

SARAH
And The
GREAT SPACE
ADVENTURE
A Novel For Children

by

Amitakh Stanford

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Chapter 1

A female voice whispered, "What's to become of me?" as she looked up at the sky. Her name was Sarah McCoy.

She was nearly twelve, with tawny golden hair, and deep blue sparkling eyes and a tanned, wind-burnt face. She felt all alone as she sat in the warm, shallow waters of the sea, a short distance from her house at Trinity Beach in tropical Far North Queensland. Rocky, her loyal brown border collie, kept her company.

Suddenly, Rocky licked her all over the face.

"Yikes!" said Sarah. "Oh no, Rocky!" She turned her face away. "Sorry, Rocky. I don't mean to reject you. I'm just not in a good mood."

She picked up the crutches beside her, lifted herself up, and slowly made her way home. Rocky followed her. As she walked along the beach, drops of sea water were dripping from her clothes onto the sand.

Her mother greeted her outside the house. "Hi, dear," she said. "Did you have a good time at the beach?"

"No," said Sarah, her eyes already turning away from her mother. "I'm going to my room."

Once inside her room, she changed into dry clothes and then threw herself on the bed. As she lay there with her eyes closed and her hands folded behind her head, thoughts began to flood her mind. This is the start of the school vacation and I'm already bored, Sarah thought. Once I was a lucky girl with just about everything I've ever wanted - a happy home, a

fun-loving dog, a swimming pool, a house by the water and lots of friends ... look at me now, a useless, ugly invalid who can no longer swim and play with Rocky and my friends in the way I used to. She sighed.

Sarah's parents didn't like the way Sarah had become since her bus accident twelve months ago. Once she had been a happy, polite, out-going girl, but now she had become increasingly moody and withdrawn. At times, she seemed to be in her own world. Her parents and her relatives were worried about her docile acceptance of idleness, and her silence. So what were they going to do about it? They talked among themselves about possible ways to help her.

Sarah's aunts, Helen and Linda Coray, had suggested that Sarah should go on a trip with them to the beautiful Blue Mountains in New South Wales. They all agreed that a change of air, and surroundings, might be good for Sarah.

A month ago, Sarah's mother, Marg - an independent woman in her late thirties, tall, slim, with kind eyes - first became concerned about her invalid daughter on a Friday when she had arrived home from school looking quite pale. Marg insisted that Sarah take some tonic and vitamins. This had pushed mother and daughter into a battle.

"I hate those things and I hate you making such a fuss!" Sarah screamed.

"Don't talk to me that way, young lady. That's not like you ----- "

"Could you just leave me alone?"

"Sure." Sarah's mother felt hurt. "I'll leave you alone, if that's what you want." She spun on her heel and hurried out of the house, down the drive.

Since that eruption between them, Sarah had become increasingly quiet and moody.

Now, back in her room, lying on her bed, Sarah could hear her parents discussing her in the kitchen.

"Alan," her mother was saying, "I'm worried about Sarah. Why don't you talk to her and get her to agree to come with me to the Blue Mountains. Linda and Helen are keen to accompany us on the trip."

"All right, Marg, but I'm not going to force her. She's a bit on edge lately. Ever since ----- "

"The accident," said Sarah's mother.

A few minutes later, there was a tap on Sarah's door. She looked up.

"Hi, Sarah, may I come in for a minute?"

Sarah didn't answer, but her father entered anyway. She was crying when her father, a burly forty- five-year old, came into the room.

"Why are you crying, sweetie?" inquired her father. He reached out and stroked her hair.

"It's nothing," said Sarah. She sat up, sniffing.

"Sure? You want to talk about it?"

"I'm all right, dad."

"OK," said Sarah's father. "Listen ... your mum and I've been thinking. How would you like to take a holiday with mum and your aunts to the Blue Mountains? We think a change of air and environment will do you good."

"I overheard what you and mum were talking about just now," she muttered. "I'll go if you want me to."

"So, I take it that's a yes?"

Sarah nodded her head. She didn't know why she agreed to go, but she did.

Chapter 2

A week later, Sarah and her mother flew off from Cairns airport and arrived in Sydney at mid-day.

Helen and Linda flew up from Melbourne and were already at the arrival lobby waiting for them. Helen was a quiet woman, small built, fair-skinned, single, never having been married. Linda was Marg's youngest sister. She was also single. She was a friendly, pretty thirty-four year old, with brown, almond-shaped eyes.

"Hi, Marg. Hi, Sarah!" said Linda, welcoming them.

"Hello, Linda. Hi Helen," greeted Marg.

"We're so glad you came, Sarah," said Helen, as she came over to Sarah and hugged her warmly. Sarah saw the concerned look on her aunt's face.

They hired a car from the airport and drove straight to the Mountains. Sarah tried to settle back to enjoy the ride. All the way, the only conversation she took notice of was the one about her home town which her mother declared was the most popular family beach on the Marlin Coast.

It was raining by the time they arrived at Leura, the Garden Village in the Blue Mountains. They had booked to stay in a charming holiday cottage, tastefully decorated and set in lovely gardens - according to the brochure.

They waited in the car for a few minutes until the rain eased. Sarah's aunts unloaded the luggage, while her mother collected the key to the cottage from the manager across the street. While they were waiting to go

into the house, Sarah observed the nearby surroundings. She noted the neat, spacious front lawn with pretty flowers and shrubs and a terrace on each side of the house. It was indeed a quiet area.

Once they were inside the cottage, it started to rain again. The four of them were glad to relax in the cosy lounge, drinking hot cups of instant soup. For the time being, they were oblivious to the rain streaming down the glass windows, blurring the outside world.

Before long, Sarah felt strangely soothed by the sound of the rain. She loved the sound it made as it drummed on the roof. But soon she was in one of her withdrawn moods again. She was starting to fidget with her fingers. Her mother watched her, wondering why she suddenly looked so uneasy.

They spent the rest of the afternoon settling into the cottage.

Next morning, the rain had stopped and the clear blue sky promised that the weather would be perfect. At this time of the year the gardens simply exploded into glorious colour, invigorating and picturesque. The trees and the flowers were in full bloom, and all around was lush vegetation. All this almost made Sarah want to sing out loud. Perhaps it was the combination of these, with the wonderful, natural bushland and the mountains, that made the place so special.

That afternoon, Sarah, her mother and aunts had a picnic beside a beautiful waterfall amongst the many fern gullies at the back of the property. It was so peaceful! Sarah thought of the rose bushes sheltered by tall palm trees in the garden back home. She thought of her father and Rocky. It would be a great holiday, if only they could come as well.

"Enjoying yourself?" suddenly a voice called out from behind Sarah, interrupting her thoughts. It was her aunt Helen, with a picnic basket in one hand.

"Err ... yes, thanks," said Sarah, looking down.

Linda was concerned. "Are you well dear?"

Sarah gave a little cough. "Yes, I'm fine. It's nice to get out."

"You're not feeling sorry for yourself, are you?"

"Perhaps," Sarah muttered. She hoped her aunt wasn't going to give her a hard time.

Helen gave a half-smile. "Now, now, life isn't always that bad," she said. But she was very concerned about Sarah's mood.

Changing the subject quickly, Helen remarked, "This is such a charming property blessed with all of nature's beauty, waterfall and all." She put her basket on the ground before turning to Sarah. "Come on, Sarah, let's go take a look around." She pointed towards a stream a few metres off to their left.

Sarah reluctantly followed her. She was a little concerned about the rocks on the ground. She wished she could walk normally without crutches. It's wishful thinking. I'll never walk properly again, she thought, as she hung her head and sighed deeply. Soon they paused to take a look at the cool stream meandering through the trees.

"What do you think Sarah? Isn't it lovely?" her aunt inquired, looking round at Sarah with a broad smile.

"I think I'll go and sit over there," Sarah replied, spotting a rock a short distance away.

"O.K. but be careful," she heard Helen call, as she swung around and started towards the spot.

She settled herself on a comfortable rock facing a huge boulder with a thick mat of moss which covered much of the surface. As she turned back to look at the waterfall, she saw the misty halo from the cascading falls. Within the thunder of cascading, turbulent water, she whispered to herself, "It's beautiful!" She felt a warm glow just watching such a beautiful view. Temporarily, she felt her resentment melting away.

Sarah stayed and relaxed under the shade of the trees until the sun was starting to go down and the crickets began to chirp.

That evening, back at the cottage, Sarah's mother and aunties had tea on the terrace under the fairy lights in the garden. Although it was a clear, pleasant, starry night, Sarah wanted to be on her own. She had an urge to tell her mother and aunts that she didn't want to be disturbed. This she did, when she bid them an early 'good night'.

Once inside her room, she went straight to bed even though she wasn't sleepy. Again, she thought about her father and Rocky. She missed them a lot and wondered if Rocky was all right. One thought led to another.

In a flash, it all came back to her. She remembered being thrown through the window when the bus she was travelling in crashed head-on with a truck. When she was taken to the hospital, the doctors found that the major nerves of her legs had been crushed.

Then followed operations and months of recovery in a wheel chair before she was on crutches. The pain of the memory of the accident lingered on. "Why did it have to be me?" she asked herself for the umpteenth time.

Suddenly, her thoughts were interrupted by a strong presence she felt in the room. She blinked her eyes and looked around. There was no one there.

Then something caught her attention.

She looked across the room at a ball of brilliant, bluish-white light glowing and swirling towards her from the hallway. When the light was about two metres away from her, it stopped, rose to the ceiling and hovered above her bed. The glow lit up everything in the room. As she stared at the glowing ball, she could sense something invisible was watching her from within the powerful light.

Sarah froze. She could not yell. Her hands were clammy and her heart was pounding. She braced herself for something terrible to happen.

Moments later, the light descended and a man-like figure emerged. It was about one and a half metres tall and dressed in a one-piece, silver, tight-fitting suit without buttons or zipper. It appeared to be a male. He had hands and feet like a human. The head was mushroom-shaped; his large, liquid eyes were round; his strange-looking nose had three nostrils, and his mouth was shaped like a giant water-melon seed. Sarah could not see any ears.

Sarah was spell-bound. As her fear disappeared, she found herself thinking: where have I seen this cute ... thing ... figure ... before?

<Do not be afraid, Sarah,> the stranger in her room communicated to Sarah, whose name he somehow knew, not by voice, but by mind communication. Sarah had heard about animals being able to communicate with other animals by telepathy - a form of mental communication - but she had never known it to be possible with humans, until now.

How does this creature know my name? Sarah wondered. By now she had lost all fear of him. She was sure she had seen that face before, but where?

"Who are you and what do you want?" Sarah asked, looking at him a little timidly.

<I am your alien friend,> the stranger said telepathically. <I will not harm you.>

But why is his face so familiar? Sarah thought, trying hard to remember.

The alien read her thoughts. <Remember me, Sarah? I used to come to you in your dreams when you were little.>

For a moment Sarah was deep in thought. But suddenly she blurted out excitedly, "You're Mushroom Head!"

The alien smiled at Sarah as she stood there with her mouth open in disbelief.

<I have come to take you for a ride in my space craft, if you would like to come.>

Sensing her concern about her mother and aunts, the alien assured her that it would only take a couple of hours and nobody would know she had been missing.

Sarah was excited about the invitation. She had often day-dreamed about seeing a space craft and meeting a good alien. At last, here was a chance of a lifetime. She would not miss it for anything.

Chapter 3

Eager to get started, Sarah sat up in bed and reached for her crutches. A force seemed to pull her from the bed to the hallway. As she was stopped in the middle of the hallway, she had her crutches in both hands. There, right before her eyes, was something unusual, big, and transparent which looked like a doorway of dazzling light. A golden glow started to spread from it as though it was beckoning her to enter.

<Step into the light, Sarah,> the alien whom she had recognised as Mushroom Head, mentally said.

Sarah obeyed and stepped forward. She felt herself being pulled upwards. Then the light abruptly vanished and Sarah found herself standing on a metal platform in an oval room with hard metallic walls. The walls were brightly lit by what looked like crystals. There was no sign of switches on the walls or anywhere in the room. Her alien friend was already there waiting for her by the time she arrived.

Then she felt the space craft rising.

<Welcome aboard, Sarah. You are now in the entry room of the space craft.> Sarah again heard Mushroom Head's message loud and clear in her head.

Sarah was puzzled. She had no idea how she could be transported from the hallway to the space craft without leaving the cottage. She was a little disappointed that she didn't get to see the space craft from outside.

Her alien friend smiled, <Come and meet the others.>

The others? wondered Sarah. She was surprised that there were more creatures like Mushroom Head.

Mushroom Head led Sarah into a room where there were five similar alien beings. They seemed to be expecting Sarah. A moment later, two more alien beings appeared suddenly through the walls.

The beings were dressed similar to Mushroom Head except they had a kind of shield, about the size of a small dinner plate, on their heads. The shields reflected light.

Mushroom Head introduced Sarah to all of them. All the aliens greeted her by putting their left hands up, as if warding off a blow. She felt an instant friendliness from them.

Sarah returned their greeting with a smile and a timid 'hello'. Then, as quickly and silently as they had appeared, the five aliens left the room. Mushroom Head looked Sarah up and down with a friendly eye.

<Well then, shall we?> Mushroom motioned for Sarah to follow him.

Sarah was excited. Her special guided tour was about to begin.

<There are four levels in our space craft. We shall now go to level one.>

Mushroom Head motioned his guest to follow him. Quick as lightning they were transported to level one where they stood in a beam of white light. Sarah could smell a sweet, pleasant fragrance as soon as they arrived there. What a lovely scent, she thought. I love it.

<Let me show you some things you have not seen before, Sarah.>

Sarah was shown many unusual things. Some of which were little alien pets which looked like a cross between a fish and a bird. As soon as they saw Mushroom Head, these fabulous little animals made a melodious sound like wind chimes swinging in the cool breeze. They were obviously very happy to see him.

Mushroom Head spread his hands out to greet them.

<These are my adorable pets, my happy companions.>

Sarah asked Mushroom Head many questions. She was starting to get used to hearing his thoughts as if spoken out loud when she asked him questions. Mushroom Head told her many things. From him, Sarah learned that he and his colleagues had come from a distant star called Lipus. She also learned that their space craft was piloted by intelligent, invisible beings.

Sarah was thrilled. "You're a kind alien," she said as her friend helped her over a shiny platform.

<Not all aliens are good; some are bad.> Mushroom Head's eyes flickered lightly as he conveyed his thoughts to Sarah.

He told her later that many different types of aliens from other stars and planets had been visiting Earth, particularly in recent years. Mushroom Head and his colleagues were actually space police who had been sent on a mission to earth to locate the bad aliens and take them home to face criminal charges.

"What had the bad aliens done?" asked Sarah.

<They have done horrible things to humans and animals. Some had even kidnapped human beings and killed animals from Earth just for sport.>

At one point, Sarah and her friend stopped in front of a glassy dish, the size of a truck wheel.

<Come and see your world through the trak- ka.> Mushroom Head pointed at the dish.

Sarah cast her glance in the direction Mushroom Head had pointed. It occurred to her then that trak-ka must be the alien word for that glassy dish thing.

The screen glowed as power hummed through it. An image came onto the screen in full three- dimensional reality, before her eyes. It was all strange and dream-like for Sarah. She seemed to be seeing Earth through the screen. It was like watching a miniature world on television. She couldn't believe it.

"That looks like my neighbour at the beach near my house!" Sarah called out. Immediately, she received confirmation from Mushroom Head. She could recognise the familiar scenery of Trinity Beach near where she lived. The sea was churning. The clouds were banking over the sea, crashing into each other. She noticed Tom, a regular lifesaver, with his eyes sweeping the horizon. Then a young boy was carried ashore by another man through the pounding surf. It appeared that there had been an accident. Sarah felt anxious just watching the scene. She quickly turned her eyes away from the screen.

When she cast her eyes on the screen again, she saw herself surrounded by dogs, cats, deer, koalas, monkeys, horses, and all sorts of animals. There were many of them, and they all looked calm, happy and contented as they frolicked around playfully in a large green field. Sarah was curious. "What am I doing with all those animals?" she asked herself.

Sarah watched the screen intently. This time she saw something different. It was a newspaper with a picture of a young lady on it. She looked at the lady's face on the screen, taking in the shape of her face, her hair, eyes, nose, and her jawline. It was her own face she was staring at, ten years into the future. She was stunned! As she looked below the photo, she caught sight of the words: Sarah Mccoy, the wonderful animal miracle worker - she makes animals happy and well. Sarah wondered - what was going on?

She loved animals and knew quite a lot about them and had picked up bits of information from her studies at school and from watching television programs on animals. As the pictures faded, she had an inkling of her future with animals; she knew that what she saw on the screen would come true. She felt happy about what she was seeing on the screen.

There was a lot for Sarah to think about. She was clearly aware that the word 'happy' had popped up more than once so far. Is this a coincidence? she questioned.

Sarah continued to watch the screen. This time it presented a series of topics about stars and space travel. Sarah read the information with ease and speed. She could understand everything she read. But she didn't realise she was doing this until a little later when she found she had read pages and pages of information. Am I really reading that fast? she wondered.

The words on the screen kept coming, and Sarah kept reading. By then she had no doubt her reading ability had increased to an unbelievable speed. "Gee, this will be great for my studies," she whispered to herself.

The screen suddenly went blank. Sarah realised then that her mind had been wandering from the screen. She looked up at Mushroom Head. Their eyes met. She knew her alien friend was telling her it was time to move on.

Chapter 4

They bypassed level two and went straight to level three. There was more light, more space, on level three.

There was a room with three entrances, one of which led to a place where lots of glossy, healthy plants were growing in rows of cylindrical containers. What was so strange was that the plants were not growing in soil or water. They seemed to be glued to the interior part of the container.

Reading her thoughts, Mushroom Head patiently explained to Sarah that in their world, plants could grow fast, healthy, and beautiful by a simple process of exposing the seeds to a strong red light.

Sarah was surprised. She had learned in school that without air and water, no living things can grow or survive.

<Allow me to show you how the cultivation of plants is done here.>

"Yes, please!" said Sarah.

Mushroom Head handed her a small brown seed. <Place the seed over here and I shall shine a red light on it.> Mushroom Head pointed at a small rectangular container made of what looked like clear plastic.

Sarah followed his instruction exactly. As soon as the seed was in the container, Mushroom Head took out a razor-like instrument from a box in the wall nearby. He aimed it at the seed and a powerful red beam shot out and made the seed glow like a hot coal.

The seed began to shimmer as soon as the beam touched it. Even as she watched, tiny green shoots began to sprout from the seed. Within seconds, the plant shot upward. She was impressed.

To her great delight, a large pink flower that looked like a rose, was opening in the air before her eyes. The petals opened and spread, opened and spread, until they formed a lovely blossom in full bloom.

"This is the most beautiful rose I've ever seen!" Sarah said. As she admired the flower, the only clear feeling she had was one of gratitude.

The next place Sarah visited was a room filled with a soothing, pale blue light.

<This is our healing room. It is a happy place. When we are feeling low in energy or unwell, we come to this room and spend some time here to recharge and rejuvenate ourselves.>

"That's great!" exclaimed Sarah. As she took a quick glance around the room, she noticed several exquisite, multi-coloured cubes in a corner of the room. They were especially attractive.

"What are they, Mushroom Head?" said Sarah, pointing at the shining objects.

<Those are special crystals.>

Sarah went closer to the crystals. "Wow!" Sarah said. "There's something strange about these things. They feel alive and very powerful. I feel good just looking at them."

<They are called coo-coo, in our alien language.> Mushroom Head smiled and moved slowly towards the crystals. Sarah liked the way his eyes lit up when he smiled.

He picked up one of the precious stones. This one had more emerald green and pink than all the others, but was smaller.

<This is my special present to you. Keep it safe with love and respect. You may one day need it to help someone or yourself.>

"Oh, thank you very much," Sarah said with excitement and appreciation. "But what do I use it for, Mushroom Head?"

<This can be used for protection, for healing and for helping you to make the right decisions. If you use it with love and respect, it will let you know in what other ways it can be used.>

"I promise to take good care of it, and only use it for good." Sarah held the crystal in her hands and admired it like it was the most precious thing she had ever seen. She felt great warmth flowing from the crystal to her heart area. It was a very pleasant feeling. Instantly she felt calm and peaceful.

When it was time to leave the room, Sarah put the crystal carefully in her pocket. She was then shown the way to the control chamber on level four. As they were passing an area on the way to the control chamber, Mushroom Head casually mentioned to Sarah that the area housed a few bad aliens whom he and his men had captured after they, the bad aliens, had tried to flood Earth with eggs of creatures from outer space.

<These eggs, when they are hatched, will produce animals which look like gargoyles. These animals are called kartarls in our language. They live on blood. The adult kartarls hypnotise their victims before they suck their blood. Unfortunately, there had been a few incidents where these creatures had attacked domestic animals on Earth and killed them.>

Sarah sensed the seriousness of the situation in her friend's tone and felt a shiver go down her spine thinking about such terrible creatures.

<Like your people, some of our people, too, are irresponsible and selfish. Some are evil ... >

Sarah paused. Her lips set firmly. "What if these criminals escape?" she asked as she glanced across at the prisoners' area. Can this coo-coo protect me from them if they should escape? Sarah thought.

<Do not worry, Sarah. There is a system which controls the shield that surrounds the whole area where the prisoners are kept. As long as it is intact, they cannot escape.>

Mushroom Head suddenly stopped. His head tilted slightly to one side. He looked as though he was receiving a message from someone, somewhere.

Then he turned around to Sarah abruptly.

<There is a slight problem in the control chamber. I am sorry you cannot go in. I shall take you back now.>

"Is anything wrong?" Sarah asked as she noticed the concerned look on her alien friend's face.

<Just a slight technical problem, but it will be resolved in no time. Come. Shall we make our way back to the ground level?>

Chapter 5

Just as Sarah was about to step into a ring of luminous light which was supposed to transport her home, a sudden dizziness struck her.

She leaned anxiously over a metallic pillar that was close by. A shock wave rose through the soles of her feet and her body began to tremble violently. She felt extreme heat all over. A prickly sensation, like showers of sand, was shooting up her arms and legs. She had never experienced anything like it before.

Tears began to roll down her cheeks. I'm going to be sick, Sarah thought. The alien being must have read her thoughts, because he took Sarah and carried her to a round crystal seat.

"Sit. Take a few deep breaths," he said telepathically.

Sarah's face started to turn green. She felt weak. Within seconds, blisters had popped up all over her face. Her face was burning. She was in quite a lot of pain.

Her voice quivered. "What's ... ha ... happening to me?"

<I am sorry, you must have contracted an alien disease from the plant. Do not be afraid. I will help you.> Then he touched Sarah's forehead. Instantly, beams of golden rays streamed from his palm.

Sarah became very scared and wondered if the alien disease could be fatal.

Several times Sarah began to speak but, as her voice broke, she had to stop. Finally she said, "Will I see my mum and dad ... and Rocky, my pet dog, again?"

The alien nodded his head.

Sarah panicked. "Oh! I can't feel my legs, I can't feel my legs any more!"

The rising hysteria in Sarah's voice seemed to puzzle the alien. He looked at her without speaking, but she could hear his thoughts in her head clearly: <That will soon pass.>

Sarah looked up at him and managed a weak smile.

Then the alien carried her and placed her on the floor in a special chamber, smaller than the size of a normal bathroom. Sarah felt claustrophobic. She struggled to get up, but to no avail.

All of a sudden the small chamber started to expand. It grew larger and larger before her eyes. It seemed only a couple of minutes before she found herself in the middle of a huge chamber. The same chamber she was in a few minutes had been transformed into a huge area at least ten times the original size.

For a moment she was bewildered, but something else distracted her - a gigantic bubble appeared out of the blue. It was pulsating furiously and coming straight at her. It swept her off the floor the minute it touched her.

"Ah!" she yelled as she found herself on top of the mysterious bubble. "Aaaaaa!"

Sarah was scared. But what could she do?

Eeeeeee ... Heeee ... Teeeeeeee ... kiiiiii ... - a series of high-pitched sounds reverberated throughout the chamber. Her immediate environment was glowing in a most exquisite golden hue.

The sounds seemed to pierce through her eyes, and her ears, and travel down her body and out through the soles of her feet. She got so absorbed in the sounds and the whole experience that she forgot all about her fears and problems.

Yet, the high-pitched sound did not hurt her ears at all. On the contrary, they strengthened her weak, aching body and soothed her anxious mind.

Little by little, her body responded. First, the green colour on her face had left. Next, the horrible blisters disappeared. There was a healthy glow on her face.

Suddenly Sarah felt most comfortable as she found herself sinking into the bubble. Cool! This is the most comfortable thing I have ever laid in. I could just stay here forever, she thought to herself.

So many things happened so quickly! The brilliant light around her had now changed from a rich, golden colour to multi-coloured, scintillating lights.

Sarah pinched her face to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

Everything felt perfect. The only thing missing was Rocky. Her furry friend always went on adventures with her. She felt powerful and big, as though she had grown taller than the giant palm tree in her garden.

At that moment, she knew everything was all right. She realised that this chamber she now occupied was an artificial reality - but nevertheless, a reality just as real as her house back at Trinity Bay. She just knew that the aliens had their own world where they could make strange and wonderful things happen. They had the technology which could maintain a huge space inside a small chamber. She called it 'alien super-magic'.

Just then, she heard Mushroom Head's voice in her mind, soft, gentle as a gentle breeze, <I am pleased you have enjoyed your experience, my dear friend.>

"Thanks a lot," Sarah whispered, her heart pounding with joy.

To her great excitement, not only was she cured of the alien disease, she found herself able to walk out of the bubble unassisted. Previously, she could only walk with crutches. In fact, she suddenly realised that she had not seen her crutches since she had arrived in the space craft.

She was cured.

Chapter 6

A special friendship began to develop between Sarah and Mushroom Head. Mushroom Head came around to her side.

<I am so glad you are happy. But I am afraid you have to stay just a little longer to make sure you are perfectly all right before you leave for home.>

"I might have thought I was going crazy if it hadn't been for your reassurance," said Sarah. Then she looked down for a moment. "OK. I'll stay a little longer."

Soon Sarah lost track of time. She had the fleeting thought that her mother and aunts were frantically looking for her. One part of her wished to stay where she was for a little longer, another part wanted to go back to her family.

<You shall have a special drink and then rest for awhile. This is all you need. You will not feel hungry or thirsty.>

What if I need to go to the toilet? Sarah thought. I'd better ask Mushroom Head where the toilet is, just in case.

Mushroom Head smiled. <The waste products from your body will automatically be absorbed by the atmosphere in the space craft. You will not need the facility.>

"Oh...," Sarah was surprised and a little embarrassed.

Not long after, one of Mushroom Head's colleagues appeared with a glass tumbler in his hand. He came over to Sarah.

Sarah looked at the alien and then at Mushroom Head.

"Drink this, Sarah," a foreign voice said.

Then the familiar voice of Mushroom Head said, <It is all right, Sarah. Take the drink and then you can rest.>

Sarah obeyed. It was a thick drink which tasted like honey and melon dew.

As soon as she finished the drink, she felt unusually sleepy. "I need a sl ----- " she said to herself.

Sarah fell into a deep sleep before she could finish the sentence; her eyes moved rapidly back and forth behind her lids.

All of a sudden, Sarah and Rocky plunged down, down, down. Bang. Crash. They landed at the bottom of an empty farm well. Rocky staggered to turn around and looked at Sarah for a few moments. Then he collapsed. Sarah saw that Rocky had stopped breathing. His face was calm, and he appeared as if he was about to see someone he loved very much.

"No, Rocky," Sarah sobbed. "Rocky. Don't leave me!"

Sarah screamed and woke up.

She found herself lying on something long and comfortable, like a sort of bed. Her heart was still beating fast. She blinked her eyes and shook her head. Then she sat up and gave a long sigh. Thank God, it's only a dream, she thought. But it had felt very real and scary.

Instantly a figure materialised. It was Mushroom Head. He looked at her thoughtfully and crouched down next to her.

<Did you have a nightmare?>

Sarah blushed.

<Forget about your nightmare. Instead, come and have some fun in our observatory room, Sarah. Well, it is really our recreation room.>

Sarah was curious. What might the fun be?

She was led into a yellowy-green room about ten metres wide and fifteen metres long. Its green was glittering with freshness. Sarah liked the room very much. It made her feel energised and alert straight away. The room was well equipped and incredibly modern. It consisted of super advanced electronics.

The focal point in the room was a big metallic dish in the wall. This one was three times bigger than the one she had seen earlier on. Mushroom Head stood in front of the dish and moved his hand across the screen. Instantly, the screen turned on.

<This screen is different from the other one you saw before. This one shows events as they are happening now. It is like watching live-television at home,> explained Mushroom Head. <I shall leave you to watch it and come back for you later. Enjoy yourself.>

With that, he left the room.

Sarah sat on a comfortable chair facing the screen. She was all alone but she was not lonely. The first thing she saw on the screen was her mother. She was in the company of Sarah's father and aunts. They looked extremely haggard and sad. Her mother looked worried. Her eyes were teary. Her father was anxious and sad even though he tried to put on a brave face. They were talking to the police on the front lawn outside their holiday cottage.

A dignified-looking, male television reporter with thick, wavy grey hair was announcing that a man and a woman had claimed they had sighted someone who looked like Sarah in Bendigo, a country town in Victoria. He

announced that the police suspected Sarah had been kidnapped, but so far no one had come forward with a ransom demand.

Another report from a different news channel described Sarah as mentally unstable and that she had run away from her parents after she had a disagreement with them.

"Gosh! How ridiculous! What lies!" Sarah shouted and punched her fist against her thigh in frustration. She was annoyed that the stories reported on television were completely untrue.

The sight of her father on the screen reminded her of Rocky's whereabouts. Rocky. Where was he? If dad is with mum, and Rocky wasn't seen with them, was he back at home? she thought while she was staring blankly at the screen. No longer was she interested in what she was seeing. Her mind was on Rocky. She remembered the horrible nightmare she had about Rocky, and shuddered. Alighting from the chair, she paced up and down the room - something she always did when she was worried.

By chance, when she later cast a glance at the screen, she saw a dog lying on the ground. She looked. It was Rocky. She was thrilled. But her excitement didn't last long. It had occurred to her that Rocky was not the happy dog he had always been. Instead, he appeared sad and in pain. There was blood on his neck and on his paws. What had happened to Rocky? Tears ran down her cheeks and her mind was clouded with all sorts of fears at the sight of her dear friend.

Sarah watched nervously as the scene unfolded. No one seemed to know that Rocky was hurt. He was on his own, badly wounded. Sarah's heart sank. Someone should take Rocky to the vet quickly. Her expression was a combination of fear, distress, and helplessness.

Next minute, the scene changed. Rocky had disappeared from the screen. Sarah was feeling all knotted inside. She had to find out if Rocky was O.K. Perhaps Mushroom Head could help. But where could she find him now? The only possibility was to try and contact him mentally. She tried, but there was no response, no sign of him having received her message. Sarah was disappointed. But she would not give up easily. She made up her mind she would venture out of the room to look for him.

Just as she was nearing the entrance, the door opened, and Mushroom Head, the very person she desperately wanted to see, was standing right at the door. Sarah was pleased.

Mushroom Head gave Sarah a look which told her that he knew what was going on. <I have some news for you, Sarah. While patrolling, one of my colleagues picked up your pet. Your dog had been attacked by a savage alien animal, the type I told you about. The katarl was deliberately released by the bad aliens ----- >

"Rocky is here? Can I see him?" Sarah interrupted. Her mind was racing.

In his usual calm voice, Mushroom Head replied, <Rocky has just been given emergency treatment for severe loss of blood and puncture wounds. He is not over the danger yet but I shall take you to see him now.>

Sarah was anxious to see Rocky at once. She bit her bottom lip and prayed and prayed that he would be all right.

At last, in a dome-shaped room, Sarah saw Rocky. He was resting on a giant cushion with his eyes closed and his tongue slightly hanging out of his mouth. Sarah knelt next to him and started to stroke him gently.

Rocky slowly opened his eyes. He didn't seem to recognise Sarah at first, but then, his eyes widened, his ears pricked up, and his tail began to

wag weakly. Next, he shook his head back and forth, looked up and got to his feet.

At first, Sarah was unsure what was happening to Rocky. Then, she started to cheer.

"Rocky, you're all right!" she exclaimed with great delight and threw her arms around her dog, and gave him a big hug. "Oh Rocky, you had me worried for a while there."

Mushroom Head gave Rocky a pat on the head and told Sarah that Rocky was fine and the wounds were healing quickly. On hearing that, Sarah checked Rocky's neck and legs. There were no signs of any wounds there or anywhere else on his body.

"How could any wounds heal so fast?" she gasped in amazement. This must be the wonder of alien medicine, she concluded and gently stroked Rocky around the neck.

<Rocky is ready to go home now.>

Sarah wished Rocky could stay with her but she understood that it would complicate matters even more if she and Rocky returned home together. There would be lots of explaining to do then. It seemed Sarah understood things naturally in a way she had never been able to before.

<You can watch Rocky from the screen in the green room as he is being dropped at your house, Sarah.> Mushroom Head consoled her.

"That'll be great, thanks." Sarah was touched by his kindness and great understanding.

Sarah spoke softly to Rocky and explained the situation. Rocky gave a few barks. For a moment she felt as though he was saying to her that he was happy to see her. But he had to be sent home soon before he too was

reported missing. Sarah sensed that Rocky had the sixth sense of knowing the events of the last few days surrounding Sarah and her parents.

But doubt quickly crept in. "That's silly," she laughed at herself. But she wouldn't let go of the idea. She was determined to do a test to see if it was just her imagination that she and Rocky could communicate. After having seen so many strange things happening around her in recent days, she was prepared to believe in almost anything.

So, to put her suspicions to the test, she asked Rocky to scratch on the floor twice if he really understood her.

Rocky cocked his head to one side, paused for a moment, then scratched the floor twice with his paw.

Sarah was wide-eyed in amazement. She asked Rocky if anyone was taking care of him while her father was up at the Blue Mountains. Mentally, Rocky told her that a painter, who lived a kilometre down the road where they lived, came to feed him daily in the morning.

Sarah was delighted that she was actually talking to her canine friend. She then asked Rocky to howl.

Rocky howled.

Now, Sarah was totally convinced. "Wow! I can really talk to animals!"

Mushroom Head beamed. He was happy for Sarah.

<Time to take Rocky home. My colleague will take care of that. Meantime, you can watch his return on the screen.>

Sarah said good-bye to Rocky and returned to the green room.

By the time she got there, the screen was already showing Rocky safely in his kennel. What speed! Rocky barked happily as though he was barking from the screen directly in front of Sarah. Sarah understood he was letting

her know that he knew she would be watching him. He was telling her that he had returned home safely.

What a triumphant moment for Sarah and Rocky!

Relieved, Sarah moved away from the screen. But she moved back again when she saw something new appearing on the screen. This time it showed a huge rising sun. Its golden colour was awesome. Its brilliant gold was like the bright yellow of melting butter. As she looked, she felt herself stretching to fill the sky. It was an incredible experience.

Suddenly she had the strange sense that the craft was cruising down into a heavily wooded valley not far from a great lake. She couldn't explain how she knew, but somehow deep down, she knew she was right. And she was. A great lake appeared on the screen. Far away were scenes of a wooded valley. Sarah imagined what it would be like to watch the emerging stars above the lake on a starry night. It must be magnificent, she thought.

As she was thinking about the stars, images began to flash in her head. She could now vividly recall a series of happy meetings with Mushroom Head when she was about eight. Those were a jumble of colourful dreams and memories. She was so absorbed in her pleasant state that she didn't even notice Mushroom Head who had come into the room and was standing right in front of her. Her recall was abruptly ended when Mushroom Head's voice interrupted her thoughts.

<Sarah ... Sarah.>

"Oh ... sorry."

<If you wish, I can show you the control chamber now.>

Sarah was excited. She was going to see the control chamber after all!

Chapter 7

Without wasting any time, Mushroom Head and Sarah made their way to level four. Moments later, Sarah's eyes caught the glint of a soaring, shimmering, golden chamber. It looked like some kind of optical illusion. It looked real, yet it looked unreal. Sarah was confused. She couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't. It was like having a dream except that she was awake.

When she entered the chamber with her companion, she was surprised she didn't see anyone else there. Yet, she felt someone, or something, was watching her. For a moment, Sarah was nervous. But then a sense of reassurance overcame her. She felt sure it came from the invisible 'something'.

Immediately she remembered what Mushroom Head had told her earlier on, that the space craft was piloted by an invisible intelligence. This must be it!

Sarah glanced quickly around the room. There was a chair and a massive control panel in the middle of the room and the ceiling had intricate patterns. As Sarah was taking everything in, her attention was drawn to two huge windows with clear, see-through screens. They were the look-out portholes where outer space could be viewed.

<Come and take a look.>

Through the portholes, Sarah stared out into the vast space and saw millions of star specks and twinkling crimson globes. She was fascinated and wished she could capture this magical moment with a camera. "The universe is an infinitely amazing place!" she whispered.

As Sarah stared at the scenery before her, she felt a deep longing inside her. It was the strangest feeling of homesickness she had ever had. Then out of the blue, another alien appeared. He greeted Sarah with the familiar hand gesture that had been used when she first arrived.

Funny, Sarah thought. I can hear their thoughts. They are thinking I'm medically safe to leave. But wait a minute. Mushroom Head is thinking he wished I could stay with them forever. This is weird.

Chapter 8

Boom! Boom! Boom! boom! boom!

A series of loud thundering sounds came from outside the control chamber. There was a sudden jolt. Then the walls gave a little tremble, and sparks of light were shooting everywhere into the room.

A moment later, again came another jolt, stronger than the previous one. The entire room began to rock and sway, as if shaken by a big earthquake.

Suddenly, the room went dim. Sarah was a little frightened, but at the same time she was excited by the thought that something out of the ordinary was happening.

Mushroom Head and the other alien raced around in a frenzy, like ants rushing to and fro on the ground before a storm. Sarah was starting to be worried.

Then came a blast so powerful that it threw Sarah through the air. Debris was flying around her and something hit her on the back of her head so hard she thought she might faint.

Mushroom Head rushed forward to catch Sarah as she fell.

<Quick! Get into the capsule over there.>

Mushroom Head hurriedly pushed Sarah towards a large capsule in the wall. Gasping, Sarah stepped into it. The capsule door shut behind her. She couldn't hear anything in the capsule except her own heart pounding furiously in her ears.

But through a small transparent screen at the front of the capsule, Sarah could see Mushroom Head and his friend flying and spinning in the air. Sarah thought they would get their faces smashed for sure. In a split second, Mushroom Head was thrown against a wall just before he hit the floor covered with rubble. The other alien was still flying and spinning when he, too, hit the floor a second after Mushroom Head.

It seemed a long time before the capsule door opened. Coughing and blinking, Sarah crawled out. She felt a little dizzy but she tried to shake it off. Her main concern was Mushroom Head who was lying a few metres away from her. Sarah blinked her eyes furiously, straining to see through the smoky haze that had filled the control room.

Mushroom Head lay sprawled on the ground, not moving. His friend was further away, looking dazed but trying to get to his feet slowly.

Sarah quickly crawled over to Mushroom Head. There was blood oozing out of a big gash on his forehead. His face was grey. He didn't look right. Sarah sensed her friend's life was in danger.

"Mushroom Head," she called. "Mushroom Head, can you hear me? Please say something." Sarah held her breath, waiting for a response.

No answer. No movement.

"Mushroom Head!" This time Sarah yelled his name. "Mushroom Head, wake up! Wake up!" Tears rolled down Sarah's cheeks and blurred her vision.

A voice called out faintly. <Sa ... rah ... > It was Mushroom Head's voice, and he sounded in great pain.

In the face of this new threat, Sarah suddenly felt courage building up inside her. She was desperate to save her friend's life.

Sarah took a deep breath. Focus. Focus. Keep calm, she mentally reminded herself. But it wasn't easy. Suddenly, she remembered the coo-coo that Mushroom Head had given her. She searched in her pocket. It was still there. Without delay, she took it out of her pocket and placed it over Mushroom Head's forehead.

There was an instant glow. Sarah waited. A moment seemed an hour. Mushroom Head stirred gently. Before Sarah had a chance to say anything to him, there was another blast and jolt which pushed Sarah and Mushroom Head along the floor.

Sarah couldn't believe it!

She quickly picked herself up and went straight to help Mushroom Head who was now lying on his stomach, a couple of metres away. To make things worse, she realised that her coo-coo was missing. As she glanced across the room she saw the other alien kneeling on the floor in the opposite direction. He appeared to be alive although stunned, in some kind of a trance.

Sarah turned Mushroom Head over onto his back. As she was turning him over, she was surprised how light his body was. She touched his face and called his name but there was no answer. In fact, he was lying quite still. Sarah feared for the worst. Without thinking, she turned her head slightly to one side and rested the other side of her face on his chest, straining to listen to his heartbeat. But there was no sign that his heart was still beating. Was he dead? she wondered.

All sorts of negative thoughts began to crowd into her head. What if Mushroom Head is dead and I'm stuck here in space? Will the other aliens still be friendly towards me if Mushroom Head is not around any more?

But what really concerned Sarah most, was her friend's life. Though the possibility of saving her friend's life appeared dimmer by the minute, she did not give up hope.

She persisted in her close watch over him, looking for the slightest sign of life, any sign at all. Then she saw a yellow discharge coming from his eyes, followed by a slight twitch on his face. Mushroom Head looked as though he was trying to open his eyes. About the same time, Sarah's finger tips started to tingle. Within a second, her finger tips were pulsating hard. Her fingers and palms became very hot, radiating heat like a heated iron poker, except that this heat did not burn her hands.

She felt the urge to place her hot palms over her friend's eyes. As she did that, she was somehow quietly confident that her action would help him. True enough, the discharge from his eyes stopped flowing. In a split second it had disappeared without a trace. This is amazing, she thought.

Mushroom Head opened his eyes, and looked lovingly at Sarah with great appreciation. It was as if he had been quietly aware of everything that was going on in the room during the time he was lying motionless on the floor. By the expression on his face, Sarah was sure he could hear her every thought, her every cry.

<You saved my life.> Mushroom Head looked at Sarah with deep appreciation.

At that moment, a look of understanding passed between Sarah and Mushroom Head. Tears of joy streamed down Sarah's face. Right then she felt closer to him than she ever had before.

Mushroom Head remembered his other friend. He got up slowly and staggered over to him. His friend was in deep shock.

<Stay here, Sarah, while I take him to the healing room.>

Sarah hesitated. "OK. I'll wait here for you."

Sarah watched as Mushroom Head left the room with his friend in his arms, his steps gaining strength with each pace he took. She felt a bit tired after all the excitement. So she decided she wasn't going to worry about anything for the time being. She sat on the floor, and closed her eyes.

But Sarah had barely rested for a minute when she heard a low humming noise. What's that? she thought. When she opened her eyes, she saw that the wall on the far end of the room had turned to liquid silver, and a strange figure stepped through. The figure, the size of a young child, slowly advanced towards her. He looked like a male with a big nose, hollow cheeks, and huge, hooded, black eyes. His feet were small. As he drew closer, Sarah noticed his eyes were peculiar. They just stared straight ahead and didn't blink once. The entity seemed to be marching in a 'lock-step' motion.

Sarah opened her mouth to scream --- but no sound came out.

Another head popped into view. Another creature. This one was carrying a huge speckled egg. Sarah's felt weak. Her heart was racing, and her mouth was dry. Without a shadow of doubt, she knew she had come face to face with the bad aliens.

"Aaaaaah!" Sarah screamed. "Help. Help."

But no one answered her frantic cries. What now?

The two creatures drew closer in a robotic fashion, their legs bending slightly with each step forward. As they drew closer, Sarah could smell a horrible stench like rotten meat. It was so bad that she thought she was going to be sick.

All of a sudden, Sarah was overwhelmed with anger at the unwelcome intruders. They must be the bad aliens who have escaped, she thought with real panic. What shall I do now?

Sarah's scalp prickled when she thought of these hostile aliens grabbing her hand. Without hesitating, she tried to run between the intruders, pushing them aside in order to reach the doorway. But the two entities caught her.

Sarah's head felt hot. Her heart pounded against her chest. She had a sense of knowing that these creatures fed on fear and were powerless against potential victims whose courage was stronger than the creatures' evilness.

Sarah's face was contorted with rage. For a second, she stood rigid, feeling as if she couldn't breathe. Then, instinctively, she lunged at one of them and hit it with her fist. The entity gave a loud yell like a frightened animal and suddenly dematerialised. The other entity just stood there, as though he was terrified. With another shout Sarah raised her hand to threaten him. Instantly he too dematerialised.

Sarah felt a moment of primitive victory. Her sweaty hair was matted on her cheeks, as she stood there breathing heavily.

Then her eyes widened. "The giant egg is still here," she whispered to herself. The egg started to move. Then it vibrated violently.

Croooaaak! Sarah heard a loud crack. The giant egg had cracked. Something black, like a monster in a horror-movie, stepped out of the broken egg. Its face and body were wet. Sarah stared at the monster. It stared back.

Sarah felt a tremor of fear. Beads of sweat formed on her brow and her eyes began to sting. Anxiously she waited until the monster was a metre away, then opened her mouth and screamed. Her scream was so loud and shrill that it temporarily frightened the monster. For a split second it stood still. Sarah could see its eyes clearly. They were red and glowing. It was a horrible-looking creature with black scales. Its four legs ended in sharp, long claws.

The monster appeared mad and confused. Its big upper lip was raising and falling in a nervous sneer that revealed its long, sharp teeth.

"Go away!" Sarah yelled.

The monster looked hard at Sarah for a moment, and began to growl, threatening her with its eyes and claws.

"Go away!" again Sarah shouted.

<Press the golden button on the wall above your head, Sarah.> Mushroom Head's voice whispered clearly inside her head.

Sarah looked up. She saw the golden button. She pressed.

Uhhhhh! The monster groaned, then collapsed.

Sarah had just enough time to say "huuh" when she heard a long, low, sniffing sound right outside the control room. Some sort of animal was behind the door. Then there was a thud and the door opened. Staring at her was another kartarl, three times the size of the one which had collapsed on the floor a moment ago. Could this be the mother looking for her egg, her baby? Sarah wondered.

Sarah fixed her eyes on the kartarl. Every cell in her body was crying out that there was danger here. As she continued to stare at the creature, she began to feel sleepy. As she was dozing off, Mushroom Head's words 'the adult kartarls hypnotise their victims ... ' ran through her mind. Panicking, she fought to shake herself out of the sleepy state by shaking her head vigorously several times.

It worked. Sarah was no longer under the hypnotic grip.

Keeeeeeee....., the creature screeched. Its sound was so piercing that Sarah's ears ached. She placed her hands over her ears waiting for the screeching sound to stop. Then she remembered how she had dealt with the

baby kartarl. But this time she was too far away from the golden button on the wall. She began to panic.

Another thought came. Perhaps this creature, like the bad aliens, feeds on fear. If I confront it, it may leave me alone, Sarah mentally reassured herself.

She began yelling and waving her arms wildly. Without warning, the monster charged at Sarah who quickly took a few evasive steps. The creature missed her. It became extremely mad and growled louder than before, threatening its victim with its sharp teeth.

Sarah saw her chance when the creature momentarily dropped its head slightly towards the floor. She moved closer to the monster and hit it broadside on, with such force that it bellowed as it lost its footing and slumped to its knees on the floor.

Just then, Mushroom Head burst into the room. He pointed a small rectangular device at the creature and the creature instantly disappeared.

"Whew," Sarah exclaimed, flushed with relief.

<Are you all right, Sarah?>

Almost in tears, Sarah replied, "I guess so," and ran her fingers through her hair, gasping for breath.

<It is over. Everything is going to be fine from now on.> Mushroom Head put his hands around Sarah and gave her a long hug. What comfort, Sarah thought.

<Do not worry, Sarah. Everything is now under control. There was minor damage to the control system but it is now being rectified. Thank you, Sarah, for saving my life. You have shown great courage and strength against fears and dangers. By doing that, you were able to immobilise the

escaped criminals. This has greatly assisted us in recapturing them before they could escape by using one of our emergency crafts.>

"Really?" Sarah said. Then her face softened. "I should be the one to thank you. You have given me heaps and been so kind since I came here."

Suddenly, light filled the room. Sarah felt the tension in her body melt away as her sense of adventure returned. She was truly happy.

<Remember, Sarah. Happiness comes from within, from inside you.>

Sarah began to realise in her own way, the meaning of happiness, of sharing, and loving.

Then she remembered something else. She tapped her head with her right hand and said, "Gosh! My mum's going to be very anxious at me for being away. She must be worried."

<I am very sorry for the delay. I did tell you that the trip would take only two hours but ----- >

"It's all right. It's not your fault that I am delayed. Besides, I would have missed out on all the action, had I not fallen sick and stayed here a little longer."

<Thank you for your understanding. Now, it is time to take you back. But before you leave, here is your coo-coo.>

Sarah was delighted. "Oh, you've found it. Thank you."

Chapter 9

Sarah stood silent for a minute. Then she thanked Mushroom Head for being the best friend she'd ever had. Strangely, time seemed to pass too fast now for her liking. She wished time would stand still for a while at least, so that she could be with her special friend a little longer.

Sarah forced herself to smile. Then she stuck out her hand. "Well, then, goodbye," she said. "Thank you very much for inviting me; thanks for everything. I hope I haven't been too much trouble."

She really meant what she said.

Mushroom Head had the kindest smile. He had a warmth and charm all his own. There was even more of a glow than usual on his face. In fact, he was radiant and less formal in his mannerisms.

<Trouble? Nonsense. In the short time you have been here, you have worked wonders and achieved the seemingly impossible. You are a brave girl, Sarah, and a true friend.>

There was so much Sarah wanted to say to her alien friend. But she knew as well as he did, that there was no need to say everything she intended, and that she knew everything she needed to know.

Sarah felt a lump in her throat. She put her hands over her eyes, and began to cry. Blinking her tears away, Sarah gave him a big hug. He hugged her back. She wanted the moment to last forever...

"I've never had a friend like you," she said, stopping to wipe her tears away with the back of her hand. "I'll miss you terribly."

Feeling the coo-coo in her pocket, Sarah once again thanked her friend for the special crystal. She had grown to love it deeply. It would always remind her of her special alien friend and of her unusual space adventure.

"I've had the most exciting time of my life in the last few days! I'll never forget you."

<Me too, Sarah. I am glad you came.>

"Will we ... "

<Do not be sad, Sarah. We will meet again. Be happy.>

Then they left the control chamber.

On her way to the ground level, Sarah turned to say goodbye to the space craft and the friendly crew. Instantly, Sarah sensed their response. She felt a lovely warm glow in her chest.

Finally, Sarah stepped into a ring on the floor. The two friends looked at each other. They smiled and said their goodbyes ... and a beautiful scent blew over Sarah ... and a sound, like sweet music on a wave ... Then a long sweeping beam came down on Sarah. In an instant she was gone.

Chapter 10

Almost instantly, Sarah found herself standing on a stretch of soft grass in the far end of the back garden of the rented cottage.

As she turned around to look at the night sky, she saw an orange, metallic coloured disc hovering over the mountain just above the tree top. It didn't seem to make any noise. Underneath the disc were beams of pale, luminous, blue light extending downwards. She stared with awe. The space craft looked spectacular.

And to think I was on that amazing thing till a moment ago, she thought.

In her mind's eye, Sarah saw Mushroom Head waving at her. Once more Sarah heard Mushroom Head's voice, soft, gentle as a zephyr ... I will always be with you, Sarah. Then the glowing disc receded into the night sky.

Sarah felt a little sad, as she gazed at the last dot of the alien light in the midst of the evening stars, shining big and white in the darkening sky over the mountains.

Reluctantly, she turned around and walked towards the cottage. She had not the slightest fear of the dark.

The lights in the house were on. As she passed the kitchen window on the way to the front door, she could hear her mother talking to someone. When she approached the front of the house she saw a late model Falcon parked in the drive-way. Instantly she recognised that it was her father's car. She was delighted!

Tap, tap, tap! Sarah knocked on the door.

Seconds later, the light on the porch came on. Then the door opened. It was Alan, her father.

"Dad!" yelled Sarah as she rushed forward to hug him.

"Sarah!" her father cried out with joy and disbelief. He had almost lost hope of finding his daughter alive.

Almost immediately, Sarah's mother, Linda, and Helen who had heard Sarah's voice from inside, hurried to the door. They crowded around Sarah, embracing her tightly, and kissing her with tears in their eyes. They were over-joyed and relieved. It was quite an emotional moment.

"Thank God you're safe, Sarah," exclaimed her mother.

"Where have you been, Sarah?" asked her aunt Helen. "We've all been worried sick."

Sarah didn't get a chance to reply.

Linda came around Sarah's side. "Everyone's looking for you. We were so worried." Then she touched Sarah's head and looked her up and down. "There's something different about you ----- "

"Your crutches! You aren't using your crutches!" All three shouted in unison.

"Yes! You're walking without them, where are they?" queried her mother.

"What has happened? What has happened?" her father repeated with dismay.

There was such a commotion that a passer-by stopped, and asked if anything was wrong.

"Shhh ... let's all go inside," whispered Sarah's father. "It's nearly midnight." He gestured to everyone to go inside.

So they all went inside the house. Linda, who was the last to go in, shut the door behind her.

Questions. Questions. Everyone in the family wanted to know about Sarah's sudden disappearance, where she had been, what had happened to her in the time she was missing, how did she get back

That night everyone sat in a circle around Sarah in the living room. Sarah's mother still couldn't believe her daughter had returned safely, and further more, that she could walk normally. She pinched herself a few times to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

"Come on, Sarah, tell us what happened," said Linda impatiently.

"Why don't I get everyone a hot drink while Sarah has a little rest before she starts?" said Helen.

Everyone agreed.

First, Sarah went into her room to change. As she entered the room, it immediately reminded her of the night when she first saw that mysterious light that was Mushroom Head in the hallway. It had only been a short while ago since they said goodbye. Yet, already she missed him.

By the time she came back into the living room, the adults had started on their coffee, and Sarah's favourite cup of hot chocolate was on the coffee table.

"That's your hot chocolate, over there, dear," said her mother.

Sarah sat next to her father. "Thanks for the drink," she said gratefully, taking a sip.

Questions. Questions. Sarah was asked many questions as she related her story briefly to her family.

"Were you worried that the nasty creatures might kill you?" asked Linda.

"Yes," Sarah paused, "it did cross my mind that they would kill me and eat me."

"I don't understand why you would trust this Mushroom Head. Have you met him before?" asked Sarah's mother.

Sarah had come to regard the childhood meetings between her and Mushroom Head as something personal and special. She wanted to keep it a secret, at least for the time being. "I don't know," she said.

"Do you remember having hit your head somewhere while you were away?" inquired Sarah's father.

"No, dad."

Sarah's family members were surprised by what she had told them. Nothing had prepared them for that type of story. They were sceptical but they didn't let her know they found her story hard too believe because they didn't want to hurt her feelings. They were just so pleased and relieved she was safe and sound. However they did wonder if she was suffering some kind of delusion from being hit on the head.

Somehow, her mother felt Sarah hadn't told them everything. They talked till the early hours of the morning. Nonetheless, the conversation left Sarah's mother unsettled and unsure.

Sarah was told that she had been away for a week, and that the police and search parties had been searching all over the Blue Mountains for her.

Eventually, Sarah's father looked at his watch and stood up from the lounge sofa. "It's late," he said, and gave a big yawn. "We should all go to bed, and talk again tomorrow."

Everyone started to get up. Turning around to Sarah, Alan kissed her good night, and added, "So good to have you home, dear. You must be tired. Go and sleep, and we'll see you later in the morning." He gave Sarah a big

smile, determined not to pursue the subject of Sarah's mysterious disappearance any further with her until the morning.

"Sweet dreams, sweetie," said Sarah's mother. "Are you going to give me a kiss?"

Sarah went over and kissed her mother good night.

On the way to her room, Sarah overheard her mother saying to her father: "She seems different, more communicative, more mature, and very happy."

"Yes. There must be a valid explanation for her sudden recovery from her leg problem," said her father. "Something very out of the ordinary has definitely happened to our little girl. She does seem so very grown up.

For the remainder of the night everyone slept very little except Sarah. The excitement, the many unanswered questions about her disappearance, and other related matters kept them awake.

As Sarah lay in bed, warm and comfortable, for a short time she thought back over her adventure with Mushroom Head.

"Good night, my dear friend," she whispered in the dark. Before she fell asleep, she relived the moments in the space craft. Somehow she knew she would see Mushroom Head again soon. Very soon.

Chapter 11

The brightness of the morning sun was pouring into the room through Sarah's bedroom window.

Someone was bending over her. Sarah half-opened her eyes and squinted slightly, shielding her face from the sunlight. She peered at the head looking down at her.

"Mum?" she whispered.

"Yes, dear, good morning. Did you have a good sleep? I've come to make sure you're all right," her mother said. She bent down and gently kissed Sarah's face. Sarah remembered how she used to love her face being touched when she was a little girl. It made her feel special, secure, and loved. Then her mother took hold of Sarah's hand and held it against her cheek. "We thought we had lost you," she said, and almost burst into tears. "I'm just so happy about your legs. It's a miracle!"

Sarah was happy. No longer was she sad or insecure. Her life had changed for the better since her recent adventure.

Haaaaaw , she yawned and stretched, wriggling her toes. There was happiness written all over her face. Finally she sat up, swung her feet out of the warm blankets and onto the floor.

"I love you, mum," she said.

Her mother was deeply touched by what she said.

In the past, people had often said that she was her daddy's girl and that had somewhat influenced her attitude towards her mother. But for the first time in her life, she realised that her mother had always loved her as much as her father did.

"Come out for breakfast when you're ready, sweetie. In our excitement and relief last night, we forgot to ask if you were hungry," she chuckled.

It was then that Sarah remembered that she had not eaten on the space craft and yet she hadn't been hungry. But now, she could hear her tummy rumbling. Within seconds she felt extremely hungry.

"I'm starving, mum," she said.

She could hear her father making coffee in the kitchen. It was his way of stirring and tapping with the spoon that distinguished him from the rest of the family. Sarah always believed her father really enjoyed his coffee-making ritual.

Minutes later, Sarah went into the kitchen led by her mother. Her father was cooking a cheese omelette in a pan.

"Good morning, dad," said Sarah, arriving in the kitchen in her pyjamas. "Mmm, that smells nice. Can I have some?"

"Good morning, sweetie. You can have as much omelette as you wish. Here, this is ready."

Her father lifted the omelette into a plate and handed it to her.

"Thanks," Sarah said and took a mouthful of the cheese-laden omelette. "Mmm, this is delicious!"

Her father smiled proudly, "I guess I haven't lost my touch. I was a ----- "

"Champion omelette maker 10 years ago," mouthed Sarah's mother. Everyone laughed.

Sarah ate like a horse on this first morning of her return from her space travel. Apart from a big serving of the omelette, she had a big glass of milk, two glasses of orange juice, some raisin toast, some pineapple and a bowl of cereal soaked in chilled soya bean milk. Her parents watched with astonishment. They smiled at each other and could hardly believe the size of her appetite.

Sarah was told that her aunts had gone out for the day. They had driven to Sydney to attend to some personal matters but had left a note for her in the living room.

Sarah read the note and smiled contentedly. She went over the note a second time, contemplating the words: 'We believe your story. It must have been one hell of an experience!'. Sarah was pleased.

At eight in the morning, Sarah's father rang the local police to inform them of Sarah's return. The search for Sarah was called off and two detectives, Sergeant Thomas and Sergeant Bolan, from the local police station, came over to interview them. They arrived just before mid-day. The detectives asked the McCoys many questions. Sarah told them that she had been on a spacecraft but they didn't believe her story.

The interview lasted for two hours. At the end of the session, Sarah and her parents were asked to sign some papers. What a relief to everybody when the interview was finally over. The detectives didn't believe Sarah's story but they were glad to close the case now that she had returned to her parents safely.

As Sarah was keen to return to the waterfall at the back of the cottage, she left in a hurry with an apple in her hand. I bet I will enjoy the scenery even more, now that I can jump and skip over the pebbles and wade in the

cool, clean water, she thought, as she danced towards her destination, humming to herself as she went.

And she did jump and skip all over the place.

An hour later, her father came. Her mother followed soon after, bringing with her a basket full of goodies - home-made cream puffs, freshly roasted nuts, fruit juice, and hot pancakes with jam.

"Right!" Sarah's father said, rubbing his hands together and winking playfully. "I have an announcement to make." Then he took a sip of apple juice. Sarah and her mother waited impatiently.

"Dad! Don't keep us in suspense."

"All right. Here is the news. We should have a party to celebrate your safe return and your miraculous recovery. Would you like that, Sarah?"

"Really?" her eyes widened. "That sounds like a cool idea, dad."

"That's a great idea," said Sarah's mother as she handed Sarah a cream puff.

They spent the rest of the afternoon discussing the events of the last few days and the plans for the party. They were all very excited.

Sarah suddenly had an urge to go back to the house to make herself a hot chocolate. As she was nearing the cottage, she saw some people at the front gate; strangers, with cameras and microphones. They looked like they were waiting for someone, or for something to happen. Sarah was suspicious. Who could they be? What do they want?

Suddenly, she knew. Television crew! Reporters!

She raced back to her parents who were relaxing in the open air, quite oblivious to what was taking place outside the cottage. "Mum. Dad. There are reporters at the gate!"

Sarah's parents were alarmed. They knew what the reporters were after!

"What should we do?" asked Sarah's mother throwing both her hands in the air.

"Sarah, you wait here with your mum till you hear from me. Marg, I shall sneak through the back door and then approach those people. I'll have to tell a white lie that you have both flown home to Queensland." With that, he hurried back to the house.

Alan followed his plan. As soon as he came out of the front door, he was greeted noisily by the media people at the gate. There were lights flashing all over the place.

One lady called out, "Mr McCoy, channel nine news here. Is Sarah home?"

Another voice shouted, "Mr McCoy, can you tell us what happened to ----- "

"Sarah is well. My wife has taken her home. Now would you please go?" said Mr McCoy politely and went into the house.

But the media continued to hassle him. They knocked on the door and windows, calling for him and asking him questions.

Alan McCoy remained quiet.

Ten minutes later the disappointed crowd dispersed.

That night, the McCoy's enjoyed a quiet dinner together, free of hassles.

Chapter 12

The next morning, Sarah and her mother flew back to Cairns while Linda and Helen returned to Melbourne. Alan arrived in his car two days later.

Alan and Marg had decided to have the party catered by professional caterers so that they could spend more time with Sarah. So, for the next three days Sarah enjoyed a relaxing interlude with her family at the beach.

The party date was set for the Saturday after their return.

On the day of the party, the weather was glorious. Helen and Linda were unable to attend but they each sent Sarah a lovely present for the occasion.

In the early afternoon Sarah noticed a long table had been arranged in their spacious living room with apricot and white table cloths and with pink and white carnations in a big bowl in the centre. The table was spread with lots of plates, cutlery, serviettes, and glasses.

By five-thirty that evening, Sarah was ready for the party. She wore a stunning, electric blue blouse, a pair of matching low blue heels that her mother had bought her two days earlier, and white jeans. Her hair was neatly brushed and she looked and felt absolutely gorgeous.

The guests began to arrive at about six. Sarah was still in her room. She peeped out at arrivals through the window curtain. Her father was greeting the people as they arrived, welcoming and talking to them. Her mother was in the kitchen with the caterers.

On the table there were bottles of chilled lemonade and fruit juices, bowls of salads and avocado dips and crackers, huge olives, cheeses, pizzas, garlic bread, satays with spicy peanut sauce, freshly cooked prawns and Moreton Bay bugs, curries and rice, savoury slices and lots of mouth-watering desserts. The food looked colourful and delicious.

How many guests were they expecting? It seemed like a big party.

The last time the family had a party like this was the time Sarah's father turned forty. But there was something magical about this party. There was an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation of 'anything could happen'.

At half-past six, the guests were still arriving. Partying sounds, with music and voices of people laughing and talking could be heard a block away from the house. There were cars parked on both sides of the road and in the adjacent park, a short distance away from the house. All the lights in the house were on and the front of the house was decorated with fairy lights. Floodlights on the sides of the house gave additional outdoor lighting. The whole place was lit up like the night lights of a football field.

Everyone at the party seemed to be having a good time. When the party was well under way, Sarah interrupted the guests to make an announcement. First, she thanked the people for coming to her party, then she proceeded to tell them about her visit to an alien space craft, about her subsequent recovery and her exciting, and at times, dangerous adventures. She proudly declared her gratitude to her alien friend who healed her and changed her life for the better. The guests listened without a sound.

When it was over, Sarah walked away, disappointed. Though her story had gripped the imagination of the guests, she knew most did not believe her story. She could read their thoughts and knew that some were quietly mocking her, calling her silly.

Sensing her disappointment, Sarah's mother quickly went over to Sarah while her father changed the subject and urged everyone to enjoy themselves.

As the party drew to an end, a wonderful thing happened.

The party room suddenly lit up with multi-coloured beams of light as in a fireworks display. Some cheered, thinking it was something their hosts had prepared. Sarah's mother and father looked at each other with raised eyebrows, each thinking that the other had planned it. But neither of them had. After a few moments, the shower of lights died down and a point of light unexpectedly appeared in a corner of the room opposite Sarah. Out of this point of light which expanded, the form of Mushroom Head emerged.

Everyone in the room, except Sarah was astonished, some were terrified. Some screamed; some held their breath. "Mushroom Head!" Sarah waved with great enthusiasm. It was a precious moment for Sarah.

The alien smiled and waved back at Sarah for a second. <Well done, Sarah. We will meet again one day.> Then he vanished.

Everyone gasped in awe, then there was a hushed silence. Sarah knew they now believed her story. Then her father's cheerful voice broke the silence of amazement and everyone began talking excitedly at once about what they had just witnessed, and continued to shout more and more loudly as each tried to be heard over the others.

Someone said this had been an unbelievable party, "Hear, hear," someone else shouted in agreement. The party was in full swing, instantly. One guest declared that it was the best party he had ever attended. Another said she wished she could have her own special alien friend. Everyone was talking about what had just happened. The alien's unexpected appearance had inspired adulation for Sarah from all the people present. Each one

wanted to get closer and closer to her with more and more questions being asked of her.

Amidst all the chattering and giggling, Sarah turned to her parents and smiled, her first big smile among her friends in a long time! The exchanges went on and on and Sarah gave them as much detail as she could. They believed her and were just as excited as she was.

Eventually the evening drew to a close with Sarah promising to tell a lot more in due course. Having been so excited, and with so many questions still to be answered, no one really wanted to leave, but when the last guests had left, the three of them, Sarah and her parents, with Rocky beside them, stood at the wide window in the family room, gazing up at the beauty of the big, bright moon. Sarah's father put one arm around her and the other around her mother. With a faraway look he whispered softly, "What we have all witnessed tonight is something very strange but true." He paused a second and added, "And Sarah, you are a remarkable young lady!"

Sarah looked up at the bright sky and beamed with happiness.