

MĪHARŌ

BOOK 1

NGĀ
WHAKAWHITINGA

Transitions

NIVA GRAM

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By Niva Gram

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Part 1

The Birthday

Chapter 1: Eight

I woke up eight years old and immediately checked whether I felt different.

I did not.

My feet were still sticking out from under the blanket. My hair was still a mess. Wai was still yelling from the room down the hall even though it was barely seven in the morning.

So far, being eight was disappointing.

Then Ahi burst into my room wearing one sock and carrying a cereal bowl.

“Happy birthday!” he shouted.

Milk sloshed over the edge.

“Mum says you're not allowed to get up yet.”

I sat up anyway.

Ahi was five and believed rules were most useful when they belonged to someone else.

“Why?” I asked.

“Surprise.”

He grinned so hard I knew the surprise was probably not very secret.

From the kitchen I could hear Mum moving chairs, opening cupboards and telling somebody on the phone that, yes, she had remembered the candles.

Our house had felt different since Dad left.

Quieter in some ways. Louder in others.

Mum, Ahi, Wai and I had been living together without Dad for almost a year. Mum said grown-up things were complicated. I had decided complicated was a word adults used when they did not want to explain something.

Dad had gone away to sort himself out.

That was another grown-up sentence.

For almost a year we had hardly heard from him.

I missed him in strange places.

When I saw hot jalebi at the market.

When Mum made curry and said it was not as good as his.

When somebody on television spoke with an Indian accent and Wai pointed at the screen and yelled, “Dad!” even though it was definitely not Dad.

Today I tried not to think about that.

Today was my birthday.

Eight.

Year Four.

Old enough, according to me, to make my own toast.

Not old enough, according to Mum, to use the big knife.

I got dressed in my favourite shorts and the green T-shirt
Nan had given me last Christmas.

When Mum finally called me out, the lounge was covered
in paper streamers.

Most of them were crooked.

“Ahi helped,” Mum said.

That explained everything.

Wai sat in his high chair banging a spoon like a drum.

He was nearly two and had three favourite words: Mum,
no and mine.

Today he added a fourth.

“Cake!”

Mum laughed.

“Not yet.”

She hugged me and kissed the top of my head.

“Hari huritau, my girl.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

Her name was Rose, but nobody in our house called her Rose unless they were annoyed with her or answering the phone.

I wrapped my arms around her.

For one second she held on extra tight.

Then the front gate clicked.

Mum froze.

Ahi ran to the window.

“Someone's here!”

It was too early for the party.

Mum wiped her hands on a tea towel and went to the door.

I followed.

A man stood on the path holding a wrapped present and looking like he had forgotten how to breathe.

I knew him before he smiled.

“Happy birthday, beta,” Dad said.

Chapter 2: Dad at the Gate

For a moment nobody moved.

Then Wai yelled, “Dad!” so loudly that the neighbour's dog started barking.

Dad laughed and crouched just in time for Ahi to crash into him.

I stayed beside Mum.

I wanted to run to him.

I also wanted to ask where he had been.

Both feelings sat inside me at the same time.

Dad looked older than I remembered. His hair was shorter. He had a new jacket and tired eyes.

“Aroha,” he said.

I walked over slowly.

Then he opened his arms and I forgot to be careful.

I hugged him.

He smelled like soap, cold air and something spicy from the paper bag he had brought.

"I missed you," I said into his jacket.

"I missed you too."

Mum stood in the doorway.

She did not look angry.

She did not look happy either.

She looked like someone carrying a glass bowl very carefully.

Dad stood up.

"Hi, Rose."

"Hi, Krish."

That was how I knew the morning had become serious.

Adults only used each other's names when things were serious.

Dad held up the paper bag.

"I brought breakfast."

Mum looked inside.

Her mouth twitched.

"You remembered."

"Of course I remembered."

Inside were samosas, sweet jalebi and the coconut sweets Dad used to bring home on special days.

Ahi cheered.

Wai said, “Mine,” which was not surprising.

By nine o'clock, Dad was helping Mum put up the last decorations.

It was weird how quickly he fitted back into the room.

Not the same as before.

But not like a stranger either.

Mum let him stay.

That mattered.

Soon cars began pulling up outside.

Nan arrived first, carrying enough food to feed an entire rugby team.

Her full name was Huiterangiora, but everyone called her Hui or Nan.

Koro came behind her with a chilly bin and a smile.

Koro's real name was Ru.

Nobody called him Ru except Nan when she wanted him to stop doing something.

“Ru, leave that alone.”

“Ru, don't climb up there.”

“Ru, you are not fixing the barbecue during the party.”

Koro ignored all three instructions.

Then Uncle Dave and Pania arrived.

Pania hugged me straight away.

She had warm hands and a laugh that made other people laugh too.

Dave gave me an envelope with money in it.

“Eight already,” he said.

“Yep.”

He nodded like I had confirmed a business meeting.

Dave was Mum's brother.

He was not mean to me.

He was just hard to know.

He talked a lot about work, power companies and projects that adults seemed to understand.

Pania made him seem softer.

She bumped her shoulder into his.

“You could say happy birthday.”

Dave looked at me again.

“Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.”

Pania rolled her eyes.

I liked her even more.

The backyard filled with cousins, aunties, uncles,
neighbours and kids from school.

Someone put music on.

Ahi stole icing before the cake was cut.

Wai fell asleep under the table with a cracker in his hand.

Dad and Mum spoke quietly near the kitchen door.

They were not fighting.

That felt like a birthday present too.

Just before we lit the candles, Koro tapped my shoulder.

“I’ve got something for you,” he said.

His voice sounded different.

Not birthday-present different.

Important different.

Chapter 3: Koro's Gift

Koro took me into the spare room where it was quieter.

He closed the door but left it open a crack.

That was another Koro thing.

He believed doors should never be completely shut when children were around.

“Sit,” he said.

I sat on the edge of the bed.

Koro reached inside his shirt and pulled out a black cord.

Something dark green hung from it.

I had seen it before.

Not often.

Usually it was hidden beneath his clothes.

The hei tiki was smooth and deep green, with a rounded head and carved curves that caught the light.

I stared at it.

“That's yours.”

“Was.”

He lifted the cord over his head.

“Now it's yours.”

I looked at him.

“Really?”

“Really.”

I reached out but stopped before touching it.

Koro smiled.

“Go on.”

The stone was cool at first.

Then warm.

I pulled my fingers back.

“Did you feel that?”

Koro watched my face.

“What did you feel?”

“Warm.”

“Mm.”

That was not an answer.

“Koro.”

He laughed quietly.

“It has been in our whānau a long time.”

“How long?”

“Long enough that I don't know the first person who wore it.”

“Did your dad wear it?”

“For a time.”

“And his dad?”

“Maybe.”

I frowned.

“That's not very helpful.”

“History isn't always tidy.”

He put the cord over my head.

The hei tiki settled against my chest.

It felt heavier than it looked.

Not bad-heavy.

Important-heavy.

“Look after it,” Koro said.

“I will.”

“And listen.”

“To what?”

Koro glanced toward the door.

For the first time, his smile disappeared.

“You'll know.”

I waited.

He did not explain.

Adults.

Complicated.

I tucked the hei tiki under my shirt and followed him outside.

Nan spotted the cord immediately.

She stopped walking.

“Ru.”

Koro pretended not to hear.

Nan came closer.

Her eyes moved from him to me.

“You gave it to her?”

“She's eight.”

“I can count.”

Pania appeared behind Nan carrying a bowl of salad.

She saw the hei tiki too.

The bowl nearly slipped from her hands.

Dave caught it.

“Careful.”

Pania ignored him.

She looked at Koro.

“Are you sure?”

Koro nodded.

“It chose long before I did.”

That sentence made no sense.

Dave's face changed.

Only a little.

His eyes sharpened.

“Chose?” he said.

Koro waved a hand.

“Old people talk rubbish. You know that.”

Dave did not laugh.

Pania did.

Too quickly.

Then Mum called us for cake.

Everyone moved away.

But Dave stayed where he was.

He looked at the hei tiki around my neck.

Then at me.

I remember that look.

At the time I thought he was curious.

Later, I would understand it was the first moment he became afraid.

Chapter 4: The Best Party Ever

For the next few hours, nothing strange happened.

That is important.

Because when I think back to my eighth birthday, I do not want to remember only the bad parts.

I want to remember the cake.

Mum had made a huge chocolate one with green icing and too many lollies.

Ahi blew out two of my candles before I could.

I made him relight them.

Dad sang the loudest.

His version of Happy Birthday was half English, half Hindi and completely out of tune.

Nan laughed so much she had to sit down.

Koro told everyone he could sing better.

He could not.

Pania knew all the words to every song on the radio.

Dave stood near the barbecue pretending he did not know any.

When Mum put on an old waiata tape, Koro sang softly under his breath.

I knew that one.

Nan and Koro had taught me bits of te reo for as long as I could remember.

Not lessons exactly.

Words while cooking.

Names of things in the garden.

Little sayings.

Songs.

But they were careful.

“At home is fine,” Nan always said.

“Don't show off at school.”

I never understood why knowing words could be showing off.

Once I asked Koro.

He stared at his hands for a long time.

“Because when I was a boy, people made us feel ashamed of them.”

“Of Māori words?”

“Of a lot of things.”

That sounded stupid to me.

Koro agreed.

But he still told me to be careful.

At the party, Dad gave me a small wooden jewellery box from India.

It had tiny flowers carved into the lid.

“For your important things,” he said.

I touched the hei tiki.

“This won't fit.”

Dad smiled.

“Then wear that one.”

Mum gave me books.

Ahi gave me a picture of what he said was a dragon but looked like a potato with wings.

Wai gave me a sticky biscuit he had already bitten.

By late afternoon, the adults were tired and the kids were still running.

The sky had turned strange.

Not dark.

Greenish-grey.

Pania noticed it too.

She stood beside me near the clothesline.

“Storm coming,” she said.

“Mum said it wasn't meant to rain.”

“Weather doesn't always listen to Mum.”

“Nothing listens to Mum.”

Pania laughed.

“Don't tell her I agreed.”

A warm gust moved through the backyard.

The hei tiki pressed against my chest.

Warm again.

I looked down.

“Do you know anything about this?” I asked.

Pania's smile faded.

“About what?”

I showed her the stone.

She touched it with one finger.

Her eyes widened.

Then Dave called her name from the deck.

Pania pulled her hand back.

“Ask Koro,” she whispered.

“Why?”

Another gust pushed through the harakeke.

Pania looked toward the plants.

“Because I think it's waking up.”

Chapter 5: The Song in the Backyard

By evening most people had gone home.

The backyard looked like a party had exploded.

Paper plates.

Cups.

A balloon stuck in the lemon tree.

Ahi had fallen asleep on the couch.

Wai was asleep in Mum's room.

Dad had gone to help Nan take food containers to her car.

Koro was packing up the barbecue.

Pania stayed to help Mum clean the kitchen.

Dave was somewhere around the side of the house on his phone.

I carried my presents inside one at a time.

The air felt heavy.

The storm had not arrived yet.

It was waiting.

I picked up wrapping paper near the harakeke and started singing to myself.

It was one of Koro's songs.

One of the ones he told me not to sing loudly at school.

“Tōku reo, tōku ohoho, māpihi maurea, whakakai marihi, nei rā te kaupapa...”

I did not sing perfectly.

I was eight.

I sang because I liked how the words felt.

Because Koro smiled when I knew them.

Because Nan always joined in on the second line.

The hei tiki grew hot.

I stopped singing.

The heat disappeared.

I frowned.

Then I sang the line again.

Warm.

Hotter.

A faint green light shone through my T-shirt.

I pulled the hei tiki out.

It was glowing.

Not bright like a torch.

Soft.

Alive.

“Koro?” I called.

No answer.

Something clicked beside me.

I turned.

A cicada sat on one of the harakeke leaves.

Its wings should have been brown and clear.

Instead they shimmered green-gold.

The light from my hei tiki stretched toward it like a thin thread.

I forgot how to breathe.

The cicada moved.

Not like an insect.

Like it had just woken from a very long sleep.

It crawled to the edge of the leaf.

Its wings opened.

Green light ran through them.

“Whoa.”

The cicada flew straight at me.

I squealed and ducked.

It landed on my shoulder.

“Get off!”

It clicked at me.

I stared at it.

It clicked again.

“Are you talking to me?”

The cicada tilted its head.

That was impossible.

I knew it was impossible.

It did it anyway.

Behind me, something moved near the side fence.

I looked up.

Nobody was there.

At least, I thought nobody was there.

Later I learned Dave had been standing in the shadow
beside the garage.

He had seen the glow.

He had seen the cicada wake.

He had seen me make Mīharo.

At the time, all I knew was that my new insect friend had
climbed into my hair.

“You need a name,” I whispered.

The cicada clicked.

“Kiki?”

Click-click.

“Kiki it is.”

The first drop of rain hit my nose.

Then another.

Then lightning split the sky.

Chapter 6: The Storm

The rain came all at once.

Mum shouted from the kitchen.

“Aroha! Inside!”

I grabbed the last present and ran.

Kiki disappeared into my hair.

“There's a bug on you,” Mum said when I reached the door.

“It's Kiki.”

“Of course it is.”

She was too busy shutting windows to ask why I had named a cicada.

Thunder shook the house.

The power flickered.

Pania stood at the kitchen window staring into the rain.

She looked worried.

Dave came in through the back door.

His jacket was wet even though he had only been outside for a minute.

“We should go,” he said.

Pania did not move.

“Not yet.”

“Pania.”

She touched the window glass.

A flash of lightning lit her face.

“Something's wrong.”

Koro came into the kitchen.

He and Pania looked at each other.

No one spoke.

I hated when adults did that.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

Koro smiled at me.

“Just a storm.”

He was lying.

I knew because Nan had once told me Koro's left eyebrow moved when he lied.

It was moving now.

The hei tiki cooled against my chest.

Kiki crawled onto my shoulder.

Pania saw her.

Her eyes widened.

“Is that—”

Dave took her arm.

“We're leaving.”

Pania looked at me one last time.

Not at my face.

At Kiki.

Then at the hei tiki.

“Keep them close,” she said.

“Both of them.”

“Why?”

But Dave had already opened the door.

They ran through the rain to their car.

Koro watched them leave.

“Ru,” Nan said quietly.

He turned.

Nan shook her head.

Another grown-up conversation without words.

Dad came back inside carrying the last food box.

“Road's getting bad,” he said.

Nan decided she and Koro would leave before it flooded.

Mum tried to make them stay.

Koro kissed my forehead.

“Look after that taonga.”

“I will.”

He touched the hei tiki.

For a second the stone warmed again.

Then he left.

I stood at the window and watched Nan and Koro's car disappear.

The storm swallowed their tail lights.

That was the last time I saw Koro alive.

I did not know that then.

If I had, I would have run after him.

I would have made him stay.

I would have asked every question I had.

Instead I went to bed annoyed because the power went out before I could use my new CD player.

Mum tucked me in by torchlight.

Dad had gone to sleep on the couch.

“Best birthday?” Mum asked.

“Mostly.”

Kiki sat on the windowsill.

“Can she stay?”

Mum looked at the cicada.

“As long as she doesn't land on my face.”

I laughed.

Mum kissed my cheek.

“Goodnight, eight-year-old.”

“Goodnight.”

Outside, lightning flashed again.

Far away, something terrible was happening.

I slept through all of it.

Chapter 7: The Phone

The phone woke me.

Not my bedroom phone.

We did not have one.

The landline in the hallway.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

I pulled the blanket over my head.

The storm had gone.

Morning light came through the curtains.

The phone stopped.

A few seconds later, I heard Mum make a sound I had never heard before.

Not a word.

A broken kind of cry.

I was out of bed before I knew I was moving.

Kiki flew after me.

Mum stood beside the telephone with one hand still on the receiver.

Dad was holding her shoulders.

Her face was wet.

“Mama?”

She looked at me.

Then she looked away.

That scared me more.

“What happened?”

Ahi appeared behind me rubbing his eyes.

Wai started crying from Mum's room.

Dad went to get him.

I stepped closer.

“Mama, what happened?”

Mum grabbed me.

She pulled me into her chest so hard the hei tiki pressed between us.

“Koro and Pania died last night.”

The sentence did not fit inside my head.

I pulled back.

“What?”

“There was an accident.”

“No.”

“Aroha—”

“No.”

Koro had been here yesterday.

Pania had eaten cake.

People who ate cake did not die.

People who told you to keep your cicada close did not die.

“What happened?”

Mum closed her eyes.

“They think a calf got caught near an electric fence in the storm. Koro and Pania tried to free it.”

“Together?”

“That's what we've been told.”

“Where was Nan?”

“Home. She's safe.”

“Where's Dave?”

Mum looked at Dad.

“He's at the hospital.”

I touched the hei tiki.

Cold.

Completely cold.

Kiki landed on the telephone cord.

Her wings were no longer glowing.

I stared at her.

Yesterday the world had been full of impossible things.

Today it felt like someone had switched all the colour off.

I did not understand the story about the calf.

I did not understand why Pania had been with Koro.

I did not understand why Dave had survived.

Mostly, I did not understand how Koro could be gone.

Mum held me again.

I cried into her shirt.

Outside, water dripped from the roof.

The whole world smelled washed clean.

It did not feel clean.

It felt wrong.

And somewhere inside that wrongness, Kiki gave one tiny click.

The Silence

Chapter 8: After the Call

The house filled with people before breakfast was finished.

Aunties came first.

Then cousins.

Then people I knew only because they knew Mum.

Someone made tea.

Someone else made toast.

Nobody ate much.

Nan arrived just after nine.

I had never seen her look small before.

Huiterangiora was not a small person, even when she was sitting down.

She had a way of filling rooms.

That morning she seemed folded in half.

Mum ran to her.

They held each other without speaking.
I stood nearby with Ahi's hand in mine.
Wai sat on Dad's hip, sucking his thumb.
Dad had not gone home.
I was glad.
Nobody told him to stay.
Nobody told him to leave.
He just kept doing things.
He made bottles for Wai.
He found clean clothes for Ahi.
He answered the door when Mum could not.
For the first time since he had returned, he looked like
Dad again.
Nan finally saw me.
Her eyes went straight to the hei tiki.
She made a sound and pulled me into her arms.
"He gave it to you."
I nodded against her shoulder.
"Yesterday."

Nan cried harder.

I wished I had hidden it.

Then I felt bad for wishing that.

“Nan,” I whispered, “why was Pania with Koro?”

Nan went still.

“What do you mean?”

“Mum said they were freeing a calf.”

“That's what they think happened.”

“But Pania left with Dave.”

Nan looked toward the kitchen.

Dave was not there.

Nobody had seen him since the hospital.

“Storms make people do strange things,” Nan said.

That sounded like a sentence adults used when they did not want to answer.

I frowned.

Nan touched my cheek.

“Not today, moko. Today we get through today.”

I wanted to argue.

Instead I nodded.

Kiki sat hidden in the curtain folds.

Only I seemed to notice her.

Every now and then her wings gave a weak green flicker.

Like she was sad too.

Later, when the house became too full, I sat under the kitchen table.

Ahi crawled under with me.

“Is Koro coming back?” he asked.

I shook my head.

He thought about that.

“What about Pania?”

I shook my head again.

Ahi leaned against me.

We stayed there together.

Above us, adults planned the tangi.

For the first time in my life, I heard Koro's name spoken in the past tense.

Chapter 9: Hui's Marae

The next days did not feel like normal days.

Time became food trays, cups of tea, people arriving, people crying and people telling stories.

Koro was taken to the marae.

Pania's whānau brought her there too.

Mum explained that they would lie in the wharenuī so people could come and say goodbye.

I did not want to go inside.

Then I felt guilty for not wanting to.

Nan found me standing outside.

“You don't have to be brave every minute,” she said.

“I'm not scared.”

“Mm.”

Nan used the same sound Koro used when he did not believe me.

That nearly made me cry.

She took my hand.

“Come when you're ready.”

Inside, Koro looked like Koro and did not look like Koro.

That was the hardest part.

His hands were still his hands.

The little scar on his chin was still there.

But the room did not change when he entered it.

Because he would never enter a room again.

Pania lay nearby with flowers around her.

Dave sat beside her.

He had not shaved.

His eyes were red.

People touched his shoulder as they passed.

He barely moved.

I had never seen Dave cry before.

I did not see him cry then either.

He looked beyond crying.

Empty.

I sat beside Koro and held the hei tiki in my fist.

“You said to listen,” I whispered.

“I’m listening.”

Nothing answered.

Kiki crawled from my sleeve and settled beside the greenstone.

Her wings glowed for one second.

Then stopped.

I covered her with my hand before anyone saw.

During the tangi, people told stories about Ru.

Funny ones.

Embarrassing ones.

Stories about him fixing things that were not broken.

Stories about him carving late at night.

Stories about how he used to know more te reo than he admitted.

That last one made Nan look down.

One old man said, "Ru carried old knowledge. Some of it went quiet, but it never left him."

Dave's head snapped up.

Only for a second.

I saw it.

So did Pania's grandmother.

Their eyes met.

Then Dave looked away.

I did not know what it meant.

I only knew that everyone seemed to know pieces of Koro that I had never been told.

At night, I slept beside Mum and Ahi in a room full of cousins.

Krish slept in another room with the men.

Wai snored between two aunties like he owned the place.

I held Kiki beneath my blanket.

“I wish he told me everything,” I whispered.

Kiki clicked once.

It sounded like she agreed.

Chapter 10: The Story Everyone Believed

After the tangi, people tried to explain what had happened.

A farmer had found a calf near a damaged electric fence after the storm.

The ground was wet.

A wire had come down.

Koro and Pania had been nearby.

There had been lightning.

That was the story.

It was simple enough for newspapers.

Simple enough for neighbours.

Simple enough for adults to repeat when children were listening.

But it did not make sense to me.

Pania had left our house with Dave.

Koro had left with Nan.

Why would both of them end up in the same paddock?

Why was Dave at the hospital but not hurt?

Why did Nan say Koro had called her from somewhere else before the storm got worse?

Every time I asked, someone said, "Not now."

Not now became my least favourite words.

Mum tried hardest.

"Aroha, sometimes accidents are messy. We don't always know every detail."

"Dave knows."

Mum's face tightened.

"Dave lost Pania."

"I lost Koro."

The words came out sharper than I meant.

Mum flinched.

I wished I could pull them back.

"Sorry."

Mum sat beside me.

"You are allowed to be angry."

"At Dave?"

"At everything."

That was not permission to blame Dave.

But it was something.

Dave came to the house two days later.

He looked clean again.

Too clean.

His shirt was ironed.

His face was calm.

The empty look had not gone away.

Mum hugged him.

He stood stiffly, then hugged her back.

When he saw me, his eyes dropped to the hei tiki.

“You're still wearing that.”

I touched it.

“Koro gave it to me.”

“I know.”

“Do you know what happened?”

Mum said my name quietly.

Dave lifted a hand.

“It's okay.”

He sat across from me.

“There was a storm. Pania tried to help. Ru tried to help Pania.”

My heart thumped.

“Help how?”

Dave's mouth opened.

Then closed.

For the first time, something cracked through his calm face.

Pain.

Huge and fast.

Then it was gone.

“It doesn't matter,” he said.

“It matters to me.”

He stood.

“Some things are safer forgotten.”

He left before Mum could stop him.

Kiki flew down from the curtain rail and landed on my shoulder.

Her wings glowed.

Dave saw that too.

He paused at the door.

His face went completely still.

Then he walked out.

Chapter 11: Dave's New Idea

Dave went back to work quickly.

Too quickly, Mum said.

He had always worked in energy.

Power stations.

Electricity.

New systems that sounded boring when he explained them and expensive when he did not.

After Pania died, his work changed.

He started coming to Nan's house with notebooks full of diagrams.

He asked questions about Koro.

What did Ru know?

Did he ever talk about strange lights?

Did Pania ever mention feeling energy in plants, stone or water?

Nan stopped answering him.

"You're asking the wrong questions," she said once.

"I'm asking the only questions that matter."

"No. You're asking how to use it."

Dave's jaw tightened.

"Use what?"

Nan looked at me.

She realised I was listening.

"Aroha, go find Ahi."

"He's in the lounge."

"Go find him anyway."

That was rude.

I went as slowly as possible.

From the hallway I heard Dave say one word.

"Miharo."

I stopped.

Kiki, hidden in my hair, clicked softly.

Nan answered, "Don't."

"Pania died because nobody understood it."

"Pania died in a storm."

“Ru died trying to control something he had forgotten how to control.”

My stomach turned.

Nan's voice dropped.

“You don't know what happened.”

“I was there.”

Silence.

I forgot to breathe.

Dave had been there.

Mum came up behind me.

I jumped.

She saw my face.

“What are you doing?”

I pointed toward the room.

Mum heard Nan and Dave arguing.

She took my hand and led me away.

“Not your job,” she whispered.

“But he said he was there.”

Mum looked shocked.

Then worried.

“We'll talk to him.”

They did.

Later.

Without me.

Dave told them he had followed Pania because she ran out into the storm.

He said he found Ru trying to help her.

He said the rest was too terrible to talk about.

The adults accepted that.

Or pretended to.

I did not.

That night, I wrote MĪHARO on a piece of paper.

I did not know what it meant in the way Dave meant it.

I knew the ordinary word.

Amazing.

Wonderful.

But this was something else.

I held the paper beside the hei tiki.

The stone warmed.

Kiki's wings lit green.

I stared at both of them.

“Is that what you are?” I whispered.

Kiki clicked.

I had no idea whether that meant yes.

Chapter 12: The Night Kiki Wouldn't Sleep

A week later, Kiki started acting weird.

Weirder than a glowing cicada usually acted.

She would not leave my room.

She flew from the window to the wardrobe to the light shade and back again.

Click-click-click.

“Stop,” I whispered.

Click-click-click.

“Mum will hear you.”

She did not stop.

I shut the window.

Kiki attacked the curtain.

“What?”

Her wings flashed.

Green.

Green.

Green.

Then the hei tiki warmed against my chest.

I sat up.

The house was quiet.

Mum was asleep down the hall.

Ahi and Wai shared the next room.

Dad had gone back to the flat he was renting, but he came over most days now.

The hallway light was off.

I listened.

Nothing.

Kiki landed on my nose.

“Ow.”

She flew toward the door.

I opened it.

The hallway was dark.

At the far end, a floorboard creaked.

I froze.

“Mum?”

No answer.

Kiki shot forward.

Her glow became bright enough to see by.

A shape moved near the kitchen.

A man.

My heart jumped.

Then he stepped into the green light.

Uncle Dave.

I let out a breath.

“You scared me.”

Dave did not smile.

“Sorry.”

“Why are you here?”

“Your mum knows.”

That was a lie.

I did not know how I knew.

I just knew.

His left hand held a small black case.

Kiki began clicking wildly.

“What's that?”

Dave looked at her.

“Something that can help.”

“Help what?”

He stepped closer.

I stepped back.

“Aroha,” he said softly, “what happened to Pania can never happen again.”

“What happened to Pania?”

His face changed.

“Magic.”

The word sounded ugly in his mouth.

Kiki flew at him.

Dave swatted her away.

“Don't!”

I grabbed for her.

Dave caught my wrist.

Not hard.

But I could not pull away.

“You don't understand what you have,” he said.

“Let go.”

“I am trying to keep you safe.”

The black case clicked open.

Inside was something silver and fine, like a tiny piece of net made from wire.

Fear rushed through me.

I screamed for Mum.

At least, I tried to.

Dave pressed something cold against the side of my neck.

The hei tiki flashed.

Kiki hit the wall of green light around us.

The whole room went silent.

Not quiet.

Silent.

Like sound itself had disappeared.

Then everything went black.

Chapter 13: A Nightmare

I woke in my own bed.

Morning light was coming through the curtains.

For a few seconds I thought the night had been a dream.

Dave in the hallway.

The silver net.

Kiki glowing.

A cold touch at my neck.

Dream.

It had to be.

I sat up.

The hei tiki lay on my pillow.

I always slept with it on.

Now the cord had been unclipped.

Kiki sat beside it.

One wing looked bent.

“Kiki?”

No sound came out.

I frowned.

I tried again.

“Kiki.”

Nothing.

Not a whisper.

Not air.

My throat moved.

My mouth formed the word.

Silence.

I jumped out of bed.

I tried to shout.

Nothing.

I tried to cough.

A tiny breathy sound came out, but no voice.

Panic hit me so fast I felt sick.

I ran into the hallway.

Mum was in the kitchen making toast.

Ahi was arguing with Wai about a spoon.

Everything looked normal.

I grabbed Mum's arm.

"Morning," she said.

I opened my mouth.

Nothing.

Mum frowned.

"What is it?"

I tried again.

My eyes filled with tears.

Mum put down the knife.

"Aroha?"

I pointed at my throat.

I tried to say her name.

No sound.

Mum's face changed.

"Krish!" she yelled, forgetting Dad was not there.

Then she grabbed the phone.

Doctors.

Hospital.

Lights.

People asking me to say ahh.

People asking whether my throat hurt.

People telling me to relax.

I wanted to scream at every single one of them.

I could not.

They found no swelling.

No injury.

Nothing stuck.

Nothing wrong with my lungs.

One doctor said stress could do strange things.

Another said they needed more tests.

Nobody asked whether my uncle had come into my room
with a silver net.

I tried to write it down.

DAVE CAME LAST NIGHT.

Mum read it.

Her face went pale.

“Dave?”

I nodded.

HE DID SOMETHING.

Mum called him from the hospital.

Dave answered.

I could hear his voice through the receiver.

Calm.

Confused.

He said he had been at home all night.

He said I must have dreamed it.

Mum looked at me.

I shook my head so hard it hurt.

Kiki was hidden in the pocket of my jacket.

Her damaged wing trembled.

The hei tiki was cold.

I knew it had not been a dream.

But I was eight years old.

Dave was an adult.

And I had no voice.

Chapter 14: Nothing Comes Out

The tests went on for days.

Then weeks.

Every doctor had a different word.

Voice loss.

Aphonia.

Trauma.

Stress.

No one could explain why my throat worked but my voice did not.

I knew why.

I just could not prove it.

Mum believed that I believed Dave had been in my room.

That was not the same as believing Dave had been there.

Dad believed something had frightened me.

Nan believed more.

Hui came to sit beside my hospital bed after one appointment.

She waited until Mum went to get tea.

Then she took the hei tiki in her hand.

“Cold,” she said.

I nodded.

Nan looked at Kiki, who was hiding beneath my sleeve.

“And she hasn't glowed?”

I shook my head.

Nan's eyes sharpened.

She had seen Kiki before.

I realised that suddenly.

Or something like Kiki.

I grabbed my notebook.

YOU KNOW.

Nan sighed.

“I know there are things our whānau stopped talking about.”

WHAT THINGS?

“Things Ru should have told you.”

WHY DIDN'T HE?

Nan looked away.

“Because people forget when forgetting keeps them safe.”

That made me angry.

I wrote so hard the pencil tore the paper.

HE FORGOT AND NOW HE'S DEAD.

Nan closed her eyes.

I wished I had not written it.

Then she nodded.

“Yes.”

No pretending.

No telling me not now.

Just yes.

Nan squeezed my hand.

“So we do not forget you.”

She bought me a thick notebook with a red cover.

On the first page she wrote:

AROHA'S VOICE.

Then she handed me the pen.

I wrote underneath:

STILL HERE.

Nan smiled.

“Exactly.”

I could not sing.

I could not say Mum.

I could not say Ahi, Wai, Dad or Nan.

I could not say the Māori words Koro had taught me.

But I could write them.

I could remember them.

I could listen.

That night, I put the hei tiki back around my neck.

Kiki climbed onto the cord.

Her wing was healing.

I opened my red notebook.

I wrote one more sentence.

DAVE TOOK MY VOICE.

Then another.

I'M GOING TO GET IT BACK.

The Long Quiet

Chapter 15: Talking With My Hands

Being unable to talk did not make everybody else better at listening.

That was the first thing I learned.

Adults spoke louder at me.

Teachers asked Mum questions about me while I was standing right there.

Ahi tried to answer for me.

Wai just yelled my name until I looked at him.

I hated all of it.

Then a speech-language therapist showed me some New Zealand Sign Language.

The first sign I learned properly was THANK YOU.

The second was STOP.

The third was NOT THAT.

Ahi learned STOP immediately.

He ignored it immediately too.

Mum learned fastest.

Dad practised every night and got his fingers mixed up.

Nan pretended she was too old, then surprised me by remembering whole conversations.

“Hui!” Mum said.

Nan shrugged.

“I know people.”

School was harder.

My teacher put a little whiteboard on my desk.

At first I hated it.

Then I realised I could write things without asking permission to speak.

That was useful.

When Mr Harris asked, “Does anyone know eight times four?” I held up THIRTY-TWO.

When Caleb whispered that my answer was probably wrong, I rubbed it out and wrote YOU'RE PROBABLY WRONG.

Mr Harris tried not to laugh.

Maia sat beside me at lunch.

She had been in my class since Year Two and had never once understood the idea of personal space.

“Teach me something,” she said.

I showed her HELLO.

Then FRIEND.

Then BISCUIT.

“Important vocabulary,” she said.

I nodded.

By the end of the week Maia could sign WANT BISCUIT? from across the playground.

It was not perfect NZSL.

It was perfect friendship.

I still missed my voice.

I missed laughing loudly.

I missed calling Mum from another room.

I missed singing most of all.

But every time somebody understood my hands, my notebook or my face, the silence got a little smaller.

At home I wrote a new sentence in the red notebook.

DAVE TOOK ONE WAY I TALK.

Then I added:

HE DIDN'T TAKE ALL OF THEM.

Chapter 16: The Quiet Girl

People at school started calling me the quiet girl.

Not to my face.

Mostly.

I hated it.

I had never been quiet before.

I was the girl who sang in the backyard.

The girl who argued with Ahi about everything.

The girl Mum once banned from asking “why” for ten whole minutes.

My voice was quiet.

I was not.

One Monday our class had to give short talks about family.

Mr Harris told me I could skip mine.

I stared at him.

Then I wrote NO.

He looked embarrassed.

“Of course. Sorry.”

I made cardboard cards.

One had a photo of Mum, Ahi and Wai.

One had Dad standing beside a giant elephant statue in India from before I was born.

One had Nan and Koro at the beach.

I nearly left that one at home.

Instead I put it first.

Maia stood beside me and read my written sentences while I signed the parts I knew.

I told the class Mum's name was Rose.

I told them Dad's name was Krish and he came from India.

I told them my grandparents were Ru and Huiterangiora.

I told them Koro had died after my birthday.

Nobody whispered.

At the end, Mr Harris said, “Thank you, Aroha.”

Not thank you, Maia.

Not thank you, Mum.

Me.

That mattered.

After school, Maia asked about the hei tiki.

“You always touch it when you're nervous.”

I wrote, KORO GAVE IT TO ME.

“Before he died?”

I nodded.

She reached toward it, then stopped.

“Can I?”

I liked that she asked.

I let her touch the stone.

Nothing happened.

No warmth.

No glow.

Kiki sat inside my jacket pocket and stayed completely still.

Maia shrugged.

“Cool.”

Then she ran off to catch her bus.

I watched her go.

For one second, I wished the hei tiki had glowed.

I wanted somebody else to see it.

I wanted proof.

Then I remembered Dave.

Maybe proof was dangerous.

Chapter 17: Dad Comes Back Properly

Dad kept coming back.

Not all at once.

Not like the year away had never happened.

He came on Tuesdays to make dinner.

Then Saturdays to take us to the park.

Then he started showing up for school things.

Mum did not make it easy for him.

I was glad.

“You don't get to disappear and then become Super Dad because you bought samosas,” she told him once.

Dad nodded.

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“I'm learning.”

I was in the hallway again.

Apparently hallways were where I heard every serious conversation in our family.

Dad moved into a small rental across town.

Ahi liked that he had a television in his bedroom.

Mum did not.

Wai liked that Dad's neighbour had a dog.

I liked that Dad always had paper on the kitchen table for me to write on.

One evening he handed me a little notebook.

The cover had elephants on it.

Inside the first page he had written:

FOR THINGS YOU WANT TO SAY WHEN PAPER IS TOO
FAR AWAY.

I laughed without sound.

Dad smiled.

“I miss that.”

My smile disappeared.

He looked sorry.

“I mean your laugh. Not because you need to make it for me. I just miss it.”

I wrote, ME TOO.

Dad sat beside me.

For a while we said nothing.

Then I wrote DAVE.

Dad's face changed.

I wrote, DO YOU BELIEVE ME?

He read it twice.

"I believe something happened to you."

I shook my head hard.

That was not enough.

Dad rubbed his forehead.

"I don't know how Dave could do what you described. But I believe you saw him. I believe you were scared. And I believe we should not ignore that."

Better.

I wrote, HE HATES MAGIC.

Dad looked at me.

"Magic?"

I showed him Kiki.

She crawled onto my hand.

Dad stared.

Kiki's wings gave the tiniest green pulse.

Dad went very still.

“Rose needs to see that.”

I grabbed his wrist.

NO DAVE.

Dad nodded immediately.

“No Dave.”

That was the first grown-up promise about Mīharo I believed.

Chapter 18: Koro's Shed

Nan did not want anyone touching Koro's shed.

For three months it stayed exactly as he had left it.

Tools on hooks.

Wood shavings on the bench.

A mug with cold tea dried inside it.

Then one Saturday she opened the door.

“We can't leave it frozen forever,” she said.

Mum, Dad and Nan sorted boxes.

Ahi found three broken radios and asked if he could keep all of them.

The answer was no.

I found Koro's carving tools wrapped in an old towel.

Underneath them was a flat wooden box.

The lid had a whale carved into it.

Not a normal whale.

Its back was covered in tiny shapes.

Trees.

Houses.

Mountains.

I stopped breathing.

I had never seen Te Waka Tōhorā.

I did not even know the name yet.

But I knew the carving mattered.

I showed Nan.

Her face lost colour.

“Where was that?”

I pointed.

She took the box gently.

Inside were scraps of paper, an old photograph and a piece of woven fibre.

The photograph showed Koro as a young man.

Beside him stood two people I did not know.

Behind them was a tree so enormous the photograph looked fake.

On the back, Koro had written three words.

TE RĀKAU KURA.

I tapped the words.

Nan sat down.

“He kept this.”

I wrote, WHAT IS IT?

Nan shook her head.

“I don't know enough.”

I stared at her.

She sighed.

“That is the truth. Your koro's parents knew things. Ru knew some of them when he was young. Then life happened. People stopped talking. People moved. People were told old knowledge was nonsense.”

She held up the woven fibre.

“His mother used to say our people helped make a place that could not be taken from them.”

I wrote, WHERE?

“I don't know.”

Kiki landed on the whale carved into the box.

Her wings lit bright green.

The hei tiki warmed.

For the first time since Dave came into my room, a thin gold line appeared across the stone.

Nan gasped.

I touched it.

The world tilted.

For half a second I saw blue water in the sky.

A huge dark shape moving beneath stars.

Then it was gone.

I nearly fell over.

Nan caught me.

“What did you see?”

I opened my red notebook.

My hand shook as I wrote one word.

WHALE.

Chapter 19: Kiki's Map

Kiki decided the next clue belonged on my bedroom wall.

I did not agree.

She did not care.

At first I thought she was just flying around because cicadas are not famous for following instructions.

Then I noticed she landed in the same places every night.

Window.

Desk.

Wardrobe.

Hei tiki.

Window.

Desk.

Wardrobe.

Hei tiki.

I drew the pattern in my notebook.

It looked like nothing.

Ahi came in without knocking.

He studied the page upside down.

"It's a fish."

I shook my head.

"A dinosaur?"

I shook my head.

"New Zealand?"

I turned the notebook.

He was almost right.

The dots looked like part of a coastline.

I grabbed Koro's wooden box and placed the old photograph beside it.

On the edge of the photo was a mark scratched into the frame.

Same shape.

Kiki clicked proudly.

Ahi pointed at her.

"Did the bug do that?"

I nodded.

Ahi's eyes became huge.

"Can I have a magic bug?"

I wrote NO.

“Why?”

BECAUSE YOU'D LOSE IT.

“Would not.”

I pointed at his missing shoe.

He left.

I followed Kiki's pattern again.

The line ended at the hei tiki.

When I pressed the stone against the scratched mark in the photo, it warmed.

A sound appeared inside my head.

Not a voice.

A low call.

Long and deep.

Like a whale underwater.

I dropped the photo.

The sound stopped.

I pressed the hei tiki back against it.

The call returned.

Kiki's wings glowed.

I ran to get Nan.

She listened to my explanation.

Or watched it.

My hands moved so fast she made me start again.

When she understood, she looked frightened and relieved at the same time.

“Your koro used to talk about a call,” she said.

I wrote, FROM WHERE?

Nan looked toward the old photograph.

“Somewhere he thought he would never hear again.”

I touched the hei tiki.

The whale call moved through my head.

Far away.

Waiting.

Chapter 20: Rangi Energy

Dave got famous.

Not movie-star famous.

Business-page famous.

His company, Rangi Energy, announced a new research project about capturing wasted energy.

Mum read the newspaper article at breakfast.

“That's fast,” Dad said.

“Too fast,” Nan replied.

I grabbed the paper.

There was a photo of Dave standing beside a silver machine.

It had a mesh pattern on the front.

My stomach dropped.

I pointed at it.

Mum frowned.

“Aroha?”

I ran to my room and brought back the red notebook.

SAME.

Mum looked at the photograph again.

“Same as what?”

I wrote DAVE'S NET.

Dad leaned closer.

Nan went very still.

Mum folded the paper.

“We are not accusing anyone based on a photograph.”

I slapped my palm on the table.

I hated that sentence.

Mum looked at me.

Then at the notebook.

Her face softened.

“But we are not ignoring you either.”

That was better.

Dave came over that afternoon.

Mum had called him.

He acted annoyed, not nervous.

“It's conductive mesh. Thousands of devices use it.”

Dad asked, “Were you in Aroha's room that night?”

“No.”

“Did you ever test anything on her?”

Dave's eyes flashed.

“What kind of question is that?”

I held up my notebook.

YOU DID.

He looked at me.

For a second I saw anger.

Then something colder.

“You had a nightmare.”

Kiki flew from behind the curtain.

Her wings blazed green.

The lamp flickered.

The radio switched itself on.

Dave stepped back.

Mum stared at Kiki.

This time there was no pretending.

Dad whispered, “There.”

Dave recovered first.

“That is exactly the problem.”

Nan stood.

“Get out.”

“You think this is harmless?” Dave said. “You think what happened to Pania was harmless?”

Mum's face went white.

“Leave.”

Dave looked at me one last time.

“One day you'll understand I'm trying to stop this hurting anyone else.”

He walked out.

Kiki's light faded.

Nobody spoke for a long time.

Then Mum sat beside me.

“I believe you,” she said.

Three words.

I had waited months for them.

Chapter 21: The Song Without Sound

After Mum believed me, I expected everything to get easier.

It did not.

Believing Dave had hurt me did not tell us how to fix it.

The doctors still saw nothing.

Nan still did not know enough.

Koro was still gone.

My voice was still missing.

But now we had rules.

Dave was not allowed inside the house.

I was never left alone with him.

Dad changed the window locks.

Mum kept copies of every medical report.

Nan kept Koro's wooden box hidden.

And I kept practising.

Not speech.

The song.

Every night I stood in front of the mirror and mouthed the words Koro taught me.

No sound.

I signed what I could.

I wrote the rest.

Kiki sat on the mirror frame.

The hei tiki stayed warm.

One night something strange happened.

I reached the part of the waiata that always made Koro close his eyes.

My throat tightened.

The hidden place where my voice should have been felt like a locked door.

I pushed.

No sound came out.

But the lamp glowed green.

Kiki's wings opened.

The curtains lifted even though the window was closed.

A tiny gold line ran across the hei tiki.

I stopped.

Everything went normal.

I tried again.

Same thing.

My voice was not gone.

Not completely.

Something was catching it.

Turning it into something else.

Energy.

I remembered Dave's newspaper article.

Capturing wasted energy.

My hands went cold.

I wrote in the red notebook:

HE DIDN'T DESTROY IT.

Then:

HE'S TAKING IT.

Kiki clicked.

I stared at myself in the mirror.

Eight years old.

No voice.

Very angry.

I wrote one final sentence.

THEN I CAN TAKE IT BACK.

The Call

Chapter 22: A Sound in the Hallway

The first sign that something was coming was not the whale call.

It was the hallway light.

Every night at exactly 2:17, it turned on.

Nobody touched the switch.

Dad replaced the bulb.

Mum checked the wiring.

Nan told them both to stop wasting time.

"It's not the light," she said.

"Then what is it?" Mum asked.

Nan looked at me.

I held up my red notebook.

MĪHARO?

Nan nodded slowly.

At 2:17 the next morning, I waited.

Kiki waited too.

The light clicked on.

The hei tiki warmed.

Then I heard the whale.

Not through my ears.

Inside my chest.

A low call rolled through me.

Kiki's wings opened.

Green light filled the hallway.

Ahi appeared in his doorway wearing dinosaur pyjamas.

“Cool.”

Mum ran out behind him.

She stopped when she saw Kiki.

Nobody could pretend anymore.

Dad came from the lounge.

Nan stepped out of the spare room as if she had been expecting this all night.

The whale called again.

I grabbed my notebook.

CAN YOU HEAR IT?

Mum shook her head.

Dad too.

Nan touched the hei tiki.

Her eyes filled with tears.

“Not the way you can.”

I wrote, WHAT IS IT?

Nan whispered, “A path.”

“To where?” Mum asked.

Nan looked at Koro's old wooden box on the table.

“I think Ru was trying to leave us enough pieces to remember.”

The hallway light went out.

The whale call faded.

Ahi yawned.

“Can we remember tomorrow?”

Mum laughed even though she looked frightened.

“Yes.”

We went back to bed.

I did not sleep.

Somewhere, something had heard me even though I had no voice.

For the first time, silence felt less like a wall.

More like a door.

Chapter 23: Wai and the Open Gate

The day my voice came back was not magical at first.

It was annoying.

Wai had learned how to open the back gate.

This was a terrible achievement.

Mum told everyone to make sure the latch clicked.

Ahi forgot.

Of course he did.

Dad was carrying groceries in.

Mum was on the landline with Nan.

I was sitting on the front step drawing Kiki.

Then I saw Wai.

He was toddling down the driveway.

The gate behind him was open.

A delivery van was reversing from the neighbour's drive.

The driver could not see him.

Everything inside me went cold.

I ran.

I tried to shout Wai's name.

Nothing.

The van kept moving.

Wai stopped in the middle of the driveway to look at a puddle.

I pushed against the locked place in my throat.

Harder than I ever had.

Pain flashed behind my ears.

The hei tiki burned hot.

Kiki exploded into green light.

And a sound tore out of me.

Not a word.

Not even close.

A raw, cracked scream.

The driver slammed on the brakes.

Dad dropped the grocery bags.

I reached Wai and grabbed him.

The van stopped well away from us.

Mum ran outside.

“Aroha!”

I was shaking.

Wai started crying because I had scared him.

I held him anyway.

Mum dropped to her knees beside us.

“You made a sound.”

I touched my throat.

It hurt.

I tried again.

Nothing.

But Mum was crying now.

Dad was crying too, although he pretended he had dust in his eye.

Ahi said, “I knew she could do it.”

Nobody reminded him the gate had been his fault.

The hei tiki glowed so brightly I could see green through my fingers.

Kiki flew in circles over our heads.

Far beyond our house, far beyond any road I knew, the
scream travelled through something I could not see.

Across forest.

Across water.

Across a path hidden from ordinary people.

Somewhere, a very large man in gumboots stopped what
he was doing.

He had been waiting for a call.

At last, he had heard one.

Chapter 24: Three Knocks

Three nights later, someone knocked on the front door.

Three slow knocks.

BANG.

BANG.

BANG.

Dad looked through the curtain.

Then looked again.

“Rose?”

Mum came over.

“What?”

Dad pointed.

“There's a giant at the door.”

He was not actually a giant.

Probably.

He was just the biggest person I had ever seen.

Broad shoulders.

Huge beard.

Long coat.

Mud-covered gumboots.

He looked like he had walked out of a forest and forgotten to stop.

Mum did not open the door.

“Who are you?” she called.

The man leaned closer to the glass.

“Matua Grog.”

Ahi whispered, “That's a weird name.”

The man clearly heard him.

“I've heard worse.”

I liked him immediately.

Mum did not.

“What do you want?”

Grog looked past her.

Straight at me.

Kiki flew from my shoulder.

His face softened.

“There you are.”

Dad stepped in front of me.

“No.”

“I haven't asked anything yet.”

“You're looking at my daughter like you came to collect her.”

Grog scratched his beard.

“Fair.”

Mum folded her arms.

“Start again.”

So he did.

He told us he was a kaitiaki.

He told us he had known Ru.

Nan, who had arrived ten minutes earlier because Mum called her in a panic, nearly dropped her cup.

“You knew Ru?”

“When he was younger.”

Grog looked at the hei tiki.

“And I know that.”

I grabbed my notebook.

TE RĀKAU KURA?

Grog read it.

His eyebrows rose.

“You've been digging through Ru's things.”

Nan said, “Answer her.”

Grog nodded.

“Yes. Te Rākau Kura is real.”

Nobody moved.

Then Ahi whispered, “Told you magic was real.”

Grog smiled.

“Magic is one word for it.”

He looked at me.

“Ru's word was Mīharo.”

The hei tiki warmed.

Grog's expression became serious.

“And if I found you, Dave can find you too.”

Chapter 25: The Place on the Whale

Grog stayed at our kitchen table until midnight.

Mum asked questions.

Dad asked more.

Nan corrected him twice.

Ahi fell asleep with his head on the table.

Wai slept in Mum's lap.

I wrote until my hand hurt.

Grog told us about Te Waka Tōhorā.

A sanctuary.

A place hidden from the ordinary world.

A place built by people who knew Mīharo could be lost if nobody protected it.

“Built on a whale?” Dad asked.

Grog rubbed his nose.

“That explanation gets complicated.”

“Is it on a whale or not?”

“Yes.”

Dad sat back.

“Right.”

Grog explained that Te Waka Tōhorā carried forests, homes, markets, waterways and a school called Te Rākau Kura.

I pointed at Koro's photograph.

“Yes,” Grog said. “That tree.”

Nan covered her mouth.

Grog told us Ru had been there when he was young.

Ru's parents had known the sanctuary too.

Long before that, people in our whakapapa had helped shape it.

A master carver.

A master weaver.

People whose names had become faint on Earth but were remembered there.

I wrote, WHY DID KORO LEAVE?

Grog looked at Nan.

Nan looked down.

“Because people make choices,” Grog said. “And sometimes they think they can come back later.”

I wrote, WHY ME?

Grog did not answer straight away.

Finally he said, “Because there are old words about someone from Ru's line.”

Mum's face hardened.

“No prophecies.”

Grog blinked.

“I didn't write it.”

“She's eight.”

“I know.”

“She's not saving anybody.”

Grog looked at me, not Mum.

“She already called across a closed path with a stolen voice.”

The room went quiet.

He continued gently.

“The old words say a child will come from two worlds and carry balance when both sides try to pull too hard.”

Dad said, “Two worlds?”

Grog glanced at him.

“More than one meaning, I expect.”

I thought of Mum's Māori whānau.

Dad's Indian family.

Earth.

Mīharo.

Voice.

Silence.

I did not feel like a prophecy.

I felt like an eight-year-old in pyjamas.

I wrote, DO I HAVE TO GO?

Grog shook his head.

“Not tonight.”

Mum relaxed a tiny bit.

Then Grog added, “Tonight, all of you have to disappear.”

Chapter 26: Packing to Vanish

There is no sensible way to pack for disappearing.

Mum tried anyway.

“Three changes of clothes each.”

Dad said, “What about school?”

“Krish.”

“Right. Disappearing first.”

Nan packed tea.

Of course she did.

Ahi packed a broken radio, two toy dinosaurs and one sock.

Mum unpacked all of them.

Wai carried a saucepan around until someone gave him a biscuit.

I packed my red notebook, Dad's elephant notebook, Koro's wooden box and the photograph of Te Rākau Kura.

The hei tiki stayed around my neck.

Kiki stayed on me.

Grog watched from the doorway.

“Travel light,” he said.

Nan pointed at his enormous pack.

“You first.”

Grog did not mention travelling light again.

Before dawn, we left.

I stood on the front step and looked at our house.

Mum had not washed yesterday's cups.

Ahi's bike lay on the lawn.

One of Wai's socks was stuck under the couch.

Everything looked like we would be back after lunch.

Grog said that was good.

“Let ordinary people think ordinary things.”

We drove in two cars.

Grog gave directions that made no sense.

Left at a road with no sign.

Right after a bridge.

Straight through a patch of mist even though Dad said
the road ended there.

It did end there.

Then it did not.

The mist opened.

A narrow road continued through thick forest.

Tall trees closed around us.

The radio lost signal.

Dad's watch stopped.

Ahi thought this was excellent.

Mum thought the opposite.

After another hour, Grog raised his hand.

We stopped beside an old wooden gate.

There was nothing beyond it except bush.

Then Grog touched a carved mark in the post.

The air shimmered.

A valley appeared.

Not slowly.

One second forest.

Next second homes, gardens, water and warm lights
hidden between the trees.

People moved along paths below.

No roads.

No power poles.

No signs.

Mum whispered, "What is this?"

Grog smiled.

"Earth Sanctuary."

Kiki flew into the air.

Her wings blazed green.

For the first time since Koro died, the hei tiki felt completely warm.

Chapter 27: Safe, For Now

The Earth Sanctuary smelled like wet leaves and woodsmoke.

It was not a castle.

I was slightly disappointed.

It was better.

Small houses sat between trees.

Gardens grew everywhere.

A stream ran through the middle of the valley.

People looked ordinary until they did not.

A woman carried three baskets without touching them.

A boy stood beside the stream and the water curled around his feet without wetting his shoes.

An old man waved at Grog and a flock of birds changed direction at the same time.

Ahi stared.

“Can I do that?”

Mum said, “No.”

Grog said, “Maybe.”

Mum glared at him.

We were given a cabin.

Two rooms.

A kitchen.

No telephone.

No television.

Ahi called it prison.

Then he discovered the rope swing.

He changed his mind.

A healer examined me.

She did not put a camera down my throat.

She held her hands near my neck and closed her eyes.

The hei tiki became cold.

Kiki hissed.

I had never heard a cicada hiss before.

The healer opened her eyes.

“There is something woven through her voice pathway.”

Mum grabbed my hand.

“Can you remove it?”

“Not safely. Not yet.”

I felt like the floor dropped.

The healer knelt so we were eye to eye.

“But your voice is still yours.”

I stared at her.

She touched her chest.

“I can feel it pushing back.”

I opened my notebook.

DAVE IS USING IT.

She read the words.

“Then we will learn how he is doing that.”

Not maybe.

Not you're imagining things.

We will.

I almost cried.

That evening, Mum sat beside me by the stream.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

I frowned.

“For not believing you straight away.”

I leaned against her.

She kissed my hair.

“I'm learning.”

That was what Dad had said too.

Maybe grown-ups were not supposed to know everything.

Maybe the good ones were the ones who kept learning.

Across the water, Grog watched us.

When Mum went inside, he came over.

“Tomorrow I show you the awa.”

I wrote, WHY?

Grog's eyes moved to the hei tiki.

“Because something on the other side has been waiting for you.”

Chapter 28: The Call of Te Waka Tōhorā

The awa was wider than I expected.

It ran behind the sanctuary, deep and dark beneath the trees.

Mist floated over the surface.

Grog took me there before sunrise.

Mum came too.

So did Dad, Nan, Ahi and Wai.

Nobody trusted Grog enough to let me go anywhere alone yet.

I approved.

We stood on the bank.

Nothing happened.

Ahi whispered, “This is boring.”

Then the water moved.

A circle spread across the surface.

Another.

A pale shape rose from underneath.

Mum grabbed my shoulder.

A whale calf broke the surface.

A tiny whale calf.

Tiny compared with a normal whale.

Still big enough that two people could probably sit inside it.

Its skin was translucent.

Light moved beneath it like stars under glass.

Wai said, "Fish."

Grog looked offended.

"Tohorā."

The calf floated higher.

Not swimming.

Floating.

It turned one bright eye toward me.

The hei tiki flared green.

Kiki flew from my shoulder and circled above the water.

The whale gave a soft call.

This time everyone heard it.

Dad whispered something in Hindi.

Nan began to cry.

“Ru told me,” she said. “Years ago. I thought it was a story.”

Grog stood beside me.

“Her name is Rere.”

The whale calf opened her mouth.

Inside was not a mouth.

There was a smooth glowing space, like a little pod.

Ahi gasped.

“Can I go?”

Mum said, “No.”

He sighed.

Grog looked at Mum.

“Not today.”

Mum narrowed her eyes.

“Good.”

“But soon.”

Not good.

Mum turned to me.

I could see the argument in her face before she said anything.

Fear.

Love.

No.

Maybe.

I opened my red notebook.

I wrote slowly.

I WANT TO KNOW.

Mum read it.

Then I added:

I WANT MY VOICE BACK.

Dad put his hand on Mum's shoulder.

Nan touched the hei tiki Koro had given me.

Grog said nothing.

He let us decide.

After a long time, Mum nodded.

“We learn everything first.”

Grog smiled.

“Agreed.”

Rere closed her mouth and sank back into the awa.

The last thing I saw was her glowing eye beneath the water.

Grog looked at me.

“Te Waka Tōhorā has heard you, Aroha.”

My voice was still trapped.

Koro was still gone.

Dave was still out there.

But I was not alone.

I was eight years old.

I had a glowing cicada, a singing stone, a family that finally believed me and a whale waiting in a river.

For now, that was enough.

MĪHARO · BOOK 1

NGĀ WHAKAWHITINGA

Transitions

Aroha's eighth birthday begins with a precious gift from Koro and a discovery that changes everything.

When a waiata awakens something extraordinary, wonder gives way to a storm, loss and unanswered questions. With her whānau and a glowing cicada named Kiki beside her, Aroha must find new ways to communicate and uncover what happened to her voice. Beyond the familiar world, a hidden sanctuary is calling.

Niva Gram

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