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*To the girl holding my hand in this  
journey. Everything in life  
is better with you.*

*To the boy nosing around the  
basement in my head looking for  
something he luckily can't find.*

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## Chapter 1

# THE SIGN

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## THE SIGN

“I need your help.”

Mara Turing jumped and quickly pulled her headphones off. They dropped on a pile of papers full of doodles and geometric shapes. What was that voice that had just interrupted her favorite song? It sounded familiar, but she wasn't sure why. How did it end up in her music? For a second, she thought maybe one of her classmates might have tried to pull a prank on her, but those bullies didn't have the brainpower for something so sophisticated.

She quickly collected herself and tried to pretend nothing weird had just happened. It wasn't the best time to make Ms. Wright angry again for being noisy. Mara had been punished several times that trimester for disrupting classes. One more strike and she'd need a new hand to keep writing “I will not speak in Music class” over and over again.

“Who are you?” she whispered, her mouth pressed against the microphone on her headset while glancing over at the teacher's desk.

No answer.

Suddenly, the song began to play from where it had been cut off about a minute ago. Mara continued with the little schoolwork she had left. It was mid-June and she had finished all of her exams, but the hours still seemed endless in that Saint Michael classroom, a school located on the outskirts of Liverpool. Even without the bullies giving her a hard time.

The two leaders of that group of punks, Nick Jordan and Tom Balzary, seemed to have calmed down once summer began. They were now completely separated, one on each

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side of the class. This year had been a nightmare for basically anyone that wasn't part of their crew: Salamander Squad. They started fights, picked on other kids, stole things here and there, and even tried alcohol and tobacco.

The most veteran teachers in the school weren't surprised. They've always had bullies. But what made these specific bullies stand out was that they had their own video channel, and this year they had livestreamed some of their "performances" to their thousands of followers. The most viewed one was when they surprised Martha Winklewood (or "Year Seven Sissy", as the bullies called her in the video) by hanging a dead bat in her locker.

Mara had been luckier. Everything Jordan, Balzary and the gang had done to her hadn't been caught on camera or livestreamed. It was a relief knowing there weren't any videos of her trapped in the shower after gym class because someone had stolen her clothes. Not because it would be embarrassing, but because she wanted to keep her mother from knowing all these things that were going on in her school. Mara's mother, Sandra, had enough on her plate by having to raise Mara on her own.

Some of the teachers had leading roles in a few videos, unbeknownst to them, since they were recorded without their consent. Nick and Tom would dub the videos to make fun of them. One of their favorite teacher videos was of Hermenegilda Wright. Even though she had heard rumors of the video from teacher meetings every Friday, Ms. Wright didn't give a flying frog about technology and didn't want to know anything more than she already did.

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She was one of those teachers that forced her students to spend hours working on pen and paper. “Let your imagination guide you!” she’d say with her loud voice, arms up in the air as if she were about to take off in flight, testing the limits of her cardigan’s buttons... and her students’ eardrums. No devices were allowed in class except for those provided by the school, which had previously gone through administrative approval.

Ms. Wright had grown up in Ipswich, United Kingdom, in a family which very much valued discipline. She had studied Spanish Philology at Suffolk University in the late 80s, so battery-powered devices and the Internet had caught her a bit off-guard. She wasn’t fond of integrating those “things” into people’s daily lives. “What can be better than a record player’s needle touching Debussy’s *Clair de Lune* vinyl? That masterpiece doesn’t need to be put into one of those MP3s things,” she’d say to whoever pointed out her obvious rejection of new technologies.

Rumor has it that she doesn’t own a mobile phone or have internet connection, although that’s something hard to believe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bob Morris, class representative, had tried to look up information on her online but found absolutely nothing.

Mara was in her first year of Secondary School and was a year ahead, which didn’t exactly help with her popularity in school. She was seen as the tiny know-it-all that got all the questions right in “Wormgilda” Wright’s class. And in Math, Physics, and all the others. “Know-it-all” might have been accurate, but tiny? She was as much of a preteen as the rest of



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her class, maybe only a few months younger than the kids who messed with her or talked behind her back. So, running into any *Salamander* in the hall on her own always led to disaster. And, although she was good at hiding it, this situation just added up to the stress she had been dealing with for the past couple of trimesters.

After recovering from the initial state of shock that voice she was hearing had left her in, Mara got up and went to the shelf to get one of the tablets that the school provided for students. More specifically, the one she had customized behind her mother's back. She liked to call it her "boring class survival device". It had games, access to social networks, videos...

She plugged in her headset so nobody would hear the familiar sound effect of a swoosh when multicolored birds flew off the slingshot. Ms. Wright also had a "No playing around with gadgets in class" policy, so it was best not to try your luck.

After opening the folder and clicking on the game icon, another strange thing happened.

"I need you to help me, Mara."

Mara held her breath for a few seconds. She looked around, trying not to move too much. She didn't want to draw any attention to her. The message appeared on the screen, but blended into the letters of the game title.

After pressing "Continue", the screen turned black. It blinked a couple of times and then showed the picture of a

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man that seemed very familiar. She knew why after reading the next message:

“I’m your uncle, Arnold Turing. I need you to help me.”

Mara turned pale. Her eyes got watery and her hands and lips began to shake. “It can’t be him. He’s been dead for years!” she told herself. She dropped the tablet on the desk, locked it and rushed to the bathroom.

The rest of her classmates kept on drawing, letting time just fly by. It was a quarter to two and the bell was about to ring.

She ran down the hallway until she reached the girls bathroom. As she got to the door, she slipped and almost had her day ruined a little bit more thanks to the cleaning lady in Saint Michael who had just mopped the floor.

“Uncle Arnold is dead. He’s no longer here, okay? Someone’s messing with you and you have to find out who it is,” she whispered to the mirror. The running faucet water drowned out her shaky voice.

She washed her face, rubbing it frantically, then tore a long piece of toilet paper to dry up and blow her nose, and firmly pulled down on her hoodie for the finishing touch.

She grabbed onto the sink with both hands, swallowed and stared at her own reflection. She was trying to find an explanation for what had just happened, which took her back to when she was 5 years old...

Her dad had passed away before she was born for reasons she didn’t know. It’s not that she didn’t ask, but her uncle and her mother, Arnold Turing and Sandra Hopper (she decided

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to keep her maiden name after marrying Mara's dad, Lucas Turing) would always avoid a straight answer. "You wouldn't understand, honey." The fact that they would always stroke her red hair in a seemingly patronizing way after saying those things made her feel dumb. Everyone had always told her how smart she was since she was a little kid.

Despite that one mystery, her childhood had been pretty joyful and sweet. Lots of games, lots of learning and not many electronic devices. Close to none, actually.

"Don't touch that phone, Mara."

"Get away from that gadget, Mara."

"Stop playing Snake on that Nokia, Mara."

She had always used computers and phones or played videogames in *secrecy*. "Some girls hide to smoke, some guys hide so they can see pictures of naked women... and I hide to play a game about moving multicolored diamonds. Seems pretty normal," she would say to her friends.

However, Sandra and Arnold made sure that her "defect", which is what she now called it, didn't affect her having fun. Mara had also admitted, despite not being happy about it as a child, that all that drawing, coloring and reading really helped her be a sharp child. She absorbed knowledge like a sponge, so her mom and uncle tried to make the most of it by teaching her lots of things that would eventually be useful later in life.

Uncle Arnold tested his niece's intellect whenever he had the chance. If they were riding the metro, he would help

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her memorize all the stops. If they had a newspaper, he'd challenge her to memorize the TV programming for the day. Movie dialogue? Mara was also great at memorizing those! Every Sunday morning, they would go to one of those places known as video rental stores, like Blockbuster.

"It's like taking everything out of Netflix and putting it all into CDs in a box and on a shelf. But not *everything* on Netflix. Only the shows and movies someone picked out because they thought were more relevant," she explained to her classmates a few years later, thinking about things she missed. Some of those kids would smile and nod as if they were remembering something from a really, really, long time ago.

But it was thanks to that old "tradition" that she'd seen lots of great cartoon movies and lots of classics from the 80s like *The Goonies*, *Ghostbusters*, *Howard the Duck* and *Karate Kid*.

Arnold Turing wasn't always at home, which made him even more valuable in the eyes of his niece. Every once in a while, he would disappear for a few days. He'd grab his patched jean backpack, put all his electronics inside, give Mara a kiss on the forehead and say: "Hasta la vista, baby." She knew that the catchphrase he'd always say to her with a deep voice was from a movie from the early 90s called *Terminator 2*. But she'd never seen it because her mother considered she wasn't old enough to see certain things yet. "Also, John Connor uses lots of computer gadgets in the worst way possible. So, forget it," Mrs. Hopper would tell Mara to make sure she understood that movie would not be part of her childhood.

Arnold made sure Mara felt that she could trust him under any circumstance and didn't feel she was missing a father fig-

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ure in her life. “I’m sort of like your dad,” he’d usually say. And, in a way, it was true. Mara didn’t feel like she was missing anything in her daily life, regardless of a few mean kids at the daycare center that would remind her she didn’t have a “real dad”. Sadly, those little guys eventually grew up and were now students at Saint Michael, too.

Mara’s life hadn’t been too different from the rest of her classmates. But on February 11<sup>th</sup> of 2006 everything would change. Without any sort of warning, someone decided to edit the script that day and change the “hasta la vista, baby” to a final goodbye. Neither Sandra nor Mara knew that they wouldn’t see Lucas Turing’s brother ever again.

During the first few weeks they thought something might have happened that wouldn’t let him get in contact. Mara would sometimes walk up to the shelf where there was a framed picture of her uncle. She would touch the glass that covered his black *DEFCON* cap and whispered for him to come back. That’s probably where her OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) started, and began developing some of the obsessions she still has to this day.

Uncle Arnold was the perfect father figure. Not only was he sweet, loving and understanding, but he also taught Mara many things. At the age of five she already knew what it was like to not have a father and lose someone she really loved (and needed). With time, she understood the difference between being *aware* of something and *feeling* or *accepting*.

She tried to toughen up in front of her mom so she wouldn’t notice how much she was falling apart. This helped develop her tough character. She learned how to hold back her tears and

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keep her feelings to herself, which also led to anxiety, insomnia and mood swings she had had to learn how to cope with.

After Arnold's disappearance, she also gave up on some of the habits she used to love. No more going to the video store, no more Cut-out Nights, Science Sundays, Comic Tuesdays or Musical Thursdays. She still wasn't allowed anywhere near electronic devices without her mom's supervision, but her love and admiration for her uncle skyrocketed.

He was still alive in Mara's heart. She would never say it out loud, but that man had been so important to her and she just couldn't understand how he could have just vanished into thin air without giving her a chance to say goodbye.

Was he really trying to communicate with her through the tablet? Just the thought of it made her smile into the mirror right before walking out of the bathroom and back to her class. She'd been in there far too long.

She started walking back while thinking to herself. The sound of other students in their classes echoed through the hallway, with only a few minutes left before the bell rang and they all stampeded out of the building just like every Friday. She got to her class before she knew it, and went back in quietly.

She grabbed the tablet and stuffed it into her backpack. Meanwhile, both of her friends, Noa Wachowski and Daniel Karamanou, completely oblivious to what had just happened, were looking at Mara with a smile of complicity. They thought she was buying time before the clock struck "out-of-jail o'clock". She walked over to their desks and told them what had just happened.

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“My uncle Arnold spoke to me,” she whispered into her friends’ ears, who had huddled their heads together.

“Right...” Daniel gave Noa a look that said “our pal’s totally lost her mind.” They both knew that was unlikely.

“He needs my help, but he didn’t say anything else,” said Mara shrugging while trying to keep her voice down. “I think I’m going to take the tablet home and show my mom. But she’s going to think I’m nuts! I don’t know... I’ll figure out a way to tell her without making a fuss.”

“Alright, but be careful. We’re not allowed to take those things. And Hermenegilda doesn’t just give detention to the perpetrator... but to their friends, too!” claimed Noa. Daniel and Mara nodded to calm her down.

“Yeah, yeah, I agree. But what’s a *perpetrator*? Someone that *perpetrenates*, right? What’s *perpetrenating*?”, asked Daniel.

“Someone that perpetrates! It’s per-pe-trate. To *perpetrenate* isn’t a thing, that doesn’t exist. A perpetrator is a person who carried out a harmful or illegal action as per the laws established in the country or place they’re in...” Noa started explaining while starting to raise her voice and using a teacher-like tone.

“*A perpetrator ith a perthon who bath carried out a harmful or illegal...* Noa, I honestly only understood ‘person’ from everything you just blabbered,” said Daniel while flailing his hands as if he had gone crazy.

Mara smiled while enjoying the scene her friends were making, and for a second forgot about what had happened just a few minutes ago.

She put on her backpack where she was carrying, among other things, Mr. Lotz, an old run-down interactive toy she’d

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always bring along with her for the past several years. But there was much more! She had lots of pens, all out of their pencil case, shavings from her sharpener, pencils, bits of her eraser and wrinkled papers with unfinished exercises. Her mother always told her how messy it was. But Mara thought one couldn't have everything in life. "Super smart and tidy? That'd be too much," she'd tell herself every time Sandra would tell her off for having her room messy.

When the longest hand on the clock over the chalkboard was over the number 12, the bell rang. Noa, Daniel and Mara rushed out of the class and ran down the hallway as if someone were chasing them. Pushing, shoving, nudging and a lot of screaming. Saint Michael's Friday stampede was like an avalanche where parents had to fight against each other to reach out and grab their younger kids however they could. They had to do whatever was necessary to keep them from running off like wild hyenas and risk having them run over by a car.

Noa and Daniel said their goodbyes to their friend, who jumped into Mrs. Hopper's car, and kept walking down the sidewalk until they turned the corner at the end of the street to go to their own homes.

"How was your day, Mara?" Her mom was waiting with the car running while checking her e-mail on her phone.

They began their drive home.

"All good. Ms. Wright didn't give me detention, so I can't really complain. Oh! Also, *someone-tried-to-talk-to-me*." She rushed through that last sentence.

"What do you mean someone 'tried to talk to you'?", she



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replied, pronouncing those last words much slower than the others so her daughter knew she had clearly heard her.

“Nobody...”

“Mr. Nobody tried to talk to you? Interesting.”

“It was uncle Arnold.”

Sandra hit the brake, turned off the car radio and closed her eyes for a couple of seconds. She opened her eyes again and let out a long breath of air, as if trying to stay calm. She put on the best smile she could and put her arm behind the front passenger’s seat and turned to look at Mara in the back seat.

“What are you on about, Mara? You know your uncle’s not with us anymore.”

“You’re wrong, he is. He was in my tablet. He talked to me while I was playing...”

“He’s not alive!!” Sandra snapped nervously, cutting her daughter mid-sentence. “He’s gone to heaven, sweetie. Why would you make up something like that?”

“I’m not making it up! I was listening to music and...”

Her daughter’s voice faded into the background while Mrs. Hopper began remembering her sweet and kind brother-in-law, Arnold. He had been the perfect uncle until the day he disappeared, leaving behind some clues that led the cops to believe he had been working for Falko McKinnon, one of the biggest crackers<sup>1</sup> of all time.

Sandra then understood that Arnold Turing had always been an expert in disappearing. Years before he had left their house

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*1. Malicious hackers that use their knowledge to commit crimes.*

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for good, Falko McKinnon and the rest of his henchmen had been forced to delete all their personal online history.

It had been after the IFV attack, an unprecedented act of terrorism. During the months following that disastrous event that had taken human lives, authorities tried their best to find the ones behind it, but always came out empty-handed. There was no trace of them.

This all happened before Mara was even born. McKinnon's crew, also known as the Dirtee Loopers, had completely vanished from the face of the earth. The same happened with all their online data, blog articles and, in general, any information there could've been about them on the Internet or any other darker network. Some considered this to be the most incredible case of online identity removal.

That massive disappearance highlighted Falko's and the Loopers' legacy. Had they been abducted by aliens? Did the government put an end to them because they discovered a hidden secret? Or maybe they moved somewhere really far away to spend all the money they had made during their years as crackers?

Sandra Hopper learned about all of this several years later. Arnold's physical disappearance and the news that came out afterwards had been a big disappointment for her. She had no idea there was another side to her brother-in-law. This also led Mara to discover something that her mother was trying to protect her from all this time. The Internet was full of websites with text, images and videos with all kinds of rumors and stories about the Dirtee Loopers. Some were a sort of

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tribute; others were harsh criticism. When it came to McKinnon, there was no middle ground.

Although Mara had asked her mother if all those stories about her uncle were true, she never got a convincing answer. Sandra wanted to make sure Mara remembered her uncle as the nice and sweet man he had seemed to be. Even if she tried to ruin Mara's idea of her uncle, it would be impossible. Arnold was almost like a demi-god to his niece, she loved him unconditionally.

Mrs. Hopper snapped back to reality and, for a split second, several questions flashed through her mind. "Is Arnold still alive and trying to communicate with us? No, it can't be. He's dead, Sandra. He's been dead for seven years..." she thought to herself.

Mara's mother quickly turned to face forward once again and began to drive. She kept driving mindlessly until they reached 4815 Threepwood street, where they'd been living for the past twelve years. She parked the car on the opposite side of the street and crossed the road to get to their house.

"Mara, in these cases it's important that you remember..."

"That I shouldn't get anywhere near those gadgets without your supervision. I know! Please, stop bugging me with that. It's tough enough being the weirdo with no electronic stuff." Mara was fed up of hearing the same story.

She thought it would probably be best to not mention she had brought the tablet along with her. The tablet through which Arnold had tried to communicate with her.

"It's fine, Mom. Sorry. I'm just really nervous, I miss Uncle Arnold each and every day and I get my hopes up very easily."

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She tried to sound as calm as possible so her mother would let her go back up to her room, where she could see if there were any more messages.

“Of course, dear. I can be quite repetitive as well. Shall we eat?”

Mara wasn’t hungry, but she didn’t want to seem suspicious. She ate a plate of spaghetti and meatballs, helped clear the table and wash the dishes and then asked for permission to go up to her room and read.

After double-checking that her door was properly closed, she pulled the tablet out of the backpack. She grabbed it with both hands and held it right in front of her, looking at it as if it were a very valuable treasure. And it was, at least for her.

She quickly turned it on, plugged her earphones in and clicked on the game icon that had previously shown her a message from her uncle Arnold. After a few seconds, the image on the screen got distorted and then it turned off.

“Oh, come on! This can’t be happening right now. Please, turn back on. I want to know what you have to say...” said Mara in a low voice before giving the tablet a few smacks and getting it to work again.

“I’m your uncle, Arnold Turing. I need you to help me, please.”

She smiled.

“Of course, uncle! What can I do for you?” she whispered at the screen.

The device started displaying a sequence of pictures, as if someone on the other side had heard her. Mara saw that under the pictures there was text with something that looked