vaya Dauphin

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A copy of this publication can be found in the National Library of Australia.

ISBN: 978-1-742843-46-9 (pbk.)

Published by Book Pal
www.bookpal.com.au

Other titles by this author

The Elementals of Aotearoa Trilogy

The Turquoise Tattoo (Book 1)

The Greenstone Garden (Book 2)

The Scarlet Sacrifice (Book 3)

Submarine Adventure (with L.D. Dauphin)

Front cover

Purangi Estuary, Cook's Beach, New Zealand

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Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated to my grandparents: William King (King King), who told me many stories, including one about a *Billy-Man*, and Decima King (nee Montgomery), an outstanding and smart woman. Francis (Jack) Dauphin, who I never met but think of often, and finally, May Dauphin (nee Wallace), a lady of great style and a courageous heart. It is because of each of you that I enjoy the gifts I have today.

To the family and friends I spent time with at Cook's Beach while I was growing up, this story honours the countless adventures we had there.

A special thank you to my family, friends, and colleagues who kindly read *The Greenstone Garden*, or provided support and encouragement: They are Ruby Dauphin, Jennifer King, Helen Milroy, Maisie Kokshoorn, Robert, Nicole and Emma Juratowitch, Iain Luck, Les Ponton, Jai Law, Jess Lawrence, Jackie Allison, Nova Doherty, Debbie Waltham, Sylvia Rapinett and Pauline Rowbury. I would also like to acknowledge Meg O'Brien for her contribution to Scarlet's catchphrases. Cheers, Meg.

Once again, I would like to thank my very talented friend and mentor, Rodney Williams, for his tireless editing and story suggestions. I must also recognise Rod's own work in the opening of this novel. *Whakamoemiti*, Rod.

Never-ending *aroha* to my family: my parents, Tony and Linda Dauphin; my husband, Leon; and to my sons, Kelum and Anton, who continue to support me every step of the way. With this book, I would like to say an

additional thank you to Granddad, without whom we may never have had a cooked meal or clean clothes. I love you, Dad.

The Greenstone Garden represents my deep love and respect for Māori culture and mythology. Greenstone people, *poutini*, did exist in Māori legend; however, Greenstone Goddesses are my invention. Where I have altered facets of mythology, no disrespect is intended.

Lastly—to Scarlet’s fans, *aroha nui*, Vaya.

this rare visit
from *miromiro*
black and white
a portent for danger
or love in your garden?

Rodney Williams

Chapter One

At some point, the tunnel I had walked into took a steep turn downwards. Descending, I carefully watched my step. The ground was uneven beneath my feet, causing me to stumble and drop the torch from my hand. As soon as my fingers connected with the jagged rock of the cave wall, I felt a little blood well against my skin—a minor injury. At least, I hadn't fallen flat on my face, I told myself. I wiped my hands on my jeans and picked up the flashlight.

Ten minutes later, I'd reached my destination—finally. I switched off my light. *One, black crow; two, panther; three, eagle ...* My nervous counting began, my own personal version of stress management, which includes matching animals with numbers to settle my thoughts.

In the furthest corner of the cave, a man stood in front of a large open fire. The flickering flames in the hearth lit his profile from behind, making it appear as if he was there one instant and absent the next.

I already knew the man to be raven-haired like me, but tall, whereas I am only five feet, three inches. In the muted glow of the fire, I could tell he wore a grey dress shirt, over charcoal pants. He had no visible tattoos. Me, on the other hand, I have dozens all over my arms.

Grudgingly I walked towards him, noting his eyes were a light brown, yet mine are every bit as dark as black onyx.

I avoided staring too long at his countenance, afraid of what I might see written on his face, knowing what he did for a living. Instead, I dropped my eyes to watch the two snakes writhing eagerly around each of his legs like malevolent guards. They hissed viciously in my direction, exposing their fangs and gleaming crimson tongues.

Four, leopard; five, cockatoo; six, horse ... Taking several steadying breaths, I held my hands tightly in front of my chest, ready to defend myself if I needed to.

I was an idiot. I shouldn't have come here. It wasn't safe. While I was an Elemental myself, it gave me little comfort to know that I was only part-human. Although I was also half legend reborn, this wasn't just any fellow Elemental standing in front of me. This was Whiro, the Lizard-god of the Dead, master of darkness and evil. It wasn't simply that he prompted cruel actions from others, as well as dispatching humans to the underworld—he was also my father.

While I let myself become distracted by old family tensions, one of his trusty pair of snakes reared up and lunged towards me, spitting venom.

I leapt backwards. The spray from the poison fell short, staining my brand new red sketcher shoes.

I stood frozen while holding my breath to stop myself from letting out an hysterical cry.

Snakes! my mind screamed. There shouldn't be any snakes in New Zealand!

Then ... Seven, polar bear; eight, fox; nine, peacock; ten, lion ...

You can do this, Scarlet, I told myself. Remember, you're here for answers. I would be fearless. I had to be. I took half a dozen slow, stabilising breaths.

With renewed calm, I raised my eyes and carefully surveyed the cave. Besides the two reptiles attached to Whiro's calves, a lone, giant lizard sat reclining in the corner: Ngārara, my father's pet assassin. Although Ngārara had never hurt me, I had seen him devour another Elemental named Marcus Ikaterē, from the inside out. My knees quivered, and it took all my nerve to stop myself from collapsing in a heap on the floor.

Be brave! I reminded myself.

Whiro cleared his throat impatiently; automatically, my eyes flicked to his. For the moment, his face gave nothing away, whereas my thoughts were all too easy to read. Elementals have the ability to read one another's minds. And my father was better at it than I was.

'Scarlet, no one here will hurt you,' the Lizard-god said.

Lamely, I pointed at the snake that had spat at me.

'Muldarpe is enthusiastic in her duty, that's all,' said Whiro, almost casually dismissing the attempt on my life.

Peeved, I just stared at my father.

Sighing loudly, Whiro complained, 'You haven't changed.'

I continued to glare at him as I folded my arms tightly over my chest.

Sighing once more, my father grumbled, 'Very well,' before looking down at the snake attached to his left leg and ordering, 'Muldarpe. Apologise, now!'

Muldarpe hissed petulantly, and moved as if to crawl towards me.

Suddenly, an apology didn't seem nearly so important: 'There's no need.'

The Lizard-god grinned victoriously and with his lean fingers, he motioned for me to sit in one of the stone chairs facing the fire. 'Let's talk about the reason why I invited you here.'

Whiro was right about one thing: a conversation between us was overdue. Reluctantly, I sat in the smaller of the rough-hewn chairs.

As he took his seat, the serpents unwound themselves from his body and slithered away; my eyes jumped from left to right in an attempt to keep tabs on them. I inhaled too loudly before being forced to clamp my hands tightly over my knees to stop them from shaking. Whiro watched me with interest. I used to reside in Australia: I was living in Melbourne when the Black Saturday fires of 2009 tore across Victoria. The tension here, in this cave, was every bit as thick as the smoke that blanketed the state that day.

'Scarlet. At last! Are you ready?' Whiro asked.

'Ready for what?' I queried.

'Ready to rule the Dead,' he explained clinically.

A spurt of panicked laughter escaped from between my lips. 'Great joke, Dad.'

The Lizard-god's nostrils flared dangerously. He disliked the term *Dad*. When I was younger, I'd only ever called him that when I wanted an argument. Some things never changed.

'You're kidding, right?' Anxiously, I twisted my hair tightly around my forefinger.

'I never say things I don't mean, Scarlet.'

And that's when I lost it. Anger welled up inside me, cancelling out much of my nervousness. It was inevitable really; I'd been spoiling for a fight from the moment I decided to see Whiro. I'd believed my father lived in Papua New Guinea, working as a mechanical engineer. That had all been a lie. 'You never say anything at all! The last time I talked to you, I was ten years old,' I yelled. Nearly a decade of pent-up resentment burned like acid in the back of my throat, contaminating every word I spoke. My hair lifted magically off my shoulders and swirled violently above my head—a sure sign I was mad.

My father raised one distinguished hand in an attempt to silence me. 'You will control yourself in my presence.' He snapped his fingers, and Ngārara scuttled up his outstretched arm. The ancient lizard settled himself around Whiro's shoulders like a familiar cloak. 'Even if you're angry with me,' he stated as he patted the animal fondly. Ngārara regarded me without expression, only blinking occasionally.

Not a single kind word for me, but he could pet the lizard. Trying to manage my emotions, I pulled a hair tie out of my pocket and quickly tamed my flying tresses.

Sarcastically, I said, 'Really? You do know I hate you, right?' Okay, not doing so well. Cautiously, I watched Ngārara for any signs that he intended to attack. The large reptile stayed motionless on my father's shoulders. I kept talking. 'You show up out of nowhere after seven years, and tell me that I'm an embarrassment. That I have to stop being me. Despite me not having seen you for ages. Not until you appeared out of nowhere in that monster Punga's lovely little underwater cave. After I'd had to fight for my life against Marcus. Without any help from you, thanks Dad—Lizard-god? Huh! With Marcus wanting me to be his Elemental pair. The kind of offer a girl just has to decline.'

Whiro's hand halted on top of Ngārara's scaly skin. He gave me a quizzical look. 'You know, I like the fact that you are my daughter.'

Glowing at my father, I vaulted out of the chair I'd been sitting in, hastening for the exit. *As if*, I muttered angrily to myself. Yet I didn't make it far. The sound of hissing advancing towards me sent me fleeing back to my seat. The Lizard-god's serpent sentinels had moved to position themselves on either side of me. I frantically tucked up my legs, attempting to minimise the parts of me that were exposed to their fangs.

'Back at the cave, you said my ability to raise the dead was a sad affliction,' I added heatedly. Did Whiro need a refresher course on my Elemental ability to resuscitate life? It still galled me that my beloved dog, Gizmo, had tried to protect me, and Marcus had killed him. Despite my father, I'd used my new powers to bring Gizmo back to life. When Marcus paid for his crimes with his life, I had no regrets that I didn't offer to bring him back from the dead.

'Your energy should end life, just as mine does, not renew it, Scarlet. I had hoped as you grew older that this ability would lessen; that, in fact, you would grow out of it.' Whiro stood up and unwound Ngārara from around his neck, placing him on the back of his chair. 'I took a chance with you,' he said seriously. 'Are you aware of what happens when Elementals pair up, Scarlet? In every union, their abilities combine to create an entirely new Elemental.'

I blushed furiously. Was my father giving me the birds-and-bees lecture, Elemental style? Moments ago I had been livid; now I was just painfully embarrassed.

The Lizard-god placed two hands on the chair, one on either side of Ngārara, and continued to stare at me. 'Elementals are drawn to each other,' he ignored my bright-red face, 'often without even realising it. And although it doesn't necessarily take two Elementals to make another mythological being, they naturally search for a mate among their own kind. When they find that being, they seek to mark them, by altering something on one another's body, like a tattoo,' he said pointedly.

Guilt and embarrassment caused my face to feel even hotter still, making me cringe. I had hoped Whiro had forgotten that I'd claimed my best friend, Sterling James, as my Elemental pair. However, I wasn't that lucky. It was an automatic thing, altering Sterling's special tattoo to include a sense of me. My father was right; Elementals were compelled to seek each other out. To mark each other. I fidgeted awkwardly in my seat.

'I didn't want to mix my abilities with another Elemental,' Whiro continued, his voice deep and emotionless. 'I broke Elemental law. But had I succeeded, you would have been safe. Death is considered to be part of the natural order of things. Creatures, humans, they all live, and then they die. As they should. Often, the sooner the better. What you do is the complete opposite, however; you're *Te Uira*, the life bringer. You have been gifted with the powers of the God of Lightning—you just need to choose to use them.'

A sneaking suspicion had just formed in my head. Without even realising it, I left my seat and closed the distance between my father and me. 'Why is it then I can raise the dead, if what you do is the reverse?' Even though the fire was burning brightly, I suddenly felt cold. 'Was my mother human?' Or I thought, *Was she another sort of being entirely?*

'Your mother isn't an Elemental.' Straightening himself, Whiro stepped backwards towards the fire, re-establishing the space between us.

Even though my intuition was telling me otherwise, I asked hopefully, 'She was human then?'

'No, your mother is not human. But, she is the reason why you can raise the dead,' the Lizard-god said.

A sick feeling took root in my stomach, wrapping itself like a noxious weed around everything I thought I knew. I tried to be calm, but I couldn't help it; every word came out angry. 'What was my mother, exactly?'

Whiro's shoulders slumped and he turned to face the fire. Staring morosely into its depths, he stood that way for far too long, making me move to his side as I yelled at him, 'My mother, what was she?' I'd been told I was unusual; that I was unlike other Elementals.

Still my father remained quiet, refusing to acknowledge my question.

Forgetting how dangerous Ngārara could be, and the fierceness of the snakes in the corner of the room, I tugged desperately on Whiro's arm. 'Look at me! You brought me here for this, didn't you?' I wasn't stupid. This was his plan all along. 'Tell me! What was my mother?'

The Lizard-god turned slowly. Defiantly lifting his chin, his dark-brown eyes steadfastly held mine as a single tear ran down his face.

I jumped back, shocked, and I quickly looked away: I'd never seen my father cry.

'She is a Greenstone Goddess.'

I dropped my hands limply to my side. 'Why do you keep saying *is*, as if she's still alive.' From a distance, the snakes spat crossly at me for upsetting their master. Ignoring them, I recaptured my father's gaze with mine.

He sighed. 'She is living—sort of.'

Disbelief threatened to knock me off my feet.

'She's alive?' I said incredulously, then added, 'Explain to me about Greenstone Goddesses.'

Whiro sighed again. 'A Goddess protects all living things. They are similar to Mother Nature.'

I stared at him with scepticism. 'And you didn't think that would mess with your powers? You destroy things, and she makes stuff grow. Isn't that what you're basically saying?'

Power surrounded my father. In the corner, the eyes of the twin snakes glowed red, and they slithered closer towards me. The God of Evil and Darkness raised his hand and lunged forward, as if he intended to hit me with his power. I shrank back from him and let out an involuntary squawk.

My yelp of fright was all it took to halt my father's fist. Next, as if his hand belonged to a stranger, the Lizard-god paused for a second to stare at it, a confused look in his eyes. I watched him intently, astonishment making my hands shake, but thankfully forcing my mouth closed. This didn't stop me from lifting my chin insolently, though I refused to be cowered.

'Help me find her. Tell me where she is?' I pleaded.

A war raged across Whiro's features. He was torn between what he would normally do, and paternal instinct, which told him he couldn't strike his own daughter. He had never hit me before, and when he caught my gaze in his, it told me he wasn't about to start now. Not because he shouldn't, but because he had chosen not to. Using the same hand with which he had been about to cuff me, he leisurely wiped the solitary teardrop from his eye. And there in his face was the one thing I hadn't wanted to see earlier, when I'd first walked into the cave: the appearance of cruelty.

'You have to stay away from your mother, Scarlet. You know how dangerous the *Atua* are! They rule this Elemental World of ours—they decide who lives and dies. They even worry me! And only they are allowed to create things,' Whiro paused. 'At the very least, the *Atua* suspects you are more than you should be. If you go to your mother, their suspicions will be confirmed, and they will punish you,' he concluded darkly.

Because of my powers, I understood that I was on the *Atua*'s hate list, but I was yet to meet their threat in person.

'Bringing you to New Zealand was an error,' Whiro admitted. 'I thought I could shield you here. But Manu practically announced your presence to the *Atua*. It was not the only mistake he made. Oh, yes, our dear Manu happened to be a stepbrother to this boy Sterling that you're so fond of. Of course I wanted Manu to acquire you when you first came to New Zealand. But it wasn't so convenient when he attacked you instead, when he was supposed to be protecting you from Marcus and the *Atua*.'

Biting my lip, I ground out, 'And?' I was starting to know my father better and better. There was more to this revelation. 'What aren't you telling me?'

'If you seek out your mother, you won't like what you'll find.' A fierce expression flitted across the Lizard-god's face. 'Before I paired with your mother, I removed her greenstone abilities and replaced them with my own.'

When I looked at him blankly, Whiro continued, 'I nullified her powers.' He stood insolently in front of me.

My face turned pale. 'What do you mean?' I shook my father. 'Did you hurt her? What happened to my mother?'

Staring down at me, the God of the Dead gave me a sneering smile. 'I killed her, Scarlet.'

My jaw dropped.

And there was the kick in the pants, right there.

My father had taken my mother's life.

The mother of my dreams was dead. At the hand of my father.

With my mouth wide open I let out a scream of rage.

Chapter Two

With power vibrating between us, I re-launched myself at Whiro. 'You killed her!' I fumed. My Elemental powers, which enabled me to manipulate electricity that coursed through my veins, yearning to find a target. Latching onto his arms, I sent voltage through him with everything I had. 'You killed her,' I said repeatedly, sending jolts of energy to beat fiercely against his skin with every punctuated word.

The Lizard-god let out a roar of pain and urgently shook my hands from his body. His eyes blazed white once in the dim light, evidence I had enough juice to harm him. He stumbled towards the fire and steadied himself against the mantelpiece, breathing deeply. The serpents re-attached themselves to each of his calves and hissed maliciously at me, with heads upright.

I sank to my knees. 'Do you know what the last seven years have been like? How it felt to discover my powers alone? And now to know that you killed my mother?' I said forlornly.

'Scarlet, listen! You have to hear what I have to say, please.' It was the word *please* that made me pause and look up at Whiro. 'I took your mother to the Underworld before you were even conceived. I didn't think her powers would survive her death. Your mother was a ghost when she had you.'

'How does that even work?' I hiccupped loudly, barely restraining my tears. 'How can someone non-living have a baby?' If my mum was a ghost, what did that make me?

'I could do it because I am the God of the Dead. I kept her physical body in the Underworld, but eventually returned her essence to the living world. She was a Greenstone Goddess in name only. I thought it would be risk-free.'

I leapt to my feet and threw myself again at Whiro's chest. 'Killing someone and separating their body from their soul isn't right!' The tears were flowing freely now down my cheeks as I pummelled my fists against his grey shirt. Thumping and pushing, I let the fury bleed out of me, my only thought being how much I despised my father. I yelled in unison with each blow I landed on his skin, 'I hate you!'

As I punched him, the Lizard-god smelt more and more of smoke and burnt flesh. My electricity was burning him, making his pets even angrier; however, I suspect out of pity, he let me assault him without retaliation. This realisation made me madder. The acrid smell of smoke reminded me of my childhood, adding to my wrath. Growing up, I'd imagined the worst when trying to explain to myself why my father smelt of burnt flesh. None of my theories ever considered that he might be the God of the Dead. Lies, in that case, I had thought to myself. Instead, my whole life was built on lies.

I continued to beat at Whiro's chest, cursing him with everything I had, until eventually my violent temper ran its course, with anger finally turning to exhaustion, stilling my hands beside me. He hugged my tired, jelly-like body against his chest. Without his support, I would have slid to the floor. I marvelled that he didn't push me away. If I'd had more strength, I would have rejected him; for once, I let him hold me.

Softly, Whiro said, 'Goddesses don't really die, not in the way you think it means. I altered your mother's bodily state and her powers, but ultimately, I did nothing to affect her *life span*. Goddesses must willingly forfeit their physical lives to die completely. Your mother didn't do that. She wanted to have you.' And with more kindness than I had ever experienced from my father, he led me back to my seat and gently sat me down. My legs knocked against his as he eased me towards the chair, and I shuddered as I felt both snake scales and a cold tongue kiss my skin.

I rolled up the sleeve on my black shirt, exposing my arm and the names written all over it, Whiro's included. 'Which one is my mother?' I demanded. I'd been told the tattooed names on my arms listed my ancestors. Previously, I wondered why my parents' names were missing, but that was until I found out my father's real identity.

The Lizard-god stretched his forefinger and pointed to the last name on my arm. When he ran his finger harshly over it, I yelped and jerked my arm away. His nail had bitten into my flesh, and a small cut had formed over the O of my mother's name.

‘Oceania,’ he said from between clenched teeth. ‘Her name is Oceania.’

‘Why do you hate her?’ I asked, shocked at the anger and disgust I heard in his voice. I paid no heed to the pool of red that swelled over my mother’s name. I avoided looking at the small drops of blood as they fell to the floor.

‘I don’t.’ Whiro scrutinised the beads of blood as they congealed. ‘Bright red,’ he noted. ‘What a relief.’ Looking up at me, he added, ‘But promise me, Scarlet, you’ll stay away from her.’

‘Where is she?’

‘Scarlet. No!’

‘Tell me!’ I screamed. ‘You owe me that, at least.’

‘Your mother can’t protect you from the *Atua*! Only I can do that. I’ve reassured you that she lives, in a way—isn’t that enough?’

‘Where is she?’

‘I don’t know,’ Whiro said miserably. ‘And it doesn’t matter anymore, Scarlet, anyway. From this point on, you have to avoid other Elementals and mythological beings, your mother included. Her house will be the first place the *Atua* will look for you.’

‘How can you be a God and not know where she is? If the *Atua* can find her, why can’t you?’

‘I’m dead to your mother.’ The bitterness was back in his voice.

‘She dumped you, didn’t she?’ That made me feel good, to think Oceania had dropped his sorry behind.

Anger flared in his nostrils. ‘She most certainly did not!’

‘Then what?’ I asked, grinning. ‘She took out a restraining order against you?’ I said facetiously. I tried to imagine the police issuing such a document against the Lizard-god of the Dead.

‘I killed her, Scarlet. I lost her. Let’s just say I’m being punished in ways you’ll never understand.’

I laughed softly.

‘I don’t expect you to comprehend everything, but you must assure me that you’ll stay here, until we can find a way to appease the *Atua*.’

‘I’m not living here. I hate reptiles for starters.’ The serpents at Whiro’s heel bared their fangs at me in response. Ngārara gave me an offended look from his seat on the back of the chair. ‘Sorry, Ngārara,’ I mouthed. ‘Besides, I’ve made a decision. I’m going to undo your mistake. I’m going to find my mother and give her back her life!’ I had the power; I could do it. I sarcastically bowed in Whiro’s direction, before grabbing my torch. ‘Nothing you can say will stop me. If you don’t tell me where Oceania is, I’ll find her on my own.’ I bravely patted Ngārara before walking out the door. ‘I didn’t have a chance to say thank you, for saving my life in Punga’s lair,’ I said awkwardly to the lizard. Ngārara yawned disinterestedly. Obviously good manners mean very little to lizards, or he was still offended by the whole *me hating reptiles* remark.

‘The *Atua* knows that you’ve marked that boy as yours,’ said Whiro, reminding me of the seriousness of what I’d done when I’d unknowingly altered Sterling’s tattoo. ‘They’ll hunt him,’ Whiro warned. There was a hint of a satisfied smile on his face, the only sign that he knew how badly I worried about this; that Sterling’s safety was the one thing which might make me think twice.

My face burned scarlet again at the mention of events in the *taniwha* Punga’s cave, where I had kissed Sterling, unintentionally tattooing him in the process. But I was also angry. I wasn’t going to let anyone hurt the people I loved. Placing my hands aggressively on my hips, I stopped walking and turned to glare at my father. ‘Not if I find them first,’ I threatened.

Since coming to New Zealand, I’d worked hard at becoming braver. I wouldn’t say I’d been a wimp before that, but I’d been close, afraid of who and what I was. In the underwater cave, when I’d been fighting for both my own and my dog Gizmo’s lives, I’d reached level ten on the bravery scale, a big achievement; and now here, with my father, I was there again. It seemed like there was no going back from level ten—go figure! My guardian in my normal life, Sarah, always said that if audacity was music, I’d be a brass band: I guess she was right. As a vet, she had a caring spirit through and through.

'You never listened to me as a child,' Whiro said. 'I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you defy me now. I won't defend you, Scarlet—not out there.' He waved at the outside world. 'Don't expect me to rescue you a second time.'

I wasn't shocked that this kinder Whiro, the man who had let me beat my anger against his chest, disappeared, replaced by the father from my past. 'You've never protected me,' I said cuttingly.

'Scarlet, I forbid you to leave!' my father commanded.

'Good luck with that, Dad.' My vocal cords placed a nasty emphasis on that last word.

With this negative note, I stubbornly turned away from my father and headed upwards, out of the cave and towards the daylight, with the Lizard-god of the Dead's snarl of dissatisfaction following me as I walked.

Switching off the torch, I blindly stumbled out into the sunlight and spread my arms wide, immediately feeling better as a result of the heat on my face. I drank in the liquid taste of the sun.

The *tūi*, the bird inside me, loved the sky. I was part-bird, Elemental, ghost, the god *Te Uira*, and goodness knows what else: it was a growing list. I placed my hand over my chest and was reassured when I could feel my heart beating. 'I'm definitely not dead,' I told myself, almost snickering. If I didn't laugh, I was going to cry.

My father was a jerk. It wasn't like this was a huge revelation. The man had deserted me when I was ten, and in all the time since, I'd hardly heard from him. The recent news that he'd killed my mother, so she could have me—an Elemental child made in his image—absolutely sucked, but it was still in character with the man I called Dad only to insult him.

Another depressing thought: I was starting to run out of people to trust. Whiro was out. I didn't even know my real mother. It had been a devastating surprise to learn that Sarah, who'd raised me since I was ten, in fact worked for Whiro himself and had even lied about being my aunt: I had only recently found out that Sarah and I weren't actually blood-related. A number of people already tried to *acquire* or kill me, so—at most—that pretty much left my best friend, Sterling James, and his twin sister, Aroha, on my side. Don't get me wrong, though—it wasn't like I had a perfect relationship with the James family either; Sterling and Aroha's uncle, Isaac, definitely hated me. I had no idea why, but Isaac took every opportunity he could to disrespect me.

As if by just thinking about him I'd caused him to make an appearance, Sterling's warm voice washed over me, and was accompanied by a loud bark from my dog, Gizmo.

'Scarlet!' Sterling called out.

I opened my eyes and gazed at the one person who made me feel normal, in spite of the whole mythological being thing, which was no mean feat. I was also in love with Sterling—on odd days. Not that I was brave enough to tell him that yet. On even days, I kept my emotions in check.

Gizmo gave another bark and whipped his tail back and forth excitedly. I gave Sterling a cheery wave and called out, 'Hey, boy' to Gizmo.

'You've been waiting for me this whole time?' I said, secretly happy that Sterling was watching out for me, despite my warning him that he should steer clear of me. All Elementals emitted a humming noise, some more appealing than others. Sterling, for instance, resonated soothingly, like rain on a tin roof. Other mythical creatures sounded different entirely.

Sterling returned my smile. 'I had to make sure you were okay,' he said. Unspoken emotions danced across his face. His golden-brown eyes held mine for a moment, letting me see exactly the things he was leaving unsaid. It was me who looked away first.

'We agreed you would stay out of this,' I reminded him. 'Whiro told you to keep away from me. You can't mess with him, Sterling; he can be difficult when he wants to be.' There was a whole lot more I wanted to add to this, but—not feeling disposed to worrying Sterling any further—I forcibly closed my mouth.

Sterling shrugged. 'I couldn't care less about what your father wants. I can look after myself.' Striding over to me, he placed a flame-ignited finger on my cheek and gently stroked my face. Sterling can manipulate fire in the same way I can direct electricity. His inherited Elemental powers

come from the Sun God, *Tāne-Rore*. Luckily, his fire doesn't burn me. Seeing the dried tears under my eyes, he said, 'Hey, you've been crying. What did your father do?' The flames spread throughout Sterling's body, an accurate barometer of his mood.

'Don't call him my father,' I said angrily. From this day forwards, I was going to think of him only as Whiro, or the Lizard-god.

Sterling paused, and the fire surrounding him dulled as he tried to read my mind. I hastily attempted to erect a block around my emotions, so he couldn't pick up on how I was feeling. Most Elementals are telepathic, but are also able to bar one another from their thoughts. Me, though, I was pretty much hopeless at it.

However, this time I did manage to keep Sterling out. Unable to decipher what was going on, he was forced to ask me. 'I thought you guys were playing happy families?'

Breaking the contact from his touch, I dropped down to stroke Gizmo's floppy ears. Gizmo is a tall, bitzer-breed brown dog with lots of attitude. Thankfully, most of his arrogance is now reserved for other people, since I'd used my ability to bring him back to life. Consequently, Gizmo adored me. Even if bringing Gizmo back from the dead was also one of my worst mistakes, in the eyes of the Lizard-god of the Dead, as my dear father had just reminded me.

Not wanting to have a melt-down in front of Sterling, I kept my eyes on Gizmo. 'There is no happy ending for me, Sterling. Whiro killed my mother,' I said in a voice intentionally devoid of passion.

Sterling tugged me away from Gizmo and went to hug me. 'Scar, I'm so sorry.'

'Don't touch me!' I said fiercely.

Sterling pulled away in surprise. 'We'll get through this. I want to help,' he tried to reassure me. 'You can lean on me if you need to. We haven't talked about all the stuff that happened in Whakatane, but Scar, you must get that ...'

'Don't say it!' I yelled. Sterling had never told me how he felt about me, not completely. However, now wasn't the time. If he claimed he loved me, I would crumble. I needed to be strong. I intended to find my real mother. Although I had told Whiro I could deal with the *Atua*, I was afraid. Every basic instinct I possessed wanted to ask Sterling for help. But this had to be avoided. I wouldn't imperil Sterling. Looking at him, I felt another excess of heat flood my heart. No hesitation: I knew without doubt he was mine. This thought was quickly followed by an attack of guilt. I'd marked him by tattoo without his permission; I couldn't risk adding to my list of sins by placing him in further danger.

'Sterling, you have to stay away from me,' I moaned.

Gizmo whined anxiously by my side, flattening his ears, unsure of what was going on. Sterling stumbled backwards.

'Scar, what's going on? I don't understand.'

'I don't want you, Sterling. I just wish you'd leave me alone.'

Sterling visibly flinched with every word I said.

'You don't mean that.' He pulled up his shirt sleeve to expose the tattoo on his arm of my *tūi* with her claws curled lovingly in the fur of the dog beneath her. This was the mark I'd placed on Sterling. I'd altered his special tattoo so that it included me, us, bound together by love.

Gizmo jumped enthusiastically around the pair of us, giving little yips of happiness, trying to encourage us to be friends.

I took a deep breath, blatantly ignoring Gizmo and the tattoo on Sterling's arm. 'I've thought about it, and I agree with Whiro. You're no good for me, Sterling, nothing but a dog.' When Whiro came to find me in Whakatane, he'd called Sterling a dog, which was not only a grievous insult, of course, but also strangely accurate. With Sterling's Elemental animal being the ancestral Māori dog, he could call on the skills and the abilities of this cunning creature. Despite his canine loyalty, the Lizard-god had warned Sterling to stay away from me.

I looked at Sterling, working hard to maintain the look of disdain on my face, all the while knowing I was hurting him. My heart fractured.

'You don't mean that,' he said again, but with less certainty this time.

'This attraction we feel, it's just our Elemental DNA kicking in. We only think we like one another because it's programmed into our instincts. Besides, my mother is a Greenstone Goddess, Sterling. I'm not only an Elemental; I'm something more. I was meant for better things.'

Sterling's face fell, crumbling painfully before me. 'Your mother's a Greenstone Goddess?'

I nodded. 'I'm going to live with her.'

'I see,' Sterling said. He didn't bother to block me from his mind. *She's right. I'm nothing but trash compared with who she is. Her mum is Mother Nature—way out of my league. I've been fooling myself.*

Every thought cut me like a knife. Why was Sterling so ready to believe me? I didn't accept that it was only our Elemental DNA drawing us together; at least, it didn't feel like it. Still, I had to be strong. Sending Sterling away was the only way to keep him safe, so I dropped the barrier on my mind and thought at him. *Go, get out of my life, Sterling. Don't bother me anymore. You have nothing of worth to offer me.*

'I get it,' he said. 'You don't have to say anything more.'

Devastated, Sterling turned his back on me, only stopping briefly to pat Gizmo on his way past, before hopping into his black 1976 Holden Torana SLR 5000. The smell of burnt rubber tortured my nostrils as he tore off down the road. It wasn't the first time Sterling had walked away from me. However, it was the first time I'd purposefully driven him off. Or made him drive away ...

Tūi raised her head from inside of me and let out a cheerless cry, keening sorrowfully at the sky. She wanted her soul-mate. That made two of us.

Gizmo whimpered at my feet.

That made three of us.

Chapter Three

'How did it go with Whiro?' Sarah asked as she looked up from the kitchen table where she was shuffling the vet clinic's receipts, her reading glasses perched precariously on her snub nose.

'Badly.' Irritated, I curled electricity in my fingers and directed it at the food processor on the kitchen bench, causing it to whirr madly. Although part of my Elemental abilities was the power to manipulate electricity, I'd only just recently discovered I could work everyday household items with a mere thought. The really exciting part was, if we ever had a power outage, I could run the washing machine.

Gizmo padded into the kitchen from through the dog door and inserted his chin onto Sarah's lap. Without taking her eyes off me, Sarah brushed his big, goofy ears back. I grabbed a glass of water and sank down to sit beside her.

'Spill, Scar. What happened?' Sarah is blonde and petite, but that's where the cuteness starts and ends.

'Whiro killed my mother. She's not an Elemental. She's a Greenstone Goddess.' I rattled off the news like I was simply telling Sarah it was wet outside.

Sarah pushed her glasses up her nose and nodded once.

I listened in on her thoughts. 'You knew, didn't you?' I shouldn't have been surprised. Besides, no one ever told me the truth. Incredibly, there wasn't any energy left in me to be mad. Instead, all I felt was disappointment. 'You have got to stop doing this to me, Sarah. Didn't we agree? No more lies!'

'Scar, I'm sorry. Whiro wanted to tell you himself.' Dramatically, Sarah lifted her hands and blocked her ears, waiting for the yelling to start.

'Take your fingers out, Sarah. I'm not going to shout at you. I had hoped that eventually, over time, I'd learn to trust you again.' I'd been unhappy, to say the least, when I'd found out that Sarah had known who my father was all along. 'But you know what?' I looked at her square in the eye as I stood up. 'I can't see that happening anymore. These days, you're just not reliable.'

'Scar, please! Don't say that.' Sarah pushed the chair out from under herself, touching my sleeve as she leaned forward.

I shrugged her hand off my arm. 'I'm leaving—tonight! And I'll need money. How much do you have on you?' The anger in my voice was unmistakable. My request for cash was delivered as an ultimatum, daring her to deny me.

'Couple of hundred.' Sarah took a deep gulp and sat heavily in her chair.

'You'll give it to me?' I said, attempting to soften my words. I'd never asked Sarah for money before; it didn't feel right. We always had a secret stash of cash for emergencies. I'd used some to get to Whakatane a few weeks ago, but I'd paid Sarah back.

'Yes,' she agreed, accepting my right to be angry. 'Where are you going, Scar?'

'I'm going to find my mother, Oceania.'

She nodded wordlessly, tears forming on her cheeks. 'Try Cook's Beach, on the Coromandel Peninsula. I overheard Whiro talking. He mentioned Oceania and how he thought she might live there.'

Yep—the Lizard-god had lied to me. Yet again.

'And you're telling me this now. Why?' I propped myself against the bench, far away from Sarah, callously ignoring her tears.

'I'm going to earn back your trust, Scar. I love you. Whether you believe it or not, I do. Initially, I looked after you because your father paid me to. I admit it. However, seven years is a long time. For ages, there's only been the two of us. We're family now.'

'So how much did he pay you?' I'd known Sarah received monthly payments from my father, but now that I knew who my dad really was, it made the whole arrangement seem worse. 'Was I

worth it? I mean, putting up with me all these years hasn't been easy! Did the money help ease the burden?' I shouted at her. So much for not yelling.

Sarah bit her lip to stop herself from speaking. Her face had gone pale, and I could hear her thoughts, full of self-hatred for being such a mercenary.

I looked out the window. Fred, our cat, was in the garden chasing birds. He harassed the bird population mercilessly, something Tūi didn't approve of. I figured I should buy a bell to put around his neck. Imagining Fred's disapproval at such a purchase, a small smile tried to form on my empty face, but failed.

'Can you make some excuse for me at school?' I asked Sarah, my eyes remaining on Fred. 'I don't know how long I'll be gone, and I don't want anyone snooping into my disappearance.'

'Okay.' Sarah blew her nose noisily.

'I'll have to catch the bus, so Gizmo can't come with me. Take care of him for me.' I stopped watching Fred and looked back at Sarah. Gizmo, still waiting patiently at Sarah's feet hoping for a treat from her plate, picked up his ears at the mention of his name at the same time as Sarah gave me a small nod.

Steeling my heart to her distress, I said, 'I'm going to pack.'

In my room, I threw a suitcase worth of clothes into my backpack. In the front hall, I could hear Sarah crying. She was tough, but I'd always had a knack for upsetting her. After a while, I heard her on the phone, which was a good sign. Sarah had made a few friends since moving here.

Just because I was mad at Sarah didn't mean I hated her. I appreciated everything she'd done for me over the years, even if she had been paid for it. If I was being mature, I would have acknowledged that she had gone above and beyond the call of duty. No one else would have put up with all my emotional baggage. Except for lying to me about Whiro, Sarah looked out for me. The problem was I didn't know whether I could rely on her anymore, and that feeling cancelled any more rational thought.

Half an hour later, just as I was getting ready to leave, there was a knock at the door. My skin turned cold when I heard Sarah say, 'Sterling, Aroha? What are you doing here?'

Walking up the hall and standing beside Sarah, I raised one sceptical eyebrow. 'Give it up, Sarah. I know you called them. Mind-reader, remember.'

'I did ring them,' she said, without remorse. Tough Sarah was back. She took Aroha's arm. 'There is something I've been meaning to show you.' Sarah led Aroha towards the kitchen.

I looked at Sterling, unsure of what to say. I was terrified to speak at all, in case my nerve deserted me, and I begged him to go with me to Cook's Beach. I reminded myself of Whiro's words, 'The *Atua* knows, Scarlet that you've marked that boy as yours. They'll hunt him down.' I wasn't safe for Sterling to be around.

We stood there awkwardly for a few moments.

Finally, Sterling said, 'I haven't come to change your mind.' He pressed the keys to his beloved Torana into my palm, curling my fingers closed over them.

Shocked, I glanced up at him, shaking my head. 'I can't,' I started to say.

'Take the car,' Sterling said.

It was the pain in his voice that stopped me from protesting further, not to mention the fire that was enveloping his body. I knew better than to argue with him when he was like this.

Instinctively, Sterling leaned in and laid his face at the nape of my neck. 'I'll miss you,' he whispered. His breath felt warm against my skin. He paused, inhaling and committing to memory the scent of my hair. 'Be careful.'

My courage wavered. How could I do this without him? I bit my cheek to stop my mouth from begging him to stay, to avoid telling him that everything I'd said was a lie. I couldn't tell him the truth, which was that I needed him. Maintaining a block around my thoughts was even harder.

Saving me from my turbulent emotions, Sterling pulled away first, his fringe falling over his eyes, disguising the suffering in them. Immediately, I missed the feel of his skin on mine.

‘Goodbye, Scar,’ Sterling said. Instead of tears flowing down his face, I saw small pearls of fire forming beneath his lashes. *I won’t bother you anymore*, he thought at me.

Not waiting for my reply, Sterling flicked the hood of his sweatshirt over his head and headed towards the front door.

Irrationally, I ran after Sterling, hands outstretched, fingers just inches from his back. He knew I was there, but he didn’t turn around, perhaps sensing that if he did, I would only reject him again. He was probably right. Despite having achieved everything I’d set out to, I felt strangely abandoned. Snatching my fingers back, I could do nothing but watch as Sterling strode out the gate and down the street, his hands punched firmly in his pockets, his shoulders hunched. His torment crossed the distance between us like a heat wave, driving me to the ground. Seated on the front step, what was left of my heart floated away like pieces of ash from a forest fire. Only then did I allow myself to cry.

I was contemplating what a total screw-up my day had been—I’d argued with Whiro, Sterling, and Sarah, a record even for me—when Aroha appeared from behind me and threw her arms around my neck: ‘I’m going with you.’

Hastily, I wiped my face on my sleeve and tilted my head to look at Aroha. ‘You can’t come with me.’

‘Yes I can,’ Aroha tugged playfully on my ponytail. I hadn’t known Sterling’s twin sister long, but I was coming to think of her as a friend. Aroha was an Elemental too, and her power was the ability to heal. Her animal nature was that of the horse.

‘I promised Sterling.’ She glanced briefly at Sterling’s disappearing back. A look I couldn’t entirely comprehend crossed her face: grief, mixed with envy and a touch of sorrow. Then, plastering a fake smile on her face, Aroha said. ‘You’re stuck with me.’ She wiggled her finger at me, as if that confirmed it.

I shook my head. ‘For crying-out-loud, Aroha, you’ve been beaten and scalped by your stepbrother, Manu’s goons. And you’ve been kidnapped to boot! All because Elementals wanted to use you to get at Sterling. Can’t you just be smart and let yourself recover?’

Aroha jiggled her head like she couldn’t believe how clueless I was sometimes. ‘Duh! I’ll be fine. Besides, my bag is already in the car.’

‘What about your education?’ Aroha had missed a lot of classes because of her injuries.

‘You’re skipping school as well, Scar. Anyway, I haven’t been back to Waihi College since you and Sterling rescued me.’ She shrugged, ‘A few more days isn’t going to make a difference.’

Gizmo joined us from the lounge as we walked into the house. His eyes watched Aroha warily. Unlike me, Gizmo was yet to decide whether he liked Aroha or not.

‘Now we’ve got the car, Gizmo can come too.’ Aroha reluctantly patted him. Even though her twin brother’s animal was a canine, Aroha wasn’t really a dog person, and Gizmo knew it.

I stared at Aroha and Gizmo, in shock, my brain not functioning properly. ‘Sterling?’ I mumbled.

‘Don’t worry about him. He’s tougher than he looks,’ Aroha answered.

‘He hates me,’ I said, the pain returning.

‘He loves you, Scarlet. Stop stressing!’

‘What about Sarah? Does she know about Gizmo?’ Thinking of Sarah, I felt a twinge of guilt. I’d been too hard on her, like always.

‘I’ve already told her I’m going with you, and we’ll take Gizmo with us. She’s gone to the clinic to catch up on some paperwork.’ I was becoming less sure about how much Sarah’s wish to have her own vet’s clinic had played its part in us ending up in New Zealand in the first place.

‘It’s not safe. It’s too dangerous for you,’ I reiterated.

‘Scar, it’s either me or Sterling. Which would you prefer?’

Neither, but I hadn’t marked Aroha and therefore the *Atua* weren’t hunting her. ‘Okay,’ I said carefully. ‘But there are some rules.’

Aroha raised one eyebrow.

‘If I say you’re to go home, you go. No arguing.’

'I can live with that.' Aroha gave me a quick hug. 'Now grab your bag, and let's hit the tar seal. It's so cool. Almost like we're going on a girl's road trip.'

Cool wasn't the word I would have used to describe our current circumstances, but I didn't respond, not wanting to kill Aroha's positive vibe. Less than half an hour later, we were in Sterling's car, having first grabbed water for Gizmo and the money Sarah had left on the kitchen table.

Aroha was going to drive. 'Where are we headed? I heard Coromandel in your mind, but not specifics.'

I growled at Aroha: 'Stay out of my head.'

In reply, Aroha poked her tongue at me.

'Cook's Beach. That's where Sarah thought I might find my mum.'

'I know where that is. Isaac has a bach there,' Aroha said as she started the car. The Australian in me had been surprised to learn that a bach—pronounced *batch*—was the New Zealand equivalent of a beach house.

Isaac James, Sterling and Aroha's uncle, normally lived in Whakatane. After Aroha's kidnapping, he'd come to stay with them for a while, mostly to oversee Aroha's recovery, or so he said. I was dubious, given that he hadn't seemed anywhere near as concerned about Aroha's wellbeing when she'd been kidnapped. Aroha and Sterling managed the house themselves. No one had seen their parents in a long time.

Isaac wasn't an Elemental; his precise skills were a mystery he kept to himself. His face was covered in intricate tattoos, or *moko*, making him look fierce and alien. That he seemed to know my father intimately didn't ingratiate Isaac to me. It just made me nervous. Isaac also made no secret of the fact he didn't like me.

'How many homes does Isaac have? I'd visited Isaac's bach in Whakatane, where it had been revealed that Marcus—the same Marcus who had tried to force me into becoming his Elemental pair—was Sterling and Aroha's cousin.

Aroha shrugged, like how should she know? Although Isaac was supposedly staying at the James' place to aid Aroha's recovery, they didn't seem to get on any better than Isaac and I did. 'All I know is that he has a bach at Cook's Beach, but he hasn't stayed there for years.' Seeing my worried face, she said, 'He likes the beach. What's the big deal?'

I took a steadying breath: I didn't believe in coincidences anymore.