On the porch, in the thickening darkness, something stirred. A shape, darker than the rest, eased flutteringly from the shadows and drifted to the verandah's edge, where it poised, watching.

"… them screech moreporks are bad news, bro. My nanny says if they hang around your house, someone living there's gonna die. I'm not saying one of you fullahs is … but … she's never wrong, bro."

As soon as his family pulls up outside the old whare, Rewi knows something is wrong. It's not just that the house is a crumbling wreck, there is something darker. Rewi feels it but can't make sense of it.

Then the nightmares begin …

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When the Kēhua Calls

Kingi McKinnon

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How do you tell someone
that something's wrong,
when you don't even know
what it is yourself?

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Kingi McKinnon

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Dear Reader

As a Māori (Te Arawa, Tainui), I have written this book with the intention of giving non-Māori an insight into various aspects of our culture. Many of the practices I describe herein are of primary importance to Māoritanga. For instance, 'whakapapa' (one's ancestry) is, and always will be, one of the most important factors of being Māori. To us, identity is of utmost importance.

We, as a spiritual people, hold deep reverence for the many spirits we believe guide us throughout our daily lives. The tramping of the house; wai ora (the spring of life); karakia; mākutu and Māori illness (mate moe), are all very real, and are an integral part of our culture. The rituals carried out within this book are also real and occur as I have written.

Much of this book was written from my own experience. Like Rewi, I was born in the city and moved 'home' to a small place in the backblocks as a young boy. Until then, I had been unaware of my culture, but there were many marae in the area that we moved to, and the local school in those days was regarded as a 'Māori school'. The first tangi I ever attended, and the ensuing tramping of the house was an experience that will stay in my mind forever.

It was this that inspired me to write this book.

Kingi McKinnon

PROLOGUE

I remember the very first time I laid eyes on the old whare, I hated it. It wasn't because of the way it looked, all rotting and crumbling. No. There was heaps more to it than that. I think it was the vibes mainly. Unwelcoming. Hostile. And I'd picked up on them the moment our car left the highway and rolled onto the rain-scarred metal road that led us up here.

I'm like that, you see. Spooky. Like my great-grandfather, Kaitangata. He was a tohunga, Mum says – a kind of 'witch doctor'. He was wise, powerful, and he could heal the sick and soothe the dying. He

knew of things that happened long before his time; and things that were about to happen, even before they did.

And, yep, I've got to admit, that does sound a lot like me, all right.

1

TAHI

"Well – there it is, you kids," Mum said, as our beat-up old Falcon trundled to a dusty halt outside the place. "Say hi to your new home."

She peered over into the back seat where Megan lay sprawled on the seat beside me, and her eyes softened, as always. Not that anyone would blame her. At only four and a half years old, Megan's a real cutie. She's got the most awesome nature.

"Just look at the little mite, Wati," Mum crooned to Dad. "Wake her up, Rewi ... and please, wipe that sour expression off your face."

My lip curled even more. I couldn't help it. The scowl had permanently lodged there weeks ago, when she'd told me we were moving. I'd never wanted to leave the city ... or my school, or my friends either. In my brief thirteen years it was the only life I'd ever known, and I was happy there.

I did understand why we had to move, though. After sixteen faithful years working for the railway, Dad had been made redundant and we were barely given a fortnight to find a new home.

That's when Mum decided we'd come back to this property she'd long ago inherited, here in Waikiore.

As Dad hauled a now giggling Megan from her carseat, I climbed reluctantly from the car, my fists clenched. Outside, the vibes felt stronger; even more overwhelming than when I'd first sensed them, and I felt apprehensive. Like something was about to happen, but I wasn't sure what. Or when.

But at last the feeling passed, and my resentful gaze fastened on the object of my displeasure.

Its blank, glassless windows stared right back. Like a pair of haunted eyes, I remember thinking at the time. And between them, wide and cavernous, its

gaping portal yawned like a toothless mouth.

I felt a tug at my jacket and jumped slightly.

"Cheer up, sweetheart," Mum pleaded. Her eyes were soft and glistening and I knew my approval meant the world to her. "I know it doesn't look much right now," she sighed, "but just you wait. As soon as Dad and Uncle Reuben get done with it, it's going to look fabulous. Isn't it, darling?" she said to Dad.

"You bet your blinkin' bootees it will," Dad promised. "A new roof, new weatherboards, and a darned good lick of paint. That's all the old girl needs. And once Mum and Aunty Wiki weave their own bit of magic into it ... hoohoo! She'll be a right little castle, boy. You just wait and see. It'll all be yours one day, too."

I turned huffily, trying to hide my distaste. Who, in their right mind, would want to inherit a dump like this? It wasn't just the house – the whole place was the pits. The yard was overrun with blackberry and gorse; rye grass and pig fern reached almost to the windowsills, and sprawling macrocarpa towered all along the fence line directly behind the house, blotting out the sun.

Sighing, Dad hoisted Megan up onto his shoulders

and dragged open the rickety gate. “Well, no sense in dawdling around out here, I s’pose. Let’s just take a quick gander inside, then head on back to Auntie’s for a feed.”

2

RUA

Inside, it looked even worse. Most of the roof at the back had caved in; timber was missing from walls and ceiling, and there were piles of animal droppings everywhere. Birds, possums – even sheep – had left their calling cards. The whole place reeked of dampness and mould.

"Jeez, someone's had a darned good tutu around in there," Dad grumbled when we were back outside again. "Taps, doorknobs – even the blimmin' bathtub's missing. Still … s'pose we can't moan too much." He shrugged. "At least the foundation's

still there, and it's damned solid."

"You can't expect it to be the same as when we left," Mum reasoned. "Anyway, regardless of what's missing, there's still the thirty acres."

She settled onto what remained of the porch and sighed happily. "Oh, I can't wait till it's all finished. We can get a house cow – a few chickens – maybe even a couple of horses as well." Her eyes were distant and dreamy and she didn't seem in any hurry to be going anywhere. "We're going to manage just fine," she vowed.

For a short time everything was quiet, save for the monotonous drone of cicadas from the distant bush.

"We grew up here, you know," she finally said, breaking the silence. She dragged me down beside her, forcing me to listen. "Your father only lived about a mile up the road." She thought hard for a moment. "Now, let me see. I think I was only four when Mum died and my Aunty Mihi took me in and raised me right here. I was her pet," she giggled, "because I was named after her. It made life easier for Dad though. He still had my older brothers – Manu and Rangi – and Wiki as well. They were all big enough to fend for themselves, though."

"Hey, what about that old fullah?" Dad suddenly remembered. "You know, old ... um ... Tangatakino. That's it. Tangatakino. Jeez, how the heck could I have ever forgotten his name? He used to scare the living daylights out of me when I was a nipper, that fullah."

"Yes, he was pretty weird," Mum agreed. "Even our animals wouldn't go near him. Aunty was the only one I knew who was relaxed around him." Her brow knitted. "I don't know how the heck he came to be here. I just got up one morning and there he was ... rocking away in Aunty's chair in front of the fire as though he'd been there all his life. Aunty was like a magnet to those lame ducks – but she'd never turn them away. She let him live in the shed out back."

"Ae, he was a strange one, all right," Dad agreed. "Didn't mix with anybody. He wasn't from round here, was he, Mihi?"

Mum shook her head. "He wasn't from anywhere. Aunty said he didn't even know his own whaka-papa."

"That's sad. It's a blimmin' shame when you don't even know your own ancestry," Dad said. "Not only do you not have an identity, but you don't belong

anywhere, either. Where the heck did they bury the old coot, anyway? I don't remember any tangi."

"Because there wasn't one," said Mum. "Wiki said he stayed on for a while and turned really nasty when he found out Aunty had left the place to me. He wouldn't even let anyone in the gate. Anyway, apparently he went walkabout one day and that was the last anyone saw of him. They thought maybe he'd had an accident, so they checked out all the likely places, but never found anything. He must have just moved on, poor beggar."

A chill evening mist was rolling in from the creek towards us. I shivered.

"It's cold," Megan whimpered, echoing my thoughts. As usual, she'd been so quiet and uncomplaining, I'd almost forgotten she was there.

"Of course it is. I'm sorry, honey," Mum apologised. "You make so much noise, I forgot all about you." Giggling, she scooped Megan up and hugged her tightly. "Ah well. Come on, Mr Wati Matenga," she said to Dad. "It's time we were getting this kōtiro home for a good hot bath and some kai."

As the powerful V6 engine sprang obediently into life, Rewi relaxed, sighing. The car lurched slightly, then bumped out onto the roadway and he turned in his seat to glare back hatefully.

On the porch, in the thickening darkness, something stirred. A shape, darker than the rest, eased flutteringly from the shadows and drifted to the verandah's edge, where it poised, watching.

A pale moon, bloated and silent, popped suddenly from the clouds and he gasped fearfully. In the glimmering light he could see it clearly now: the spectre, its eyes hate-filled and glaring, the slash of a mouth cruelly twisted.

Rewi blinked in disbelief, then blinked again. And in that very instant it was gone. In its place – slowly dwindling – just a shimmering mist of swirling haze.

3

TORU

I didn't tell Mum and Dad what I'd seen when we got back to Aunty Wiki's. I didn't think they'd believe me. Besides, the further away we got from the place, the harder I found it to believe myself.

I told Pauly though, and he just grunted. Pauly's my cousin, and we're the same age. We were sharing his room until our own place was ready.

"Might've been a kēhua, man," he said, as cool as anything. "There's heaps of them round here, you know."

When I asked what a kēhua was, he snorted:

"A ghost, man! Spooks. The bogeyman. Jeez, don't tell me you haven't heard of them."

I shook my head – not because I hadn't heard of them, but because he really bummed me out sometimes. I'd never met anyone like him. He didn't even speak proper English half the time and was thick as, but because I didn't know much about Māori things, he treated me like I was the dumbo.

"'Course I've heard of them," I snapped. "I've just never heard them called by that name before, that's all."

"Well, not everyone can see them, you know, e hoa. You must have the gift. What did it look like?"

"Well … it was sort of like a … a man," I said, trying hard to remember. "An old man."

"Yeah? Out in the sticks – where my old man comes from – he reckons they know when someone's gonna die, coz they can hear kēhua calling from the bush. Sort of like a karanga, eh. Ghostly and wailing. Hooooo. Freaky, man. They're the spirits of our tūpuna, he reckons."

I squirmed slightly. Spooky stories have that effect on me.

"Hey – you ever been to tramp a house?" he asked, suddenly.

"N-no," I stammered. I didn't have the slightest idea of what he was talking about.

"E hoa, you city dudes are useless, man," Pauly sniffed. "Right. I'll tell you what they do. Kēhua know when someone's gonna die, eh, and they stay with that person till it happens. Then they guide their soul right back to Hawaiki where all us Māoris come from. That's what my old man reckons. Sometimes, though, some of the kēhua get to like where they are, eh, and don't want to leave. That's why you gotta tramp the house ... Hey! Giz a bit of room, man," he suddenly yelped. "You're just about shoving me through the blimmin' wall."

"Okay, don't get off your bike. I'm sorry, all right? Jeez, talk about touchy. So … so what do you actually do when you tramp the house then?"

"Well, after the tangi, everyone goes back to the tūpāpaku's whare, eh," he growled. "Tūpāpaku's the name for a dead person. Then everyone tramps through every single room in the house. At the same time, they do a haka to scare off the spirits, while the minister or tohunga sprinkles holy water and chants karakia. That way you get rid of them and they can't harm anyone else who's living there, see."

Pauly told me heaps that night. I listened … and listened … till we finally drifted into oblivion.

4

WHĀ

It was hardly even daylight when Dad woke me next morning. As usual, Pauly had already gone with his father to check the stock.

"You should've let him sleep," Aunty Wiki chided as I stumbled bleary-eyed into the kitchen. "He's supposed to be on holiday."

"Nope. It's time he got a taste of farm life," Dad said firmly. "We're making a start on the whare today and there's plenty he can do to help."

My two younger cousins, Kuini and Hana, came in from feeding the chooks. Behind them trailed Megan, cuddling a fluffy grey kitten.

"Look!" she cried happily. "I'm allowed to keep him."

"Excellent. What's his name?" I grinned at her.

"It's Hōhā," she giggled, "coz he's a nuisance and wants to play all the time."

"Right. You fullahs go and help Rick and Tama load the truck," Dad told Pauly and me when we'd finished breakfast. "Kia tere. They'll show you what to do."

Pauly's older brothers were big and muscly from hard work and rugby league, and they tossed everything around as though it were a load of feathers: heavy timber, fence posts, chicken netting, roofing iron.

"You little turds better keep back from the sideline or you'll get caught up in our slipstream," teased Rick.

The kai was loaded on next. Everything we'd need for the two weeks Dad reckoned it would take to finish the job: sacks of potatoes, pumpkin and kamokamo; wild pork and venison from the freezer.

"Looks like you fullahs are just going out there to eat," Mum joked as she loaded some of the more delicate supplies, like eggs and home baking.

"You've gotta look after the old puku, you know,

Mihi," Uncle Reuben said, rubbing his rather ample stomach.

"Aue. That puku of yours is the best looked after thing on this planet," scoffed Aunty Wiki. "Now, don't forget to take some cabbages."

"What for? There's a creek full of watercress out there, woman," Uncle barked.

By mid-morning, we were fully laden and ready to roll. There wasn't much room left on the back, but Pauly, Rick and I – and my little fox terrier, Jacko – all managed to squeeze in somewhere.

With Tama at the wheel and Dad and Uncle squashed into the cab beside him, we set off for the whare.

Nothing had changed. Everything looked just as bleak and as miserable as it had earlier.

"We'll take that front fence right out," Dad said, as he climbed from the cab, "then we can drive the truck right up to the whare."

"Right. You heard the man," Uncle Reuben bellowed to the boys. "Let's give it the works."

"You come and help too, e hoa," Dad called as I

made to race off with Jacko. “You didn’t come here to play with no dog, you know.”

5

RIMA

It was late afternoon by the time Mum, Aunty and the girls arrived. They'd decided to come out just for the weekend. The place looked as though it had been hit by a cyclone. Rotten posts, old weatherboards and rusted iron lay strewn on the grass, and inside we'd already begun ripping out the wallboards.

"You men certainly haven't been mucking around," Mum said, as she poured us all a drink of cordial.

"Nope," Uncle agreed, slurping his drink down greedily. "We've only got these young fullahs for the holidays, and it won't be long before Rick and Tama

will have to go back fencing, so we have to make the most of it while we've got 'em."

By the end of the day, I was tired and filthy. I'd never worked so hard in all my life. I had dust and cobwebs through my hair, blisters on my hands and feet, and – after staying awake half the night before – I felt I could nod off on a bed of nails.

The cold river and the feel of an eel slithering against my leg soon revived me though, and before long I was splashing about like an otter.

As Uncle Reuben had said, the river teemed with watercress and the juicy fat stalks popped like firecrackers as we snapped some off for dinner.

Bedded down that night in the marquee we'd brought with us, I was warm and comfortable. My mattress was soft, my puku full of good kai, and right then the city and my friends there were but distant memories.

All around, between lulls in the men's snoring, I could hear the others murmuring in quiet conversation: Mum and Aunty reliving the old days, Hana and Kuini softly giggling, and Rick and Tama engrossed in their favourite topic – sport.

On the mattress beside me, Pauly breathed deeply. I sighed, wishing it could last forever.

Then my blankets were suddenly pushed aside and I jumped, startled, as Megan and her purring friend crept in beside me. "It's too noisy over there," she grizzled. "We can't get to sleep."

"I hope Hōhā doesn't snore as loud as Dad and Uncle," I joked, as I pulled the blankets over them. But Megan's eyes were already closing, and within minutes she was sound asleep.

I watched her for a while, wrapping an arm around her so she could cuddle into my shoulder. She smelt fresh and clean, like shampoo. She's everybody's pet, Megan. She gets away with murder. Not just because she's cute and lovable, but because she's a miracle baby as well.

Mum had had big problems during my birth, and doctors told her she wouldn't be able to have any more kids. They'd forgotten to tell Megan though, and one month after my ninth birthday, she arrived. She wasn't the world's most perfect baby; she had a harelip, a cleft palate, and her left foot was badly deformed.

It took time, and heaps of surgery, but the doctors eventually put it right. If it wasn't for a slight scar

on her upper lip, you wouldn't suspect a thing. And through it all, she barely whimpered or made a fuss … and that, I reckon, is what makes her special.

6

ONO

"Oh, it's looking fabulous," Mum gushed, when she returned a week later. "I can't believe you guys have done so much in such a short time."

With a shiny new roof, new weatherboards and windows, as well as a rebuilt porch, even I had to admit the whare looked pretty good.

"Yep, and now the electrician's hooked us up to the power lines, we can make a start on the inside," Dad said. "Hoo, thing's are gonna be happening a whole lot faster now that we can plug in the old power tools, eh Reuben?"

"We've been lucky with the weather," Uncle said, "and while it's still holding, I reckon Rick and Tama should make a start with the painting."

"Can Pauly and me help too?" I pleaded, already knowing the answer.

"You fullahs just carry on pulling nails out of that old timber and stacking it," Dad ordered. "Let us worry about who does the painting."

By Friday of the second week, the whare was all but finished. With its few new additions, fixtures and brightly coloured paint, it really did look choice.

"Well, I think we've just about got it licked, Wati, old boy," Uncle said at dinner that night. "Tomorrow the boys can cart all your furniture and whatnot over, and we'll help you set it up. There's still a bit of clearing up to do, but that won't take us long."

"Don't worry about that, e hoa," Dad told him. "Me and Rewi can do it in our spare time."

That night, after the others were asleep, I lay wide awake, staring into the darkness. Tomorrow it would be all over, and on Sunday Uncle Reuben and his crew would be heading home. I sighed, missing them

already. A closeness had built up amongst us all, and the last two weeks had been the happiest of my life.

Outside I heard a piercing screech. It came from one of the big old macrocarpas. Morepork. Ruru. He'd been hanging around a lot lately.