

# TRANSCENDENT

**PATRICK GALLAGHER**

Orion

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Hodder & Stoughton

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Text copyright © Patrick Gallagher, 2024

Illustration copyright © Teo Skaffa, 2024

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

*All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 510 11242 1

Typeset in Sabon Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk,  
Stirlingshire

The paper and board used in this book are made  
from wood from responsible sources.

Orion Children's Books  
An imprint of Hachette Children's Group  
Part of Hodder & Stoughton Limited  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company  
[www.hachette.co.uk](http://www.hachette.co.uk)

[www.hachettechildrens.co.uk](http://www.hachettechildrens.co.uk)

*For Eunata, my grandma*



# CHAPTER ONE

The town of Jinja, Uganda, was an explosion of sound and vivid colour, its smell a pungent mix of car fumes, market spices and body odour. Car horns blared. Market sellers shouted. Dirt was heavy in the air. It coated everything from the dented bonnets of the cars to the fruit and vegetables in the stalls. Crouched in the alleyway, Kira Flynn could feel it mingling with the sweat on her skin. The sun was so hot that she could not stay in the same place for too long. She winced and shifted her back along the rough brickwork.

Kira's piercing eyes of electric blue peered into Wanyama Road. The facades of the buildings, originally painted in bright colours, had dulled over time beneath the burning African sun. Market stalls lined the red soil on either side of the afternoon traffic, which was at a standstill. A policeman in the middle of the street blew his whistle and pointed but nothing moved. Kira could

see a black Jeep Cherokee parked next to him. The car was gigantic. It dominated the road and all the cars around it looked little more than toys. Its windows were tinted so they were just as black as its bodywork. Something about the car made Kira uneasy. It took her a moment to work out what that was.

The Cherokee was gleaming. There was not a speck of dirt on it. It obviously had not been in Uganda long and people who came to town in that sort of car were rarely up to anything good. Kira pulled out her RanaPhone, scrolled until she found the contact named *ORANGUTAN* and began to type. A bead of sweat curved its way through the grimy layer from her frizzy hair to her temple. When she was finished, she tapped *SEND*.

*ORANGUTAN!*

The word blared from Jacob Flynn's own RanaPhone in the sound of Kira's voice. Jacob grimaced. He really needed to stop Kira changing his text alert. Ian turned and looked at him, eyebrows raised. Jacob pulled his RanaPhone out of the back pocket of his jeans. He switched it to silent, put it back and waved in apology.

'My bad. Do continue.'

Jacob and his best friends, Ian and Zachary, were squeezed into the sweltering basement of Ian's mother's drapery shop on Wanyama Road, less than a hundred feet from the alleyway where Kira was crouching. Fabrics

were stacked against the walls. High on one side, a barred window looked out to street level, letting in not just light but the sounds and smells of Jinja. Jacob could see ankles and feet walking past. He did his best to ignore all of that and focus on the video they were supposed to be recording.

‘Actually, Captain Cosmic,’ said Ian, scowling at the RanaPhone which Zachary was holding up to film them, ‘it’s your turn to speak.’

Zachary swivelled to point the RanaPhone at Jacob and gestured impatiently with his other hand.

‘Oh, right! Thank you, Spaceman,’ exclaimed Jacob. He pointed at an old gas lantern on the floor in front of him. Joined to the lantern by a rubber pipe was a contraption that looked like a heavily modified electric microwave. The contraption began to splutter and spark violently.

‘Get a good shot of it before it catches fire!’ Jacob beckoned to Zachary before straightening to face the camera and speak excitedly.

‘In the middle of Jinja, we are surrounded by engines, guzzling fuel and coughing up carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. My twin sister and I have created this atmospheric converter to recycle that carbon dioxide into fuel for this gas lantern. It works by reducing the carbon dioxide into carbon monoxide and then combining it with hydrogen to—’

*ORANGUTAN!*

Both Ian and Zachary looked at Jacob this time. He had switched his RanaPhone to silent! How did she do that?

‘Apologies, Spaceman. We’re going to have to cut today’s video short.’ Jacob hurried towards the basement door and past the atmospheric converter, which was producing a lot of smoke. Zachary stopped recording and lowered his RanaPhone.

‘Jacob, that’s the third video your sister has ruined.’

‘She does it on purpose,’ Ian pouted.

‘The last time Kira texted me more than once, she’d flooded and set fire to our kitchen at the same time,’ said Jacob. ‘I really need to go.’

‘Before you do,’ said Ian, using one of his mother’s drapes to fan away the smoke, ‘Double M’s uploaded a new video. Looks like a good one.’

‘I’ll watch it tonight,’ said Jacob. ‘See you later.’

He jogged up the steps that led onto Wanyama Road. It had been hot underneath the drapery shop but stepping outside was like stepping inside an oven. Sweat crawled from the fade of Jacob’s close-cropped hair. His T-shirt and jeans clung to his body. Making his way along the crowded footpath beside the road, he stood on the tips of his toes to look over the heads rushing past to the other side of the street. Where was Kira?

Jacob stopped. His electric blue eyes narrowed.

Kira's text had been right. That Jeep Cherokee was definitely too clean.

The driver's door of the Cherokee opened and Jacob retreated under the shade of a market stall, keeping his eyes fixed on the parked car. A man stepped out. Just like his car, he was a colossal figure, clad completely in black. More than six feet tall, his broad shoulders towered over the other shoppers, who made sure to step aside as he stalked onto the footpath. The man was wearing a bomber jacket and sunglasses. His bald head was taut with muscle and his face contorted into a permanent scowl. Both sleeves were rolled up to reveal an expensive watch on his tattooed left wrist.

*ORANGUTAN! ORANGUTAN! ORANGUTAN!*

Kira was calling him now. Jacob frowned and pulled his RanaPhone out of his pocket, answering the call. Bomber Jacket was bending to speak to a street seller and had his back to Jacob. He seemed to be arguing over the price of a bottle of water.

'I don't like him,' said Kira on the other end of the line.

'Where are you?' Jacob muttered, looking frantically around. 'Also, how did you change my text and call alerts to the sound of your own voice? There's not even an option for that!'

'Clock the boy,' said Kira, ignoring the questions.

Jacob turned again. A little down Wanyama Road, a

boy no older than ten was creeping along the footpath by the road and away from the other shoppers. He was wearing a faded T-shirt that hung to his knees. There was something on the boy's neck. Even from a distance, Jacob could see it was the blue tattoo of a spider.

Spider's eyes were fixed on Bomber Jacket's watch.

Spider ran, his naked feet slapping the road. He held his hand out, aiming to rip the watch from Bomber Jacket's wrist. Bomber Jacket was ready. He turned with alarming speed away from the street seller and grabbed the front of Spider's T-shirt, hauling up the boy so he was dangling in front of him. Spider struggled and kicked with his feet. Bomber Jacket's face was twisted in fury, like a towel being wrung. He raised the other hand. It was the size of a dinner plate. He was going to strike the boy across the face.

'Yeah, I really don't like him,' said Kira.

'Kira. Don't,' said Jacob.

'Too late.'

There was the scream of an engine. It was Kira, racing a red Yamaha DT125 motorcycle down the far side of the street in the narrow gap between the cars and the footpath. People yelled and threw themselves out of the way. Just before she reached Bomber Jacket, Kira hurled herself from the bike and grabbed Spider. They collapsed onto the footpath in a heap at Bomber Jacket's feet. The bike crashed onto its side and skidded in a six-foot

arc until it rested, smoking, at the feet of some tourists, who had dodged it just in time. Bomber Jacket looked down at Kira in shock while still holding his hand up to strike Spider. The rear wheel spun in the air.

‘Pick on someone your own size,’ panted Kira, heaving herself to her feet. She straightened to her full, fourteen-year-old height and only then seemed to realise the top of her head barely reached Bomber Jacket’s barrel of a chest.

‘Kira!’ Jacob shouted. He fought his way through the crowd and onto the road. The traffic had just started moving again. Jacob ignored the car horns and dodged the hot, metal bonnets that were slowly beginning to roll forward. The Cherokee was still parked in the middle of the road with its driver’s door wide open. The other cars beeped as they manoeuvred around it. Jacob placed himself between Kira and Bomber Jacket.

‘Back off, mister. Or I’ll make you back off,’ Jacob said.

Bomber Jacket’s eyes were wide, his face screwed into an expression of flabbergasted surprise. He seemed unable to speak.

Kira mouthed a bemused, ‘Mister?’ at Jacob then ran to the Yamaha, hauled it upright and jumped back on. For a moment, Bomber Jacket looked as if he were finally about to say something but Jacob turned his back on him to face Kira.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ Jacob demanded. ‘I could have stopped him hitting the kid.’

‘From across the road?’ she asked in return. ‘I know you’ve got the freakishly long arms of an orangutan but—’

‘No, I mean, what do you think you’re doing *now*? Get off the bike. I’m driving.’

‘Why? Because I’m a girl?’

‘No! Well, yeah.’

‘What’s the point? You can probably reach the handlebars from over there.’

‘Kira, you’re wasting time!’

Jacob looked back at Bomber Jacket, who was starting to look less and less surprised and more and more angry. His hands were curling into fists the size of plump market chickens.

‘OK. Off we go,’ said Jacob.

He darted to the Yamaha but Spider had already hopped onto the back, thin arms wrapped snugly around Kira’s waist. Jacob could see the hairy body of the tattooed spider nestled on the boy’s neck. Two of its eight legs crept up to his ear.

‘He’s coming too, is he?’ asked Jacob in exasperation.

‘Do you want to leave him here?’

The boy blinked mutely up at Jacob, who glanced back at Bomber Jacket.

‘Good point. Let’s go.’

Jacob had just enough time to leap on and put his arms around Spider and Kira before his sister released the throttle and kicked the Yamaha into third gear. The 123cc engine screeched. The back wheel spun, spraying dirt. They sped down the road. Hot air rushed over them. Jacob's shirt hugged his chest and rippled across his back. Sweat that had been creeping vertically down his face slowly turned horizontal. Pedestrians, cars and market stalls hurtled past in a blur, inches away on either side. A dog yowled and dashed out of their path.

'Kira, slow down!' yelled Jacob over the bellow of the engine and the howl of the wind.

'Do you really want me to do that?' Kira yelled back.

Squinting to keep the biting dust out of his eyes, Jacob twisted round to look back down the road. His stomach wrenched itself into a knot.

The Cherokee was following them. Its gigantic, black form could be seen over the tops of the other cars. The traffic was flowing much faster and there were large enough gaps between vehicles for the Cherokee to navigate its way around them to keep up with the Yamaha.

'Speed up! Speed up! Speed up!' Jacob shouted, facing forward again.

Kira was forced to do the opposite. Spider had also seen the Cherokee and appeared to have decided he had more of a chance of escaping Bomber Jacket on foot

than he did on wheels. He squirmed on the seat. The Yamaha rocked dangerously and Kira had to jerk the front brake. The front wheel of the Yamaha screamed to a halt. The back wheel skidded and cut another arc into the footpath with the sound of tearing paper. A cloud of red dirt billowed around them. Stones scattered across soil. As soon as the Yamaha was stationary, Spider attempted to spring from it like a leaping frog. Jacob saw a glint of something in the sunlight.

‘Wait!’ Jacob’s hand closed around the boy’s wrist, hauling him back. Incredibly, Spider was wearing Bomber Jacket’s watch. The black leather strap was far too big for him and slid up and down his spindly arm.

‘That doesn’t belong to you,’ said Jacob.

Spider tried to wrench his hand out of Jacob’s. As the two of them struggled, both pairs of eyes fell on the back of the round watch face and the logo engraved upon it.

It was an R in the middle of a golden crown. The RanaTech logo.

Both Jacob and Spider stared at the logo and then each other. Then Spider finally tore his hand free and, with nothing but a toothy grin, slipped from the Yamaha and vanished into the crowd that had gathered around them.

Jacob looked back at the oncoming Cherokee. It was less than twenty feet away and the gap was closing fast.

Either Bomber Jacket had not seen Spider escape or he did not care. It appeared to be Jacob and Kira he was interested in now. Even though Jacob could not see anything through its tinted windows, he could imagine Bomber Jacket's huge form hunched over the steering wheel, black leather boot pushing ever further down on the accelerator.

'Time to go.' Kira twisted the throttle.

'Wait!' Jacob gripped Kira's hand to stop her releasing it completely.

'What are you doing?' Kira cried.

Jacob was muttering under his breath. 'If we take a left by Ico Computers then a right by Dheyongera Electronics that will bring us onto Tororo Road and we can lose him by Mukobe Homestay and if acceleration is the rate of change, that means it's a derivative of velocity so the speed differential will be less than . . . I got it. Go that way!'

Jacob pointed through the crowd towards an alleyway five feet in width. Kira did not question him. She wrenched the handlebars. Onlookers scattered as the bike careered into the alleyway and away from Wanyama Road. Flashing past them on one side was a rugged brick wall and, on the other, a corrugated metal fence, behind which the concrete skeleton of a high-rise loomed. Hot air and stinging dust buffeted them. Up ahead, construction workers milled around the alleyway,

staring up at a stack of blue water pipes on a pallet the size of a small car. It was being hoisted precariously to the upper floors by a rope winch.

‘Is he following us?’ Kira shouted over her shoulder.

‘I don’t know! I can’t see him,’ Jacob shouted back.

With feline agility, Kira twisted herself around so she was facing Jacob. She pulled her legs up and rested her dirty trainers on the saddle.

‘Get off! Get off! Get off!’ Jacob pulled his face away from the filthy knees of Kira’s jeans. He reached around her to grab the handlebars. The Yamaha swerved alarmingly. Tufts of grass whipped at the spokes.

The construction workers shouted, scrambling out of the way as Jacob and Kira roared past. The shadow of the water pipes swept over them. Kira reached into her back pocket and pulled out a slingshot, along with a stone that had been sharpened to a vicious point. She loaded the stone, pulled back the elastic sling and then it was her turn to mutter under her breath.

‘Multiply the spring constant by the distance to find the magnitude of the force and use the kinetic energy of the projectile to find the horizontal and vertical velocity so the trajectory will be . . .’

Kira stuck her tongue out between her teeth and let fly with the slingshot. The stone whistled through the air, slicing the rope. It frayed. The water pipes jerked violently. Their shadow swayed over the alley. The

construction workers pulled each other out from underneath it, yelling and gesticulating after the Yamaha. Kira waited until the workers were clear, loaded another stone and let fly again. The rope snapped cleanly. The pipes plunged downward. There was a shattering discord as they struck the rough gravel of the road, bouncing, quivering and rolling along the ground. A cloud of red dust filled the alleyway.

‘Let’s see him bully his way through those.’ Kira grinned and twisted herself back to take the handlebars. She slowed the Yamaha and steered it out of the alley and onto the main road.

‘There was no need to do that,’ said Jacob. ‘I’d already thought of a shortcut.’

‘It was an amazing shot, though, wasn’t it?’

‘There’s something very wrong with you,’ Jacob sighed.

‘Yeah? Then why didn’t I miss?’

Cars honked as Kira weaved the bike past them to reach the other side before following Tororo Road out of Jinja. Jacob loosened his grip and leaned back on the saddle. He looked down at Bomber Jacket’s watch, which he had managed to pull from Spider’s wrist before the thief had escaped. The golden RanaTech logo glinted in the sunlight.

‘Kira, that man worked for RanaTech.’

‘RanaTech? The biggest technology conglomerate in

the world?’ Kira sounded surprised. ‘Did you forget to pay your phone bill?’

‘What if he comes looking for us?’ Jacob asked.

‘He won’t come looking for us, Jacob. That kid stole his watch so he went after him. It had nothing to do with us.’

Jacob craned his neck back around to watch Jinja shrink behind them. There was no tarmac outside of town, and the Yamaha lurched along the red dirt track, belching smoke.

‘I don’t know,’ he said nervously. ‘It looked a lot like he was gunning for the two of us back there.’

‘Don’t worry yourself, Jacob.’ Kira laughed. ‘I bet you five thousand shillings we never see that guy again.’

# CHAPTER TWO

Mbale was two hours east of Jinja, connected by Tirinyi Road.

The sky began to streak with oranges and purples as the echoing bellow of the Yamaha rolled across the fields. Jacob and Kira dipped into a valley where the air was cooler. The breeze was a balm on their sticky skin. The setting sun was a simmering, red disc, slowly sinking beneath the hilltops. The fields, once a lush green, were a burnt ochre, cut into the hills and stacked on top of each other like steps on a staircase. There was the smell of burning, too, from the bonfires, red glimmers in the distance that cast long shadows across the grass. There were women working in the fields. They looked up and watched as the bike screeched past. One of them, standing by the red dirt road, leaned on her hoe and waved in greeting. Jacob waved back. The woman smiled. A baby bound to her back peered from

behind her. Further along, a group of men sat in plastic chairs by the side of the road.

‘Mzungus!’

Laughing children were running along a ridge high above. Jacob could see their thin forms silhouetted against the darkening sky.

Mzungu. ‘White’ in Swahili.

It was only half true but that far out of town, anything different was an attraction. Jacob and Kira’s blue eyes and light skin – the result of being the twins of a Ugandan mother and English father – were enough to cause everyone to look up from their warm bottle of Nile Special. Jacob could not see Kira’s face but felt her body stiffen.

‘Ignore them,’ he said, just loud enough to be heard over the bike.

Before returning to their business, the children, women and men of the valley watched the small but noisy shape of the Yamaha diminish into the dying light.

The only light came from the red flames of a fire rustling in front of the porch. There was the fragrant smell of burning logs. Creaking banana trees lined the Flynn’s wood-panelled cabin and garage, which sat amongst a vast patchwork of paddy fields that stretched in all directions into the darkness. Mount Elgon stood on the horizon. At just over fourteen thousand feet, it was the

seventeenth highest mountain in Africa and straddled the border of Uganda and Kenya. Now, it was merely a reassuring, black shape in the distance, obstructing the inky glow of the night sky. An endless sea of glistening, white specks spun overhead, spiralling from the shimmering aurora of the Milky Way. Sitting on the porch and rocking backward and forward on the swing seat, Eunata Flynn heard her children coming before she saw them.

There was the distant squall of an engine and a tiny headlight flickered into existence in the darkness, like the flame of a candle. The light grew until Jacob and Kira finally chugged into view on the back of a filthy, red motorcycle, following the winding lane up to the house. The bike struggled to a halt. Kira swung off elegantly. Jacob, less so.

‘What time do you call this?’ asked Eunata, trying to sound angrier than she was. ‘I thought you were just going to Jinja for the afternoon.’

‘We went for Jacob’s jerk jamboree,’ said Kira, striding towards the house.

‘It was not a jerk jamboree!’ Jacob cried. ‘It was another really important video I needed to shoot with Ian and Zachary, and Kira ruined it – again!’

‘Fine,’ said Eunata. ‘Make sure the boda boda goes into the garage tonight.’

The porch shuddered as Jacob stomped up the two

steps and into the house. Wind chimes tinkled as he opened and closed the door. Kira jumped onto the swing next to Eunata. It swung back and forth before Kira settled it, dragging her trainers on the worn, wooden decking.

‘Did you two get up to anything unusual in Jinja, mtoto?’ Eunata asked.

Kira thought for a moment. ‘Honestly? Not really.’

‘Are you hungry?’

‘No. We picked up a rolex in Nabweyo.’

‘I was up the mountain with Sunny today,’ said Eunata, ‘and you will never guess what.’

She removed her RanaPhone from her pocket. Kira leaned forward to see a photograph of a patch of grass. At first, Kira thought a large circle had been cut into it, leaving only exposed red soil. Then she realised that something large, circular and extremely heavy had been pressed into the grass, crushing it into the earth.

‘Is that . . .’ Kira breathed.

Eunata nodded. ‘Elephant tracks.’

Eunata looked at her daughter. Face bathed in the red glow of the fire, the light of the screen glinted in Kira’s shining blue eyes. It was not just those she had inherited from her father. The expression of childish delight and zeal at the new, the dangerous and the unexplored was something Eunata had seen on Henry’s face many a time. Kira was the same size as Jacob, more because he was

small for a fourteen-year-old boy than because she was large for a fourteen-year-old girl. Though both pairs of cheeks were dotted with freckles, Jacob's face was longer and more serious. Kira's was heart-shaped, smaller and brighter. Her hair was tied back into French plaits in the same way Eunata's was, just frizzier and without the traces of grey.

'In Uganda?' Kira said excitedly. 'I thought the elephants kept to the Kenyan side of the mountain these days.'

'I thought so, too,' said Eunata, putting her RanaPhone back into her pocket. 'Sunny and I found these tracks leading to Wagagai Cave. Something is causing the elephants to stray from their usual territory. We are going out tomorrow to investigate. Do you want to lend a hand?'

'Sure! I'll ask Jacob.' Kira leaped from the seat, causing it to rock back and forth and the porch to shudder.

'I want that boda boda in the garage tonight!' Eunata called after her.

Kira had already disappeared inside the house. The door slammed. The wind chimes tinkled. A bird cried in the distance. Eunata instantly recognised it as the eastern bronze-naped pigeon and smiled. The thoughts of a bored environmental conservationist.

'They truly are your children, aren't they, Henry?' she sighed.

It was already starting to get cold. Eunata rubbed her shoulders over the body warmer she always wore with her sleeves rolled to the elbows. She was a small but athletic woman and easily used the swing to propel herself onto her feet. Eunata walked to the edge of the porch and looked up at the stars again. They twinkled reassuringly. At no point in her thirty-eight years had the view gotten old and she doubted it ever would.

‘Goodnight, my love,’ Eunata said.

She walked back to the house and closed the door quietly behind her.

Jacob threw his RanaPhone onto his desk with a clatter and then himself onto his bed with a heavy sigh. The springs of the mattress creaked as he bounced a few times before settling. He stared up at the white shroud of the mosquito net that dangled above the bed.

*ORANGUTAN!*

Kira’s voice, muffled yet still infuriatingly loud in the enclosed space of Jacob’s bedroom, emanated from the discarded RanaPhone.

Jacob groaned. The springs creaked again as he sat up and looked around his cramped bedroom. It smelled of slight damp covered up by cheap deodorant. There was a vintage poster on one wall for *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*. Like the floor, shelves and most of the other flat surfaces, the desk was piled with Alex

Rider books and Spider-Man comics. Jacob swung his legs off the bed and walked over to the cluttered desk. Scouring the desk for the RanaPhone, Jacob's eyes fell on something else.

On top of a pile of old paperbacks was a small, spreadeagled action figure, an astronaut in a crimson and gold spacesuit. It was so well-used that it was covered in white marks where the paint had been scratched off. Jacob picked it up. The astronaut's face was wearing an expression of boyish determination. Jacob's father had bought him the action figure from Mbale Central Market when he was five. Jacob had named the figure Captain Cosmic. It was one of the last things his father had done for him. He had died a few months later.

Jacob picked up Captain Cosmic, enjoying the familiar feel of the plastic figure in his hands. Memories of running around the cabin, clasping the action figure and soaring through space to fight imaginary alien beasts, ran sunnily through his head like an old Super 8 film. Jacob tossed Captain Cosmic onto his bed and spotted the RanaPhone, tucked underneath the cover of a battered copy of *Dune*. He picked it up. Kira's voice alert had not been heralding another text from her. It was from Zachary.

*Bro watch double m's new video right now*

Underneath the text was a link. Jacob dived onto the bed, scrambling back to lean against the headboard. When it came to online conspiracy theorists, Double M was the real deal. Jacob's own video channel, which he hosted alongside Ian under their own pseudonyms, Captain Cosmic and Spaceman, could never hope to compete. Their videos mostly centred around Jacob and Kira's inventions and received around a dozen views each time – usually from Ian's mother, as well as some loyal customers of her drapery shop.

Jacob opened the link. For a moment, his eyes hovered enviously over Double M's subscriber count. It was in the millions. He found Double M's latest video. The tip of his thumb hovered over the screen, about to press PLAY.

There was a loud knock on the door. Jacob threw the RanaPhone in surprise. It clattered onto the hardwood floor.

'What do you want, Kira?' he asked, hoping he had not cracked the screen.

'I just wanted to say sorry,' said Kira through the door. 'For today. If I freaked you out. And for interrupting your video.'

Jacob paused.

'It's fine,' he said eventually.

'You sure?'

'Yeah. Honestly.'

‘OK. Well, we need to help Mama up the mountain tomorrow. I thought I might try out my model rocket again. I think I’ve found a way to fix the cooling cycle so there are no more hairline fractures.’

‘Sure.’

‘OK.’

Kira pranced down the corridor and into her bedroom. Jacob heard the door closing behind her. He picked up his RanaPhone in the corner of the room, next to a pile of more books: Harry Potter and His Dark Materials. No cracks. Getting back into bed, he untied the mosquito net from the railing on the ceiling and folded it around every corner of the mattress. Jacob leaned back against the headboard and, holding the RanaPhone extremely close to his face, finally played the video.

All the screen showed was a dark and featureless figure sitting inside a dark and featureless room. Shrouded in shadow, the figure of Double M was huge and took up most of the screen. The pale light of a single lightbulb hanging behind them illuminated a bowed head, concealed inside a black hoodie and the outline of two hulking shoulders. Whoever Double M was, they were incredibly physically imposing. It was easy to imagine them as an ex-military type, one who had turned their hand to uncovering the secrets of the wealthiest and most powerful people in the world.

Jacob’s excitement flared, his hands clammy. He

remembered a previous video which had exposed an oil company that had been dumping waste in the Peruvian Amazon. Another had successfully predicted the downfall of a member of the British royal family after some unpleasant habits had come to light. Of course, Double M had never been acknowledged by any legitimate news channel. More often than not, however, when a scandalous story hit global headlines, it was preceded by a video from Double M with more than a million views. If the curtain needed to be pulled aside on a global mystery or plot, Double M was always going to be the one with their hand on the cord.

Double M spoke three words.

‘THEY ARE COMING.’

The voice was a low, genderless rumble, clearly digitally altered to hide Double M’s identity. Their breathing was loud and echoey, as if they were using a gas mask.

‘THEY ARE COMING, CREEPING OUT OF THE DARK SPACE IN THE SHADOWS BEYOND THE STARS. WE HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN THEY WOULD COME. AND NOW THEY ARE ON THEIR WAY. THEY ARE SO VERY FAR AWAY NOW, TINY, A SPECK IN THE NIGHT SKY. BUT THAT SPECK IS GROWING LIKE A BLACK STAIN. AND THEY ARE GETTING CLOSER.’

Jacob stared at the RanaPhone, blue eyes wide. He

was numb. If his heart was still beating, he could no longer feel it.

‘THEY ARE CALLED THE OTHERS,’ Double M boomed. ‘OR, AT LEAST, THAT IS WHAT RANATECH CALLS THEM. THEY HAVE BEEN COMMUNICATING, YOU SEE, RANATECH AND THESE OTHERS, IF COMMUNICATING IS WHAT YOU CAN CALL IT. I HAVE HEARD WHISPERS, WHISPERS BEHIND THE CLOSED DOORS OF THE BOARDROOMS OF RANATECH. AND I HAVE SEEN THINGS, THINGS YOU WOULD NOT BELIEVE. SCHEMATICS. BLUEPRINTS. LANDING PATTERNS. I CANNOT RELEASE THESE YET. BUT I WILL.’

Images of papers and tablets on desks flashed onto the screen, too quickly and blurred for Jacob to see any details, and then Double M was back on screen.

‘ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW FOR NOW IS ONE THING, JUST ONE THING.’

Double M leaned towards the camera, face still obscured. Their voice became deeper still. Its rumble was akin to approaching thunder.

‘THE OTHERS ARE COMING. AND RANATECH KNOWS.’

The screen went black. The video ended.

Jacob continued staring at the blank screen. His own distorted, flummoxed reflection stared back at him. Still sitting against the headboard, Jacob pulled out Bomber

Jacket's watch. There was no watch face, just a circular, black disc. It was no ordinary watch, he realised, but some sort of smart device. Jacob turned it over in his hands. The strap was expensive, black leather. The RanaTech logo, an R in the middle of a golden crown, glinted up at him in the warm glow of his bedroom light. Double M's last words reverberated in his head.

*THE OTHERS ARE COMING. AND RANATECH KNOWS.*

Jacob was beginning to wish he had just let the boy keep it.

A few hours later and across the flat paddy fields, a black Jeep Cherokee was parked by the side of Tirinyi Road, less than a mile away from the Flynns' wood-panelled cabin. The Cherokee's black flanks and formerly pristine chrome hubcaps were streaked with red dust, having driven all the way from Jinja. The tinted window on the driver's side lowered a few inches with an electronic whine. Bomber Jacket raised a pair of binoculars. He gazed across the rippling grass at the cabin. All the lights were out. Everyone was asleep.

Bomber Jacket closed the window, placed the binoculars onto the passenger seat and drove on towards the mountain, where the glittering lights of the city of Mbale lay at its feet.

**WANT TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?**

**READ MORE IN**

# TRANSCENDENT



