

Prologue

Ngarara had been commanded to remain beside the Ohinemuri River. He was content to obey: the rock where he sat was warm and there was plenty of prey nearby.

It had been a long time since Ngarara had pursued the enemies of his master, Whiro. He was so old now he no longer craved the chase and he'd almost forgotten the quivering sense of anticipation the hunt brought with it.

Ngarara, Whiro's favourite assassin, moved his eyes skywards to the dark canopy of fern fronds where a tree weta was trying to hide from his sight.

Leaving his sunning spot, Ngarara quietly stalked the insect. His quarry tried to leap to safety, but he was faster. Snapping quickly, he gulped his meal in a single swallow.

With a reptilian's gait, Ngarara returned to drink from the river. Overhead he heard the rude cry of a tui, sharp and desolate. Night descended quickly in the New Zealand bush.

Whiro had said all he had to do was to wait patiently and the girl would come to him.

Wrapping his long tail around his body with practiced care, the giant lizard prepared himself to kill again.

Chapter One

'That's it then,' I said bitterly to the crimson rosella on my finger. The small injured parrot cheeped sympathetically in response. 'Sarah gets exactly what she wants again.' I knew I was being childish; Sarah didn't normally put herself first.

'Scarlet, who are you talking to?' my aunt Sarah asked curiously through the bedroom door. Without waiting for an answer she pushed open the door and stepped into my room. Sarah wasn't the least bit surprised to see a wild bird in my room. Animals seem to like me, especially birds. 'Where did you find the parrot?' she asked.

I tossed my black hair in the direction of the park across the street. How the bird had got there I had no idea. Perhaps it had been a pet. Many parrots don't survive in the suburbs of Melbourne. 'Its wing is broken. I've bandaged it with a couple of icy pole sticks.' I gently extended the parrot's wing to show her my handiwork.

Sarah nodded approvingly. Sarah was a vet and prided herself on having taught me everything I knew about helping injured animals.

'So,' I said abruptly. 'When were you going to tell me?'

Sarah's eyes shot to my face. 'Huh?'

'Duh! Mind-reader, remember, Sarah?' Surprise! I'm telepathic. I'd like to say it's an awesome talent to have, mind-reading, but imagine knowing the secrets of your neighbours, teachers and schoolmates. Some things you really are better off not knowing. As soon as Sarah had gotten home from work I had heard her stressing about how to tell me her latest news.

Sarah blushed angrily. 'Stay out of my head.' She wasn't happy I'd trespassed in her brain. As a rule I tried to avoid listening in on her feelings and thoughts. There was an unspoken agreement between us which said the contents of Sarah's brain were off limits to me. I did my best to keep that promise but mind-reading wasn't always something I could control.

My aunt Sarah was only ten years older than I was. Other people described her as adorably cute because she was short and petite with blond hair which was stylishly cut in an attractive bob. In reality she was as tough as nails. Sarah didn't take animal dung (her expression, not mine) from anyone.

'So, you weren't even going to ask me? Just like that you've decided for the both of us?'

Sarah shrugged. 'It's my job to watch out for you, remember. Besides, I pay the bills. What I say, goes.'

I gave Sarah a withering look. She was never this dictatorial. Sarah had small-person syndrome and she could be a major pain in the butt sometimes, but she was always fair. Seven years ago Sarah had become my full-time guardian after my father left to take up a position working for a company in Papua New Guinea. My father was a mechanical engineer and worked for a big company over there. He said the wilds of Papua New Guinea weren't a safe place to raise a ten year old. Apparently, this also applied to teenagers, because I was now seventeen and still living with Sarah. I got the occasional email from him, a card on my birthday, and every second year a visit at Christmas. I didn't remember a lot about my mother, Sarah's sister. She died when I was little. For a long time it had only been Sarah and me against the world.

I gently sat the crimson rosella on top of my dressing table. 'I can't believe you made this decision without me.'

'I've always wanted my own surgery and Tony is prepared to sell it to me at a reasonable price.'

'Tony? As in your first boss? That Tony? The guy who gave you a job while you were at uni?' I remembered him. 'But doesn't he live in New Zealand now?'

Sarah watched me expectantly, quietly waiting for the explosion.

I'd missed this detail in her thoughts. 'What? No way! There is no way I am moving to New Zealand.' I couldn't hide the anxiety in my voice. Nervously I twisted a strand of hair around my finger. Reciting a list of my favourite animals in my mind (my personal version of counting to ten), I took a slow, stabilising breath of air.

'Too late,' Sarah said stubbornly. 'I've already said yes to Tony. And I don't want to hear any arguments from you. We're shifting. End of story.' Hands on hips, it was clear Sarah wasn't going to budge. 'Now hurry up and get dressed. Tony's offered to take us out to dinner.'

I stared at Sarah in disbelief. How could she do this to me? Anger and frustration made my body go rigid. The strand of hair I was twisting around my finger was cutting off my circulation like a tourniquet. Taking another deep breath to stop myself from hyperventilating, I counted: one, black crow; two, panther; three, eagle; four, leopard ... Glaring determinedly at Sarah, I said, 'No way. I'm not leaving here.'

Chapter Two

I pulled the curtains in my room and hid in the dark. I was as grouchy as a cornered wombat, and every bit as restless. How dare Sarah make this choice without asking me! I paced back and forth. She knew I hated change. For the first time in a long time everything was going well at school. I was keeping my weird gift under control. As I only had a year left of school, I wanted to see the time out in Melbourne.

My emotional side felt like staging a protest over Sarah's high-handed decision and pointedly refusing to go out to dinner with her and Tony, but over the years Sarah had put up with a fair bit of drama from me. I'd spent a long time being angry at my father. Plus, with the mind-reading stuff, I'd done some odd things, like inadvertently answering people who hadn't said anything aloud. Sarah had dealt with all my moods and weird behaviour without complaining; well, without moaning too much. If she wanted to run her own vet clinic, I would do everything in my power to make sure her dream came true. And even though I was seventeen and should have been practically grown up, I didn't think I could survive without Sarah. Sarah had always had my back. This left me with only one option, which Sarah would have already factored into her decision. She was one step ahead of me, as per usual. Checkmate.

I let out a heavy sigh as I dug into my closet to look for my favourite black strapless dress and white silk jacket: we were moving to New Zealand.

The silence in the car was unbearable. Sarah hadn't looked at me once since we'd left the house.

'I'm sorry, Sarah. I had no right to be angry with you. It's not your fault I have an issue with change. I acknowledge that. You've always made the best choices for me. I get that it's time you made the right decisions for you, too. It's just I'm afraid. I wish I knew another person who could do the same things as me. It would make me feel less ...' I struggled for the right word, '... less alone, I guess. More like I belonged in the world. And if I lost you ...' My words trailed off. Without Sarah I had no one.

From the driver's seat, Sarah glanced at me briefly. 'I get that it's hard for you, but I love you and I wouldn't be doing my job if I went easy on you. You need a change. You need a shake-up. You need to make some friends, get a boyfriend, live a little, let people in,' she said forcefully. 'How bad could it be, to tell the truth? So you can read minds. Who cares? Stop using it as an excuse to shut people out.' Her tone was light, but I could tell she was struggling, trying not to be upset with me. 'Maybe in New Zealand you'll find other people like you,' she said quietly.

I stared at Sarah in surprise. 'Yeah, right. And maybe pigs will fly too,' I said.

Sarah curled her hands tightly around the steering wheel. 'You can't be the only person who can read minds, Scar. You know that.'

I didn't respond and instead gave the night sky all of my attention. Of course I knew there must be other telepaths in the world. How many times had I lain awake at night wishing I would meet someone like me? I'd read about people who could do the stuff I did; I'd just never met one.

I wanted to argue with Sarah because she'd brought up yet another sore point. But rather than ruining things by fighting again, I kept my mouth firmly shut. Maturity dictated

I stop taking my insecurities out on Sarah. Deep down I knew she was right. I had to let people in.

Hey, what was the worst thing that could happen?

I had to let go of the feelings my father's betrayal had left me with and begin afresh. I had to start making some changes. I had to learn to accept what I was and stop worrying about being different.

Right. Easier said than done.

Chapter Three

Tony was already at the restaurant when we arrived. He looked nothing like the person I remembered and I paused, trying to merge this man with the one I'd known earlier.

Tony was wearing a loose-fitting, red-and-black shirt in what I vaguely recognised as a New Zealand tribal design, over khaki pants. It was clear he'd recently lost a lot of weight. His glasses looked too large for his face, as if he'd shrunk somehow. I calculated his age at about fifty, but the man standing before me looked more like someone in his late sixties. All the life had been leached from his face and his dark skin had an unusual grey tinge to it. He looked tired and worn. I felt sorry for him as I realised he must be very sick.

Sarah and I walked towards Tony and she gave him a warm smile as he stood up from the table to give her a fatherly hug. I could tell from Sarah's face she was as shocked by his appearance as I was, but she blocked any further emotion from showing on her face before affectionately returning Tony's greeting.

While they hugged and shook hands I watched quietly as they renewed their friendship. 'Do you remember Anna and Claude?' Sarah was asking Tony. 'They moved to Sydney last year.'

I tuned out and let my eyes drift across the restaurant. For some reason I was expecting to see someone I knew. Why, I didn't know. Possibly I was trying to wish into existence my own circle of friends so I'd be like everyone else. I'd be connected and a part of the real world, surrounded by people who knew me and whom I could trust instead of always feeling like a stranger in my own life. But of course, I didn't recognise anyone I knew in the crowded restaurant.

As I scanned the room, my eyes settled on a boy sitting alone in the far right corner of the restaurant. He had long, raggedly cut blond hair which sat carelessly across his face. He caught my attention because he was wearing dark sunglasses inside at night. I also questioned his fashion choices for an upmarket restaurant like Ambrosia. He was wearing a black T-shirt with several holes in the sleeves which were visible from where I was standing, and faded blue jeans with metal rivets down the sides. I guessed his age to be about twenty. On his arms were several aggressive-looking tattoos. Tattoos were frowned on in fancy eateries. He didn't seem to care. I could see two facial piercings, one in his nose and the other through his lip. His lip stud was a skull and crossbones.

Classy, I thought sarcastically.

His body language was cold and arrogant; the boy's shoulders were tense and his lip was curled in a sneer. I wasn't surprised he was sitting alone. I wouldn't have wanted to eat with him. He barely spoke or looked at the waiter who came to take his order. His attitude screamed, 'Stay away from me!' but I couldn't tear my eyes from him. He was fascinating in a similar way to a car crash. You're compelled to look, even though you know the safe thing to do is to concentrate on your own driving.

Etched on his left hand was the most unusual tattoo I'd ever seen. It was like a glove moulded to his hand. The tattoo was made up of a sequence of interlocking spirals but it wasn't just the design which interested me; the colours were amazing. If you've ever seen the inside of an abalone shell, his skin looked like that. Within each of the whorls was an explosion of colour: turquoise, pinks, blues and every shade of green. On anyone else the

colours might have seemed feminine—in contrast to his other tattoos, this one certainly seemed out of place. But on him this tattoo became his distinguishing feature.

So intent was I on studying the boy that it took me a second to realise Tony was talking to me. Reluctantly my eyes left the tattooed boy to look at Tony.

‘That’s extremely rude, wouldn’t you say?’ Tony was asking me.

‘Huh? Sorry, I wasn’t listening. I didn’t mean to be rude,’ I said hostilely.

Sarah furiously shook her head. ‘Tony said we should sit down and was apologising for keeping us standing for so long.’ Sarah filled in the blanks for me. ‘He wasn’t saying that you were being rude.’

I flushed when I realised I’d misunderstood. My hackles were well and truly up tonight. I reminded myself that Tony had always been polite in the extreme. It had bugged me when I was younger because he’d always been correcting my manners, as if Sarah was doing a bad job raising me. If I was honest, I’d admit that now and then I’d done things just to annoy him. His insistence on good manners had made me want to scream.

‘Scarlet, it’s good to see you again,’ Tony said courteously. ‘So, Scarlet, what do you think about the big move?’

Sarah took my arm and hissed a warning under her breath. ‘Be polite.’ She was worried I’d tell Tony exactly what I thought about our impending shift.

‘I’m not happy about it,’ I said truthfully. ‘But I’m excited for Sarah, of course. She’s always wanted her own clinic and now, thanks to you, that’s going to happen.’

‘But you’re nervous,’ Tony guessed accurately. ‘About beginning again at a different school.’

I smiled at Sarah as I said to Tony, ‘Yeah, of course. It’ll be hard starting again in my final year, but Sarah’s promised to help me with all my homework.’

Sarah had taken a sip of her water and she choked a little at my words. She hated helping me with my homework.

‘Does your nephew go to the local high school?’ Sarah asked Tony. It was her turn to cast me a sunny smile. I glowered back at her. ‘Perhaps he could show Scarlet around.’

Sometimes I could almost hate Sarah. I gave her a slight nudge under the table.

‘Yes, he does,’ Tony said. His eyes were immediately guarded. The next words were forced from his mouth, like he didn’t really want to say them. ‘Manu is looking forward to meeting Scarlet. I’ve told him a lot about her. I’ve even shown him a photo of her.’ As he said the last sentence he started to choke. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and began to cough violently into it.

‘You gave him a photo?’ I looked at Sarah, mortified, but she wasn’t listening to me; instead she was staring, horrified, at Tony. We could both see the tiny flecks of red blood on his handkerchief. Time froze as we each contemplated what they meant.

‘I’ll introduce you to him when you get to Waihi,’ Tony said between coughs. ‘Promise me you’ll let me introduce you.’ His coughing grew worse while Sarah and I looked on helplessly.

Glancing briefly towards the far corner of the restaurant, I met the sunglasses-ed stare of the tattooed boy. I could have sworn he was listening to our conversation.

Tony was coughing even more fiercely now. The blood on his handkerchief was a very, very bad sign.

Sarah looked at me and rolled her eyes meaningfully towards Tony, poking me hard in the side. She thought loudly at me, *Tell him you’ll let him introduce you to his nephew. Make up for being so terrible to him when you were younger. Do this. Please,* she begged.

I resented Sarah at that moment. She hated it when I read her mind, except when it suited her. She had a point, though, about being amiable. Tony wasn't asking me to sell my soul, just to play nice with a relative of his. I could do that. I wasn't going to let Sarah off the hook, though. There was still the matter of the photo.

Tony reached into his bag for a tissue and discarded his bloody hanky in his pocket. As he covered his mouth again he turned his solemn gaze on me. 'Promise me, Scarlet, that you'll let me introduce you.' For some reason it was incredibly important to him that I do this. 'Promise me, Scarlet. It would make me very ... happy.' Oddly, he said the word 'happy' half-heartedly, like it wouldn't really make him that pleased at all.

Mind to mind, Sarah pleaded with me to say yes. Between her demanding thoughts and Tony's scrutiny, I felt trapped, like I was being backed into a cage. None of it was necessary, however. I was going to say yes but I hated feeling pressured.

'Yeah, sure—hook me up with him, Tony. In fact, why not introduce me to all your relatives? We could raffle off dates with me,' I said unpleasantly to the table.

Sarah glared at me. 'You don't have to be horrible about it,' she muttered under her breath.

As soon as I gave my word, Tony abruptly stopped coughing and smiled weakly at me. Either he didn't hear my smart comment or he was choosing to pretend he hadn't.

Seeing Tony satisfied, Sarah gave me a happy smile too and thought at me, *See? Was that so hard?*

I gave her my best petulant look. 'You owe me,' I murmured in return. 'I can't believe you gave him my picture,' I reminded her. I felt like my privacy had been violated.

And yeah, I do get the irony: this, from a person who reads minds.

Now that I'd played my part and agreed to let this Manu guy show me around, the two adults forgot about me and returned to their earlier conversation. Realising Sarah and Tony were going to talk shop nonstop, I blocked out their chatter. Without intending to I found that my eyes had sought out the blond boy.

I watched, mesmerised, as the turquoise-tattooed boy picked up his steak knife off the table and started to revolve it rapidly through the fingers on his right hand. His fingers were a blur as the knife turned faster and faster. He raised his elbow to sit his arm upright on the table, and like a basketball player spinning a basketball, he spun the knife as easily as if it was indeed a ball. His hand moved so quickly that in the end the black handle became the only visible evidence that he even held a blade. His body language softened while he juggled the knife; his face became a blank canvas, showing no sign of strain, or that he even knew I was studying him.

I wasn't the only one observing him. His show was drawing an audience; the entire restaurant was watching his knife wielding and commenting.

'What an idiot,' the man to my left said.

'Waiter, we want a table further away from that crazy boy,' a slender lady sitting two tables away from the tattooed boy complained loudly.

The tattooed stranger lifted his head in response to the woman's complaint and his fingers faltered.

An involuntary gasp escaped my lips as the blade of his knife nicked his skin. A bright patch of red blood welled up on his hand. Inexplicably, he showed no awareness that he'd cut himself. Ignoring the tall woman, he continued to wind the sharp knife aimlessly around his fingers.

It was then that I saw the white cane leaning against his table. The tattooed boy was blind. No wonder he'd cut himself. He couldn't see the knife he was spinning.

I've got great hearing, though, a voice whispered in my right ear.

I spun in the direction of the words, expecting to see someone next to me. There was no one there.

To my left, the tattooed boy dropped his knife heavily onto the table. The noise it made drew me back to stare in his direction. The knife was whirling crazily in circles. I watched it turn until the point came to stop, facing towards me.

Wanna play? the phantom voice whispered.

'What the ...?' I muttered.

'Scarlet? What's the matter?' Sarah was poking me in the arm.

I blinked uncomprehendingly at her. Sarah mouthed words I couldn't hear. I was having a brain-fade. Spellbound, I turned back to look at the boy in the corner. It was his voice I could hear.

Finally sensing he'd cut himself, the knife-wielder fumbled in his pocket for something to wipe his hand on. As he shuffled in his seat he inadvertently knocked his cane over and it fell to the floor beside him. The boy lithely leant over and swiftly located it by feel.

'Scarlet? Hello? Are you listening? Tonight is meant to be a celebration,' Tony reminded me.

I dumbly turned to face Tony. He'd raised his glass and was indicating I should do the same. When I realised what was happening I faked a smile.

'I'd like to make a toast to Sarah and to Scarlet,' Tony said, with his glass raised. 'To Sarah's future as a rural vet. To Scarlet's start at a new school. And to Sarah and Scarlet's new life in New Zealand.'

As I looked at Tony through my raised crystal glass, I felt something unexpected run over my foot. I tried to ignore it until whatever it was crawled over my left leg and up my right calf. I gave a small scream and dropped my wine glass on the table, spilling the contents all over the expensive linen tablecloth.

I pushed my chair back and slapped at my leg like a crazy person, trying to dislodge whatever had climbed up my skin. I let out a mid-volume yelp as I saw something small scuttle away from the table. I expected a huntsman spider. Do you know how many huntsman spiders there are in Melbourne? Instead, what I saw was a small lizard.

Sarah was up out of her chair, as was Tony, and they were both staring at me like I'd gone mad.

'A lizard,' I stammered. 'It ran up my leg.' My hands were shaking. Reptiles are one of the few animals I dislike.

'I can't see anything,' Sarah said, peering at the floor and then gawking at me like I'd completely lost my mind.

My performance had drawn the interest of the waiting staff and nearly the entire restaurant. I could see the tattooed boy in the far corner listening to me with an amused expression on his face. Good to see his face could show some emotion, even if he was laughing at me. No mysterious voice spoke to me though, making me wonder if I'd even heard him in the first place.

Tony looked nervously around the floor. 'Whatever it was has gone,' he said, more trying to reassure himself, I thought. He obviously didn't like reptiles either. It made me like him a little more. We had something in common.

'Come on, let's sit back down. Scarlet, Sarah.' Tony pulled out Sarah's seat so she could sit down and he waved the waiting staff away, trying to give us some privacy. 'It's okay, folks,' he said to the restaurant. 'Just a lizard. Gone now. Nothing to worry about. Enjoy your meal.'

I looked hesitantly from the floor to my legs before I sat back down. I needed to take a serious chill pill.

Sarah gave me a questioning look, wondering if I had deliberately spilled my wine and made up the lizard just to humiliate her. She suspected I was paying her back for making me promise Tony I'd let him introduce me to his nephew Manu.

Blushing under her unfair speculation, I then became angry and gave her a dirty look. 'I've been very polite tonight, thank you very much,' I haughtily replied.

I searched the far corner of the restaurant, expecting to see the tattooed boy still laughing at me, but instead his seat was empty. I hadn't even realised he'd gone. A flash of frustration curled in my gut. We had unfinished business, he and I. He'd spoken inside my mind. I wanted to know who he was.

'Let's finish our toast,' Sarah said, stopping me mid-fixation.

I noted the waiters had replaced the tablecloth during my frenzied leg-swatting and had also brought me a new glass. I raised my refilled wine glass in line with Tony and Sarah's.

'Congratulations, Sarah,' Tony toasted, and we all took a mouthful from our goblets.

As I took a small sip of wine, something glittered at me from the bottom of my glass.

Puzzled, I lowered my cup and peered into it. My nose wrinkling in disgust, I realised there was something foreign in my wine. I looked at Sarah and pointed silently to the lump at the bottom of my wine flute. Sarah screwed up her nose in revulsion too. I grabbed my fork to remove whatever it was.

At the bottom of the long glass was a small pebble of some description. Using my fork like a rake, I fished around until I captured the tiny stone. I hauled it to the surface. Tony and Sarah were watching me now and Tony was waving again for the waiter, complaining that there was something in my wine.

Sarah got up from her chair and peered over my shoulder. I stared fixedly at the small object I'd dropped into my palm. As we gazed at the item in my hand, I automatically started to count animals in my head. One, black crow; two, panther; three, eagle; four, leopard; five, cockatoo; six, horse; seven, polar bear...

'Scar, what is it?' Sarah's voice cut through my counting. My silence was making her nervous. Sarah looked more carefully at the item in my hand. 'Yuck, is that what I think it is? That's disgusting,' Sarah pronounced.

I continued to stare at my palm, trying to comprehend what I was seeing. It wasn't a stone in my hand. It was a lip stud.

'Waiter,' Tony called out. 'Get her another glass. Take that away,' he gestured towards the piece of jewellery in my hand.

I gaped uncomprehendingly at the stud like I was studying a bug. It wasn't just any lip stud. It was shaped like a skull and crossbones. A design I recognised. I looked at Sarah, bewildered.

'Scar ... Are you alright?' she asked, worried.

... eight, fox; nine, peacock; ten, lion. My mind whirled.

A wave of nausea rolled through my stomach. I stood up and bolted for the bathroom.