

**THERE'S  
DANGER &  
DARKNESS,  
RUNNING  
ON THE EDGE.**

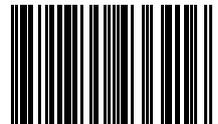
Amateur investigator and new kid in the hood – Cassi Whelan – treads a bit too close to a hidden truth when her daily run takes her through the wide open spaces of the cleared Red Zone and alarmingly near a condemned and vacant house that local kids believe to be haunted.

Possessed with the curiosity of a cat, nothing will stop Cassi venturing into the shadows of the creepy house to investigate. Not even tall tales of bats and giant tarantulas that her new-found friend, Quinn Fordson, spins in jest to scare her.

But when the shady owners turn up and something even more creepy and crawly rears its head, will Cassie have the courage to follow her instincts, and can she and Quinn solve the red edge mystery?

**A compelling eco-adventure mystery  
by acclaimed author, Des Hunt.**

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RED EDGE DES HUNT



# HUNTS RED EDGE

WHAT WILL  
YOU FIND,  
RUNNING ON  
THE EDGE?



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01

## RED ZONE

Cassi Whelan slowed from her running, feeling the first twinge of cramp. If she didn't do some stretches soon, she'd be crippled before the end of the run. The tree she chose for support wasn't the best for the task, but it would have to do. Other runners might use poles, fences, sides of buildings ... but not Cassi. She didn't like leaning against any manmade structure that rose above her shoulders; stuff fell down from manmade things, especially around Christchurch.

Natural objects like trees and shrubs were okay, and there were plenty of those. Years earlier they had surrounded sections with houses and sheds and driveways and trampolines.

But all of those had gone, as had the people. This was the Red Zone, the part of Christchurch that would never be built on again – or so they said. It was the residential area that had suffered the most in the two massive earthquakes nine years before, when Cassi had been four. The thinking was that it was likely to be torn apart again when the next big one came, whenever that might be.

Many Christchurch citizens hated the Red Zone. Not Cassi. For her it was near perfect. Here she could run in the middle of streets without fear of being hit by traffic. There was also

enough space to check out other users and avoid them if need be. But most of all it was the absence of structures. For her that was the biggest plus of all, and had been the deciding factor in choosing a house at the edge of the Zone.

They'd moved in two days ago, Cassi and her dad, Mike. The shift had taken little more than two hours. After eight moves in as many years they'd learnt to live with a minimum of furniture and personal effects. Besides, Cassi's mum had taken a fair bit with her when she'd left after the fourth move. She now lived in Nelson with Cassi's younger brother, Ben, vowing never to return even if the city was fully repaired. Not only buildings were broken apart when the earth moved.

With the stretches completed, Cassi tightened the elastic on her ponytail before taking off up the bank to the path that ran alongside the Avon River.

She could tell already that this would become a favourite part of her running as she always enjoyed being near water, especially when it was as serene as the Avon. The edge was dotted with swans, ducks, shags, even a heron or two. Out on the water the birds scooted away as the local rowing club went through their Sunday morning training. A woman rower, going the same way as Cassi, twisted around to give her a smile.

From there on, the river narrowed as it turned into the final stretch before joining the Heathcote Estuary. Cassi's run was almost over. After a final sprint she slowed as she reached the Avondale Bridge. It was best if she walked from there, letting her muscles cool before she reached home. Turning onto the footpath, she noticed an elderly man scooping a net through

the water. She stopped and moved down the bank to take a closer look.

“Lost something?” she asked.

The man chuckled. “Only my mind.”

“Uh ... what?”

“Only my mind ... for thinking the whitebait would be running this early in the season.”

“Okay,” said Cassi. “You’re like, fishing, right?”

“Fishing, yes. Catching, no.”

“Are there really fish here? Do you *ever* catch anything?”

“Oh yes. There are fish all right.” He pointed across the river to a shag perched on a pole, drying its wings in the sunshine. “He wouldn’t be here if there weren’t.”

“Whitebait,” said Cassi. “They’re like those little things with big eyes, aren’t they? Transparent – you can see their guts and everything.”

“That’s them. Very tasty they are.”

Cassi turned up her nose. “Do you eat all the bits?”

“Of course. There wouldn’t be much left if you chopped the heads off.” He smiled wryly.

“And you cook them?”

The man nodded. “Tell you what. *When* I catch some, I’ll give you enough for a meal. *And* I’ll give you my special fritter recipe.”

“Mmm ... I don’t think I’d like them much. Dad might.”

The man accepted that. “You live around here? I haven’t seen you before.”

“We only moved in on Friday.” She pointed along the road. “Just down there.”

“Which one? The new build or the repair job?”

“The repaired one. We couldn’t afford the new one.”

“Well then, welcome to Avondale,” said the man. He climbed up the bank, dragging his right leg as if it was unable to move properly. He stretched his arm out to Cassi. “Jim Maclean. I’m one of your neighbours. I live four houses past yours.”

Cassi shook his hand. “Cassi Whelan.”

“Ah,” said Jim, “an Irish name. That explains the lovely auburn hair and blue eyes.”

“And the freckles and sunburn,” groaned Cassi.

Jim smiled. “Yes, I suppose there are some drawbacks. Are both parents Irish?”

“Dad is. Mum’s a Kiwi. And Dad was only little when he came out here with his parents. He doesn’t remember Ireland at all.”

“Same here,” said Jim. “I was born in Scotland, but don’t remember any of it. I’m planning to go back next year. Meet up with some of the rellies before we all die.”

Cassi had nothing to say to that.

“So,” continued Jim, “you live next to that wreck of a house – the Horton place.”

Cassi’s eyes went wide. “The *haunted* place? Did somebody die there? Is that why it hasn’t been fixed up?”

Jim laughed. “Not haunted. *Horton*. That’s the name of the woman who lived there. Although I’ve heard kids call it the Haunted house. Some even claim to have seen a ghost. I suppose it could be haunted in some way, the things that once went on there.”

“What things?”

“Arguments, mostly. Lots of yelling from the woman. Screaming. And the police were always parked outside. I don’t think they were very nice people.”

“What happened to them?”

“They stayed there for a bit after the quake, before they were forced to leave. Don’t know where they went. I’ve seen a car parked in the drive a few times lately, but no one’s living there.”

“Why hasn’t it been fixed?”

“Oh, there could be all sorts of reasons. There’s still a few wrecked places around here. Most are still fighting their insurance company. And I guess there are some people not yet ready to have anything to do with their old places because of the bad memories.”

Cassi nodded. She could understand that. “Oh well, I’d better go. Dad’ll be expecting me.” She sprinted off, forgetting her plan to walk the remaining few hundred metres.

Only when she approached the broken house did she slow, first to a walk and then to a stop. She stared down the overgrown driveway, waiting for her heart to slow and the heavy breathing to ease. Two concrete strips with grass between led to a double garage.

Without thinking, she walked a few metres onto the section until she could see more of the house. Several of the windows were broken and the bricks on the nearest corner were all out of alignment. A veranda leaned to one side with the lowest concrete step broken in three places. Through a sliding glass door Cassi could see a pile of newspapers in the middle of the

floor. No carpet, no furniture, no wall hangings. The place had been stripped. Maybe it was a haunted house after all.

Moving further around, she found a sticker stuck to the back door:

**RESTRICTED USE**  
**NO ENTRY EXCEPT ON ESSENTIAL BUSINESS**

While it was clear that nobody was living in the house, the garage could be different as there was no sticker there and the building seemed mostly undamaged. Curtains on the window suggested it could be some sort of home. It was worth a look.

The garage was one of those kitses made out of galvanised iron pressed to look like weatherboard. Finding no gap in the curtains on the house side, Cassi moved to the side by the boundary fence, but it was so overgrown with weeds that getting anywhere near the window was impossible. Maybe there was another one around the back.

There was, and one of the curtains was torn.

That's when Cassi became nervous. Was this trespassing? What if, when she looked inside, she found somebody staring back? Jim had suggested that the Hortons were aggressive people, fighting all the time, maybe criminals.

"You can give up now, Cassi," she whispered.

But she knew she wouldn't. She had to take look. The idea of a haunted house had become fixed in her mind. She stepped forward, cupped her hands to her eyes and peered through the tear.

Nothing. Just blackness.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness she began to make out objects: cupboards, a workbench ... and something else at the other end, close to the lift-up double doors. Was it a cage? Yes, maybe a bird aviary. The only movable furniture was a high stool. Objects on the bench were covered by a tablecloth. At the near end a few things sat uncovered in a group: a tin opener, a spoon, and a can of cat food.

The can was open with the lid pushed back down. Some food, still stuck to the spoon, was moist enough to reflect light, suggesting it was fresh. If so, where was the cat? Not in the garage, as far as Cassi could see, although if it were a black witch's cat, it could be hiding in the shadows.

"Kitty?" she called, leaving the window. "Kitty, kitty? Where are you?"

She walked around looking for any opening where a cat could get in and out. There was none. The animal was either locked out, or, worse still, locked in. With this thought she returned to the window to try and get a better look at the cage.

"Is that where you are?" she asked. She tapped on the window. "Kitty, kitty ... are you there?"

When there was no sign of movement in the cage, she stopped calling. And yet she kept looking, convinced that the cat had to be in there somewhere.

After a few minutes she turned away and headed home. But she would be back. She would free that cat. Already in Cassi's mind, the Hortons were animal abusers, and for her those were the worst people, especially when they abused cats.

It was mid-morning when Cassi came out of the bathroom, all clean and clothed, to find her father, Mike, sitting at the kitchen table reading from his tablet.

“How was your run?” he asked without looking up.

“Good. I met an old guy fishing for whitebait.”

“In the Avon?”

“Yeah. He said he caught heaps last year.”

Mike looked up. “I didn’t think there’d be fish in the middle of the city.”

“He says the shags catch them all the time.”

“Yes, but are they safe for humans to eat? The sewerage system is still broken in places.”

“Must be,” replied Cassi. “He eats them.”

Mike shrugged. After a pause he asked, “Have *you* eaten today?”

“No. We’re out of fruit.”

“You could have some of this,” said Mike, pointing to a box of cereal on the table. “There’s milk in the fridge.”

Cassi pulled a face. “That stuff you eat is, like, so full of starch and sugar.”

“Yes! Just what you need if you’re going to keep up all this running.”

“I get my carbs from fruit.”

“All right,” said Mike, pushing his chair back. “Then let’s go shopping. We need to get some furniture as well.” He pointed to a pile of boxes sitting by the back door. “Some storage for all that gear.” He looked directly at Cassi. “Unless you’re ready to cope with things put in the high cupboards?”

Cassi’s body stiffened. She looked away, shaking her head.

Mike gave a sad nod of acceptance. He lifted a bunch of keys from the table. “C’mon then, grab the list and let’s go.”

• • •

Mike’s vehicle was a big Dodge Ram double-cab ute covered in decals. He was site foreman for a construction company that used their vehicles as travelling billboards. Cassi liked the vehicle, but not the decals, especially as their logo was a cartoon hippopotamus. These had been placed on the two front doors so that from the outside it looked as if a hippo had the head of the driver or the passenger. Cassi could see the humour in it, but the constant stares and pointing became annoying after a while.

There were plenty of gawkers that day, as Mike eased the big vehicle around the parking building of The Palms shopping centre. Cassi was relieved when they eventually found a wide enough park and could begin shopping.

While Mike went looking for kitset cupboards, Cassi went to the supermarket. She preferred to shop alone. That way she could buy what she wanted, not what her father thought

she needed. He was the one who wrote most of the list she carried. That was a guide to the sort of food *he* wanted to eat over the coming week. So she would buy and prepare that food. Not always did she eat it.

Although she'd never shopped in this supermarket before, the layout was much the same as any other and soon she had everything on the list plus some of her own preference. Now she could do her secret shopping.

First up was cat food. She wanted something fancy, unlike the jellymeat she'd seen in the Horton garage. She wanted one of those small cans of specialty food with names like Entice, Obsession, Desire. Something that would bring a cat out of hiding no matter how distressed it might be. The one she chose was salmon and liver flavour. She very nearly bought several cans: one to catch the cat and the others for when it became *her* pet.

Next stop was the health supplement aisle, definitely a no-go area as far as her father was concerned. She spent several minutes looking at high-protein drinks, the sort of thing you drank after a run. There was one that she would have liked to buy, but at \$65 it would take the bill over \$200. She couldn't sneak that past Mike. He was sure to want to see the docket.

Moving along the shelves she studied the other products available: weight-loss pills, muscle builders, fat burners. The range was varied, with the ingredients having exotic names like East-African mango, Caledonian thistle milk, Nepalese salt, Mongolian ginseng. And the prices were just as exotic – all breathtakingly high. Finding nothing affordable, she moved on, heading for the checkout.

With the groceries packed into bags and charged to Mike's card, Cassi returned to the ute. She dumped the groceries on the back seat, slumped down in the front and checked her phone. The only message was a text from Mike: *Won't be long. How about a café lunch?*

"No way," she moaned. After a moment's thought she stretched over to the groceries and grabbed an apple. If she was eating when he got back she might avoid going to a café. She'd suggest he went to the bakery and got a pie or something. That usually worked. Mike liked his pies.

• • •

Cassi had to wait until mid-afternoon before she could visit the haunted house. Her ploy to avoid the café had succeeded, but Mike had then insisted she prepare a sit-down lunch when they got back home. Afterwards, she'd helped assemble the two new cupboards. Only when they'd been filled with the contents of the boxes, could she escape next door, clutching the can of cat food.

At the entranceway she paused to pull the tab on the can. The lid bent back releasing a stink of fish and liver.

"Pooh! That's foul," she cried.

Holding it at arm's length she began walking down the drive. "Kitty, kitty," she called. "Woo-hoo, kitty. I've got yummy food. Come and get it. Here kitty, kitty ..."

Halfway down she got a reply, but nothing like what she'd expected.

“No cat will eat that muck.”

The voice had come from inside the house. Turning, Cassi saw the source. A boy was sitting on the pile of newspapers, staring at her. There was no missing him, because this boy was big. Not so much muscular big, but fat big. He was definitely overweight.

“Anyway,” continued the boy, “there’s no cat around here. If there was, I would have seen it.”

“There must be,” said Cassi, stepping to the open door. “Or why would there be cat food in the garage?”

“They’re feeding something else.”

“Who? The Hortons?”

The boy shrugged. “If that’s what you want to call them. I don’t know their names for sure. I just see them come here.” He pointed over the driveway. “I live there. I can see everything that happens from my bedroom. I saw you here this morning, and I saw you moving in on Friday.”

“What are you – the neighbourhood spy?”

“Yes!” said the boy, grinning. “Quinn Fordson, neighbourhood spy. And you’re Cassi Whelan, neighbourhood nosy parker.”

“I’m not a nosy parker.”

“Yes you are. You questioned Jim Maclean this morning. Then you came poking around here. And,” he added with a grin, “nosy parkers are always very skinny.”

“I’m not skinny. I’m slim.”

Quinn shook his head. “No, you’re skinny.”

Cassi stuck her chin out. “Compared to you, everyone must be skinny. You’re obese!”

That got a reaction. “No, I’m not!” Then, in a quieter voice, “With a BMI index of 29 I’m classed as overweight. Obesity starts at 30.”

This caused the conversation to falter for a time, before Cassi asked, “So, if the Hortons aren’t feeding a cat, what are they feeding?”

“Spiders. Giant tarantulas.”

Cassi’s jaw dropped. “Spiders!”

“Yeah. There’s spiders in that cage you can see through the window. And bats. They like cat food too.”

Cassi looked at him sideways. “Are you saying this place is haunted?”

He grinned. “Some kids think it is. Last Halloween some of them camped here all night.”

“But you’re just making it up about the spiders and the bats?” A nod. “And you haven’t been in there to see what there really is?”

“Nah.” Quinn looked her up and down. “But there’s a way we can find out. You’d be able to get in. You’re skinny enough.” He climbed to his feet. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

“Who are these people?” asked Cassi, as they moved to the garage. “What are they like?”

“A man and a woman. I don’t know their names. I call them Bella and Barty. You a Harry Potter fan?”

“I’ve watched the movies,” replied Cassi. “I’m not a big fan.”

“I am,” said Quinn. “Bella is Bellatrix Lestrange, and Barty is Barty Crouch. Do you remember those characters?” Cassi nodded. “Well, I’d say this Bella and Barty are about forty. They drive a black Audi Q7, license plate OKI746.” He stopped

walking when they got to the side door. "I've tried to get in this way by picking the lock, but they've left the key on the inside." He bent down and lined up his eye with the keyhole. "Yeah, it's still there. But once you get in, you'll be able to unlock it and let me in."

"Okay," said Cassi. "So how do I get in?"

"Come with me."

He led the way around the back, past the window with the torn curtain to the wilderness on the other side. Using the fence for support, he knelt down and pulled back the corner plate of the shed, which allowed a sheet of the wall iron to pop out a little.

"See?" said Quinn. "There's no lining, so if you squeeze through there you'll be right inside."

Cassi studied the gap. It looked awfully narrow. "Can you pull it out a bit more?"

With a bit of huffing, Quinn doubled the size of the gap. "There. Will that do?"

It would ... but did she really want to do this? "This is illegal, right?"

"Yeah. The police call it breaking and entering. But if you don't damage or steal anything, I think we're okay."

Cassi sneered. "You think?"

"You don't have to do it," said Quinn. "You're the one who's saving a cat."

Cassi breathed deeply for a while, staring at the gap.

"All right, I'll do it." Then, after a pause, "But I'm blaming you, Quinn Fordson, if anything goes wrong."

The first thing that Cassi noticed when she got to her feet inside the garage was the smell – an unusual odour that smelled a bit like cat pee. Straight away she began calling.

“Here, kitty, kitty!”

“Forget it, Cassi,” groaned Quinn. “There is no cat.”

“There is. I can smell it.”

She went to the cage in the corner. “Kitty? Are you in there?”

“No! There is no cat in there,” yelled Quinn.

Cassi opened the door, half expecting the animal to leap out. Nothing did, and when she looked inside it was plain that a cat had never been in there. Nor had there been any spiders or bats. All she could see was a dusty floor and a leafless branch propped up by wood.

“Unlock the door,” ordered Quinn.

“All right,” said Cassi, moving towards the door.

She didn’t make it. Part way across her foot caught on something and she spilled onto the floor, crying out in alarm.

“What is it?” asked Quinn. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I think so,” she replied. “I tripped on ... a piece of wood.” She looked around, now seeing lots of thick wooden planks laid side by side. “Hey! There’s an underground chamber here.

That must be where the cat is.”

“Cassi!” yelled Quinn. “Forget the cat. Let me in. Unlock the door. Now!”

But Cassi wasn’t listening. Already her fingers were clawing at the end piece of wood. “Kitty,” she called, lifting the plank and moving it to one side. Now she could see steps leading down into darkness. Steps, but no cat. Maybe it was too scared to show itself. She grabbed the next plank. With three of them removed she could see more steps, but nothing else. More light was needed – time to open the door.

She called to Quinn. “I’ll let you in so you can help.”

“No! Don’t!”

“What? Make up your mind!”

“Hide, Cassi,” he hissed. “There’s a car coming down the drive.”

Yes, she could hear it now.

*Hide? How? Where? Oh no!* She looked around the garage. *The cage? No, too close to the entrance. Where else?* There was nowhere else ... except for the underground pit.

That’s when she heard a car door slam. There was no choice. She climbed down onto the steps leading to the darkness. By the time she had one plank back in place, footsteps were approaching the tilting door. Shoes with heels. A woman’s shoes.

When a key was pushed into the lock, the second plank was already in position. Fortunately the door creaked as it was raised, otherwise whoever was out there would have heard the last plank drop into its slot. Even then they might have seen movement. Cassi crouched down and held her breath.

The footsteps resumed, this time clumping along the

concrete floor, then on the wooden planks until they were over Cassi's head. And there they stopped. And stayed. So long that Cassi had to take a breath. To her, the movement of air in and out of her lungs was a roaring wind. Surely it must be audible to the woman above. The shoes moved, as if the woman was turning around, suspicious eyes searching the garage looking for changes.

Once again the movement stopped. *What has she seen? Did Quinn close the gap?*

After an eternity, the feet moved on, a natural movement, not one of suspicion. Next came the sound of a key in another lock. This had to be the cupboard beside the bench. Sounds of sorting through objects followed. The woman was looking for something.

Although these normal sounds should have helped Cassi relax, they didn't. Other things were happening close by, scraping movements from deeper in the pit. Then something began climbing up her leg. She gasped in fear, slamming a hand over her mouth to stop screaming. The thing kept climbing.

*Tarantula!* she thought. Should she brush it away? No, she might get bitten.

Still the creature was climbing, passing her knee and moving onto the thigh. She knew she couldn't hold out any longer. She had to scream. Then the cupboard door slammed shut. The creature dropped to the floor, scuttling away.

The sounds from earlier returned in reverse order: key locking cupboard door; woman walking over the boards and concrete, this time without pausing; the garage door squeaking

down, and so on, until the car was reversing down the drive.

Cassi had the planks off, and was scrambling out of the pit before the car had made it to the road. Another second in there and she would have lost control. She staggered back from the opening, half expecting the creature to crawl out after her.

“Quinn!” she called. “Quinn! Are you still there?”

“Yes,” came the calm reply. “You okay? Let me in.”

With the door open Quinn went straight to the pit, staring down the steps. “That’s a mechanic’s inspection pit,” he said. “You use them to work underneath cars.” He turned to Cassi. “Is that where you—” By then he had seen that she was shaking. “What’s the matter?”

“There’s a creature in there. A tarantula. It crawled up my leg!”

His eyes went wide. Not with fear, but with excitement. “Yeah! I knew there wasn’t a cat. This I’ve got to see.” He moved closer to the hole. “We need a torch. I’ll go get one.” He moved to the door. “Don’t go down there until I get back.” Then he was gone.

Cassi gave a nervous giggle. *Go down there? No way!* But she would investigate the rest of the garage.

As she moved around she found the smell of cat pee was stronger than before. Maybe the smell came out of the cupboard when it was opened, or from the woman? Except what sort of person would use a perfume like that? *Maybe a witch?*

At the bench she checked the can. It smelled of cat food, not pee, and yes, it was fresh. She folded back the table cloth, expecting to see dishes that could be used to feed whatever creature was in the pit. They were dishes of a sort. Scientific glassware: beakers, test tubes, petri dishes, filter funnels. There

was even a Bunsen burner connected to a butane cannister, along with tripod and gauze. Below the bench was a shelf containing twenty or so glass bottles, each labelled with a different scientific name. Someone had been doing some serious chemistry on that bench.

Quinn returned. When he saw the science equipment his excitement level went up another notch. “Wow, I could do with some of that stuff”

“We’re not taking anything,” growled Cassi, “remember?”

“Yeah, yeah. But I am taking a movie.” He whipped out his phone and began shooting a video of the equipment, panning around the garage until he had it focused on the pit.

“You could have used that as a torch,” said Cassi.

“Yeah, but it’s not as bright as this.” From his pocket he extracted a black LED torch. “This can do two thousand lumens. It’ll turn this pit into daylight.”

It did – but only the steps – and there was no creature resting there. They slid back more planks until half the pit was uncovered. This time when the torch was turned on they did find something. Not just one, but thirty, maybe forty of the creatures. And they weren’t spiders. These were wētā, giant cave wētā, their legs spanning 15 centimetres or more, their feelers extending even further.

Quinn chuckled. “That’s what was crawling up your leg, Cassi!”

Now that she could see what the creatures were, Cassi was more relaxed. She’d handled wētā before in a study they’d done at school. They looked and felt creepy, but she’d never been bitten by one, and she knew they couldn’t poison you, unlike a tarantula.

“And there’s your cat food,” said Quinn, directing the beam onto the floor.

There were four dishes in total, two with cat food and two with filthy water. In fact everything was pretty dirty. As Quinn scanned the beam around the floor, bits of dead wētā could be seen, mostly legs and feelers, suggesting that the rest of the body had been taken away. And there were tiny ones, some quite pale in colour. Perhaps some of the bits of rubbish on the floor were eggs.

“Why?” asked Cassi. “Why is she keeping these things?”

Quinn shrugged. “Because she’s a witch.” He pointed to the bench. “She’s been brewing up something.”

“Yeah, but what?”

“Witches always put creatures into their brews. Snails, lizards – ‘eye of newt and toe of frog’. Maybe she uses wētā?”

Cassi wasn’t convinced. “Give me the torch. I want to take another look in that cage.”

“I’ll do it,” said Quinn, moving to the cage. “There’s nothing in here.”

“Shine it on the floor,” said Cassi. “I thought I saw something there.”

A scan of the floor revealed something in the back corner that looked like a piece of fine fabric. Cassi picked it up and held it under the torchlight. “That’s the skin of a lizard,” she said. “They shed them as they grow bigger.”

“Yes!” said Quinn. “She’s using lizards as well as insects. She is a witch.”

Cassi gave him a sideways look. “Doubt it.”

“You got a better idea then?”

Instead of answering, Cassi walked over to the cupboard. A padlock on a hinged fitting held the two doors together. Cassi pulled at it, creating a small gap between the doors. “She got something out of here. Wonder what it was? See if you can poke your torch in there.”

Although the torch wouldn’t fit, they could see a large sheet of cardboard which blocked most of the view except for a shelf at the top containing some papers. Nothing could be seen in detail.

“Can you open this?” asked Cassi.

Quinn studied the padlock. “Not by picking the lock. But I might be able to get hold of a key. Why?”

“I think those papers would tell us what she’s doing.”

“They could be spells,” said Quinn with a smile.

“Yeah, right!” said Cassi. “C’mon, I’ve got to get back home. We need to put this place back the way it was.”

With the planks in place and the cage shut, Quinn left by the door so that Cassi could lock it from the inside. Then, she took one last look around before squeezing out the corner gap where Quinn was waiting to push the metal sheets back in place.

“Do you have a cat?” asked Quinn, nodding to the can Cassi had left on the ground. “

“No,” said Cassi, lowering her head. “Not anymore.”

“So what are you going to do with that?”

“Dunno. Throw it out, I suppose.”

“I’ll have it.”

Cassi stared at him. “Why? Are you going to eat it?”

“Nah, don’t be stupid.”

“Then what?”

“Feed it to my snails. They like pet food. I use it to train them.”

When Cassi kept staring at him, Quinn explained. “I’m training some snails to race. You put them in the middle of a circle of wallboard with pet food around the outside. The first snail to get to the food wins.”

Cassi continued the stare, her mouth now gaping.

Quinn went on. “They have world championships for it. There’s a guy organising the New Zealand champs here in Christchurch.” He gave a big grin. “I reckon there’s one of mine that could easily win.”

“Right!” said Cassi, rolling her eyes. “Then you’d better have this.” She picked up the can and handed it over. “Got to keep your snails in shape, don’t we?”

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