

Chapter 1

Jewel of the Desert



“What a dump!” Tyson announced as his dad guided their four-wheel drive over one last row of dunes, and Sapphire Waters suddenly sprang into view before them.

“Yeah,” Olivia agreed, gazing sulkily through one dust-streaked side window. “I still don’t know why we had to come all the way out here. What could we possibly learn from these hicks?”

“Now, now,” said Mum. “These ‘hicks’, as you call them, have been living off the grid for years. So I imagine they can teach us quite a lot, actually. With the price of biofuel so high these days, we need to conserve all the energy we can.”

Tyson groaned. Energy was all anyone seemed to talk about these days. Every second week there seemed to be yet another “fuel crisis” headline splashed across the news. To be honest, he couldn’t have cared less. And now Mum and Dad had dragged the entire family halfway across the continent so that they could all experience life in a “permaculture” community at first hand.

“It’s really amazing what the people here have achieved with so few resources—and in such a short time,” said Dad. “People only started moving here in 2020. To have done all this in only 40 years—remarkable!”



Tyson had to admit that Dad had a point. If nothing else, Sapphire Waters certainly lived up to its name. A dozen artificial lakes of various shapes and sizes sparkled like enormous jewels beneath the desert sun. Each was surrounded by lush gardens, which in turn gave way to a thick forest that stretched all the way to the surrounding hills.

Scattered among this greenery were low, single-storey houses, quite different to the high-rise apartment blocks of Sydney, where Tyson and his family lived.

Tyson was not looking forward to spending a whole month here. They'd be staying with a family who led a "self-sufficient" lifestyle. They weren't even connected to the electricity grid!

As they drew closer, Tyson noticed people working in the gardens. Back home, everyone's food came wrapped in plastic from the hypermart, so it seemed a bit odd to see tomatoes, lettuce and other vegetables growing straight up out of the dirt. There were quite a few animals wandering around as well—goats and chickens, for the most part.