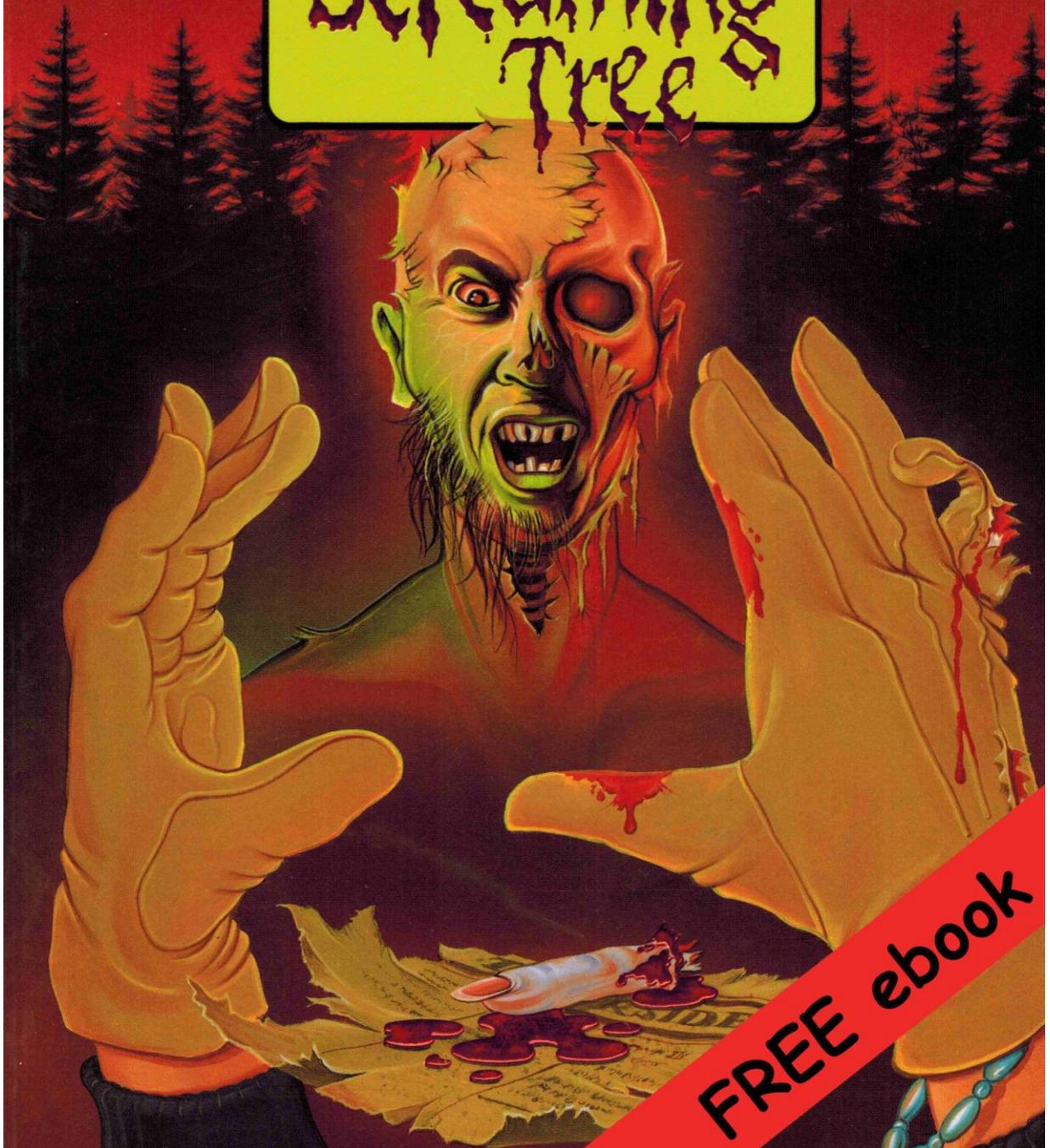




Tom Bradley

# The Screaming Tree



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### **What the critics said about 'The Screaming Tree'**

- *...writes for the TV generation and his latest book will no doubt end up as a TV movie* (Wellington Evening Post)
- *As different from [Bradley's] other books as chalk and cheese. He has proved with this spine-chilling story that he is an accomplished and versatile writer* (Rotorua Daily Post).
- *...not only exciting, but gives considerable insight into character and development* (NZ Herald)

### **What this story is about**

Brett Nichol, 16, has heard screaming in his head since he was five.

After a drunken party goes tragically wrong, he's sent away to stay with his surly grandfather in remote Timberside, a town with a grisly past.

There Brett meets Karla and discovers the tall pine tree with a scream of its own... and the decomposing killer who won't stay in his grave.

But why does his mother now want Brett dead?

And what is the terrifying family secret that only Granddad knows? Will it prove a death sentence for the whole town?

Shock follows shock as the story races to its thrilling climax...

## Chapter One

It started when he was five. Always at night. Always in his sleep. The head splitting scream that no one else could hear.

His parents sent him for tests, but the doctors couldn't find anything. They thought he'd grow out of it. They were wrong. It got worse.

By the time he was 16, he heard screaming every night.

No pictures. Just a black hole.

\*\*\*

The siren blasted the air around Brett as he slumped in the back of the old V8, fighting to control his stomach, and to stay upright as the car hurtled around every corner.

'Brett's turning green,' Zoey yelled to Scott the driver.

'Serves him right. Can't hold his booze. Shove his head out the window.'

Zoey tried to unwind Brett's window, but the handle jammed.

Brett groaned, getting greener by the second. His black, curly hair was soaked with sweat. He stared at Zoey, but his normally bright blue eyes wouldn't focus.

'Brett,' Zoey yelled at him, 'don't you dare throw up on me. I'm warning you.'

They all had to yell to make themselves heard over the siren and the booming car stereo.

The patrol car stuck to their tail like a magnet, its bonnet only metres away from the V8's bumper. The red and blue lights pulsed time with the throbbing in Brett's temples, their reflection bouncing around the V8's interior like an out-of-control laser beam.

Scott's car, with its crumpled yellow panels and hand-sprayed patches, was hard to miss at any time. Now, as it roared through the night, its single headlight stood out like a beacon.

'You should have fixed the light,' yelled Denny, as a pedestrian leapt out of the way.

'Didn't have time,' yelled Scott. 'Jimmy broke it, before you arrived.'

'He hasn't got a licence.'

'Blame Brett. It was his idea.'

The chase had started when the cops told the V8 to pull over. Scott only laughed and planted his foot to the floor. Denny, in the front passenger seat, had leaned out the window and made a rude gesture to reinforce the point.

Now, the cops tried again with their loud hailer.

'Pull over. I repeat. Pull over. This is your last warning.'

'What'll they do if we don't stop?' Zoey yelled.

'Probably shoot out the tyres,' Scott yelled back.

'They only do that on TV,' yelled Denny.

Zoey leaned over and thumped Scott on the shoulder.

'Brett's about to chuck up and I don't want to wear it. Turn up Clyde street.'

'No,' yelled Brett as he realised where Zoey was pointing. 'It's one-way.'

'That's the whole idea,' yelled Scott, as the car lurched into the turn, pitching Denny onto the floor.

Zoey and Brett crashed together in the back seat, Zoey's face glowing from the adrenalin surge, her head beating time to the rhythm of the music.

With a squeal of rubber, the wheels locked, flinging the vehicle sideways across the intersection.

In peak traffic, it would have been a multi-car disaster. At 4am, it became a slithering one-car wreck as the V8 demolished the one-way sign, tore the pole from the ground, and sent the one-way symbol spinning off into the night.

No one was wearing seat belts. And the old V8 car didn't have air bags.

Scott thudded into the steering wheel as Brett crashed into the back of his seat. The force drove the air out of his lungs, and the curdled beer out of his stomach.

'Yuck,' yelled Zoey, dodging the vomit as it washed over the cracked vinyl upholstery.

She and Denny were unhurt as the driver's side had taken the brunt of the impact. Their escape route was clear and without pausing to look back, Zoey and Denny disappeared into the night, whooping like banshees.

The first cop – older, a sergeant – wrenched open the driver's door on its buckled hinges. Scott was still too dazed to flee as the sergeant dragged him out and shoved him up against the car.

Brett lay between the front and back seats, moaning, winded, and covered in vomit. The party seemed a long time ago.

It hadn't even been a great party.

Some kids from school had hired an empty warehouse on the edge of town. The five dollars at the door covered a make-shift stage and a live band. As the crowd grew more unruly, the band kept cranking up their amps, which took the noise close to the pain threshold.

Brett's mother had dropped him off at Scott's house on the way to her job at the hospital. By the time the rest of the gang arrived, Scott's older brother, Jimmy, was back with their booze.

That had been Brett's idea. They were all under age, but Jimmy was old enough to buy it for them. Zoey said it was the best idea he'd had in weeks.

Brett heard the second cop – younger, more aggressive – force open the buckled back door.

'You. Out.'

Brett hauled himself off the floor as far as the back seat. 'I'm dying.'

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Scott blowing into a breathalyser.

'Are you getting out,' said the younger cop, 'or do I have to pull you out?'

'Leave me alone.'

'Have it your way.'

He reached into the car and hauled Brett out by the lapels of his denim jacket.

The cop reeked of garlic. The odour and the rush of fresh air clawed at Brett's stomach and he emptied the residue of the party over the cop's shoes.

As he jumped away, the cop released Brett's jacket and with nothing to hold him up, Brett collapsed in a heap, cracking his head on the concrete gutter.

He lay, face down, wanting to die as the cop wiped his vomit-covered shoes on Brett's denim jacket. Right across the skull-and-dagger patch that Zoey had given him. She'd even sewn it on which was very domesticated for Zoey.

Brett tried to roll over, but his body wouldn't obey and he flopped face down again.

'Hey,' said the cop, giving his right shoe a final wipe, 'this skull looks like you - on a good day.'

'See this?' the sergeant called to his younger partner, waving the breath-testing unit in the air. 'Almost off the dial.'

Brett wasn't surprised. With the amount of booze Scott had consumed, his breath could have peeled the paint off the patrol car.

The sergeant scowled. 'This kid shouldn't be able to stand up, much less drive. What's the world coming to?'

The cop prodded Brett with his toe. 'Hear that? Your friend's in *big* trouble.'

With an effort, Brett forced himself into a sitting position and tried to stand up. Even at full height, he didn't stand above the crowd, but he was stronger than most boys his age, with powerful arms and shoulders.

His legs, which carried him anywhere on a football field, were slow to respond. He grabbed the car door with both hands and dragged himself upright.

'Hey, kid,' said the cop. 'You're bleeding.'

Brett felt a trickle of blood run down his forehead and into his eye. It felt warm on his skin in the cold night air. More blood dribbled onto his nose. Brett flung up his hand and met the flap of skin hanging down.

'You did this,' Brett told the cop, trying to staunch the blood with both hands. 'Pulling me out of the car.'

'You fell over without any help from me. Don't move.'

He came back with a thick wad of dressing and taped it across the flap.

'This'll hold until we get you to a hospital.'

'Take me home.'

'That'll need stitches.'

'My Mum's a doctor.'

'Lucky you. Who were the other kids in the car? The two who ran away?'

No way Brett would answer that question. Friends had to stick together, no matter what.

'I've never seen them before tonight,' said Brett. 'Got anything for a sore head?'

'There's aspirin in the car,' said the cop, lowering his voice. He pointed to Scott who sat, handcuffed, in the back of the patrol car.

'Look, you don't want to join your friend down at the station, do you?'

Brett grabbed at his bandage and pulled a face.

'Okay, I'll get you something for the pain,' said the cop. 'Your friend's the one we really want. But we still need details. And even if you weren't driving, you've been drinking, and you're under age.'

He pushed Brett towards the patrol car. 'If you were my kid, I'd give you a good hiding.'

'You already did a good job on my head.'

'Then we're even for you throwing up on my shoes.'

\*\*\*

'How could you be so stupid?'

Brett clenched his fists. Standing face to face, he was half a head taller than his father. 'I'm not stupid.'

Ron Nichol retreated a step.

'Anyway,' Brett explained, 'it wasn't my fault.'

'Whose fault was it then?' Ron walked over and thumped his hand down on the kitchen bench. 'How could you do this to us?'

Brett wanted to grab his father and shake him. He hadn't done anything to *them*. Couldn't they see that? If he'd done anything, he'd done it to himself.

'Brett, sit down,' said his mother. 'I can't look at your head if you keep jumping around.'

He flopped down at the table.

'And when your mother's finished patching you up, go and take a shower. And get out of those clothes. You look and smell revolting.'

'Calm down, you two,' said Sarah Nichol.

She'd arrived home as the patrol car dropped Brett off at the front door. Brett was pleased to see her. She was much better than his father at dealing with emergencies.

She cleaned the wound with wet cotton wool from a small kidney-shaped basin. Brett

flinched as the antiseptic bit into his raw flesh.

'You're going to need stitches.'

'Can't you just tape it up?'

'Stitches are better for this.' She brushed away the mass of curly hair. 'You might even see the scar one day if you ever cut your fringe.'

Ron glared, 'Sarah, this is no time to be funny.'

'What's funny about it? Believe me, I haven't had many laughs tonight.'

Sarah threaded her curved needle and Brett screwed up his face.

'Don't worry,' said his father. 'Since you smell like a brewery, you shouldn't feel a thing. And talking of alcohol, I'd like to know...'

'So would I,' said Sarah, 'but now's not the right time.' She injected local anaesthetic into Brett's forehead. 'Just be thankful no one was killed.'

'What about my reputation?' asked Ron. 'I've got a very important interview next week. If the chairman of the company heard about this...'

'He wouldn't bat an eyelid. Not if he's a parent.'

Brett's father was unemployed and hated it. The Nicholls had moved cities when Ron landed a job with a local company. But when that company went belly-up, Brett's father suddenly discovered no one wanted to hire executives over 40. Sarah now provided the family's only income.

Brett felt sorry for his father most of the time, but not when he got like this.

'Ron, stop pacing up and down,' said Sarah. 'You're getting on my nerves.'

She'd just come off duty at the local hospital's *Accident & Emergency* department.

'While you were home watching television,' she told her husband, 'I had to deal with two fatal heart attacks, a stroke, a stabbing with a broken bottle, and a little girl who's lucky to be alive after a hit-and-run. I've had one hell of a night.'

'You and me both,' said Brett.

His whole body felt numb. A combination of the alcohol, the injection and the aspirins the cops had given him.

Sarah worked quickly and expertly, snipping the thread with practised ease, covering her handiwork with a strip of plaster.

'Now, roll up your sleeve, Brett. I'll give you a tetanus shot, just in case.'

Ron finally sat down with them at the table. 'Brett, just tell me one thing, and I'll let it go for the night. Why? Tell me that. Why? You come from a good home. You don't lack for anything.'

Brett kept his eyes on the syringe as his mother withdrew the needle from his arm. How could he explain? What could he say?

'I'm still waiting,' said Ron, trying to keep his voice down. 'Why did you do it?'

Why? The question parents always asked. Brett wasn't sure he could put it into words, even on a good day.

He settled for, 'Dad, you wouldn't understand.'

Ron flared. 'That's not good enough. And it's not an answer.'

'If there is an answer, let's look for it tomorrow,' said Sarah, getting up and packing away her kit, rinsing out the bowl in the sink. 'When we've all had some sleep.'

'Stop protecting him,' said Ron.

'Then stop nagging him.'

'He's changed since we moved here.'

Sarah slammed the bowl down on the tiled bench. 'Of course he has. He's growing up.'

'Other kids don't get into this sort of trouble.'

'Come and do a shift at the hospital with me,' said Sarah, taking her kit through to the other room.

'It's your so-called friends,' Ron said to Brett as the two of them glared at each other across the table.

'There's nothing wrong with my friends.'

Brett knew what his father meant. Scott, Denny, Zoey and the others lived life full on. Sometimes, like tonight, they were so wild it frightened Brett. But he never said so.

He wanted to fit in. He wanted to belong even though they lived on the edge of the law.

Scott had already drifted across that line. So had Denny. He was on probation for stealing an old woman's purse from her supermarket trolley. They'd both end up in jail one day. Nothing surer.

Ron shook his head. 'I can't get through to you. No one can tell you anything these days. Sixteen years old and you think you know it all.'

'I hated being 16,' said Sarah coming back into the room. 'I was a seething mass of insecurities.'

Brett looked at his mother in surprise. A seething mass of insecurities? Cool, calm and collected Sarah Nichol?

One thing for sure. She wouldn't have looked like Zoey. Or acted like Zoey. They were from different planets.

'You certainly don't take after me,' Ron said to Brett. 'Or your mother.'

Sarah managed a faint grin. 'Who *does* he take after then?' The grin got bigger. 'Has the Nichol family got a few skeletons in the cupboard you'd like to tell us about?'

Ron didn't get the joke. 'Certainly not.'

'Well nor do the McCabes,' said Sarah. 'My ancestors were a boring bunch. The whole

lot of them.'

Brett thought about that. He knew his father's side of the family pretty well. His mother's side was a different story.

'So,' Sarah continued, 'if we think it's in his genes, Ron, we'd better start with us.'

'When I was his age, I was a good student.'

'I'm a good student, too,' said Brett.

'When you apply yourself,' said his father. 'And you haven't done that since we moved here. You need more academic subjects. What use is metalwork?'

What use was his father's business degree, thought Brett, if there weren't any jobs?

'And when I was a teenager, I did as I was told.'

'Sounds boring.'

'And I never, ever, back-chatted my parents.'

Brett kept his mouth shut.

Ron paused when he saw Sarah shaking her head. 'I know we've had this discussion before, but maybe we should get away from the city. Try our luck in a smaller town.'

Brett tuned out. His mind drifted to his double bed. His parents had bought it for him when they moved cities. Ron called it an incentive. Sarah called it a bribe. With all the pain killers, he'd sleep for a week.

And he desperately needed some sleep. He'd hardly slept at all the night before. The screaming had woken him twice. No, three times. Louder, more insistent, than ever.

Sarah rejoined them at the table, the stress of the night obvious in her body language.

'Take it from someone who grew up in a small town,' she told her husband. 'Jobs are hard to find, wherever you go. And teenagers still have problems. Even in towns like Timberside.'

Timberside? The name snapped Brett's mind back into the conversation. Timberside.

Ron grunted. 'To call Timberside a town is a gross exaggeration. It's hardly a dot on the map.'

Timberside. The name ran around and around in Brett's head like a marble in a pinball machine.

Then the screaming started!

But that only happened when he was asleep. This time he was awake. Wide awake.

Ron was saying, '... maybe you should go and see the old man.'

Brett misheard, distracted by the screaming. 'Who, me?'

'Your dad was talking to me,' said Sarah.

She hadn't spoken to her father since the Timberside earthquake a while back when she'd rung to make sure he was okay.

'But that's not a bad idea,' said Sarah. 'You could go, Brett. Your grandfather's all alone up in that cabin with only a dog for company.'

'I pity the dog,' said Ron. 'Henry McCabe is the most unfriendly man I've ever met. Why do you keep trying, Sarah?'

'Because he's still my father, Ron, and I love him the way we still love Brett. No matter what.'

Ron looked embarrassed. 'Yes, but...'

'You don't stop loving someone just because they do something you don't like. Do you?'

'Of course not. But your father...'

'Is a decent man,' said Sarah.

'With a big chip on his shoulder.'

The screaming in Brett's head went up a notch.

'Dad's haunted by something,' said Sarah.

'Your mother's death.'

'That's part of it. But it's got to be more than that. Don't ask me what. He won't talk about it.'

'You mean, he won't talk to you.'

'But he might talk to Brett. He might even appreciate a visit from his only grandchild.'

'Unlikely,' said Ron. 'The only thing your father and Brett have in common is they both have a birthday in August.'

'But it would get Brett out of town for a while. Away from those friends of his.'

Brett raised his voice to make himself heard above the screaming in his head.

'I don't even remember what Granddad looks like.'

'Stop yelling,' said Sarah. 'I'll show you some pictures.'

'I can't go to Timberside,' said Brett, his panic rising as the noise got louder.

'Why not?'

'I've... I've made other plans.'

He couldn't think of anything in particular, but anything sounded better than what his mother was proposing.

There was a knock on the door. As quickly as it had come, the screaming stopped.

'Who on earth...?' said Ron.

'I'll get it.' Brett was grateful to get out of the room. He flung open the front door and smelt the garlic before he saw the badge.

'Who is it?' Ron called.

'Trouble,' said Brett, leading the young cop into the lounge and slumping down on the couch.

The officer pulled out his notebook. 'Did any of you know that the boy who was driving tonight, Scott Owens, has a police record?'

Brett knew that, but he stared at the floor.

'I don't like the sound of this,' said Sarah.

'Earlier this evening there was a hit-and-run downtown. A little girl...'

'I know,' said Sarah. 'They brought her in as I went on duty. Poor girl. She could still lose her leg.'

'Luckily for us,' said the cop, 'someone got the licence plate of the car that hit her. It was the same car your son was picked up in. The yellow V8.'

Brett's head snapped up. 'Scott's car?'

'That's right,' said the cop, 'except your friend, Scott, says that at the time of the hit-and-run, *you* were driving.'

'He said *what*?'

'He said you were driving. If it's true, you're in more trouble than he is.'

Brett forced himself to his feet. His legs felt like rubber and his stomach churned. 'That's a lie. I've never even driven that car.'

'That's not what your friend says.'

'I was only in that car once tonight, when we were pulled over. I don't know anything about any hit-and-run. Or any little girl.'

'Officer, what time did it happen?' asked Sarah.

The cop checked his notebook. 'Seven ten. We have several witnesses to the time.'

'Then Brett can't have been driving the car.'

'Why not?'

'He was with me. I left here at seven, dropped Brett off at Scott's house at seven fifteen, then drove straight to the hospital for a seven-thirty start.'

'Was the Owens boy there when you dropped your son off?'

'Sorry, I can't remember.'

'Was his car there?'

'Again, I can't remember. Brett might know.'

'I don't remember either,' said Brett.

That was a lie. The V8 *wasn't* there when he arrived at Scott's. Jimmy had already taken it, doing what Brett had suggested on the phone. Picking up the booze for the party.

Jimmy had hit that girl. And Jimmy didn't have a driver's licence. He'd already lost it for drunk driving.

Now, because of Brett, a little girl could lose her leg. He felt as guilty as if he'd been driving the car himself. He'd done stupid things before, but never hurt anyone. Not like this.

Brett rushed to the bathroom and his stomach found enough bile to stain the sink before the dry-retching started. As the spasms eased, he rinsed his mouth with water and stared into the mirror. He looked like death.

Should he take the chance his mother had offered to get out of the city for a while? Let everything cool down and blow over?

Should he go to Timberside?

He clutched his ears as the screaming started up again.

## Chapter Two

Brett slumped down in the seat, the wheels of the bus carrying him closer to Timberside with every turn.

He thought of what he'd left behind. Zoey hadn't minded at all.

'Oh well,' she'd said, 'when the cat's away...'

She had no intention of waiting for him. Zoey lived every day at full speed. Why slow down because Brett was out of town?

And she kept making silly jokes about city boys getting lost in the bush.

The jokes didn't seem funny as the forest flashed past Brett's window. Dense green as far as he could see.

Scott was on probation and had cut Brett out of the group like a leper. Jimmy was in prison. He'd been refused bail and was about to go on trial for the hit-and-run.

Denny reckoned that Brett should have taken the blame. Brett did feel guilty, but nothing they could lock him away for.

They'd saved the little girl's leg, but she'd be in hospital for months and would possibly limp for the rest of her life. Brett's nightmares were full of the accident, even though he hadn't been there. The V8 crunching into her flesh, her body flying through the air.

But it wasn't her cries that haunted his nights. It was the screaming in his head. Worse than ever. It left him dripping with sweat, his pillow and sheets drenched.

Every night he'd wake, his heart pounding, his mouth tasting foul, like the bottom of a dumpster.

He'd stumble to the bathroom, throw cold water over his face, brush his teeth till his gums bled. Anything to drive away the panic that threatened to overwhelm him.

Something was out there, calling to him, beckoning him.

Was it in Timberside?

He'd soon find out.

'First time out this way?' asked the woman squeezed into the seat beside him.

'Yes,' said Brett, not looking for conversation.

'Where are you headed?'

'Timberside.'

She chuckled. 'Why on earth would you want to go to Timberside?'

'Family business.'

'Well, I knew you wouldn't be going there to have fun.'

Brett's heart sank and he turned away to discourage any further discussion.

Timberside, where Granddad's parents, Darcy and Elizabeth McCabe, had lived and died. And Granddad's wife, Cynthia. She'd died suddenly, in their cabin in the hills.

Sarah didn't even know what her mother had died of. Granddad would never talk about it. Families were weird sometimes.

The bus hit a bump and shook Brett back to the present. The woman beside him was snoring, her head rising and falling on her large bosom.

She was probably right. Timberside was no place to have fun. From all Ron Nichol's dot-on-the-map jokes, Brett suspected his arrival would double the population.

He'd even considered getting off the bus early and vanishing for a while, but he barely had enough money for the return trip. Certainly not enough to live on, or to rent a motel room.

Brett looked out the window again. Summer. Maybe he could rough it in the bush? He dismissed that idea. He liked his comforts too much. The closest he got to roughing it was walking to school in the rain.

He thought of his double bed and hoped Granddad had somewhere comfortable for him to sleep.

Brett dozed off with his head against the glass, but woke with a start when the woman nudged him.

'Passengers for Timberside, next stop,' said the bus driver over the intercom.

The bus pulled up by a sign that read, BUS STOP. Nothing else. Not even a shelter.

Brett looked around in wonder as the driver rescued his backpack from the luggage compartment at the back. No one else made a move to get off. Not a house or vehicle in sight. Plenty of trees, but no sign of civilisation.

'This can't be Timberside?' He knew it was small, but this was ridiculous.

'You're right, son,' said the driver. 'This is only the pick-up and drop-off point.'

'Where's the town?'

'See that road winding up into the hills? Follow that. Timberside's down the valley on the other side.'

'How do I get there?'

'Isn't someone picking you up?'

Brett shrugged. 'I thought so.'

'Long way to come without being sure.'

'Granddad will pick me up, I guess.'

'If he doesn't, you could always try walking,' said the driver. 'One of the logging trucks might pick you up.'

'Why would anyone want to live way out here?'

'Beats me,' said the driver.

Brett turned away to stare at the lush green blanket that stretched as far as he could

see. He swung back at the sound of the air pump closing the bus door.

'Wait a minute,' Brett cried, 'I...' but the driver had already engaged first gear and took off in a cloud of dust that sent Brett into a coughing fit. By the time the dust settled, the bus had disappeared, leaving a mix of hot rubber and diesel fumes hanging in the air.

Suddenly Brett felt very alone. Where was Granddad? He'd die of hunger and thirst if the old man didn't turn up.

Granddad hadn't wanted him to come, but Sarah had used Brett's run-in with the police as leverage. When she'd phoned Granddad, she made it sound as if Brett's only choice was Timberside or jail.

Her father had resisted, but Sarah was as stubborn as he was.

'See,' Sarah told Ron as she finished the phone call. 'My father's not the ogre you think he is.'

'How long am I going for?' asked Brett.

'A week,' said his mother.

'Only a week?' said Ron.

'And only if he keeps out of trouble,' Sarah added.

Ron had laughed. 'How much trouble could Brett get into in Timberside?'

For once, Brett agreed with his father.

He looked up the road that led to town. Not a car or truck to be seen. He heaved his backpack over his shoulder and started walking.

The sun burned into his back as his feet kicked up puffs of yellow dust with every step. It would be easy to twist an ankle in the deep ruts carved by the heavily-laden timber trucks.

Brett began to sweat, wet patches spreading under his arms, creating patterns on his shirt.

He wished he was inside, out of the heat that made his jeans cling to his legs, chafing his thighs.

Every few metres, he stopped and scanned the horizon hoping to see a logging truck thundering into view. The two he'd seen had turned out to be mirages, optical illusions caused by the shimmering summer heat bouncing off the road.

Putting his head down and trying to strike a comfortable walking pace, he let his mind wander. Anything to take his mind off the heat and the dust.

He thought about the little girl from the accident. Why did some people get so much bad stuff dumped on them while others got off free? It didn't seem fair.

Brett kept walking. Wondering now about other things.

Why was Granddad so secretive about Grandma's death? Maybe he'd murdered her. Chopped her up with an axe and buried the bits in the forest.

Brett gave a nervous laugh. He'd been watching too many horror movies. But Grandma's death was still a mystery. He'd ask Granddad about it. But what if his axe-murder theory was true? *He* could finish up buried in the woods.

Brett forced his mind back to the facts. After Grandma died, Granddad found someone to look after baby Sarah and threw himself into his work, running the general store he'd inherited from his father.

Brett's mum had spent more time away at boarding school than she had at home. The big bust-up came when Sarah chose to study medicine rather than take over the family store.

But Sarah still loved her father. She'd made that clear. And she'd keep loving him, no matter what.

Brett wondered if *he* could ever do anything that would make his parents stop loving him. He hoped not.

He stopped and gazed up the hill. The top never seemed any closer.

He put his backpack down and wiped his forehead, his fingers brushing the small scar, all that remained of his head wound.

Timberside had a doctor. Peter Ferguson, his mum's childhood friend. And Peter had a teenage daughter, Karla.

If Zoey wasn't going to wait for him, then he was a free man. He wondered what Karla looked like.

He smiled. Maybe Timberside wouldn't be that bad after all.

He was still smiling when he saw what looked like some kind of vehicle heading down the winding road towards him. He held up his hand to protect his eyes from the glare. Was it another mirage?

Brett kept watching, counting off the seconds to see how long it would take to disappear. It kept on coming. Not a mirage.

Whatever it was, it wasn't a logging truck, either. Too small.

Maybe he could persuade the driver to turn around and take him to Timberside. He felt in his pocket and found the meagre roll of bank notes. In this heat, he'd gladly pay for the trip.

The vehicle drew closer and closer, the noise of its engine bouncing around the timber-clad hills. It was a dusty panel van with writing on the side, but the glare and dust obscured the words.

The van slid to a halt, 10 metres away. The driver killed the engine, but made no attempt to climb out.

Brett waited. He couldn't see the face behind the windscreen. Maybe the driver was a

local crazy with a sawn off shotgun, waiting to blast him away.

He really *had* been watching too many horror movies.

Brett stood up as an elderly man threw open the van door and stepped down into the dust. His grey hair was cropped close and receding at the temples. A thick beard covered a lot of his face, leaving no room for a smile.

Brett had only ever seen old photos of Granddad. In all of them, Granddad was clean shaven. He imagined the man in front of him without his whiskers.

'You must be Brett,' said Granddad McCabe, shoving both hands in his pockets.

'Right,' said Brett.

'Henry McCabe.'

'Hello... Granddad.'

Brett started to extend his hand, but realised Granddad's hands were still in his pockets and not about to move.

The old man looked Brett up and down. 'You've grown. Wouldn't have recognised you.'

'Mum sends her love.'

Granddad grunted.

'So does Dad.'

Brett became aware of another face inspecting him. It belonged to the ugliest dog he'd ever seen.

Granddad pointed down at the barrel-chested mongrel rubbing against his leg. 'Ugly,' he explained.

'I can see that,' said Brett.

Granddad scowled. 'That's his name.'

Brett said, 'Good name. What is he? A hunting dog?'

Granddad leaned down and scratched the dog behind one of its half-chewed ears. 'The best. Once. Getting a bit old now, like most of us.'

He gestured at Brett's backpack. 'Throw that in the back.'

As Brett walked around the van, he ran his finger over the dusty sign writing and exposed what was underneath.

MCCABE'S GENERAL STORE - SERVING TIMBERSIDE FOR GENERATIONS.

The town was closer than Brett had realised. Within minutes, the van crested the brow of the hill and Timberside came into view, providing the only colour in the green parade.

Without warning, the screaming started up again!

Brett grunted in pain and grabbed his head. Ugly started to growl. Had the dog heard it, too, the way dogs hear ultra-high pitched sound?

'Shut up, dog,' said Granddad, throwing Brett a quick glance. 'What's wrong?'

The screaming stopped. 'Nothing.'

'I hope you're not getting sick.'

'I'm just a bit tired after the walk from the bus stop.'

It was the wrong thing to say to someone of Granddad's generation.

'When I was your age, I used to walk twice that distance every day. Rain or shine.'

'Why did you do that?'

'Delivering groceries for my father.'

'Darcy McCabe?'

Granddad nodded.

'I don't know much about your side of the family,' said Brett. 'I'd like to know more.'

'Nothing to tell.'

That wasn't the way Brett saw it, but he kept his mouth shut. He'd wait for a better opportunity.

'This is it,' said Granddad as the van left the dirt road and rolled onto tar seal.

Civilisation. If Timberside could be called civilisation.

'It's smaller than I thought,' said Brett. 'How many people live here?'

'Not as many as there used to be. Still a few living up in the hills.'

The town had boomed in the late 1800s when gold was found in the forest streams. Overnight, hotels outnumbered houses with thousand of prospectors and their families living in tents and hovels.

Eventually, the mountain streams gave up the last of their gold and the town had drifted back to its present level, relying on logging and the timber mill to keep it alive.

'This is Main Street,' said Granddad, slowing down and pointing. 'The centre of town.'

One small block with a handful of shops and businesses on both sides of the street. None of the shops looked very prosperous. A couple of storefronts were boarded up.

Leading off the town centre, Brett glimpsed streets full of modest looking houses, sun-faded peas in a pod.

'The timber company owns most of the houses,' said Granddad. 'Accommodation for the workers.'

He pointed. 'And that's the Community Centre. The museum's in the back.'

Museum? In a little town like this?

The notice board outside the centre stood on two upright poles driven into the overgrown grass. The place to advertise coming attractions.

The notice board was empty.

'Community Centre's not used much these days,' said Granddad. 'Used to show movies there when I was young. Real movies, not the junk you get on TV.'

Junk or not, watching a bit of TV appealed to Brett. That's what he'd do when he got to the cabin. Help him chill out. After he'd eaten. All he'd had on the bus was a chocolate bar.

'That's Doc Ferguson's surgery,' said Granddad, pointing to a house at the end of the block of shops. 'He lives at the back.'

'Mum says he has a daughter about my age.'

Granddad gave him a strange look. 'Karla's a nice girl. Don't forget that. If you're going to stay with me, you've got to keep out of trouble.'

Brett nodded.

Granddad thrust his finger in the direction of the town's only hotel. 'And that means keeping away from that place. No alcohol while you're here. Agreed?'

That was a new rule, but Brett knew he couldn't argue.

'Agreed.'

Across the road from the hotel stood a small, service station with a workshop for car repairs, and petrol and diesel pumps on the forecourt.

Next door was McCabe's General Store.

'The family store,' said the old man. 'At least it used to be a family store until your mother had other ideas and moved away.'

He stopped the van. 'Let's go in. You can meet Agnes. She helps me out most days.'

'And when I'm not working here,' Agnes told Brett, resting her outsized frame on the counter, 'I run the Timberside museum.'

'Granddad pointed it out,' said Brett.'

'Only a small museum,' said Agnes, warming to the topic. 'All run by volunteers. We even have a reading room with copies of the town's old newspapers. Come and see it while you're here.'

Visit the Timberside museum? Read old newspapers? No way. Brett would fill his time watching TV.

Granddad had vanished into one of the back rooms and Agnes paused to get her second wind.

Brett was already exploring the aisles. The general store was well named. It sold everything from coke to coffee, hammers to hammocks, all neatly laid out.

The walls of the store were hand-cut timber planks, carved from logs dragged from the forests by men and horses in a bygone era. The gloomy atmosphere in the store reeked of another age, intensified by the parade of posters nailed above the shelves advertising products Brett had never heard of.

Agnes explained, 'Things they used to stock when the store first opened.'

'Mum says this place has been in our family for generations. My great-grandfather built

it.'

'Yes, Darcy McCabe. Your grandfather was talking about him just the other day. Do you know Darcy once tried to sell the store? Wanted to pack up and leave town. He only stayed in the end because he couldn't find a buyer.'

'I've never heard that story. When was that?'

'I think it was just before your grandfather was born.'

'What else did Granddad tell you?'

'Not much,' said Agnes. 'He's not a big talker.'

She dropped her voice so she wouldn't be overheard.

'He's a nice old man,' she told Brett, 'and still pretty active for someone pushing 80. But he always seems lonely and he's worse since he stopped working all hours in this place. You ask me, he's a bit depressed.'

Brett finally found what he'd been looking for.

'I'll give you a discount on those,' said Agnes as he held up the large bag of potato chips. Which had a price tag much higher than at his local supermarket.

Agnes saw his frown. 'Things are more expensive in a little town like this. Our transport costs are higher.'

Brett opened the bag and munched as he walked. Now his eyes were used to the gloom, he recognised many of the brands on the shelves. 'Is there anything you don't sell?'

'We don't sell meat. We leave that to the butcher. And we don't sell petrol or oil. Have you met Larry at the service station?'

'No.'

'You're in for a treat. Larry doesn't get on with many people around here. Too aggressive. People say it's those little pills he pops before he works out, lifting those heavy weights.'

Agnes seemed to know everything about everyone.

'What's he training for?' asked Brett.

'To look beautiful.'

'Bodybuilding?'

'Waste of time if you ask me,' said Agnes. 'I've never trained a day in my life and look what I've achieved with *my* body.'

She laughed and the ripple effect took several seconds to run from head to toe.

'Agnes, stop talking the boy's ears off,' said Granddad, emerging from the back of the shop. 'I'm just going next door for petrol.'

Brett heard the van start up and drive a few metres.

'Like everyone else, he'd prefer to buy his petrol somewhere else,' Agnes explained.

‘The only trouble is, Larry’s got the only pumps in town.’

Brett kept munching chips as he walked out into the sunshine and crossed to the other side of the road where he stood under the awning of the town’s sun-bleached hotel. It was a good place to get a better look at the store. And Larry’s service station next door, which badly needed a fresh coat of paint.

But the really big presence in town stood on the other side of Larry’s business. The timber mill, ringed by a steel mesh fence.

His mother had told him the mill was the heart of this little community and the biggest employer. Some of the timber was trucked out as raw logs, but the mill also had equipment to cut and process the rest before it left town.

He glanced at the doctor’s house hoping to see some sign of the girl who lived there. No luck.

Brett crossed back to where Granddad had almost finished filling up the van, but as he reached the oil-stained concrete forecourt, a man in his late 20s walked out of the workshop at the back. Larry.

He was the same height as Brett, but had the over-pumped chest and arms of a serious bodybuilder. Larry wiped his hands on a rag as he approached.

‘You must be McCabe’s grandson,’ he said, flicking the rag like a wet towel at Brett’s face. Brett pulled his head back, but the rag caught him across the chest, leaving an oily streak across his shirt.

‘Hey, watch what you’re doing,’ said Brett, clenching his fists.

He remembered what Agnes had said about Larry popping pills. Steroids by the look of his grotesque muscles. And steroids made people aggressive.

Larry laughed and dropped his voice so Granddad couldn’t hear. ‘You’ve arrived in town with a big reputation, city boy.’

Granddad must have said something to Agnes which would be like telling the whole town.

Brett watched Larry’s shoulders. People telegraphed their moves with their shoulders. Brett had learned that from fights he’d had at school. Fights he usually won.

‘You’re not so impressive in person, city boy,’ said Larry. ‘Bit of a disappointment really.’

Brett tensed. He realised Larry was baiting him. He also knew that if he threw a punch he’d be on the first bus home so he held his anger in check.

Granddad broke the tension as he walked up and handed Larry some cash. The mechanic relaxed, double checked the price on the pump, and stuffed the money in his pocket.

‘Don’t tell me,’ said Brett as they pulled away. ‘Someone else to keep away from.’

'Definitely,' said Granddad as they climbed into the van.

The chips were all gone, but Ugly had discovered residue salt on Brett's fingers and drooled as he licked it off.

As they drove past the mill and left the tar seal behind, Granddad turned up a side road.

'Cabin's up there,' he said, pointing through the windscreen in the general direction of up.

Brett had a lot of questions he wanted to ask. But he'd already figured Granddad would clam up if he went too hard at it so decided to try and ease his way in.

'How did you get to school when you were a kid?' he asked the old man.

'Walked.'

'What about Mum?'

'She walked, too, until she went away to boarding school.'

'Pity you and Mum don't get along.'

'Who says we don't?'

'You never see each other,' said Brett.

'No law against that.'

'It's a shame.'

'Life's a shame.'

'I don't understand,' said Brett.

'You might one day,' said Granddad as he turned the van into a well worn gravel turning circle outside his log cabin.

'It's pretty small,' said Brett.

'Big enough for me. I never have visitors.'

Brett looked up at the roof. 'Where's your TV aerial?'

'I haven't got a TV.'

'No TV?'

'Got rid of it. Nothing worth watching. I've got a phone, though. It works most of the time.'

'What about electricity?'

'There's a generator out the back.'

Brett had a horrible thought. 'What about plumbing?'

'Of course there's plumbing. Water comes from a tank up the hill. And the out-house is round the back.'

'Out-house?'

A faint smile crinkled the old man's eyes. 'The toilet. It's a long drop.'

'A long drop to where?'

'You'll find out soon enough.'

'You mean a hole in the ground? What happens when it rains?'

'I think the out-house still has a roof.'

Now it was Brett's turn to smile. Granddad was pulling his leg. Maybe his mother was right. Maybe there was a warmer person under the gruff exterior.

Granddad walked up onto the covered porch, unlocked the door and stepped into the cabin. Ugly followed close behind.

Brett noticed the whole place needed repair. Granddad had let it go to seed.

He'd seen a video once about a chainsaw psycho-killer who lived in a cabin just like this. The killer had buried what was left of his victims under the porch.

This cabin was exactly like the one in the video. Brett was tempted to poke around with his toe to see if there were any loose boards, but resisted.

His Granddad might be many things, but he didn't seem violent.

'Come in and close the door,' said the old man.

The main room, like the posters at the general store, belonged to another age.

It was smaller than Brett's bedroom at home and the walls were lined with sacking which sagged in places.

A bare light bulb swung from the ceiling and an ancient kerosene lantern stood in one corner. Maybe the generator wasn't all that reliable.

A lumpy couch was rammed up against one wall. A broken leg had been glued back crooked so the edges didn't match. An unpainted folding table stood next to the couch.

The layer of dust suggested it hadn't held food for some time. There were no dining chairs anyway.

No carpet, either, although a misshapen animal skin rug covered the centre of the floor.

Some of the floorboards had buckled with age and Brett could imagine the wind that would whistle up through the gaps in winter.

One wall was mostly fireplace. The cosiest spot in the room, judging by the single rocking chair in front of it.

Brett turned around, trying to take it all in. The room had only one picture, hanging in a dark stained frame between the front door and the window. No one could leave the cabin without seeing it. A picture of his grandmother, Cynthia McCabe.

The woman who'd died so mysteriously in this cabin.

'How did Grandma die?'

Granddad stood by the fireplace, lighting his pipe, ignoring the question.

'I'm going back to the store for a couple of hours,' he told Brett. 'I still have things to do.'

He used the pipe as a pointer as he spoke.

'The kitchen's through there. Help yourself to any food. There's a tub next to the fridge if you want a quick wash.'

'I'd prefer a shower,' said Brett. 'You *have* got a shower.'

'Course I do,' said Granddad. 'Out the back. Nothing fancy but it does the job.'

'With hot water?' Brett asked.

'Sometimes, if the boiler's working.'

Television was off the agenda, but he still wouldn't mind stretching out somewhere comfortable for a nap.

Brett pointed to a closed door. 'Is that where I sleep? Through there?'

'Nope. That's where I sleep.'

'What about me?'

Granddad reached down behind the couch and pulled out a thin rubber mattress wrapped in a grey blanket.

'It's not much, but I told you before I'm not set up for visitors. And don't wander too far from the cabin. It's easy to get lost in these hills.'

### Chapter Three

As Granddad's van disappeared down the road, Brett dropped his backpack next to the rubber mat and the blanket. The old man said he'd be gone a couple of hours, but up here that might mean anything.

Brett knew one thing. He wouldn't be spending too much time in this cabin. The rocker had no cushion, the couch had more lumps than the road from the bus stop, and the rubber mattress looked like something even Ugly might reject.

He managed to have a shower that never got above lukewarm, and jumped out when the water suddenly turned icy.

The dulling effect of the chips had worn off and Brett was hungry again. He started with the ancient fridge. A cold slab of beef sat on the top shelf, and there was a frozen loaf of bread in a tiny chest freezer.

No problem. He'd soon thaw the bread out in the microwave. But maybe cabins without televisions didn't have microwaves? He was right. Instead, he twisted two slices of frozen bread off the loaf and laid them in the sun coming through the window while he continued his search.

He managed to find enough for a sandwich of beef, cheese, salami, pickles, mustard and horseradish and packed it into a paper bag he found.

Brett had already decided to hike up into the hills behind the cabin, find a good view and enjoy his make-shift picnic. That would give the bread time to thaw out properly. Now, all he needed was something to drink.

He opened the fridge again. No soft drink of any kind. But there was a can of something, hidden behind some jam. Beer.

Brett picked it up and looked at the label. He didn't recognise it. Must be a local brand.

He put it back and closed the door. Beer was a no-no. Granddad had made that quite clear.

He found a glass and tried to fill it with water from the kitchen tap. He heard a gurgle roll down the pipes and then a faintly brown liquid splashed into the glass.

Brett held the glass up to the light and saw several UFO's. Unidentified Floating Objects. He quickly poured the water down the sink. Safe or not, he wasn't drinking it.

It was the beer or nothing. But taking it could mean trouble. And get him sent home.

He decided to take the risk. Granddad obviously wasn't much of a drinker. Maybe he wouldn't even notice the beer had gone.

Brett reached for the ring top on the can, then paused. If he opened it now, he'd have to drink it all straight away or it would soon go flat. Then he'd have nothing else to drink for the rest of the day.

He decided to leave the can unopened till he got up into the hills and had worked up more of a sweat. It was something to look forward to.

He was about to leave when he remembered Granddad's instructions about locking the cabin. The spare key was hidden in the out-house, but Granddad hadn't told him where.

It should be easy enough to find. The out-house wasn't much bigger than a small wardrobe.

Brett approached the door and reached for the handle. He noticed the unpainted door didn't even fit the frame. You could freeze to death in there in the middle of winter.

The image of frozen figures on weird toilets made him smile. He decided that if he could smile about things like that, he could probably survive a week in this little town in the middle of nowhere.

He pulled on the out-house door, which screeched open on rusty hinges. And there was the key hanging in full view. So much for security.

The back and sides of the out-house were made of recycled packing cases. Brett could still read stencilled letters on the panels.

He looked up before he looked down. The corrugated iron roof seemed solid enough and free of holes. That was a plus. The base of the toilet pan, which sat over a hole in the ground, was a cut-down oil drum with an old wooden toilet seat hinged to the top.

The seat was cracked. Definitely a minus. And agony if he sat on the crack in the dark. Brett reminded himself to bring a torch if he came out here at night.

He decided not to look down. The smell was enough. Body odours and chemicals. Brett held his nose, grabbed the key and backed out of the tiny room.

His bladder was full, but he'd wait until he got out in the bush. He'd seen enough of Granddad's long drop.

He was halfway back to the cabin when he realised something vital was missing from the out-house. Toilet paper. Only a pile of old newspapers.

Brett made a mental note to buy a roll of toilet paper from the store. Roughing it was one thing, but no way he was wiping his backside with newspaper.

Five minutes later, he was climbing the hill behind the cabin, following a rough track up through the bush, his defrosting sandwich in one hand, the can of beer in the other.

Ten minutes later, he'd lost sight of the cabin and the track. Fifteen minutes later, he was hopelessly lost, surrounded by a barrier of green, closing in around him, cutting out most of the overhead sun. He stood, silently, unsure of what to do next.

In the city, no problem. The city was his patch, but this was foreign territory. He lifted his head to call for help and stopped, feeling stupid. His bladder was ready to burst so he relieved himself where he stood, not bothering to hide.

He almost died when he saw the girl, staring at him.

Like a demented kangaroo, Brett hopped behind the nearest tree. His face burning as he zipped up his jeans.

'Sorry I scared you,' the girl called.

'You didn't scare me,' he called back, double checking his zip as he stepped out from behind the tree. 'I thought it was the other way around.'

The girl just laughed. She looked about his age. Sweat shirt, shorts and sneakers. Taller than Zoey, but not as skinny, more curvy, with big glasses and a pony tail.

'My name's Karla.'

'Right. The doctor's daughter?'

'And you must be Brett Nichol.'

Someone else who'd heard about him. What did they use out here for communication? Jungle drums?

'My father says you killed a little girl with a stolen car.'

That took his breath away for a few seconds. 'It wasn't stolen, she wasn't killed, and I wasn't driving.'

'Dad says to keep away from you.'

'Granddad said much the same to *me* about *you*.'

He kicked at a stone. 'Your father got that story completely wrong.'

'Tell me *your* version,' said Karla.

Brett told her. About the party, getting drunk, the crash in the V8, then about the cop coming to the house with questions about the earlier hit-and-run. How his mother had given him a rock-solid alibi.

He left out the bit about it being his idea to get Jimmy to buy the booze. That only made him look bad, and it didn't add anything to the story.

'You don't sound so bad in your version,' said Karla when Brett finished. 'But I can't say the same for some of your friends.'

'Ex-friends,' said Brett. 'So who do you believe now? Me or your dad?'

'I'll keep an open mind.'

Brett felt disappointed. He'd hoped she'd say she believed him. She seemed nice, and he wanted to make a good impression.

Karla took off her glasses and held them up to the sun while she cleaned them with the edge of her sweat shirt.

'Dad would kill me if he knew I was up here with you.'

'How old are you?' he asked.

'How old do I look?'

He laughed. 'Unfair question.'

She paused while she put her glasses back on and adjusted them. 'I'm 16. Soon.'

'How soon?'

'Soon enough.'

'Where I come from that means next year.'

'I'm old enough not to be treated like a child.'

'Join the club,' said Brett. 'My Dad's the worst. Mum's easier to get along with. What's your mum like?'

Brett could see her pull down the shutters. 'I haven't got a mother.'

'Hey, I'm sorry. That was dumb.'

She looked at him and the shutters opened a fraction. 'It's not your fault. Everyone around here knows. That's the downside of living in a small town. My mother ran off and left us when I was still a baby.'

'Why?'

Karla shrugged. 'To find herself.'

'Did she?'

'Find herself? Who knows? I don't even know where she is. I get a birthday card every year, but there's never a return address.'

She read the expression in his eyes. 'Hard to believe, isn't it?'

'Yeah. How can a parent do that?'

Karla gave him a look that said, "let's change the subject", and pointed at the can and the paper bag lying on the ground.

'What are those? Emergency rations?'

Brett laughed. 'There's a sandwich in the bag. It should be defrosted by now. We can share it if you like.'

'No, but I'll share that beer with you.'

Brett hesitated. Granddad had warned him to keep away from alcohol *and* Karla.

Sharing a beer with her could be double trouble. He could end up thrown out of the cabin and sleeping in the woods. Even an old rubber mattress and blanket were better than that.

'I'm not planning to drink the beer,' he told her.

'So why did you bring it?'

Brett picked up the can and hoisted it in the air. 'See, better than a dumbbell. The perfect outdoor exercise.'

Karla laughed. 'Okay, I'll settle for half a sandwich. But not here. It's too gloomy. Let's go up to the lake.'

'What lake?'

'Pine Lake.' She pointed. 'Through that gap in the trees and straight up the hill.'

Brett couldn't see any gap. 'The trees all look the same to me.'

'We could go somewhere else.'

'No,' said Brett. 'Might as well see the local sights.'

He suddenly cocked his head to one side. 'Did you hear anything?'

'Like what?'

'Hard to describe.'

He knew what it was. Screaming.

'These hills can do strange things to you,' she said. The forest is full of strange sounds, strange shapes.' She grinned at him. 'Strange people.'

Brett laughed.

'The track's pretty steep,' said Karla. 'I hope you can handle the pace.'

'Are you kidding?' asked Brett. 'I play football. I run up and down hills all day at training.'

Five minutes later, and only halfway to the top, Karla slowed down and waited for Brett to catch up. 'What was that you were saying?'

'I'm built for strength,' said Brett. 'Not speed.'

They walked in silence for the next few minutes, Brett concentrating on avoiding the slippery roots and undergrowth. It was still hot, and for the second time that day, he was sweating freely.

'Tell me about the lake,' he said.

'Pine Lake? It used to be a great swimming hole.'

'Used to be?'

'You'll see when we get there.'

'It's a long way to walk for a swim.'

'There's a road up here,' said Karla, 'but this way is shorter. We're almost there.'

Brett suddenly stopped as he glimpsed the brow of the hill through the trees. The screaming was getting louder. Was it coming from the lake?

Without explanation, he pushed past Karla and sprinted the rest of the way.

As he neared the top he slowed, suddenly afraid of what he might find. But then gulped a lung full of air, and plunged on over the brow of the hill.

It was like something from another planet.

Karla was right behind him and angry. 'What was all the shoving about?'

'Sorry.' Brett's mouth hung open. 'Where's the lake?'

Below them lay an enormous crater. A giant bowl. Deep, and bigger than a football field. With sides of dry, cracked clay stretching up to where they stood, and ringed around the top

by green bush and trees.

'That's what's left of it,' she said.

'You mean that whole thing was once filled with water?'

'Yep.'

Only a shallow pool of slightly murky water remained, covering the bottom of the giant bowl like a huge puddle.

'What happened?'

'We had a big earthquake a while back,' said Karla.

'I remember,' he said. 'Mum rang Granddad to check that he was okay.'

'Well,' she continued, 'the tremors opened up hundreds of fine cracks and the water's been draining away ever since.'

'Like a leaky bath?'

'Something like that.'

'Couldn't they do anything?'

Karla shielded her eyes from the sun and looked across the lake bed. 'Some engineers came up and looked at it, but they said it was a freak of nature. Nothing they could do.'

She turned back to him. 'Are you listening to me?'

Brett's mind was elsewhere. He was staring at a very tall pine tree on the other side of the lake which towered over everything else, and stood out like a lighthouse.

'What's with the big tree?' he asked, pointing. 'It's huge. Looks like it doesn't even belong there.'

'Didn't your mother tell you about that as well?'

'No,' he said, as the screaming went up another notch, the pain now giving his voice a rough edge.

'Just tell me, okay,' he demanded. 'Come on, what's the story with that thing?'

'Hey, why are you getting angry?'

'My head hurts and I really want to know about that pine. Is there something special about it?'

'Of course there is,' said Karla. 'Everyone knows that.'

'Knows what?'

'That's The Screaming Tree.'

## Chapter Four

Brett nearly fell over in shock. 'The what?'

'The Screaming Tree.'

He struggled to process what she was saying. 'So you know about the screaming?'

She gave him a strange look. 'You're starting to scare me.'

He held his hands up, palms out, to show he meant no harm. Then tried to describe the screaming he'd heard in his head since he was five.

For some reason he wanted her to hear the story, to understand. He watched her face.

'That's freaky,' she said when he finished. 'And they couldn't find anything wrong with your head?'

'No, but if there is an answer, maybe it's here, in Timberside.'

Karla stared at the can of beer he still clutched. 'Are you sure the problem's not from drinking too much of that stuff?'

Brett dropped the beer and the paper bag on the ground and grabbed her arm. 'I'm telling the truth. Why won't you believe me?'

She stared at him, the sun glinting off her spectacles. 'What are you on? Larry's angry pills? And who says I don't believe you?'

'Tell me more about the tree.'

'Not until you take your hands off me.'

The anger left Brett as quickly as it had come. He let go of her arm and slumped to the ground.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I've had a rough few weeks.'

'Well, don't take it out on me.'

'Karla, I've got to know more about the tree.'

'There isn't much to tell. It's the tallest pine around here. Bit of a freak, really. See the way the big bottom branch sticks out? The kids used to tie ropes around it and swing out over the water. When there was still water.'

'But why do people say it screams?'

'It gets very windy up in these hills. Especially here. The tree's so tall, the wind howls through the top branches. And when it blows *really* hard, the tree sounds as though it's screaming.'

He lifted his head. 'The way it's screaming now?'

'Brett, there's no wind. And you have to be right under the tree to hear it.'

He jumped to his feet. 'Well, *something's* screaming. Let's go over and take a closer look.'

'What about the food and drink?'

‘Bring it along.’

Brett led the way. The screaming in his head dropped in volume as he got closer to the tree, making it easier to think, but it was still there, behind his eyes, like a bomb waiting to explode again at any moment.

They followed the green line around the rim of the bowl that had once marked the lake’s high water mark.

As they got closer to the tree, he pointed to the big branch. ‘What are the marks?’

‘Scars. From where kids used to tie their ropes.’

‘Did you do that? Swing off the tree?’

‘Every summer until the lake drained. I bet your mum came up here, too, when she was young.’

‘I’ve never swum in a lake. In fact, I’ve never swum in anything bigger than the school swimming pool.’

‘Which is probably heated.’

He nodded. ‘I’ll bet this tree could tell a few stories.’

The sun sat behind the tree, giving it a golden halo, and throwing a large shadow that stretched out to where Brett and Karla had stopped. It was very hot, but they both shivered at the same time.

‘This is weird,’ said Karla. ‘I’ve never been spooked up here before.’ She touched his arm. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

‘I can’t. I can sense this tree’s somehow part of what’s been happening to me.’

He walked towards the big pine, his pulse racing as he reached out to touch it.

As he did, the screaming in his head finally stopped.

Karla walked over, stood beside him.

‘See,’ she said. ‘It’s just a harmless old tree I used to swing off when I was little.’

Before Brett could stop her, she scrambled up the tree and disappeared into the greenery.

‘Karla,’ he called, after a few seconds had gone by and he could no longer hear her climbing. ‘Karla, are you okay? Where are you?’

The green curtain above his head parted and her head popped through. ‘Boo!’

‘Don’t do that,’ he yelled, jumping back. ‘I almost had a heart attack.’

Her eyes sparkled behind the glasses. ‘Thanks for worrying about me. I’m fine. But look what I found.’

A length of rope came snaking down towards Brett’s head. He ducked and it clipped his shoulder.

Above him, Karla tied the other end to the big branch and clambered down, hand over

hand.

'Impressive,' said Brett.

'The climbing, or the rope?'

'Both.'

'I've been climbing this tree since I was tiny. This is my old rope. I hid it up in the branches last time I swam here.'

She offered him the end of the rope. 'Have a go. The branch will hold you.'

Brett tugged on the rope a few times, testing it out.

'It is pretty old,' said Karla, keeping a straight face. 'I'll understand if you're scared.'

Brett flashed her a grin and started to climb, hand over hand. He hadn't done this since football training, but rope climbing always made him feel strong. Invincible.

But within touching distance of the branch, he stopped.

'What's wrong?' Karla called up to him.

A picture had flashed through his mind. Like a video in slow motion. A bizarre vision of him and the tree.

'Run out of puff?' asked Karla.

Her voice broke the spell and, as it did, he sensed the rope start to stretch. It was too old for someone of his weight. But he was so high up he'd injure himself if he fell.

Brett lunged upwards, caught the branch, let go of the rope, and hauled himself up.

Karla applauded. 'You're pretty strong for a guy who can't run up hills.'

He forced himself to smile down at her, but he knew the smile wasn't reaching his eyes. And the sweat on his forehead had nothing to do with the heat.

'Should we have our picnic up there?' she called to him.

'No,' he said, sharply. 'I'm coming down.'

This time he slithered down the trunk, using knots in the bark for footholds, the way Karla had got up in the first place.

'What's wrong with the rope?' she asked as he landed beside her.

Brett blew on his hands and rubbed them on his jeans. 'It's old. Felt like it was about to break.'

His excuse was only part of it. He didn't want to touch that rope ever again. Not after the bizarre vision he'd just had.

'Let's picnic here in the shade of the tree,' Karla suggested.

Brett wanted to put as much distance as he could between him and the pine. 'Any other options?'

'How about a boat ride on the lake?'

He nodded. Anything to get away from the tree. Then realised what she'd said.

'What boat?'

'I spotted it when I was up the tree. Over there. Hidden in the bushes.'

The small rowing boat sat where its owner had left it, just above the old lake level. Like most things in Timberside, it needed repairs.

'It might float,' said Brett. 'One way to find out.'

With both of them pulling and pushing, they slid the boat out of the bushes and dragged it to the top of the clay bank.

'It should slide down the slope easily enough,' said Karla. 'Let's give it a shove.'

'No,' said Brett. Sharp pieces of rock stuck out of the dry clay walls of the old lake bed. 'If it hits one of those, it'll get wrecked. We'll have to ease it down.'

'What do you mean "we"?''

'Then I'll do it,' he said, rolling up his jeans. As he peeled off his shirt, he stepped into a bodybuilding pose.

'Look at this,' he said. 'Competition for Larry!'

Karla laughed. 'No contest. He's much creepier.'

Brett threw her his shirt then took hold of the stern and tried to guide the boat down the slope towards the water, digging his heels into the cracks in the clay, trying to control the speed.

The boat was too heavy, and it quickly turned into a frantic slither as the boat picked up speed, dragging Brett with it, heading straight for a jagged rock.

He flung his weight to one side and steered out of danger, but the momentum yanked the boat from his grasp.

Free of its human anchor, the boat careered down the remaining slope, and as the nose hit the water, it looked as though it would dive like a submarine. But at the last second, it flattened out and the stern hit the shallow water with a solid splash.

Brett arrived a few seconds later, covered in a layer of clay dust.

Karla grabbed the only oar they'd found and slid down the slope to join him.

'What about these?' She was holding the paper bag and the can of beer.

Brett's mouth felt as dry as the crater walls. Even a warm beer would taste great.

'Yes, to both,' he said. 'Hop in. You may as well stay dry. I'll push you out.'

'I really hope this thing floats,' she said as placed the food in the bottom of the boat and climbed in.

'We haven't got far to sink if it doesn't,' he said.

He waded in until the water was above his knees, then clambered into the stern.

'How are you going to row with one oar?' she asked.

'I'm not going to row with it. I'm going to push with it.'

He drove the pole into the lake floor, slowly propelling the boat along. Reaching down, he splashed some water over his dusty body and face.

'Nice, but cold,' he said.

'What do you expect in a mountain lake? Thermal heating?'

Brett gazed down into the water. 'I can almost see the bottom. It really is shallow.'

'Come on, I'm starving. Let's eat.' She tore open the bag and pulled out the sandwich.

'What's *this* supposed to be?'

'A city special.'

'Special what?'

'Don't you like beef, cheese and salami with pickles, mustard and horseradish?'

'Yeah, but not on the same sandwich.' She tore off a piece of bread and cheese before handing him the rest.

Brett dragged the oar into the boat and lay back to enjoy the sun as they floated towards the middle of the lake. He tried a bite of the sandwich, but there was already too much clay dust in his mouth. He needed a drink.

Karla held out the can of beer and with practised skill, he pulled off the ring-top and flicked it into the water.

'Hey,' said Karla. 'What about the environment?'

Brett grinned back. 'This lake's in enough trouble as it is. I can't make it any worse.'

As he tipped the can back and took a long swallow, he could feel Karla's eyes boring into him.

'Thanks for offering me some.'

'I'm not supposed to get you into trouble.'

'One sip of beer's hardly trouble.'

'Just like one ring-top's hardly pollution.'

'Truce,' she said, reaching for the can. She screwed up her face as she swallowed, then handed it back.

'Don't you like it?'

'Never tasted it before.'

'Nor have I,' said Brett. 'Must be a local brand.'

'I mean beer.'

Brett did a double take. 'You've never tasted beer?'

'Dad doesn't drink so we never have alcohol in the house.'

'Don't you drink it at parties?'

Karla shrugged.

Brett couldn't believe it. A 15 year old girl who'd never tasted beer. He sat up and stared

into Karla's eyes.

'You're different from the girls back home.'

Her smile showed she took it as a compliment, which is how he'd intended it.

Brett suddenly sat up even straighter.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

'I've just found an enormous splinter.'

'Where?'

'I'm sitting on it.'

He tried to unhook himself, which started the boat rocking.

'Careful,' she cried. 'You'll tip us over.'

The boat rocked even more.

'Brett. Stop it.'

He gritted his teeth. 'Almost got it.'

With a final tug, he pulled free of the splinter, but his momentum propelled him towards Karla.

She threw up her hands to stop him crashing on top of her, and managed to redirect him. Over the side, and into the water.

'Help,' he cried, floundering around, raising his hand above his head like a drowning man.

'I can't swim. Help,' he cried again, sinking beneath the water.

'Brett,' Karla cried. 'Don't be silly. Brett. Where are you?'

She grabbed the oar and tried to turn the boat around. But the row boat was old and slow in the water.

'Brett,' she yelled, peering down into the murky water. 'This isn't funny. Wait till I...'

'Yaaaaah!' he yelled, leaping out of the water, pulling down on the side of the boat.

With a cry, Karla also tumbled into the water.

She surfaced, angry and yelling. 'You idiot. I've lost my glasses.'

Brett stood up. The water barely came to his waist.

'How could you lose anything in this overgrown paddling pool?'

He ducked under and, on the second attempt, came up with her glasses.

Karla's face showed anger and relief at the same time.

'You frightened the life out of me. Pretending you were drowning. Don't do that again.'

'Now we're in, let's swim,' he said.

'No way. It's freezing, even for me. I'm getting back into the boat.'

As Karla levered herself back on board, Brett spun around and swam away.

The cold water was murky, but strangely refreshing and at least it would get rid of all the

clay dust which had stuck to his body.

As his strokes cut through the water, his mind replayed the trip to Timberside.

Meeting Granddad. Karla. The tree. The vision he'd had while climbing the rope.

He suddenly stopped swimming and stood up in the shallow water.

The screaming was back, and it was definitely coming from the direction of the tree.

Brett started to back away from the old pine, toes struggling to grip the muddy bottom.

The noise got louder.

He kept retreating, and a new, more intense burst hit him like a tidal wave and knocked him off his feet. The pain almost blinded him, worse than any sunlight bouncing off water.

'Karla!'

'I'm coming!'

She'd got the old row boat moving using the single oar as a pole and, as she reached him, he grabbed hold of the side.

'Brett, what's...?'

'Head towards the tree.'

He stayed hanging off the side, his head throbbing, as she moved them towards shore.

'Listen,' he said as they got close.

'I don't hear anything.'

But he did. The volume of the screaming had gone down again.

Was the tree calling him? He let go of the boat and started wading in.

'Hey,' Karla yelled. 'Where are you going?'

He didn't answer and he didn't stop till he'd reached the point where the shadow of the tree met the water. When the lake was full, it would have been a deep spot. Too deep for kids jumping off ropes to ever touch the bottom.

As he waded further into the shadow of the tree, he suddenly yelled and tumbled forward, vanishing under the murky water.

'Brett,' Karla cried. Dropping the oar, she pulled off her glasses and jumped overboard, heading for where he'd disappeared.

He suddenly burst to the surface. 'Karla, you've got to see this. There's something down here. I stubbed my toe on it.'

Brett and Karla both ducked under the water to examine what he'd found.

'It's an old metal trunk,' he said when they resurfaced. 'It could have been there for years.'

'But how did it get in the lake?' she asked. 'And it's wrapped in chains and padlocks. What if it's valuable?'

'Our lucky day,' said Brett, grinning. 'Buried treasure. Pirate booty.'

Karla took a playful swipe at his head. 'This is Timberside, you clown, not the Spanish Main.'

'Let's drag it out and see.'

The trunk was partly buried in the muddy bottom, but a handle on each end gave them something to hang on to. It was still harder than they expected to drag the trunk loose and onto dry ground.

'We need to take it right up the slope,' said Brett, pointing towards the tree.

'That's crazy,' she said. 'Why can't we just open it down here?'

'No way. These chains and padlocks are rusted solid. We'll need to come back with the right equipment. And if we have to leave it, I don't want anyone else finding it.'

'No one comes up here anymore.'

'We did.'

Karla nodded. 'Up the slope then.'

Using cracks in the dry clay wall to anchor their feet and hands, they slowly, very slowly, hauled the trunk up the slope, centimetres at a time.

When they finally reached the top, they collapsed on the ground, out of breath and sweating from the exertion.

Brett rubbed his biceps. 'That thing weighs a tonne.'

'Larry could have carried it with one hand,' Karla joked.

He laughed. 'Just think, all those years you spent jumping into the lake, and that trunk was sitting on the bottom.'

'That's spooky,' said Karla.

'It is a bit.'

'How do we get into it?'

Brett studied the trunk and pointed to dark patches on the metal surface. 'Looks like it's been in a fire at some stage.'

'But can you open it?'

'A gas torch would open it like a can of peaches.'

'Do you know how to use one?'

'Sure,' said Brett. 'I use them at school. Maybe we could borrow one from the service station. They'll have one in the workshop.'

'You mean ask Larry?'

'No. Bad idea.'

'Why don't we just take the trunk into town?'

'Too heavy,' said Brett. 'And this way we can keep it a secret.'

'Why?'

'Finders, keepers.'

'What if it's stolen property? It would still belong to the original owner.'

Brett looked at her in surprise. 'Are you serious?'

'Of course. I'm not a thief. Are you?'

Brett didn't reply and now Karla apologised. 'Sorry. I didn't mean it.'

He wasn't a thief. Not like Denny. But he was tired of the tight budget at home.

With his father out of work, his mother insisted the family cut right back on luxuries.

Which meant that until his dad found a decent job, a car for Brett would never make any sort of priority list.

And what if his father didn't find a job? Where did that leave Brett? After school work paid peanuts.

Whatever was in the trunk could be the solution. The down payment on his car. He wasn't going to walk away from it.

Not without a fight.

Karla spotted what looked like initials. 'I think it says "MB".'

'Whoever he was.'

She paused for a few seconds. 'I'm not sure I should tell you this, but Dad's got a small gas welding set in his workshop at home.'

'Then he'll have a cutting torch. How big are the gas bottles?'

'About the size of scuba-diving tanks.'

'Perfect.'

'But I can tell you now, he won't lend them to you.'

'What if we don't tell him?'

Karla screwed up her face, then seemed to come to a decision. 'Dad's out of town most of tomorrow.'

'Great. We'll come up here first thing, cut open the trunk, and have the cutting gear back before he even knows it's gone.'

Karla reached out and touched his arm. 'Are you sure we're doing the right thing?'

Brett could hear the branches of the tree rustling above his head.

'Right or wrong,' he told her. 'There's no turning back!'

## Chapter Five

'Don't lie to me, Karla,' said Peter Ferguson. 'I'll ask you again. Who were you with?'

Karla had arrived home before him, showered and washed her hair, but she'd forgotten to move her muddy clothes off the back steps where she'd stripped them off.

'I told you, Dad, I was on my own.'

'You went up to Pine Lake by yourself?'

'It's not that far.'

'How did you get so dirty?'

Karla tried to fudge her answer. 'I slipped down the bank.'

'You shouldn't be up in those hills on your own.'

'What harm can I come to?'

'You're old enough to answer that yourself.'

'I'm always careful.'

'Sometimes careful isn't enough.'

'Are you scared I won't come back? Like Mum?'

A look of pain crossed his face. Pain from the past, and pain from the damaged knee that had shortened his temper over the last few months.

'Karla. I simply have all the normal fears fathers have for their teenage daughters.'

'Then let me grow up.'

'That's what I'm trying to do.'

Karla dialled out. She knew his anger was aggravated by the pain. They'd both be happier once he'd had his knee operation.

She dialled back into her father's lecture and caught the end of a sentence.

'... Karla, you could have drowned.'

'Dad, it's not very deep, and Brett's a good swimmer...' The words froze in her mouth.

'Brett? Brett Nichol? Have you been spending time with that young... criminal?'

'He's not a criminal, Dad. He's nice. He just got in with a bunch of bad friends.'

'When did he tell you all this? While you were together up at the lake?'

The phone saved her. Doc Ferguson picked it up and asked a few questions, then replaced the handset and snatched up his medical case.

'There's been an accident at the mill. That's the second one with that new saw. We'll finish this conversation later.'

Karla relaxed. By the time her father got back, he'd have calmed down.

As she heard the front gate close, Karla jumped up and headed for the back door.

A few minutes later she returned, picked up the phone and dialled the cabin. Brett answered and she described the scene with her father.

'Lucky you're still in one piece,' said Brett.

'His bark's worse than his bite.'

'Like *my* Dad.'

'Did you tell your Granddad?'

'About the trunk?' asked Brett, dropping his voice to a whisper. 'Are you kidding?'

'I mean about going up to the lake?'

'Waste of time. He wouldn't be interested. Are we still on for tomorrow?' he asked, keeping his voice low.

'I've just checked. The gas equipment's in the workshop, behind some old medical records.'

'Hey, we make a good team. And this is only day one.'

Brett couldn't see her smile. 'We're getting better,' she told him.

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Brett fell into a deep sleep near dawn, only to be woken soon afterwards.

'It's the middle of the night,' he mumbled as Granddad wandered out of his bedroom and into the main area where Brett had been sleeping.

'In the country, we call this the morning,' said the old man, growling through his beard.

Brett started to reply, but changed his mind. He was in enough trouble already over the missing beer.

While Granddad was in the out-house, Brett jumped up and made them both coffee.

Granddad took the cup Brett offered, grunted a thanks, then settled in his rocking chair while he sipped it.

'Don't you ever sleep late?' Brett asked.

'I hardly sleep at all. You need less sleep as you get older. Makes the days longer.'

Brett threw on some clothes and packed away the mattress.

The whole sleeping arrangement had been a fiasco. When Brett laid out the rubber mattress and blanket, Ugly made a dive for it. Brett had a sneaking suspicion that he'd been sleeping on the dog's bed.

All night, Brett had pushed Ugly away, but every few minutes he'd woken up to find the dog's foul smelling mouth only centimetres away from his own.

Brett looked around and wondered what to do with himself. At home, he had plenty of options. Not here. Not in a low-tech cabin like this.

The early morning air was chilly as he pulled on an extra jersey before flopping down on the corrugated couch.

'Granddad, I'm really sorry about the beer.'

'So you keep saying.'

'I was dying of thirst.'

'Nothing wrong with the water up here. Comes from a mountain spring.'

'I didn't think you'd mind. It was sort of an emergency.'

'We went through this last night. I've got a good mind to send you back home on the next bus.'

Sent home within 24 hours of arriving? That would go down really well with his parents.

'But I've decided against it,' said Granddad. 'Your mother said you needed to get away, so I'll give you a second chance. But there won't be a third.'

At times like this, the old man sounded almost human. So why did he try and keep his family at arm's length? Why did he put up all the barriers?

'Granddad, can I ask you a question? About you and Mum?'

'I told you yesterday. No. Are you going out today?'

'Yes.'

'Well, take Ugly with you.' It was a command, not a request. 'He needs the exercise.'

Brett noticed with disgust that Ugly had fallen asleep in a corner of the cabin on the hard wooden floor. Why hadn't he done that during the night and let Brett sleep on his own?

'I still want to know the big family secret,' said Brett.

Granddad flared. 'Who told you about that?'

'No one. What is it?'

'You'll never hear it from me. I plan to take it to my grave.'

Brett sensed he'd touched a raw nerve with the old man. There was something weird going on with his family. Was it something about Brett's mother that only Granddad knew?

'How would you feel if *your* father had shut you out of *his* life?' said Brett.

Granddad's face went even darker. 'You *do* know!'

He'd touched another nerve. Or was it the same one?

Maybe there was *more* than one secret. Something about his mother, *and* Granddad's father. How many secrets could one family have?

'Answer me,' Granddad demanded. 'Why did you bring my father into this? What do you know about him?'

Brett shook his head. 'Darcy McCabe's just a name to me.'

Granddad relaxed and went back to his coffee.

'Leave the past alone, Brett. Don't keep digging it up. Never does any good.'

'But it's my past, too. What happened between you and Mum?'

'Your grandmother died. And it *shouldn't* have happened.'

It didn't make any sense, but Brett saw the crack in the old man's defence and zeroed in. 'How did Grandma die?'

'Damn you, boy. Do I have to spell everything out for you? Someone killed her.'

Brett leapt to his feet. 'Murder? Grandma was murdered?'

'I didn't say murder.'

'What do you mean then?'

'You really want to know?'

Brett nodded. He was now so close to finding out there was no turning back.

'All right,' said Granddad. 'I'll tell you, but don't blame me if you don't like the answer. I've never come out and said this before, but...'

Brett didn't move a muscle. His Granddad's eyes were clouded over. Reliving some private, painful memory, dragging it to the surface.

'Brett, your *mother* killed your grandmother, as surely as if she'd put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger.'

Brett felt like he'd been punched in the gut. His *mother*? Brett couldn't – wouldn't – believe it. Not his mum, Sarah. She wouldn't hurt a fly.

Granddad's words tumbled out. 'Last week was the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of your grandmother's death, but not a day goes by I don't miss her.'

Brett knew instantly that it didn't add up! Grandma had been dead for 40 years. But Brett's mother had just turned 41.

'Hang on, Granddad. Mum was only a baby when Grandma died. How could she have...'

The old man rounded on him. 'Believe what you like.'

'But I don't understand.'

Granddad pointed to the door. 'That's your problem. Now, take the dog. He needs some exercise. And get out of here.'

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Karla waited at the door of her father's workshop.

'Who died?' she asked.

'Don't joke, Karla, I'm not in the mood. I've just opened the family can of worms.'

'Want to tell me?'

Brett hoisted a heavy gas bottle onto each shoulder and Karla took the rest of the stuff.

'Everyone else in this town probably knows anyway,' he said. 'I'll tell you on the way to the lake.'

As they climbed, he told her. 'Granddad called Mum a killer, but it doesn't make sense. Mum was only a baby when Grandma died.'

'Why didn't you just phone your Mum and ask her about it?'

'With Granddad sitting there?'

'Maybe we should leave the lake for another time.'

'No, let's keep going. It'll take my mind off it.'

Halfway up to the lake, Brett lowered the gas bottles to the ground and rubbed his shoulders.

Karla, who was carrying the cutting-torch, rubber hoses, and safety mask, stopped and called back. 'You okay?'

'I'll survive.'

Ugly had spent most of the trip running in and out of Brett's legs, yapping at the gas cylinders.

'Shut up, dog, or I'll make you carry them.'

'Take longer breaks,' said Karla.

'Your father's only gone for the day,' said Brett. 'Not a week.' He hoisted the bottles back onto his shoulders.

'Think how fit you'll be next football season,' she said.

'You sound like my coach,' said Brett, as he set out after her.

They'd skirted the town centre to avoid being seen and kept off the road to the lake for the same reason, Karla picking her way through the dense bush, guiding them up.

The weight of the bottles kept Brett's speed down and it was mid-morning by the time they crested the brow of the hill and looked out over Pine Lake.

The trunk was where they'd left it, on the far side of the lake, hidden behind the big tree.

Taking a handle each, they dragged their fire-blackened prize out and around to the front of the tree, right under Karla's childhood rope.

'This is freaky,' she said, as Brett assembled the gas equipment.

Karla pointed to where Ugly stood, well away from them. Watching. Growling softly.

'Stupid mutt,' said Brett.

Karla said, 'Maybe he'll stop performing when we open it.'

Brett slipped on the safety mask.

'You sure you know how to use this thing?'

Brett nodded. He used oxyacetylene torches all the time in engineering class, cutting and welding all sorts of things.

Only the month before, Scott had turned up with an expensive-looking bike. He'd asked Brett to modify the frame and repaint it, without telling anyone. Brett wished he hadn't done it. The bike was probably stolen.

He waved Karla away. 'Stand back.'

'Don't you need matches?'

Brett held up the pistol-shaped cutting torch. 'It's self-igniting.'

'You look like a cowboy with his six-shooter.'

Brett did a quick draw from an imaginary holster. 'Fastest flame in the west. Pull the trigger and instant barbecue.'

Karla laughed. 'With all that firepower, we should have brought some steak for later.'

Brett opened the valve to mix the gases, but then almost dropped the torch as he pulled the trigger and a huge flame erupted out the end.

'I forgot to tell you. Dad says it's a bit temperamental.'

He laughed. 'Yeah, a temperamental flamethrower.'

He experimented a bit more and managed to get the small flame he needed with minimal trigger pressure. When he was finally happy, he moved the cutting torch towards the trunk.

As the flame touched the first of the chains, he heard the screaming again.

'It's started,' he yelled to Karla.

'I can see that,' she called, watching the links on the first chain melt under the intense heat.

He meant the screaming, but it didn't matter. Only he could hear it as the sweat poured down his face, dripping under the mask, onto the front of his shirt.

Not bothering with the small padlocks, he cut straight through both chains. That left the big padlock securing the lid on the trunk which seemed well made and watertight.

The padlock melted like butter and Brett flicked off the torch, killing the flame as he threw his mask on the ground.

Karla handed him a towel. 'Take a break,' she suggested.

'I'm alright,' he replied. 'Let's get it open.'

'You okay?'

Brett didn't reply. He pulled out the orange crowbar which he'd also borrowed from Doc Ferguson's workshop, and which had the doctor's name scratched into the paint.

'Be careful with that,' said Karla. 'I gave it to Dad for his birthday.'

Brett gripped the crowbar tightly and attacked the rim of the trunk lid. It was a tighter fit than he'd realised. Definitely air-tight. At least the contents would be in good condition.

'Take it easy,' said Karla. 'You don't have to tear the whole thing apart. Just open it.'

'What do you think I'm trying to do?'

He put all his strength into it, but the lid wouldn't budge. It was stuck, solid. He redoubled his efforts and strained against the crowbar.

'Last try,' he called to Karla, yelling to make himself heard over the noise in his head.

With a final yell of pain and frustration, Brett forced the bar down and the lid burst open.

## Chapter Six

The trunk was full to the brim with a canvas sack, stitched up tight.

Ugly let out a low pitched, blood curdling growl. Every muscle in the dog's body was quivering, its eyes filled with the madness of the hunt. Ready to attack.

'Don't you start,' said Brett, trying to keep his voice under control.

Ugly kept growling and Brett hurled a stone at the old dog, but missed.

'Hey,' said Karla, grabbing Brett's wrist as he went to grab a second stone. 'What's wrong with you?'

'Screaming. In my head. I don't need Ugly's performance as well.'

The wind had come up since they'd arrived and the giant pine above them started to rustle.

Brett glanced up. 'Maybe our audience is getting restless.'

'Stop it, you're freaking me out.'

He grabbed hold of the canvas corners and took the strain. 'This thing's stuck. Wedged solid. Let's turn the trunk on its side and slide it out.'

He grabbed one of the handles as Ugly's growls went up another notch.

'Take it easy, will you?' said Brett, taking a step towards the dog.

A watery growl burst up from Ugly's belly.

'We're friends, remember? We even share the same bed.'

Ugly started to foam at the mouth.

'Have it your way,' said Brett, backing away.

'Maybe he knows something we don't,' said Karla. 'Brett, I'm scared. What if Ugly knows what's in the trunk?'

'How can he?'

'Animals can sense these things. What if he's trying to warn us?'

The sky had clouded over and the wind was getting stronger. They both shivered.

'Why don't we just close up the trunk and go home?' said Karla. 'Forget the whole thing?'

Brett stared at her. 'After all the trouble we've gone to?'

'We don't know what we've opened up. Some things are better left buried.'

'You're letting Ugly freak you out.'

'Everything's freaking me out. Ugly. You. The screaming in your head. Maybe we should tell someone. Let them handle it. Whatever's in that trunk's not ours anyway.'

'That's debatable.'

'You can't just take everything you want in life.'

'Karla, either you're in or you're out. Make up your mind.'

Karla turned away. 'I want out.'

He watched her walk away and started to follow, to make her change his mind. But the screaming pulled him back.

Ugly kept growling, and the wind ripped through the branches of the pine tree above his head, making a strange sound.

He turned back to the trunk, but jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Karla.

'I thought you were going.'

'The tree.' She pointed upwards, to where the branches waved in the wind. 'Hear that? That's why they call it The Screaming Tree.'

'That's not the screaming I hear.'

There was an awkward silence. 'I really came back to collect my father's equipment.'

'Karla, it's too heavy for you to carry.'

'I can't just leave it.'

'When we've finished here, *I'll* carry it back to town. But before you go, you *could* help me with the trunk.'

'Brett, I...'

'Last chance.'

'I still think we're making a mistake.'

'In or out?'

Ugly howled.

'Brett, maybe that old dog...?'

She stopped as he stared at her.

'All right,' said Karla. 'I'm in.'

Taking a handle each, they managed to tip the metal trunk on its side.

The canvas sack was still wedged tight and Brett dropped to his knees, grabbed the edges, and tried to slide it out. He only succeeded in dragging the trunk towards him.

'Sit on this,' he said to Karla, tapping the upturned side of the trunk.

Brett took another grip on the canvas and pulled. Slowly, but surely, the sack slipped out onto the ground.

Karla glanced up into the tree and shuddered. 'I've never seen it screaming like this. It's going crazy.'

'We need something sharp,' said Brett.

He grabbed the big padlock. It had melted into an unrecognisable mass of metal with several dagger-like points sticking out. Brett placed the most lethal looking point against a corner of the canvas.

Without warning, Ugly flew at him.

The force of the blow sent Brett sprawling and the make-shift knife flew from his hand.

The dog's teeth clamped around his arm and, for a second, he thought Ugly was going to tear it off, but the pressure was restraining, not ripping.

'Get off me, you crazy animal!' he yelled and Ugly released his grip a fraction.

It was enough and Brett placed his hand on Ugly's head, pushing him back while Karla grabbed his collar and dragged him off.

Ugly stood, straining against Karla's grip, a guard dog ready to attack again.

'Brett, open that thing before this mad mutt yanks my arms out of their sockets.'

He grabbed the melted padlock and slashed the canvas from corner to corner. The screaming in his head stopped as what was inside the sack unfolded to its full length.

A man's body!

Karla yelled, and Ugly tore free, launching himself at the corpse.

Brett was in the way and he instinctively threw open his arms to stop the charging animal. But he was still on his knees as the old dog tried to jump over him. And failed.

The collision forced Brett backwards, twisting his ankle, and Ugly managed to sink his teeth into the dead man's thigh.

Brett grabbed the dog's hind legs and, as the dog let go of the corpse to meet the attack on his flanks, dragged him away.

'Karla. The chain.'

Brett dragged the struggling dog over to a nearby tree. He shoved the chain through Ugly's collar, curling the rest of it around the trunk until there was no way the dog could escape.

As he turned around, he saw Karla, head down, vomiting into the bushes.

'Are you okay?'

'No, I'm not. I knew we should have stopped. We should have left the trunk where it was. Just look at that... thing!'

The face that stared up at them was set in a grotesque death-mask, the man's eyes bulging from their sockets, staring straight ahead.

He had a long straggly beard and a shaved head. Death had sucked in his cheeks, and the shrunken muscles around his mouth had forced his lips into a permanent sneer, exposing shrivelled gums and broken yellow teeth.

Brett's stomach churned. He'd never seen a dead body before. Only in the movies. This was *real*.

'Look at that.' He pointed to the gash Ugly's teeth had opened up in the man's thigh. There was no blood, only a reddish-black powder.

Karla shivered. "He's all shrivelled up. Why hasn't the whole body turned to dust?'

'The trunk was air-tight, said Brett. 'Might have helped.'

He examined the trunk up close. It was heavier than it looked, even when empty. He again noted the blackened surface. Yeah. It had definitely been through a fire at some stage.

Inside, the workmanship was rough around the edges of the bottom panel. He had no idea why. But the initials Karla had found the day before definitely looked like "MB".

Brett now took a closer look at the body they'd found.

The clothing was a bit like Granddad's father, Darcy McCabe, might have worn. Except the corpse's jacket, shirt and trousers were made of a coarse, roughly woven cloth. And on his feet were scarred and well worn boots. Probably some kind of manual labourer.

He started to search the man's pockets and Karla objected.

'I have to,' he explained. 'It might help us identify him.'

'Rather you than me. I don't want to touch him.'

'Whoever he is, we can't tell anyone,' said Brett. 'Not yet.'

'Why not? This is not a dead possum we're talking about. It's a dead body.'

'But not a *new* dead body.'

'New *or* old,' said Karla, 'it doesn't make any difference.'

'Found something,' he said, sliding a folded piece of paper out of the man's inside jacket pocket.

An old newspaper article, dated the year before his grandfather was born.

'Something about a local businessman,' he said. 'Someone called Quigley. And his coin collection. We need to talk to Agnes.'

'You know her?'

'I met her when I arrived. She invited me over to the museum to see her old newspapers.'

Karla looked at her watch. 'The museum closes at midday. We'll have to do it tomorrow. What about...?' She screwed up her nose as she pointed to the corpse.

'It's been here so long now, a few more days won't hurt. We'll stuff it back in the trunk and hide it behind the tree again.'

'Then what?'

'Tomorrow morning we talk to Agnes and do some research. See if we can find out who he is, and what he was doing at the bottom of the lake.'

'I still think we should tell someone,' said Karla.

'Not yet. Let's be sure of what we've found. There could be more to this.'

'More trouble, you mean.'

'Give me a hand to put him back in the trunk.'

Taking care with his twisted ankle, Brett righted the trunk then lay out the canvas like a

stretcher and rolled the body on to it.

'Grab one end,' he said to Karla.

'I'm not going to touch that... thing.'

'Karla, I've injured my ankle. I can't do this by myself, not balanced on one leg.'

'Okay. But I'm not touching him.'

They took one end of the canvas each, Brett with the head and Karla with the feet, as they positioned the body over the trunk.

'Careful,' said Brett. 'Ugly's done enough damage.'

They tried to lower it in, but the unfolded corpse was too long and its head and limbs spilled over the sides.

'We could always chop him in half,' said Brett.

'One more sick joke like that, Brett Nichol, and I'll leave you to it.'

'Let's try again,' said Brett.

But Karla's hands were sweaty and she dropped her end of the canvas. Which sent the corpse sliding towards her.

She screamed and tried to jump back. But tripped, and she and the body ended up sprawled on the ground.

With one dead arm draped across her leg.

Karla lay there, trembling, too paralysed to move. 'Brett, get this thing *off* me!'

It took him another 10 minutes to persuade her to try again, and this time they got the corpse folded back into the trunk.

But the hinges had buckled from being forced back, and the crowbar had damaged the lip of the trunk so the lid wouldn't shut properly. Which meant they had no way of locking it.

'Doesn't matter,' said Brett, lowering the lid as much as it would go. 'He's not going anywhere. And he might enjoy a bit of fresh air after all those years at the bottom of the lake.'

Karla unchained Ugly, but kept a good grip on the dog's collar as Brett threw what was left of the chains and padlocks into the bush.

'What about Dad's gas bottles?'

'I can't carry them with this twisted ankle,' he said.

'Well, they're too heavy for me and I can't let go of this mutt.'

'What say we just leave everything here and come back for it tomorrow? Your father probably won't even know it's missing.'

'You hope.'

Brett laid the gas bottles, cutting torch, mask and the other equipment under the tree, in a hollow between two of its large roots. Then he added the orange crowbar and covered

everything with leaves and pine needles.

As they got ready to retrace their steps around the crater's green rim, the wind dropped.

'The tree's stopped screaming,' said Karla, lifting her head.

So had the screaming in his head. But for how long?

And whose body had they found?

As he limped away, Brett tried to imagine the man's face without the beard. It somehow looked familiar. Like he'd seen it before.

*Before* he came to Timberside.

## Chapter Seven

The one night Brett wanted to use the phone, Granddad chose to stay up late, sitting in his rocker, staring into the fireplace.

Brett considered walking down to Timberside to find a phone box. But he couldn't wait all night. He needed to talk to his mother about Grandma's death.

As he got up to get his windbreaker, the phone rang.

Granddad answered.

'I'm fine,' Brett heard the old man say, his voice tense. 'I said I was fine. You're like your son. Everything has to be spelled out for you.'

Granddad shoved the receiver at Brett. 'It's for you. I'm going for a walk.'

The old man whistled to Ugly and they disappeared into the cold night air.

'Mum?'

'What's got into him?' said Sarah. 'He's not usually that rude.'

'He's had a bad day. I didn't help.'

'Are you in trouble?'

Brett thought about it. Finding a corpse in a lake might be considered trouble. So might keeping quiet about it.

'I just asked Granddad the wrong questions.'

'About Mum's death?'

'How do you know that?'

'I asked the same questions when I was growing up, but he wouldn't tell me.'

'Well, he told *me*.'

There was a moment of silence on the end of the line. 'He *told* you?'

'Kind of.'

'Brett, stop beating around the bush.'

'He said *you* killed her.' Silence. 'Mum, are you there?'

'I'm speechless.'

'Is it true?'

'Brett, I was only a baby. This isn't some sick joke, is it?'

'It's no joke.'

'Tell me what Granddad said. Exactly.'

Brett recounted the conversation. 'And then he said you killed Grandma as surely as if you'd put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger.'

'What's got into that silly old...? Had he been drinking?'

Not since Brett took his only can of beer. 'No.'

'Believe me, Brett, this is the first I've ever heard this story.'

'Then how *did* Grandma die?'

'I honestly don't know. It's one of those bizarre things no one would talk about.'

'Well, it's not the only secret around here. Granddad hinted at something else. Even *bigger*. Something else about the family which he swore he'd take to his grave.'

'I've had enough of this nonsense.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I'm going to start with Mum's death and finally try get some answers.'

'Granddad won't tell you.'

'No, but I know someone else who might.'

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'You were right, Sarah,' said Peter Ferguson later than night, down the phone from Timberside. 'Your mother died long before I took over this practice, but it's all here. I knew I'd kept these old medical records for some reason.'

'I'm sorry I had to drag you out of bed, but it's important.'

'No problem. Happy to help an old school friend. Anyway, I couldn't get to sleep with the pain.'

'When are you going to get that knee fixed?'

'I was booked in for surgery day after tomorrow. But then an hour ago, I got a call to say that the locum who was coming to fill in for me, can't make it. And to top it off, when I went to the workshop a few minutes ago to dig out these medical records, I discovered someone's stolen my gas welding bottles and cutting torch.'

'Sorry,' said Sarah. 'Have you seen Brett since he arrived?'

The doctor paused before he answered. 'No... but he's spending a lot of time with Karla.'

'By the tone of your voice, that's a problem.'

'I know he's your son, but I think he's too wild for Karla.'

'What's he done?'

'Nothing. Yet.'

'Give him the benefit of the doubt, Peter. All teenagers are a bit wild.'

'Not Karla.'

She could hear the rustle of papers on the other end of the line.

'What do the medical notes say?'

'Are you sitting down, Sarah?'

'Is it that bad?'

'No easy way to say this. Your mother committed suicide.'

Sarah held the phone a bit tighter. 'I always suspected as much. What happened?'

'After you were born,' said Peter, 'your mother was very down.'

'Postnatal depression.'

'Yes. The doctor here at the time did what he could, but back then his options were limited.'

'It was only 40 years ago, Peter. You make it sound like centuries.'

'It seems your poor dad had to juggle the demands of a new baby daughter *and* a depressed wife, as well as run the store. Your grandparents were dead by then so he was on his own. As you might imagine, he was exhausted. As a last resort, the doctor prescribed sleeping pills for your mother, probably to ease the pressure on your dad.'

'I can see where this is going,' said Sarah.

'Right,' said Peter. 'One night, your mother swallowed the whole bottle, and your dad woke up to find you crying and his wife dead.'

Sarah took several deep breaths before she asked, 'Anything else in that file?'

'That's it in a nutshell.'

'Why on earth did Dad tell Brett that I killed her?'

'I'd say your dad's fighting a few painful battles. Old age, for a start. He's slowing down. And you know he's only working part-time at the store these days. My guess is that keeping busy was Henry's way of burying his pain after your mother died. To avoid some of the normal grieving process.'

'You think he might still be grieving, after all this time?'

'Possibly,' said Peter. 'It could explain why he lashed out at Brett and made those accusations. Sarah, it could be a cry for help.'

'It could be a lot of things. Listen, Peter, don't cancel that knee operation. I'll look after your medical practice while you're in hospital. I'm owed a few days' leave. And if I can hit the road early enough tomorrow, I can be there in time for dinner.'

'That's wonderful,' he said. 'I might be gone by the time you get here, but Karla can show you the ropes. You'll stay here? In my house?'

'I will. Thanks.'

'No, thank you. You're a lifesaver.'

'Lifesaver sounds so much nicer than "killer".'

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'I thought the museum was supposed to open at nine,' Brett said to Agnes the next morning. 'We've been waiting outside for over half an hour.'

Agnes Quinn smiled, patiently. 'I can't be everywhere at once. And this is voluntary work. I'm not getting paid for it. It's a labour of love.'

Brett and Karla followed her into the Community Centre and through to the back rooms

which were home to the small museum.

The main area was lined with pictures from days long past. Men with collarless shirts and braces posed beside the long handsaws they used to cut down the giant logs and the teams of horses that hauled them out.

And more formal pictures. Family portraits. Stern looking men with moustaches or full beards, women in tight-waisted dresses, children in frilly suits and frocks.

One picture in particular caught Brett's eye. He stopped and stared at it, then rubbed the dust off the frame so he could read the names and the description.

'Hey, look,' he told Karla. 'Family.'

Brett's great-grandparents, Darcy and Elizabeth McCabe, outside the general store, ready to drive off on their honeymoon.

'You don't look like either of them,' said Karla.

Brett wiped more dust off the glass and noted the date. January the first. A New Year's day wedding. The same year Granddad was born.

He and the old man both had birthdays in August, so Granddad must have been born seven months after his parents got married.

Brett also noticed that one photo seemed to be missing. He could see where it had hung, now a dark patch in a dingy corner, standing out against the faded wall.

Agnes hadn't noticed, or maybe didn't think it worth mentioning, so Brett kept his mouth shut. The morning was running away fast enough as it was.

Brett found most of the stuff in the museum boring. Old saw blades. Gold mining equipment. Saddles. Cooking utensils. Ancient linen and dresses. Baby furniture. Children's toys.

Karla was more polite than Brett and asked the occasional question which sent Agnes into long explanations which he tuned out.

Finally, Agnes allowed them access to the newspaper room. But as she hit the light switch to illuminate the gloomy interior, she gasped.

'We've... we've been vandalised.'

The room was a mess, with bound volumes of old newspapers strewn from one end of the room to the other.

'Who would do a thing like this?' said Karla.

Brett thought Agnes was about to faint. Instead, she slumped into a chair.

'What will my museum committee say? They might ask me to resign.'

'Who's been in here lately?' asked Brett.

'This room hasn't had a visitor for weeks. We keep a record of all comings and goings. As chairwoman of the committee, I insist.'

Brett grabbed her arm and helped her to her feet. 'Check and see what's missing.'

The old newspapers were bound together in heavy volumes with stiff, numbered covers.

Brett and Karla helped lay them out on a table while Agnes checked. And re-checked.

'No, nothing missing,' she told them. 'They all seem to be here.'

Brett looked around the room. The Community Centre was old and an easy target. The intruder had probably got in through the back window. Although it had been pushed shut, he could see the broken latch.

'Someone's gone to a lot of trouble just to read some old newspapers,' he said.

Agnes had recovered her composure. 'I won't resign. But I will have to tell the police.'

Then she remembered. 'I can't. Constable Haddon's in hospital. Poor man. Hasn't been able to sit down for months. Haemorrhoids can be such a pain.'

'Spare us the gory details,' said Brett.

Timberside had one aging policeman to serve the town and the neighbouring community.

In his absence, Agnes told them, they'd have to wait for an out-of-town patrol car to swing by. Which could take days.

'It's a long way to bring the police for something minor like this,' said Brett. 'Especially when nothing's missing.'

Agnes nodded her head in agreement. That pleased Brett. The less he had to do with the police, the better. As an out-of-towner with a reputation for trouble, he was sure he'd be a prime suspect.

'I'll leave you to start searching for whatever you're looking for,' said Agnes, pointing at the table full of old newspapers. 'I have to phone around and arrange an emergency committee meeting.'

As Agnes left the room, Karla surveyed the piles of bound volumes. 'Where do we begin?'

'Let's wait for our resident expert to get back when she's finished organising her committee.'

Thirty minutes later, when Agnes finally returned and examined the article, she asked where they'd found it.

Brett avoided the question. 'Who's Quigley?'

'Used to own the mill,' she said. 'Very wealthy. And this story about his valuable gold coin collection was not a wise move.'

'Why not?' asked Karla.

'Soon after it was published, he was robbed and killed in his own home.'

Brett remembered the rough working man's clothes on the corpse. No way the dead

man was Quigley.

'Who killed him?' Karla asked.

Agnes's eyes lit up. 'The Guy Fawkes Killer.'

'The what?' said Brett and Karla in unison.

Agnes knew the story by heart and warmed to the task as she told them about Jonathan Rigg, a local timber worker. A strong and brutal man. A violent drunk and petty criminal. People who knew him said he was full of hate. Pure evil.

Two weeks after the newspaper story, Rigg and his regular partner in crime, Mathew Braun, the local blacksmith, broke into Quigley's house. It was Guy Fawkes night, the 5th of November, and most people in town were at a local fireworks display.

The robbers forced Quigley to open his safe. And because the mill owner could identify the thieves, Rigg, who had a gun, shot him.

'Didn't anyone hear the shot?' asked Brett.

'Not with all the noise from the fireworks,' said Agnes, 'No one heard a thing. Not even the screams of Quigley's young housekeeper when Rigg raped her.'

He'd probably have shot her, too, but they were interrupted by the woman's fiancé who'd come to collect her after work.

Rigg and Braun fled into the night, taking the gold coins which were never recovered.

The housekeeper was traumatised, but her fiancé identified both local men.

Braun retreated to his blacksmith's shop, which was soon surrounded by armed police.

He had a rifle at the shop and, in the fierce gun battle that followed, a bullet shattered a paraffin lamp. The shop was engulfed in flames. Braun was trapped inside and died in the fire.

'Are they *sure* Braun died?' asked Karla..

Agnes nodded. 'There was enough of his body left to be identified.'

Brett made a mental note. Another one to cross off the list. It definitely wasn't Mathew Braun, either, in the trunk. Could it be Jonathan Rigg?

Agnes explained how Rigg was eventually tracked down by a party of police and townspeople and captured. He was locked up, but swore that one day he'd take his revenge.

The story took a dramatic twist when, within hours of being locked up, Rigg escaped with the help of someone who was never caught. Not Braun, who by this time was dead.

The manhunt only ended after an anonymous tip led police up to Pine Lake.

Agnes looked at Brett. 'Do you know Pine Lake? Not being a local.'

'I know it.'

'Then you'll have seen that big pine tree. The Screaming Tree?'

Brett nodded, not trusting his voice.

'The thought of prison must have been too much for Rigg,' said Agnes.

'What happened?'

'He used his leather belt to hang himself from the tree.'

Brett sat down with a thump. Jonathan Rigg. Hanged from The Screaming Tree. Within a stone's throw of where they'd found the corpse.

'The same tree I used to swing off as a kid,' said Karla. 'I've never heard this story.'

'What did Rigg look like?' asked Brett.

'There's a picture of him on the museum wall. When he was still a young man. Let me get it.'

In a moment, Agnes was back. 'More things to raise at our committee meeting. Rigg's picture is missing.'

'What happened to the housekeeper?' asked Karla.

'No idea. Quigley's killer was already dead so there was no trial. And the police never named her. Just as well. The poor woman had suffered enough.'

'Can you describe Rigg?' Brett ask.

'Handsome enough when he was young,' She stared at Brett. 'Your sort of good looks.'

Brett wouldn't be swayed by the compliment. 'What about later? At the time of the murder?'

'Average height, but stronger than he looked. Wore a beard. And he always shaved his head.'

Brett struggled to keep his voice calm. 'And what happened to Riggs' body?'

Agnes picked out one of the newspaper volumes and slapped it down on the table.

'That was weird. Police took the body to the local undertakers, but overnight it vanished. There was speculation it was stolen by angry locals. Buried somewhere in the wilderness where Rigg would never be found.'

Brett and Karla exchanged glances, but Agnes missed it.

'There's a photo of him in there somewhere,' said Agnes, pointing to the newspaper bundles, 'taken when he was arrested, but you'll have to come back tomorrow.'

Karla protested. 'The museum doesn't close till midday.'

'It's closing early today because of the emergency committee meeting.'

'But you can't...'

'Yes, I can,' said Agnes. 'I'm the chairwoman.'

'Can we come back later?' asked Brett. 'After lunch.'

'The museum will still be closed. And I'm working in the store this afternoon.'

'Can't we stay here while you're at your meeting?' asked Karla.

'Out of the question.'

Brett tried one last option. 'Could we borrow some of the newspapers, even for a few hours.'

Agnes shook her head. 'Sorry, this is not a lending library. I'd like to help, but the committee wouldn't understand. Not after what's happened.'

A few minutes later, Brett and Karla stood across the street from the Community Centre and watched as Agnes locked up.

'So we've found the long-lost Jonathan Rigg,' said Karla.

'The newspaper photo should prove it beyond any shadow of a doubt.'

'But we'll have to wait till tomorrow to see it,' said Karla.

'Unless we let ourselves in.'

'How? Break down the door?'

'Through the reading room window around the back,' said Brett. 'The one with the broken latch.'

He led the way down the narrow, overgrown path that ran around behind the Community Centre.

Brett pointed to dents in the edge of the window frame. 'Looks like they used something to force it open.'

'Maybe this,' said Karla, spotting a flash of orange lying nearby.

Her hand was shaking as she picked it up and handed it to Brett.

Doc Ferguson's orange crowbar. The one with his name scratched into the paint and which Brett had used to force open the metal trunk.

The crowbar they'd left behind at Pine Lake, along with the gas bottles and cutting torch, hidden under a pile of leaves. In the shadow of The Screaming Tree.

Where they'd also left the corpse of Jonathan Rigg.

## Chapter Eight

The cabin was as cold as the night air and Brett and Granddad ate in silence.

It had been simple for Brett and Karla to climb through the museum window and find the older picture of Rigg in the newspaper, taken when he'd been arrested.

Which confirmed the identity of the corpse. Dead now for 80 years and shrunken in death. But definitely Rigg.

Brett had stared at that picture for a long time. There was something familiar about the long dead killer, but he still couldn't figure out what.

After they left the museum, he and Karla had raced back up to Pine Lake. He could no longer feel his twisted ankle. Tight strapping and painkillers had taken care of it.

Nothing else was missing when they got to Pine Lake and Rigg was where they'd left him, folded up in the trunk.

They *had* hoped to return the cutting equipment that afternoon, once Karla's dad had left town for his operation. But the doctor was late in getting away, so they'd been forced to postpone their plan till the next day.

In the end, they'd put the orange crowbar back with the rest of the welding equipment and again covered everything with leaves.

'Granddad,' said Brett that night, toying with his bowl of melted ice cream, 'have you ever heard of Jonathan Rigg?'

Granddad stopped eating. 'Where did you hear that name?'

'I saw it in some old newspapers down at the museum today. Rigg was...'

'I know who he was.'

'Do you know what happened to him?'

Granddad took his time before answering. 'Do you?'

'Sure,' said Brett. 'He hanged himself. Up at Pine Lake.'

'Hanged himself,' Granddad repeated.

'I meant after that,' said Brett. 'What do you think happened to his body?'

'I hope it's rotting in hell.'

Brett blinked. Why was Granddad getting so hostile about something that happened so long ago?

'He died just before you were born, didn't he? Did your parents know him? Did they ever talk about him?'

Granddad slapped his hand on the table and jumped up from his chair. 'I've told you before, boy. Stop digging up the past.'

Too late Brett almost said. We've already dug it up. Dug *Rigg* up.

'This obsession with what happened years ago,' said Granddad. 'It never does any

good.'

The old man turned away and stormed out into the night with Ugly close behind.

As Granddad's footsteps receded on the gravel drive, the phone rang. Brett answered and heard his mother's voice on the other end of the line.

'I'm just ringing to let you know I'm running really late.'

'Just don't get a puncture.'

It was a family joke. His mother was smart, but not physically strong enough to change a car tyre, despite the hours she spent at the gym keeping fit.

She used to just laugh and say no one could be good at everything.

'I better get going,' she told him now on the phone. 'I've got a long drive in front of me. See you at Karla's.'

'Be careful,' said Brett.

'I will. Don't worry, I'll be there.'

A few minutes later, as Brett walked down the hill towards town, he pulled up the collar of his windbreaker against the chill night air.

Karla's father had finally left town for his knee operation and she'd accepted his offer of company until Sarah arrived.

There were only a few lights on in the town below him. Most people were already tucked up in bed. Brett wondered how many of them had to share a mattress with an old hunting dog.

As he walked, he tried to make sense of finding the crowbar at the back of the museum. Had whoever took it from up at the lake also looked in the unlocked trunk? Found the corpse? If that was true, how long would it take till the whole town knew?

And people would soon tie Brett in with it. They'd want to know why he hadn't reported finding the body straight away. The best he could hope for was to keep Karla out of it.

But then her father would want to know how his gas bottles and cutting torch got up to the lake. What a disaster.

The only happy person would be Agnes Quinn. A great event for a local historian, finding the body of the notorious Jonathan Rigg. Killer and rapist.

And Brett's father thought people only got into trouble in *cities*. A few days in Timberside and he'd soon change his mind. The town should be renamed *Trouble*-side, with a capital T.

As Brett reached town, he walked past the main gates of the timber mill. The whole place was in darkness. So was the service station next door.

The only light came from the old house out the back where Larry lived.

Very convenient. Larry only had a few metres to walk to his regular day job, then through the fence to his night-time job, which Karla had told him about.

Night watchman at the timber mill.

Larry probably kept a few wake-me-up pills in his collection. He'd need them with two jobs.

Through the lighted windows of the old house, he could see the bodybuilder inside, doing deep knee bends with a heavy loaded bar across his shoulders.

Brett stood for a moment and watched Larry's head bob up and down in the window, like a jack-in-the-box.

As he turned away, he glimpsed a shadow, inside the mill fence, flitting past the office window.

A burglar? Maybe he should tell Larry.

Then Brett had a better idea. If he caught the burglar in the act, he could go from zero to hero in one move. Even Karla's dad would be impressed.

Brett examined the heavy chain-mesh gate. Locked, but the links in the mesh were big enough for fingers and toes.

Before he could change his mind he was up, using his upper body strength, his hands and feet digging into the wire, then over and down the other side.

He peered into the darkness and spotted his quarry. Probably male from the way he ran.

The intruder moved down the alleyway between the office and the main mill towards the timber storage area at the back of the yard.

Brett stalked him, keeping to the shadows.

The man slipped in between the stacks of timber and disappeared. Brett started to follow, but stopped. What if the intruder was armed? Brett might be biting off more than he could chew.

He shook his head to clear that thought and headed into the gap between the towering piles of timber.

The moon had come out from behind the clouds, but the timber offered too many hiding places for Brett to be sure of where his target was, or if the intruder had spotted him.

Keeping his back to the timber stack, he edged along it. This way, no one could jump him from behind. But what about from above?

He risked a brief look up. All he could see was more timber and sky.

Brett heard a noise and froze. A rat, maybe. Or a possum. The forests were full of them.

He heard the noise again. The intruder, heading back towards the main building, where logs were sawn before being trucked out.

Brett retraced his steps and saw him again. Framed in the moonlight, standing near the door of the mill, face hidden.

Brett glanced over at Larry's house, where the bodybuilder was now visible doing arm curls, and briefly wondered if he should yell to Larry for help.

By the time he looked back, the intruder had disappeared again.

Brett was sweating. He turned his collar down, and wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his windbreaker.

Where had the intruder gone this time? Then he saw the flash of light. Brief, fleeting. Inside the mill building.

The intruder must have struck a match to get his bearings. He could hardly turn on the light.

And if he'd risked striking a match, he must be pretty sure he hadn't been seen. That meant he didn't know he'd been spotted. And was being followed.

Brett still had to get to the main building without being seen in the moonlight. He'd have to risk it. He silently counted to three and sprinted across the open ground.

He pressed his body against the aluminium wall, his breath coming in gasps. Not a sound from inside.

He found a door handle, touched it, and the door swung open with a creak. Not much of a noise, but it still made him jump.

Brett tensed, waiting for the intruder to confront him, but no one appeared.

He decided the intruder wouldn't be watching the door. If he'd seen Brett, he'd have taken off long ago.

Reassured, Brett edged the door open enough to slip through.

He crouched down against the inside wall and let his eyes adjust to the gloom. The mill was a vast aluminium shell, full of machinery and tall, purpose-built timber racks, separated by wide aisles to allow the forklift trucks easy access.

Why would a burglar come in here? The money would be in the office.

Unless the intruder was planning to steal one of the forklifts. But how could he get it out without alerting Larry?

Brett had to move. There were probably other doors in the building and his quarry could slip out without Brett knowing.

Staying crouched over, he began a careful examination of the nearest aisle which ran the length of the building. There were few windows, with only a trickle of moonlight beaming in, barely enough to see where he was going.

He reached the end of the first aisle and started up the second. Nothing. He entered the third aisle and stopped beside a large circular saw bench.

The saw blade was enormous, and the weak moonlight glinted off its vicious metal teeth.

But still no sign of the intruder.

It was hotter inside the building than out and Brett unzipped his windbreaker. He'd be better off without it. Be able to fight better. Standing up, he slipped it off his shoulders.

The jacket was still sliding down his arms when the intruder hit him across the shoulders with a length of timber.

Brett's hands were trapped behind his back in the jacket sleeves and he couldn't protect himself. He pitched forward, trying to shed the jacket as he fell, the concrete floor jarring his knees.

As he rolled over on the hard floor, he managed to get his arms free and the jacket slipped off. But now the intruder was taking aim again.

Brett couldn't see the man's face or head, which were hidden behind some kind of headgear. And the hands were hidden by gloves.

But he saw the blow, coming straight for his head, and managed to rise enough to take the force on his chest. Which saved his head, but sent him reeling back, against the edge of the circular saw table.

Another swing with the timber, but this time Brett sidestepped. The force of the blow unbalanced the intruder and Brett leapt on him.

They crashed onto the table, rolling around in a layer of wood chips and sawdust. A ghostly dance in the moonlight.

The intruder suddenly went floppy. Like a rag doll.

Not expecting the move, Brett loosened his grip. Which was all the intruder needed.

Grabbing a handful of sawdust off the table, he hurled it into Brett's eyes.

Brett was blinded and the intruder now had the advantage, flipping Brett over and forcing his face into the sawdust-covered table.

Brett couldn't breathe. His mouth were full of dust and wood shavings and his lungs felt ready to explode.

Blinded and in agony, Brett roared and tried to twist onto his back as he lashed out. He missed the intruder, but his hand hit something and a blood-chilling scream erupted close to his head.

He'd accidentally started the circular saw and he could feel the breeze of the spinning blade.

Every hack-and-splatter video he'd ever seen flashed through his mind in vivid colour. Was he was about to die, chopped into little bits by a circular saw?

It made him fight even harder, but he still couldn't breathe properly. Made a hundred times worse by the man's hands around his throat, slowly choking the life out him.

But he didn't want to die, not here, not like this. Dredging up his last reserves of

strength, he managed to force his body up off the table.

It was enough to unbalance his attacker and Brett lashed out with his feet, intending to propel the man off the table and onto the floor.

But instead sent the attacker flying spine-first into the spinning blade of the circular saw! A bank of bright light suddenly hit Brett's dust-filled eyes, forcing them shut.

'Who's there?' yelled Larry from the other side of the mill.

Brett pried open his eyes. The intruder had vanished. But the man had backed into the saw which was still spinning. Where was the blood?

'I'm armed,' shouted Larry, throwing on even more lights as he approached, slowly, not taking any risks.

Brett had to get out of there and, with his eyes still half closed and tears pouring down his cheeks, he sprinted for safety.

Larry was still yelling, loud enough for Brett to know where he was and avoid him, the noise of his running feet masked by the scream of the circular saw.

The yard was empty as he burst out the door, the air exploding from his lungs. Any thoughts of being a local hero long gone. There was too much to explain. Too much he *couldn't* explain.

He headed straight for the fence, up and over, and was gone before Larry was out of the mill.

As he sprinted for Karla's, he suddenly remembered two things.

His attacker hadn't uttered a sound as the circular saw blade chewed up his spine.

And Brett had left his jacket behind.

'Let me in,' he said urgently, trying not to yell, thumping with his fist on the Ferguson's back door.

Karla recognised his voice, but as she opened the door, her face fell. 'What happened to you?'

Brett slumped into a kitchen chair. 'You should see the other guy.'

He told her, quickly. 'I swear to you, Karla, that blade went right into his back.'

'And he didn't even cry out?'

'No.'

'That's crazy. There must have been blood.'

'No. No blood.'

'What are those marks on your shirt?'

Brett slipped off the shirt and studied them. 'I don't know.'

'And you never saw his face.'

'He was wearing some kind of head covering. Mask. Balaclava. Something like that.'

And gloves.'

'What else was he wearing?'

'Come on, Karla. I was fighting for my life. I wasn't looking at his clothes.'

They both heard footsteps coming up the path.

'That might be your Mum,' said Karla.

'Too early,' said Brett, grabbing his shirt and disappearing into the lounge.

'Is city boy here?' demanded Larry as Karla opened the door. He took a step forward, but Karla blocked his way.

'Why?'

'I'd rather tell *him*.'

'Have you got a licence for that?'

Larry stopped waving his gun. 'There are some desperate people in this town.'

'Besides you?'

'Very funny,' said Larry, pushing past Karla.

'No,' she cried.

'You heard her,' said Brett, coming into the room. 'Get out of here.'

He'd left his shirt in the lounge. The stains invited too many questions. Questions to which he didn't have answers.

'Did I interrupt something?' asked Larry with a sneer, eyeing Brett's bare chest.

'None of your business.'

Larry grinned. 'If I had a body like that, I'd keep it hidden.'

'What do you want?' asked Brett.

'There's been a break-in at the mill.'

'So?'

'There's a thief running loose.'

'We'll let you know if we see anyone suspicious, Larry.'

'By the way,' said Larry producing Brett's windbreaker from behind his back. 'This yours?'

Brett hesitated. 'No.'

'Can you prove it?'

'How do I do that?'

'It's cold outside. Where's *your* jacket?'

Brett was stumped.

'Here it is,' said Karla, stepping into the hall and retrieving a different jacket.

'My... Dad gave it to me,' Brett explained, pointing to the university badge.

Larry grunted, turned to leave, but then stopped in the doorway and looked back.

'I've reported this to the cops. They said they'll have a patrol car here tomorrow afternoon. We'll get him. Whoever he is.'

'Good luck,' said Karla, slamming the door.

As Larry's footsteps died away, Brett collapsed in a chair.

'You heard him, Karla. I've got less than 24 hours to come up with some answers. It'll take no time at all for the cops to trace my jacket, but thanks for trying.'

She glared at him. 'You mean thanks for *lying*. It's frightening. It gets easier every time I do it. Go put your shirt on.'

Brett came back with his chest still bare, his shirt in his hands.

'What is it?' asked Karla. 'You look as though you've seen a ghost.'

He held out the shirt. 'Look at these marks on the shirt. Does the colour remind you of anything?'

'Should it?'

'Up at the lake. When Ugly went berserk.'

Karla started to shake her head, but then it clicked.

'That's right,' said Brett.

'Impossible,' said Karla.

He agreed. But he knew the reddish-black marks reminded both of them of something they'd seen the previous day.

When Ugly took a bite out of Jonathan Rigg!

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Sarah Nichol glanced at the petrol gauge as she sped towards Timberside. Still plenty in the tank. Good. This was no place to run out of fuel. Not this late at night. The road was pitch black and she hadn't passed another vehicle in the last hour.

She adjusted the vents on the dashboard. The air-conditioning was on the blink - another expense that would have to wait - and she needed all the help she could get to stay awake.

She should probably have stopped off somewhere overnight. Too late now.

Sarah took a deep breath as the smell of pine trees flooded the car. Timberside. Endless green hills of bush and pines.

She smiled as she remembered the biggest of them all, The Screaming Tree. She'd swum in the lake beneath its branches and listened to the wind howl through its leaves.

She just wished the memories of her father were as happy.

He'd always been difficult to get along with, but she wasn't about to give up on him. Her mother's death still haunted him. No doubt about that. But was there something else? Brett had hinted at an even bigger family secret. Something Granddad wouldn't talk about.

Another mystery for her to unravel when she got to town.

Timberside was getting closer. The lake and the tree were only a few kilometres over the hills to her right.

But nothing around here ran in a straight line. Especially the roads, and this was the most dangerous stretch, full of tight twists and bends. Not a house or soul between here and town.

A possum dashed into the road in front of the car and stopped, frozen in the glare of the headlights. Sarah hit the brakes and the car slithered to a halt, almost touching the little animal. It was enough to break the hypnotic trance and the possum skittered off into the dense bush.

Sarah laughed with relief. She wouldn't kill a snail if she could avoid it.

The scare with the possum made her even more cautious and she resisted the temptation to plant her foot on the accelerator. This was no place for speed.

She'd just rounded the next bend when a figure lurched out onto the road, right in front of her.

Sarah slammed on the brakes and closed her eyes.

The brakes squealed and she felt a thump. Softer than she'd expected. More like a hand slapping the bonnet.

Sarah opened her eyes. Nothing. He must be lying in front of the car, hidden from view by the bonnet. Him? Instinctively, she knew it was a man.

She grabbed the door handle, ready to jump out, then stopped. She was a woman alone, in the dark.

Instead, she locked the doors and reversed a few metres.

The headlights told the story. The road was empty.

Sarah suddenly felt very alone. And very frightened.

She'd hit someone. But where was he? And what was he doing out here on this lonely road in the middle of the night?

Then she heard it. A muffled, indistinct cry coming from behind the car, off to one side. It was hard to hear so she killed the ignition.

That didn't help. The cry still sounded muffled and far away. Even if she turned the car around, she might have trouble getting the headlights to shine in the right spot.

The headlights. They were still on. She flicked them off. No place for a flat battery.

She sat there in the dark listening for other sounds, other clues. Only the cries.

Sarah turned around to grab her medical kit and paused. Even if the man was injured, she was still all alone out here.

She fought the urge to drive off. At least she had a heavy torch. That would make a

good weapon to defend herself with.

She could feel the stickiness of the sweat under her jacket. She'd need a long hot bath when she got to Timberside. *If* she got to Timberside.

It wasn't too late. Who'd blame her for running away? Who'd even know?

She'd know. That was enough.

Sarah reached down and flicked the boot release. Pulling the keys from the ignition, she stepped out of the car.

The inside light briefly illuminated her then died as Sarah closed the door, dropping the keys into her jacket pocket.

The cries sounded closer. Near the edge of the road, just inside the trees. Not too far in by the sound of it. That made her feel better, but not a lot.

Facing the noise, Sarah slid along the side of the car until her fingers found the boot. The lid sprang up with a bang.

Sarah jumped. In the stillness, it sounded like a cannon going off. Her heart pounded.

With one eye on the patch of black forest where the noise was coming from, Sarah put her medical kit on the ground and scabbled around in the boot until her fingers found the torch.

She hit the on switch and a reassuring beam of light shot out in front of her. Grabbing her kit, she edged towards the line of trees.

'I'm a doctor,' she called, the words echoing hollowly. 'Are you hurt?'

A muffled cry.

'Hello,' she called again. 'I'm a doctor, do you need help?'

Nothing.

'Hello.'

Silence. Sarah's suit clung to her and she could hear herself breathing. She'd never felt so frightened in her life.

She fought the urge to turn and run. If only Ron or Brett was here.

She took a few deep breaths. They did nothing to steady her nerves. Her arms trembled as she held the torch out in front of her and stepped into the trees.

An arm suddenly wrapped itself around her throat, choking her from behind. Another arm grabbed her around the waist.

Sarah dropped the kit and swung down with the torch, aiming for the man's groin. He was too close and she missed.

The grip around her throat tightened. She was going to pass out.

Desperately, Sarah swung the torch up and over her shoulder. She heard a thud and the pressure came off her throat.

Sarah screamed and wriggled free. She knew she was fighting for her life.

She could see the car in the moonlight and sprinted towards it.

Sarah gasped in relief as her fingers gripped the door handle.

It was torn from her grasp as the man crashed into her, driving the air from her lungs.

Sarah still had the keys in her hand and she clenched them between her fingers, jabbing wildly at his face. Again and again. She could feel the metal spikes slice through some kind of mask, ripping into the flesh beneath.

She lunged again and felt an eyeball explode as the metal shaft found its mark. The force drove him back a few steps and Sarah spun around and grabbed the car door, pulling it open.

Too late, as her attacker threw himself against the partly open door, trapping her hand, crushing it, the vice-like pressure slicing into flesh and bone.

Pain, excruciating pain, rolled over her in waves.

Sarah blacked out.

## Chapter Nine

Brett threw open the door. 'Mum, where have you been? It's past midnight.'

He and Karla had been waiting, and worrying, for hours.

'What happened to you?' he asked.

He tried to take it all in. Sarah was a mess, her face and clothes streaked with dirt. And her skirt was ripped.

She stared at him without answering.

'Mum?' What was wrong with her?

She pushed past him, clutching the strap of her gym bag over her shoulder. In her other hand, she carried her medical kit. He caught a whiff of strong body odour.

'There's a suitcase on the back seat,' she said.

The voice belonged to his mother. But gruffer. Strained, stressed. By the time Brett got the case inside, Karla had introduced herself, but now even she was looking uncomfortable.

'Are you sure I can't make you a cup of something, Mrs Nichol?'

Sarah stared at her. 'I don't want anything, except to go to bed.'

Brett had to know. 'Mum, you've got to tell me what happened.'

'Nothing happened.'

'I can't believe that,' said Brett. 'Look at you.'

Sarah hesitated.

'How did you get into such a mess?'

'I... had a puncture.'

'That explains it,' said Karla.

'Yes,' said Sarah. 'That explains it.'

It didn't explain it to Brett. 'A puncture?'

Sarah's eyes flashed at him. Even her eyes looked different. Glazed.

'That's what I said.'

'Who changed the wheel for you?'

Sarah bristled. 'I changed it myself.'

Brett blinked. Really? She changed it herself?

'Larry at the service station can repair the flat tyre in the morning,' said Karla.

Brett glanced at his mother's hands. She was wearing leather driving gloves. The right one was stained.

'Mum, what have you done to your hand?'

'Nothing.' Sarah clenched her fist and tucked her hand out of sight.

'Nothing? Mum, there's blood on that glove.'

'I hurt my hand. Changing the tyre.'

'Can I get you some water to bathe it?'

'Do I have to answer questions all night or can I go to my room?'

Brett backed off. His mother was in no mood to talk. And she was the doctor. If the hand needed attention, she'd know.

Any discussion on the bizarre things that had been happening in Timberside would have to wait until morning. Until his mother was more like her old self.

'You'd probably like a shower,' said Karla.

'No,' said Sarah.

Karla hesitated. 'I was just going to say there are towels in the...'

'Is everyone in this house deaf? I don't want a drink. I don't want a shower. I want to go to bed.'

Karla glanced at Brett. He felt embarrassed. He'd described his mother to Karla. Not an oversell. Just the way she was.

Karla had said, 'I can't wait to meet her.'

But no one would want to meet the woman who stood in front of them. She was cold, aloof. And smelly. How could she not want a shower? His mother was acting completely out of character.

'I'll take this,' said Brett, reaching for the gym bag.

Sarah beat him to it. 'You bring the medical kit.'

'And I'll bring the suitcase,' said Karla. 'Follow me.'

She threw open the door to the back bedroom and switched on the light. 'This is Dad's room. He insisted you have it.'

'And Brett's going back to the cabin. Right?'

'No,' he said.

Karla did a double take. 'You're not?'

'It's too late to go back to the cabin,' he explained. 'I'd wake Granddad up.'

The real reason was he didn't want to leave Karla alone. Not with his mother acting so weird. Not till he figured out what was going on.

Karla started to protest then changed her mind. 'You can bunk down on the surgery couch.'

'Does this bedroom have a key?' asked Sarah.

'Yes, but Dad never uses it.'

'I want it.'

In a moment, Karla was back with the key. She pointed across the hall. 'That's the bathroom. You'll need it eventually. Call me if there's anything else you want.'

As Karla left them, Brett held out the medical kit to his mother. 'I hope you feel better

after you've had some sleep.'

Sarah stared at him with that same glazed look in her eyes. At him, and through him.

He frowned. 'You sure you're okay, Mum?'

She didn't reply, simply reached out her right hand to take the kit and this time Brett noticed the little finger on the bloody glove.

It was empty.

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Brett rose early. He needed some answers. He'd only managed a glimpse of the glove and, before he could react, his mother had slammed the door and locked it. Had he imagined the missing finger? He'd soon find out.

He tapped impatiently on his mother's bedroom door, but there was no reply. He walked through to the kitchen and looked out the window. Her car was still there, so she couldn't have gone far.

The phone rang. Karla's door was still closed, so Brett grabbed the receiver. It was his father.

'I just wanted to make sure your mother got there in one piece,' he told Brett. Ron Nichol sounded on top of the world.

'This job interview yesterday could be it, Brett. They still had one or two other applicants to see, but they as much as told me the job's mine.'

Brett had heard this story before. Every time his father applied for a job.

'How was Mum when she left?'

'Fine. Why?'

'She's been acting kind of strange since she got here. Says she had a puncture on the way to town.'

'Close to somewhere she could get some help, I hope.'

'What if I told you Mum changed the tyre herself?'

'I'd say you were joking, Brett.'

'And she seems to have hurt her right hand.'

'Nothing serious, I hope.'

'Was it okay when she left?'

'I didn't notice anything wrong.'

You'd have noticed a missing finger, thought Brett. If his father didn't know anything about it, Sarah's wound must be very new.

Maybe it really was an accident trying to change the tyre? The car jack could have slipped.

But if she had lost a finger, that was serious. She should be in hospital. A wound like

that could become infected.

'Brett, are you still there?'

'Sorry, Dad. I'll tell Mum you called.'

He replaced the receiver before his father could argue. Nothing made sense.

Why did his mother try and hide her damaged hand, pretending nothing serious had happened?

Or was the empty finger in the glove Brett had glimpsed an illusion, a mirage, like the phantom logging trucks he saw when he got off the bus? A trick of Brett's tired mind.

Sarah's car keys lay on the kitchen table and he picked them up and headed outside. If there was a flat tyre, it should still be there.

He opened the boot. No tyre. He lifted up the carpet covering the recessed tray where the spare tyre normally sat.

The tyre inside was brand new. He ran his hand around the casing and felt the tiny bits of rubber still clinging to the tread. The bits that rubbed off as soon as a tyre hit the road.

He went back inside, dropped the keys on the table, and walked across to Doc Ferguson's bedroom which his mother was using. If he was going to check out the room, now was the time to do it, while his mother was out of the house.

He tried the handle on the door. Locked. He rattled it again but the lock held. He knelt down and examined the mechanism. Nothing he couldn't force with a wire coat hanger.

One of many skills he'd learned from his big town former friends.

But to get a coat hanger, he'd need to get into Karla's wardrobe, preferably without waking her. He'd rather not explain, not yet.

He crossed to her room and turned the handle. The door opened, silently. He could hear the sound of her heavy breathing as he tiptoed in.

Karla lay on her side, the blankets pulled high around her neck. He turned towards the wardrobe, then jumped in fright as Karla suddenly sat up in bed and screamed.

'Karla, it's okay, it's only me.'

She scrambled around on her bedside table for her glasses, and the bedclothes fell briefly, giving Brett a glimpse of bare flesh.

She snatched up the bedclothes, her face was scarlet. 'What are you doing in my room?'

'I want to borrow a coat hanger.'

She stared at him. 'You what?'

'Mum's acting really strange, Karla. I'm going to check out her room while she's out. I need some wire to pick the lock.'

Karla pointed to the back of her door. 'Take my key. It fits Dad's door as well.'

'Keep a look out, will you? Warn me if you see Mum coming back.'

Karla clutched the bedclothes even tighter around her neck.

'Okay, but I'm not going anywhere with you standing there gawking. Get out of here while I throw on some clothes.'

Brett retreated with the key and inserted it in Sarah's bedroom door. He twisted it and turned the handle. The door swung open.

The drapes were pulled shut so Brett walked over and opened them. The room didn't get the early morning sun, but he could see the bed was unmade. Sarah's nightgown lay on the floor and clothing was scattered all over the place.

At home, his mum was *super* tidy.

Brett opened the wardrobe and checked the contents. Mostly Doc Ferguson's clothes, plus one of his mother's jackets and the skirt she'd ripped.

The jacket that matched the skirt was missing.

Replacing everything as he went, Brett examined the contents of her suitcase, embarrassed by what he was doing, but wanting answers.

He noticed a strap sticking out from under the bed. He gave it a tug. It wouldn't move. He knelt down and gave it another tug. It came free. The brightly coloured gym bag Brett had given his mother for Christmas.

He hesitated as he reached for the zipper. If his mother found him in her room, how could he explain it? Would she ever trust him again?

Did it even matter? At the moment, he didn't trust her. Not the stranger who'd landed on the doorstep the previous night. That was the right word for it. Stranger. His mother, the stranger.

He pulled on the zipper and the bag opened. On top were Sarah's new running shoes. Not that she ever ran, but she'd vowed to spend even more time at the gym now she was in her forties.

She'd be well dressed for it, too, in her favourite pink tracksuit which was underneath the shoes. He took them out and laid them on the bed.

There was a tiny plastic bag on top of a folded jacket. The jacket that matched the torn skirt.

He put the plastic bag to one side, unfolded the jacket, and walked over to the window, holding it up to the light. It was covered in reddish-black stains. Identical to the stains on his shirt he'd got at the mill.

What on earth had happened to his mother on the way to Timberside?

'Brett, hurry up,' Karla called from outside the door where she was keeping watch.

'Almost finished,' he replied. He was running out of time. The cops would be here in a

few hours to check out the break-in at the mill.

He walked back to the bed and as he started to repack the gym bag, he knocked the tiny plastic bag onto the floor. He picked it up and opened it.

Inside was a human finger.

His stomach heaved and he had to fight not to throw up all over the bed.

'Brett,' Karla suddenly hissed. 'Get out of there. Now. Your mother's coming back.'

He quickly re-wrapped the finger, choking back the bile, and rammed everything back into the gym bag.

Shoving it under the bed, he pulled the drapes and made a hurried exit. Relocking the door, he threw the key to Karla.

'What did you find? You look as white as a ghost.'

'I'll tell you later.'

Karla raced back into her bedroom and closed the door.

Brett was sitting in the kitchen reading a magazine as Sarah walked in. She looked terrible, as though she hadn't slept. And smelled like she hadn't showered.

Although she'd changed her clothes from the previous night, she still wore the same driving gloves, her right fist clenched, obscuring the fingers.

'Mum, I need to talk to you,' he said.

'Later,' she told him and headed for the bedroom.

Sarah walked down the passage, unlocked the door, and walked over to the window to open the drapes.

Kicking away the nightdress on the floor, she bent down, located the gym bag under the bed, and pulled it out. Unzipping the bag, she stared at the contents.

The track suit sat on *top* of the shoes. She dug down. The tiny plastic bag lay on the bottom of the bag - *under* the jacket.

Sarah stared at the gym bag and its contents for a full 30 seconds before she headed for the kitchen.

'Brett' she called. 'We need to talk. On the way to Granddad's cabin.'

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Karla lay on her bed and listened to Sarah's car drive off, studying the key in her hand. What had Brett found? If only he could have told her before his mother dragged him off. And why so suddenly?

Sarah was a strange woman, no doubt about it. She was nothing like the woman Brett had described.

What *had* Brett found in his mother's room?

Karla bounced the key up and down in her hand, wrestling with the problem. Finally, she

made up her mind, crossed the passage and unlocked the door to Sarah's room.

Two minutes later she raced out to the kitchen and dialled the cabin. She felt sick to her stomach. Brett and Sarah would be there by now. In fact, they could have driven there and back in the time.

Come on, come on, she wanted to yell. Answer the phone!

'Yes?' Henry McCabe sounded as grumpy as ever.

'Mr McCabe, I need to speak to Brett. It's urgent.'

'You could, if he was here. He didn't come home last night.'

Karla heard the phone bang down in her ear. Granddad hadn't even asked who was calling.

But it was clear Brett and Sarah hadn't arrived at the cabin. Had Sarah got lost? Unlikely. This was her home town.

Karla felt her blood turn to ice in her veins. She ran and fetched a sweater from her room before dialling again.

'I told you, he's not here.'

'He's got to be there.'

'You calling me a liar?'

'Sorry, Mr McCabe. Just tell him to ring Karla. Urgently, please.'

Karla put down the receiver and spent the next few minutes pacing up and down the kitchen. Knowing Mr McCabe, he wouldn't even tell Brett about the call. She dialled again.

'For the last time, he's not here. And don't ring back. I'm taking the phone off the hook.'

Karla dropped the phone and raced for the door.

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'This is not the road to Granddad's,' said Brett.

'We're not going to the cabin,' said his mother.

They were the first words she'd spoken since they left the surgery.

'Where are we going?'

'Pine Lake.'

Brett tried to keep his eyes off Sarah's right hand. Without grabbing it off the wheel and ripping off the glove, it was still impossible to tell whether it was all there or not.

He wished he'd had a chance to tell Karla. She might have made sense of it.

Karla. Where was she at this moment? Heading up to the lake to try and retrieve her father's gas welding equipment? As they both planned the night before? No. She'd never be able to carry it on her own.

Or was she sitting at home, counting off the hours until Brett was arrested for breaking into the mill?

'Tell me again about the puncture,' he said to his mother.

'Nothing to tell.'

Brett heard the engine change down and the car slowed as it started to climb the dirt road up to the lake.

'There's a *lot* to tell.'

'Like what?'

'Like what happened to the flat tyre? After you took it off?'

'I threw it in the boot.'

'Mum, I checked. The tyre in the back is brand new. It's never been on the road.'

Brett lurched forward as Sarah hit the brakes, throwing him off balance. He tensed, then realised they'd arrived at the top, giving them a clear view of the shallow lake, right across to The Screaming Tree.

Sarah turned in her seat and faced him. 'What's wrong with you?'

Brett's mouth fell open. 'With me? You're the one who's been acting strange. Ever since you got here. You're like a different person.'

He glanced down at his mother's right hand. She slipped it behind her back.

'I've been under a lot of stress lately,' she said.

Her voice still didn't sound right. And her eyes still had that same, glazed look.

'But why the lies?' he asked.

'Lies?'

He grabbed the door handle. 'Unless I get some answers, I'm out of here.'

'You want to know what happened with the tyre?'

Brett nodded.

'Larry was in his workshop when I went for a walk this morning. Before you woke up. He checked the flat for me and said the tyre was beyond repair. He sold me a new one.'

Brett ran it through in his mind. Possible. But it was only a tiny piece of the puzzle. He still had no idea of the bigger picture.

'I still have more questions,' he told her.

'Later,' she said.

He went to fling open the door.

'Wait,' she said and he paused as he felt Sarah's hand on his arm. 'I need some fresh air.'

She withdrew her hand. Her left hand. The right hand was still hidden. 'You'll get the answers soon.'

'When?'

'Within the hour.'

## Chapter Ten

Karla knew Henry McCabe was in his cabin as she banged on the door. She could hear Ugly snorting on the other side.

'Mr McCabe, let me in. It's urgent!'

There was no sign of Sarah's car. Karla heard the scraping sound as the old man got out of his rocker and walked to the door.

'I told you on the phone. He isn't here.'

'I know that, but he was heading this way. He and his mother...'

'Sarah? What's she doing in Timberside?'

Karla wasn't sure she knew the answer to that question. Not anymore. 'You're sure they haven't been here?'

'Why would I lie about something like that?'

'Sorry, Mr McCabe. Something's wrong. Your daughter's acting really strange. And Brett's in trouble. Big trouble. I can feel it.'

'What do you expect me to do?' asked Granddad.

Karla was close to tears. 'He's brought us nothing but trouble.'

'It runs in this family.'

'Not Brett,' said Karla. 'Jonathan Rigg.'

Granddad's head snapped back. 'What did you say?'

'Jonathan Rigg.'

'Brett was asking me about him. That boy won't leave the past alone. What have you two been up to?'

She told Henry McCabe, quickly, the words tumbling out. Everything that had happened since she and Brett found the body in the lake.

'And you're sure it's Rigg in that trunk?'

'We saw his photo in the newspaper. It's him all right. The body's all dried up, but he's still in one piece. And the trunk's got Braun's initials on it. "MB".'

Granddad whistled to Ugly. 'I've got to see this,' he said and there was a glint in his eyes that frightened Karla.

'Maybe we should tell someone.'

'You've told the right person, Karla. Believe me.'

Karla didn't know what to believe, but she trotted after Granddad and Ugly as they set off at a fast pace, up through the bush towards Pine Lake.

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'Where are we going?' asked Brett, as Sarah led him around the rim of Pine Lake.

'Not much further.'

His mother had barely spoken since they left the car.

'Did you come up here when you lived in Timberside?' he asked, in an attempt to get her talking.

She pointed to the big pine. 'Yes. I once swung from that tree.'

Brett shivered. So did Jonathan Rigg.

'So why are we heading there now?'

'There's something I want you to see.'

Was it Rigg's body? But she couldn't know about that. She'd only arrived last night and Brett hadn't told her.

The sun was lower than he'd ever seen it behind the tree. Like a spotlight, playing its beam through the branches, illuminating Karla's rope, dangling from the branch where they'd left it.

His eyes scanned the base of the tree and he noted the undisturbed pile of leaves he'd used to cover up the gas bottles, cutting torch and crowbar.

But where was the trunk?

As he reached the tree, a man stepped out.

'Hello, city boy.'

Larry? What was he doing here? Larry, with his gun, aimed at Brett's head.

'Who'd believe it?' Larry said to Sarah. 'Your own son?'

'What's going on here?' Brett demanded.

Sarah's eyes didn't even flicker. 'I told Larry that if he brought his gun up here, I'd deliver up the thief who broke into the timber mill.'

Brett's heart pounded in his ears. What was his mother doing?

'I'm handing you over, Brett.'

'And I appreciate it, Doctor Nichol,' said Larry. 'With you to identify his jacket, the cops can put this kid of yours where he belongs. Behind bars.'

Brett's brain whirled. This couldn't be happening. His own mother.

'But... but Mum, how did you know about what happened at the mill? I didn't tell you.'

'Larry told me. When I bought the new tyre.'

'What tyre?' asked Larry, lowering the gun slightly as he glanced at Sarah.

Brett had been watching his shoulders. As they dropped, he lunged for Larry, driving his elbow into the bodybuilder's stomach.

It was like hitting a rock, but the momentum made Larry drop the gun, and carried them towards the tree.

At the last moment, Larry used his greater strength and swung Brett around, slamming him against the bark.

Fighting Larry was like wrestling a bulldozer.

'That's enough,' yelled Sarah, as Larry drew back his fist.

Larry hesitated, and Brett brought up his knee. Larry jumped back, but not fast enough as Brett straightened his leg and kicked him in the throat.

As the bodybuilder staggered back, choking for air, Brett dived at him. They struggled and fell, Larry underneath. Brett forced his face into the dirt.

Brett suddenly felt pressure behind his ear.

'That's enough, Brett,' said Sarah.

The gun was only centimetres away from his skull as he released Larry. 'Mum, you wouldn't...'

Then he saw her right hand. Her bloodied gun hand from which she'd peeled off the glove.

Larry jumped up, and reached for the weapon.

'Give it to me,' he said, his voice husky from where Brett had kicked him.

'No,' said Sarah.

She stepped away and pointed the gun at both of them. 'I'll keep this.'

Larry's face went white as he saw the mangled hand holding the gun. 'Hey, Doctor Nichol, I thought...'

'I know what you thought, Larry. You thought this was your lucky day. Praise from the sawmill company, and the cops, for catching the thief. And a never ending supply of steroids. From me.'

'But this morning...'

'I lied, Larry,' she said. 'Why would I even make an offer like that to a loser like you?'

Larry's face went blank.

'It was too easy,' said Sarah. 'Your brain's been scrambled by all those pills.'

Sarah's voice had dropped a notch beyond gruff. And there was a menace in it that they couldn't miss.

'Larry, tie Brett's hands behind his back. You did bring something to do it with, didn't you?'

He nodded, sweating profusely, as he pulled a length of chord out of his back pocket.

'If either of you tries to escape, I'll shoot you down.'

Brett couldn't tear his eyes off his mother's hand. The little finger had been sheared off at the stump. The rest of the fingers looked crushed, and the whole hand was a bloody mess.

His whole body felt numb as Larry tied him up, pulling the chord tight.

'It's all your fault, city boy,' he snarled in Brett's ear. 'If you hadn't come to town...'

‘Quiet, both of you,’ said Sarah. ‘Brett, don’t move. Larry, drag that trunk around here. And, remember, I’ve got the gun.’

Sarah positioned herself so she had a good view of both men as Larry reached into the bush behind the tree and hauled out the trunk.

‘This thing’s heavy.’

‘Stop complaining. We need it.’

What did they need it for? And where had his mother learned to use a gun? With a smashed hand. Didn’t she even feel any pain?

When the trunk was in position, she pointed the gun at Brett. ‘Get up on the lid.’

Suddenly, Brett had another flash of the terrible vision he’d had the day he’d climbed the tree with Karla. He doubled over and threw up, his vomit splattering over the roots of the pine.

At the time, the image had made no sense. It did now. It had been a premonition. A warning. Now it was about to come true.

His mother would make it come true. She was going to hang him from the tree.

Hang him like Jonathan Rigg.

Sarah kept her voice steady. ‘Either you get up on the trunk, or I’ll make Larry haul you up.’

Brett’s stomach heaved again, but he forced his legs to obey. As he clambered up, Sarah produced a leather belt and handed it to the bodybuilder.

‘Now get up there and tie this around his neck.’

‘You can’t be serious,’ said Larry, his face alternating between white and grey. ‘There are some things even I won’t do.’

Sarah stood as still as a statue. ‘Do it, Larry, or I’ll put a bullet in your gut. A very painful way to die.’

‘Mum,’ Brett cried. ‘Stop.’

‘I’m sorry, Brett. It’s beyond my control.’

Sarah’s voice was now a throaty grumble and as dead as her eyes. As dead as Brett would soon be.

Larry was too scared to disobey. He climbed up beside Brett and slipped the belt around his neck, tying the end to Karla’s rope which dangled from the branch above.

‘Pull it tight,’ Sarah ordered and Larry did, forcing Brett up on his toes.

Only the lid of the metal trunk under his feet stood between Brett and strangulation.

‘Watch him,’ Sarah told Larry, then turned and disappeared into the bush.

‘Quick, get me down,’ Brett gasped, the leather digging into his throat.

Larry backed away, his eyes begging for forgiveness. ‘I’m sorry, Brett, I’m really sorry.’

Brett could smell the fear coming off him in waves.

'I'm out of my depth,' said Larry. 'I'm getting out of here.'

'You can't...'

'You bet I can. But I'll be back. I'll bring help. I promise.'

Larry turned to run, but he'd only gone a few steps when a shot rang out. He crumbled to the ground, clutching his leg, a bloody hole in his right calf.

Out of the bush, holding the gun, stepped Jonathan Rigg!

Rigg's body had shrivelled even more. One eye still bulged, but the other was a pulpy mass. There were deep puncture wounds all over his face. What flesh was left on his skull was pulled as tight as a drum skin.

Rigg's disfigured lips moved only a fraction as he spoke. His voice was hoarse and weak. 'I've waited a long time for this.'

The sun had climbed higher, weaving its way through the branches of the pine, throwing erratic patterns over the whole scene.

Brett's knees sagged, increasing the pressure on his throat. He couldn't breathe. He forced his legs to straighten.

Larry was trying to crawl away. Rigg turned and fired a warning shot into the ground near Larry's head.

As he did, Brett got a good look at Jonathan Rigg's back. Which confirmed it had been Rigg at the mill.

The circular saw had cut deep into the spine, exposing the discs, crushing some and severing others. The edge of the wound ran down his back like a festering trench.

Rigg turned back to Brett. 'But you're the one I've really come to see.'

'What have you done to my mother?'

'She's alive. For the moment. But I don't need her any more. Now I have you.'

Brett's brain was spinning. Somehow Rigg had taken over his mother's body on the drive into Timberside, and *that* was the Sarah who'd arrived in town last night. A possessed puppet with Rigg pulling the strings.

'I made a mistake at the mill,' Rigg told Brett. 'I thought I could handle you on my own, but you were too strong. That's when I decided to get some help.'

'Why?'

'Too long in that trunk. I'm rotting away. Fast. Not enough strength left for what I still have to do.'

A big piece of the puzzle fell into place and exploded in his head like a mortar shell.

'You want *my* body!'

Brett knew with sickening certainty that Rigg planned to possess him as well. The way

he'd possessed Brett's mother.

Rigg laughed. 'Your body, fuelled by *my* hate.'

Brett remembered what Agnes had said. Rigg had been full of hate. And his hateful spirit still lived in his decaying body.

'You won't get away with it.'

'Who'll stop me?'

Larry wouldn't. The bodybuilder clutched his leg and sobbed in pain. Larry was out of the game. But as long as this bizarre conversation went on Brett was still breathing, although he had no idea how long that would last.

For the first time in his life, Brett prayed for a cop. Any cop. Better still, a *car*-load of armed cops, charging over the rim of the crater to rescue him from this disintegrating madman.

He knew it wasn't going to happen.

'I'll use you, Brett, to help me finally get my revenge,' said Rigg.

Revenge against the people of Timberside!

'I've had a long time to plan this,' said Rigg. 'Locked in that trunk. Pity you interrupted my little scouting trip around town last night.'

Reacquainting himself with Timberside, Brett realised. Scoping out locations for whatever he was planning.

But something didn't make sense to Brett. If Rigg wanted strength - a strong puppet he could control - why hadn't he chosen Larry?

Rigg seemed to read his mind.

'This way, the revenge is even sweeter. This way I can destroy the family of the man who helped me escape from jail. I didn't know who he was till he lured me up here to die.'

Family? What family? What man?

'He killed me,' said Rigg. 'Then dumped me at the bottom of this lake.'

'You killed yourself,' said Brett. 'You committed suicide.'

'Lies,' screeched Jonathan Rigg, the sound gurgling up from his rotting lungs. 'I was lynched. Executed. By Darcy McCabe!'

Darcy McCabe? Granddad's father. And Brett's great-grandfather. But why had Darcy taken the law into his own hands?

'Remember the housekeeper at Quigley's house?' said Rigg.

The woman Rigg had raped. Where did she fit into this?

'I caught up with a lot in those old newspapers at the museum,' said Rigg. 'Two months after the robbery, that young woman married her fiancé. The same man who interrupted us that night. And when they got married, the woman became Elizabeth McCabe.'

More pieces of the jigsaw fell into place.

'Then,' said Rigg, 'I read about Darcy and Elizabeth's son. Born seven months later.'

Rigg was talking about Granddad.

'The child was *mine*. *My* son!'

It all suddenly made terrible sense to Brett. Granddad, conceived by rape on Guy Fawkes night in November, then born exactly nine months later in August of the next year.

Which would also make Jonathan Rigg, *not* Darcy McCabe, Brett's real great-grandfather!

'You can't prove it!' Brett yelled, fighting the awful truth. 'It's a lie.'

Rigg pulled something from his pocket and held it up. A photo, yellowed and faded with age. But the man in it was still recognisable.

A young Jonathan Rigg, the picture stolen from the museum wall.

'Now do you see?' screamed Rigg. 'Now do you see?'

Brett saw. And realised why Rigg looked so familiar. He and the young Jonathan Rigg could be brothers.

'But why kill me first?'

'Your spirit is too strong,' said Rigg. 'You would fight me for possession of your body.'

'But once I'm dead, *my* body will rot, like yours.'

'I only need it for a few days. See this?' Rigg waved the gun. 'You and I are going to make what happened all those years ago on Guy Fawkes night look like a Sunday School picnic. The streets of Timberside will run with blood.'

Rigg lowered his voice to barely a whisper. 'Starting with your mother.'

'No,' yelled Brett. 'She's your granddaughter.'

'Only we know that. And I don't care. The rest of the world will think she was killed by her own son, Brett Nichol. A sad, twisted descendant of Darcy McCabe. A deranged killer who went on a murderous and bloody rampage, slaughtering dozens of people in Timberside. Including his mother *and* his Grandfather. And his young friend. Karla, isn't it?'

'No!'

'Oh, yes,' said Jonathan Rigg. 'You should thank me. I'm about to make you very famous.'

Jonathan Rigg shoved the picture back into his pocket, and placed his foot against the trunk, ready to push it away from under Brett's legs.

'Goodbye, Brett.'

Granddad's yell rang around the lake as he and Ugly burst from cover.

Rigg spun, fired, and Ugly dropped like a stone.

Granddad yelled even louder and lunged at Rigg's hand holding the gun. Rigg was too

fast and sidestepped, bringing the barrel crashing down on the old man's head.

Granddad lay on the ground, not moving. Had Rigg killed him?

No. The old man was tough, and forced himself up onto his knees.

'I always suspected this,' said Granddad, blood trickling down his face. 'But I've never been able to prove it. Until now.'

Another piece of the puzzle. *This* was Granddad's secret. The *big* secret he swore he'd take to his grave.

'You ruined my parents,' said Henry McCabe. 'My mother never recovered from what you did to her. You destroyed her mind, and her years of suffering destroyed my father.'

'But *I'm* your father.'

'My father was Darcy McCabe,' said Granddad, spitting out the words. 'He brought me up. Loved me. He was a better man than you, Rigg. A better man than you could ever be in a million lifetimes.'

'I don't care what you think of me,' said Rigg. 'I'll wipe you and all the rest of the McCabes off the face of the earth. And then I'll burn your precious store to the ground. What a fire that will make.'

Fire. The word sent Brett's mind spinning. Was it possible...?

'But first,' said Jonathan Rigg, walking over to Brett, 'you can watch your grandson hang. In a way, I'm almost sorry to have to do it. He's so much like me.'

'I'm nothing like you,' yelled Brett.

'Yes, you are,' said Rigg. 'You not only look like me, you're like me inside as well, inside your head.'

How could Rigg know what was happening inside Brett's head?

'Think about it, Brett. Who do you think was screaming? Do you still think it was this stupid tree?'

Brett stared at him. If it wasn't the tree...?

'That's right,' said Rigg. 'It was me. Screaming to be released. And you heard me because we're so alike.'

'That's not true,' yelled Brett, 'I'm not another Jonathan Rigg.'

Brett struggled against the leather belt. He wasn't evil. Not like this monster. And he'd prove it if he could just get down from this tree.

Granddad staggered to his feet.

'If you take one more step, old man,' said Rigg, 'I'll blow off one of your kneecaps. Then I'll leave you to bleed to death.'

'May you rot in hell, Rigg,' said Granddad.

'I've done all the rotting I intend to do,' said Rigg, forcing the words through his broken

yellow teeth as he dragged the trunk away.

Brett's legs suddenly swung free and the belt tightened around his neck, twisting his face upwards.

But it wasn't over yet. Karla had climbed up into the tree and was attacking the rope, trying to slice through it with the sharp edge of the melted padlock.

Jonathan Rigg saw her at the same time and fired up into the tree. Karla ducked for cover just in time and the shot ricocheted off the branches.

Brett knew if Karla couldn't cut him down, he'd be dead in seconds. But if she tried again, Karla would die. Killed in the tree from where she'd once swung out over the lake.

On her rope. The old rope now tied to the belt around his neck.

Ignoring the pain in his neck and twisted spine, Brett kicked out with his legs. His body started swinging from side to side like a pendulum.

Jonathan Rigg laughed, but there was little sound from his disfigured lips.

Blackness rushed towards Brett as he kicked his legs harder. Swinging further each time. It worked.

The strain was too much for the ancient rope and, with a crack, the strands parted and Brett crashed down.

But his hands were still tied behind him and there was no way he could control the fall. He hit the ground at an awkward angle and felt his leg snap under him.

Karla screamed, scrambled out of the tree, and ran into the bush.

Rigg took a few halting paces after her, but she was out of sight before he could take aim.

The diversion also gave Brett a few seconds.

The cord around his wrists had loosened and, despite the blinding pain in his leg, he managed to free his hands and tear the leather belt off his neck.

Jonathan Rigg turned back and saw him.

'Sorry, Brett,' he said. The voice was so low Brett had to strain to hear the words. 'You're no use to me with a broken leg. I'll have to patch Larry up and use him. After I shoot you.'

Jonathan Rigg was concentrating so hard on Brett, he failed to see Ugly crawling along the ground towards him. The old hunting dog was bleeding heavily, but his mouth was set.

Rigg raised the gun and pointed it at Brett. But as his finger tightened on the trigger, Ugly lunged and sank his teeth into Rigg's heel.

Rigg's face registered no pain, but his good eye turned towards his attacker. Granddad took his chance, lunged at Rigg, knocked the gun to the ground and snatched it up.

Henry McCabe faced his real father. 'You deserved to hang for what you did. You

deserved everything Darcy did to you.'

'What are you going to do? Shoot me? It's too late. I'm already dead.'

'You are now, you monster,' yelled Granddad, pulling the trigger.

The bullet hit Rigg over the heart with a dull thud. It had no more impact than a push in the chest.

'It'll take more than a bullet,' screeched Rigg, throwing himself at Granddad, knocking him down and snatching back the gun.

As Rigg stood up, skin peeled off the back of his hand and a gaping wound opened up in his cheek, splitting it from ear to chin.

He was disintegrating fast, before their eyes.

Rigg turned to where Brett had dragged himself over between the tree's large roots.

He was fighting to stay conscious, the pain in his leg worse than anything he'd ever experienced. But he couldn't give up. Not now.

His fingers frantically searched under the leaves where he was lying. He could feel the crowbar, but that's not what he really needed to end this.

'You're finished, Rigg,' he yelled. 'You've run out of time.'

'No,' said Rigg struggling to push the words past his broken teeth. 'It's *you* who have run out of time.'

Rigg lifted his gun and took aim just as Brett's finger's finally found what he was really looking for.

Too late! Brett couldn't beat a bullet and he knew it.

'Stop!' screamed Sarah, bursting from the bush on the other side of the tree, stumbling towards them, her mangled hand waving like a torn and bloody flag.

Jonathan Rigg spun away, turning his gun towards this new threat.

Brett took his chance, snatched up the crowbar and hurled it. Hitting Rigg's arm so hard he dropped the gun.

As Rigg reached down to try and grab the weapon, Brett hit him with something else.

Serious firepower, as Brett's fingers crushed the trigger of the self-igniting cutting torch.

The fireball that erupted hit Rigg like a flamethrower and drove him back, flames pouring from his clothes.

He stood in the shadow of The Screaming Tree where he'd died his first death. The Guy Fawkes Killer, twitching like a 5th of November dummy as the fire consumed his torso and limbs.

Then leaping higher to ignite his beard. Then the rest of his face. Devouring his remaining eye and peeling the shrunken skin off his shaved skull.

Jonathon Rigg opened what was left of his lips. And one, terrible, soul-wrenching

scream pierced Brett's brain.

Every scream he'd heard since he was five years old, compressed into one, long, pitiful cry.

He looked up and saw the giant pine shaking, witness to this last, terrible act.

Then it stopped as the screaming stopped.

Brett looked across at the pile of bones and ashes.

'Goodbye, Jonathan,' he said. 'And good riddance.'

## Chapter Eleven

Brett sat with his back against the tree as Karla adjusted the makeshift splint on his leg. 'Not too tight,' said Sarah. 'I'd do it myself, but...' She gestured to her mangled hand.

Granddad had torn his shirt into bandages and wrapped up Sarah's damaged hand as best he could. But he couldn't do anything for the pain which had carved lines of agony into her face.

It was obvious she'd need surgery, in hospital, but there were limits to what could be done and her finger was gone forever.

'Damn,' she said suddenly, sweat dripping from her forehead.

'What is it?' asked Brett.

'My hand. Now I'll *never* be able to change a tyre.'

Brett managed to grin, despite his own pain. This was more like the real Sarah.

'Excuses, excuses,' he said.

His mother stared at him and Brett saw the other pain on her face and in her eyes.

'Can you forgive me?' she asked.

'You didn't do it,' said Brett. 'It was Rigg. Just like it was him screaming in my head all these years.'

'That monster's haunted all of us in his own way,' said Sarah, glancing over to where her father was now attending to Larry. 'You and Granddad got the worst of it.'

'I'll survive,' said Brett. 'I'm a McCabe.'

'That's not what Rigg said.'

'I don't care what he said, Mum. I'm with Granddad on this.'

'Good,' said Sarah. 'And I'm a McCabe, too. It doesn't matter who our ancestors were or what they did. We can't change the past, but we don't have to let them destroy the future.'

'Tell that to Granddad.'

'I intend to. I've got a lot of things to say to him.'

'Can we keep it a secret?' said Brett. 'About being related to Rigg.'

Karla shook her head. 'In a small town? With all this carnage? And today's media? Unlikely.'

'Larry's leg has stopped bleeding,' called Granddad, hurrying over, 'but he's passed out.'

'You'd better get going, then,' said Sarah, throwing him the car keys. 'I'll stay here and do what I can.'

The old Sarah Nichol was back in charge. The eyes glinted, even through the pain in her hand.

'Head straight for the mill, Dad. They'll have stretchers there and a first aid team. They

can alert the other emergency services. Then grab my medical kit from Karla's. Bring it back with you.'

Brett saw his grandfather glance at the body of his old hunting dog under the tree.

'I'm sorry about Ugly, Granddad,' said Brett.

'I'm sorry, too,' said Granddad, his shoulders drooping. 'Sorry about a lot of things.'

Sarah froze. 'Are you talking about Mum?'

'Sarah, I can't turn back the clock.'

'I didn't kill her,' said Sarah. 'I was only a baby.'

'She was depressed.'

'That's no disgrace, Dad.'

'I did everything I could.'

'Of course you did,' said Sarah.

'But your mother still died.'

'She committed suicide.'

'Are you blaming me for that?'

'No, Dad, I'm not blaming anyone. Mum's death was a tragedy. A terrible tragedy. But it wasn't *your* fault. And it wasn't *mine*!'

'I lost my wife,' said Henry McCabe.

'And I lost my mother,' said Sarah.

Granddad reached out and took his daughter's damaged hand in his.

'Some things never heal.'

'And some things, Dad, just take a while.'

Granddad held her hand for a few seconds longer, then abruptly let go.

His eyes were moist as he turned away, setting off around the rim of the lake, moving as fast as his old legs could carry him.

'It's a start,' Sarah said to Brett and suddenly laughed. 'Now, if I could only find a shower. I stink.'

Larry groaned and Sarah went over and knelt beside him, grabbing his hand, holding it tightly. Brett could hear her, willing him to hang on until help arrived.

Brett tried to move his broken leg to ease the pressure. The effort brought him out in a sweat.

'If I hadn't come to town, none of this would have happened,' he told Karla.

'You didn't make Jonathan Rigg what he was,' she said.

'It's still been another disaster.'

'Another one?'

'There was something I didn't tell you. About the hit-and-run.'

Brett finally filled in the rest of the story. How it was his idea that Jimmy go out in the car and buy the alcohol. The guilt he'd been carrying for what happened to the little girl.

'That wasn't your fault either,' said Karla.

'Maybe, but I want to do something. To make amends.'

Karla looked at him. 'You'll think of something.'

Brett suddenly realised that there *might* be a solution close to where he was lying.

He still had questions about Jonathan Rigg. Most of them would probably remain unanswered. But he'd finally solved one local mystery.

They knew now that it was Darcy McCabe who'd helped Rigg escape. Then executed him by hanging him from the tree before tipping off the police where to find the monster so everyone would know he was dead.

And it was Darcy who'd stolen the body and dumped it in the lake. Condemning Rigg to a watery grave. In a metal trunk. Wrapped up in chains.

A fire-blackened trunk with Braun's initials on it, which Darcy must have pulled from the ashes of the fire that killed Rigg's accomplice.

Brett lowered his voice. 'Karla, I know what happened to Quigley's gold coins.'

'Where are they?'

'Think about it,' said Brett. 'Some of the metalwork inside the trunk was rough. That's because Braun tried to hide the coins before he was caught. Under a false bottom which he'd have built in a big hurry. That's why the trunk was so heavy.'

'So the gold coins were right under Rigg's nose all those years?'

'And we're the only ones who know.'

Karla tensed. 'And you want to *keep* them?'

Brett stared at her for a few seconds. 'No... no, they're not mine. But maybe there'll be some kind of reward for finding them.'

A reward he could use to help the little girl from the hit-and-run. He told Karla and she smiled, brushing her hand lightly over his. It felt good.

He *wasn't* another Jonathan Rigg. And he never would be. He was sure of that now.

Brett looked up into The Screaming Tree.

'It's finished!' he yelled. 'It's over!'

The branches rustled for a few seconds.

Then stopped.

The end