

Outback Heroes

Book 1

PERISHER

Was it a legend or a curse?



Shale Kenny

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Perisher

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Shale Kenny

*To my dear husband Ken Hoffman,
my reward for every good thing I've ever done.*

Some Australian Words...



Akubra (a-coo--bra)

A shallow-crowned, wide-brimmed hat. A significant feature of rural Australia.

Anzac (an-zac)

An Australian soldier.

Billabong (bill-a-bong)

A waterhole. Originally part of a river.

Cark (sounds like dark)

To die.

Cooee (coo-eeee)

A long distance away.

Cop

To take or accept.

Corroboree (core-rob-are-ree)

An Aboriginal assembly of festive, sacred, or Warlike character.

Dag

A very uncool person. A dork.

Damper (damp-a)

Bread made from flour and water, traditionally cooked in the coals of an open fire.

Didgeridoo (dij-er-ee-doo)

An Aboriginal wind instrument.

Dingo (ding-go)

A wild dog found throughout mainland Australia.

Dinki Di (dinky die)

The real thing.

Dob (sounds like rob)

To betray, or tell tales.

Emu (ee-mew)

A large, flightless Australian bird.

...More Australian Words

Fair Dinkum (fair dink-um)	Genuine. True.
G'day (gid day)	Hello.
Hessian (hesh-shan)	A strong fabric used to make sacks.
Ridgy-didge (rigee-dij)	Original. Genuine.
Skivvy (skiv-vee)	A thin, turtle neck sweater.
True Blue	Sincere.
Uni	University
Ute (you-t)	A utility truck.
Uluru (oo-loo-roo)	A massive sandstone monolith in the heart of Australia's red center desert. Sacred to the indigenous population. 2,851 ft tall. Unique for changing color at nightfall.
Vegemite (vej-a-mite)	A thick, black vegetable paste used on sandwiches and toast.
Walkabout (Walk-a-bout)	A period of wandering as a nomad.
Wrapped (rapt)	Excited.



1

The first time I saw Joanie Thomas was just an ordinary day at high school. It was history lesson—last class of the day—and I'm clock-watching. Only thirty minutes to go. That's when this pretty girl comes rushing into the room, walks up to the teacher's desk, and hands her a note.

“Excuse me. I'm new. The office told me to give you this.”

Miss Walker reads the note while I'm feeling sorry for the girl. Starting a new school is bad enough, but midway through second term—and halfway through last lesson? That's a horror story! Anyway, I get it why Miss Walker doesn't seem too impressed, gives the girl the once-over, then stares pointedly at her jeans and shirt. The rest of us go quiet—and in my case—interested.

Miss Walker pushes her glasses higher up her nose. Uh-Oh. That means she's totally pinged off. “Kind of

late to be arriving to class, don't you think, Joan?"

"Joanie. My name is Joanie Thomas."

"Joanie Thomas? I stand corrected." Miss Walker sighs. "Oh well, find yourself a spare seat."

The girl has my full attention as she stomps her way towards the spare seat next to me. I say "stomps" because she's wearing cowboy boots. So I fold as much of my own grasshopper legs as possible under my desk, to give her more room.

"Oh, Joanie!"

"Yes, Miss Walker?"

"When will you have your books, and school uniform?"

"I'll wear my uniform tomorrow, Miss Walker. And I should have all my books by then."

Short answers. I shouldn't have too much trouble holding my own in a conversation with this girl.

"Good. Now just for today, perhaps Riley Williams might allow you to read along with him."

Like I would object.

"No worries." I whisper. She pulls her chair up beside me, so that's when I get my first close-up look at Joanie, and the remainder of our history lesson flies right out the window. Long black hair, which she constantly twirls around her fingers. And a refreshing blast of peppermint every so often, when she blows an offending curl away from her pretty green eyes.

"I love history." she whispers. "Even if I'm only here for half of today's lesson. Hope you don't mind sharing your book with me."

Sadly, liking history is one subject we won't be able to agree on. "My name's Riley Williams."

"Yes, I heard the teacher say your name," she mumbles, her head in my book.

Normally, knowing each other's name, helps you get to know each other faster. Good thing, too, because I sense Joanie isn't a girl to ask many questions. So I start the ball rolling. "Where are you living?" Miss Walker is moving around the classroom gathering up yesterday's homework, so I keep my voice low. Good. That means the lesson is officially over.

"Perisher Valley. We just moved into the Cooper place."

"You live in the Valley? Hey, so do I. You going to be catching the school bus?" I stand, take a few steps to leave and hear her clomping along behind me—except I run into Miss Walker. Our teacher is a real shorty, so I converse with the top of her head, as usual.

"Riley. Where's your homework? Didn't you understand what I wanted you to do?"

Darn it. I didn't want to have to explain in front of Joanie. "I'll bring it tomorrow for sure, Miss Walker." Then we stroll out to where the Valley bus is waiting, and I'm wondering—should a guy wait to be invited to sit next to this pretty Outback girl?

The bus is crowded, so she plonks herself down in a window seat, then glances up at me. That's when I completely morph into my true self. A total dork. Which is why I can't believe it when she moves over and I feel this vacant grin devour my face. So I fit as

much of me as I can on the seat beside her and notice she's hanging onto an overloaded backpack. "Want me to put that up on the overhead shelf, so you can see out the window?" She smiles and nods, so I lift the thing up to the shelf above her head. "Wow! That's quite a load. Got far to walk from the bus?"

"No, thank goodness. The bus stops right outside our house."

She has this cute dimple in her chin, which appears whenever she smiles, and next minute I'm wondering—how many face muscles does it take to smile? And are any extra muscles required to produce a dimple? Are you nuts, Williams? A pretty girl wants you to sit beside her, and you're wondering how many muscles it takes to smile? I'll google that one at home, though. The structure of the human body fascinates me. "I like your cowboy boots."

"Thanks. I'm from Coober Pedy, in the Outback. We don't wear school uniforms there, just jeans, shirts and boots. But I'll wear the school uniform from now on. Except for my boots. They stay."

"Think you're gonna like the snow country?"

"Probably. Although I consider myself an Outback girl at heart. Still, Perisher Valley is a really small town, inaccessible and remote like Coober Pedy, so it's just a different kind of Outback."

"Interesting way to put it. Made any friends yet?"

"Not really. Well, sort of."

"There's not much to do in the Valley. Apart from winter sports, sled-dog rides, and mountain climbing."

“Sled-dog rides sound fun. Have you ever tried that?”

Oh man. A girl and I are talking, and for once it happens to be a subject I know plenty about. So, when she turns away from the window, I let rip. “Sled-dogs are what I do. My family used to train sled-dog teams. Big winter tourist turnover, but the dogs take a lot of care year-round and my dad's not involved anymore. Now he's a respiratory specialist.”

“What about all your sled-dogs?”

“Sold them to a neighbor, but I still work there, so I'm cool with it. Dad's way happier working at the hospital. Oops! Dropped my pen.” I bend down to retrieve the half-sized pen I like to chew on when I'm nervous. I've actually learned some pretty good tricks on precisely how far I can dangle that pen from my mouth without dropping it.

“Wow, I bet you miss your dogs, though.”

“I see them almost every day. I have my own dog, too.” Chewing away, I'm feeling more confident now. Totally in the zone.

“A sled-dog?”

“Yes, and no. He's a sled-dog, but not a Husky. Ding's a Dingo, actually. I trained him myself.”

“You trained a Dingo? Awesome! I didn't think you could keep a Dingo as a pet.”

“Ding's one-tenth Husky, so on that technicality, I was able to get him a dog license.”

I glance out the window, and get a shock. “You said you moved into the old Cooper place, and we're nearly

there. Will you be catching the bus tomorrow?"

"Yes. Dad works from his Canberra office, mostly. And Mom doesn't drive much, these days."

And then the bus must have hit a ditch, because she bottoms out so hard Joanie's backpack gets jolted off the overhead shelf, and comes hurtling down towards her. Would have hit her too, except I'm faster. Riley Williams doesn't have long arms for nothing. I swoop the thing up, mid-flight, with one hand. And I'm still hanging onto it when the bus flings her sideways and she lands on my chest. Her soft hair brushes my face and I'm not complaining when she thanks me.

By now I figure my cheeks must be beet red. Happens when you're afflicted with carrot-top hair and a complexion to match. My friend Callum, who's also a redhead, found out that we never go bald—fair compensation, I guess. Darn! If my face gets any hotter someone will be calling Triple Zero to report an emergency.

"I can't believe you did that. My backpack is so heavy. Oh, I met one girl. Lisa. Know her?"

"Lisa, the gastroenterologist? Oh sure, I know Lisa."

"Why do you call her that?"

"Well, Lisa is crazy about hair, see? Wants to take a hairdressing course. But her old man is a gastroenterologist, so he's forcing her to follow in the family business."

Joanie's mouth is wide open, her eyes nearly as wide. "Oh, that's terrible! Poor Lisa! My Dad's totally

obsessed when it comes to medical science, but he would never want me to make a career of that, or something I didn't like. It must be a huge disappointment for Lisa.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Now I'm feeling ashamed because we all thought it was a big joke about Lisa.

“Anyway, I'm glad you told me. If I get to know her better I'll try to help her. We all need someone to tell our problems to, don't we?”

“Yeah. Always helps to talk to someone. Hey—since you're new—you can call on me if you need a friend.” Idiot! That's a line from a kid's movie. Very mature, dude. Time for a change of subject, so I look down at her tiny feet. “You gonna' cave on the cowboy boots?”

“I'll wear regulation clothes like everybody else. But my boots stay.”

By now I'm finding Joanie strangely compelling. She's like...how can I describe it? Like someone on a mission for something. Intelligent, but cute.

“Thanks for your offer of someone to talk to, Riley. I may take you up on that one day.”

With those green eyes of hers boring into mine, I don't totally get her drift, so I improvise. “No probs. Glad to help with science, math, history, practically any subject other than languages.”

“No, I wasn't thinking of schoolwork, I'm okay with all that. I do have a problem I need help with, though. It's with my parents.”

2

Next morning, I'm perched on the top rail of my front fence, waiting for the school bus. I can't wait to see Joanie again, because we really clicked yesterday. I've never had a real girlfriend before now, so I'm wondering how can you tell when a girl stops being a friend and becomes an actual girlfriend? The bus is usually late, so there's plenty of time to nut that one out, because I really dig Joanie. She's cute, and she makes me laugh.

“Fresh from the glorious armpit of the Outback.” I'm gonna tease her with that one after we know each other better. I sure felt sorry for her yesterday though, when Miss Walker gave her heaps.

From my position on the top fence railing, I look up at the mountains surrounding our valley, and suddenly get this awesome idea concerning my family history. My great-grandfather, grandfather, and my dad—were all tough Aussie blokes. Those guys could pull their own teeth out if they had to. Me? I'm just an average dude. Until today. Now I've come up with this epic

plan.

I've just decided how to become the most famous sixteen-year-old in Perisher Valley. Because Ding and I are gonna climb Mount Perisher. Correction—Mount Perisher up the steep face of Widow's Peak from the back side, where none of the tourists even want to go. A lot of people have climbed Perisher. But not as far as the very tip. Widow's Peak. Probably has something to do with that old curse that says “any team that makes it all the way to the top will come down minus a man.”

As for taking Ding along, the locals around here all hate Dingoes. Convinced they'll end up with an arm or a leg chewed off if they get within ten feet of one. Not true in Ding's case, of course. But I enjoy people thinking I'm brave for having trained him. He's lying under the fence, so I reach down to pat his head.

“We'll do it together, won't we boy?”

Dingoes are cunning, savage, and strong as heck, although they don't look it. That's their secret weapon, see? The Australian government even built a dingo fence to protect farmers' stock. Runs from Jimbour, Queensland, to Fowlers Bay, South Australia—three-thousand three-hundred miles. Massive. And no government's gonna spend all that loot to keep dingoes out unless it's really necessary, are they?

I often show a jawbone of a dead dingo to tourists, to demonstrate how that gigantic, gaping mouth makes it easy for them to steal porkers, newborn lambs, even poddy calves. I paint a real gruesome picture. Guess I'm after payback, for all the times Ding's been treated

mean. He's tame, but dingoes in the wild are capable of anything. Dad says I better keep it in mind that no dingo can ever be completely trusted.

Finally I spot the bus a long way up our dirt track, but it's winter, which means I won't get a deposit of red dust up my nose. Big relief. Again I admire the Snowy Mountains—the Snowies, we call them around here—then bend down to talk to Ding. “How lucky are we Ding, to have all this practically in our own backyard?”

He looks up at the mountains too, since he understands everything I say.

So I continue with my dream logic. “I'm sure to make front page of the local newspaper, Ding. A kid, doing it alone, with no-one else except his dog.”

Ding smiles at me. According to Dad dogs can't smile, but he's wrong.

“Stand up, boy.” I command and Ding immediately jumps to attention. “Good dog.”

He flops down to resting position, again.

“Look at you, lying there so quiet and innocent, like you wouldn't hurt a fly. But we know better, don't we, boy?”

The bus is laboring closer as I check out Mount Perisher again, except now I feel a little uneasy. Climbing her will be risky—like everyone knows how she got her name. So I switch my gaze to take in Mount Kosciuszko, this time, which is crawling with skiers, yet Mount Perisher is practically deserted. Why? Because tourists rate Mount Perisher second to Kosciuszko. That's why.

Perisher

Huge mistake on their part. Gigantic! But nobody in the Valley is gonna set them straight. The fact is, Kosciuszko may be taller, but Mount Perisher is the one they ought to be worrying about. Three climbers gone missing in four years. Wham! Just vanished somewhere up there, the way the curse says. So, if Ding and I can make it to the summit and safely back down again—I'll be the man.

Solving the mystery of those climbers would be a biggie, too. It would prove that curse is nothing but a legend people told so many times everybody believes in it. I could really make a name for myself. Familiar rumblings a little way off, so I stretch, then take one final look at my destiny.

“I'm dead-set on finding out what happened on your slopes, old girl. Arthur says he knows, but he's not telling. I reckon he enjoys tormenting me. And since he's the oldest person in Perisher Valley, I guess he's entitled to a few secrets.”

Then a horrible thought strikes me. “This is risky stuff you're planning, dude. Ever consider maybe you could be nuts, but no-one's told you, yet?”

Still, what have I got to worry about? It's a perfect day today, and I can see all the way to the summit. That jagged, curled-over part that looks like an eagle's beak. How hard can it be to climb that? I glance down at Ding, nudge him affectionately with the toe of my sneaker. “Your coat's a little thicker already, boy. If you could talk, I'd ask what you think about climbing Perisher with me.”

Chewing harder on my trusty pen, I try to face facts. How come I'm so cool with taking on a dangerous mountain, when snakes, flu shots, even strange noises coming from the woods, can rattle my cage. You're getting to be a real nut-case, Williams. But whenever those old fears come over me, all I have to do is think of the blood-soaked beaches in a foreign country, where my great-great-grandfather, the Anzac, won a Victoria Cross for bravery.

You must be one brick short of a full load, wanting to go hang off the top of a mountain, when you could be fishing with your mates. But, no! You gotta' take on the unknown, don't you? And why? You play rugby league. You'll soon be able to bring down one of the New Zealand rugby forwards. So, how come the list of things you're afraid of keeps growing?

The latest is tsunamis. Not very likely, since I live nowhere near the ocean. And red-back spiders, after I found one in an empty box. But where mountain climbing is concerned, I'm fearless! Go figure.

“If anyone from school finds out, I'm cactus, Ding. But I can do it if you come with me. We go everywhere together, don't we, boy? Except for when you go walkabout. Even I can't stop you then, can I? Must be because your ancestors once trekked across the Outback with the Aborigines, hunting Bilbies for thousands of years. Probably in your DNA, Ding. Just like doing something stand-out is in mine.”

The winter sun feels warm on my arms as the bus slows down for me. So I jump down from my fence.

No great leap when you're over six feet tall. Then I rake my fingers through my hair which I've always thought is the color of red Outback mud. I'm hoping Joanie is watching, as I tuck both thumbs inside the waist of my jeans, then use my best swagger to amble across the road, with my pen dangling from one corner of my mouth.

No one can hear me, so I stake my challenge. "Have to shut the big plan down for the day now, but anyone intending to keep me off my mountain better have a rockin' good reason. Because, once school is out—I'm tasting altitude."

On the first step into the bus, I remember Dad, and shout back over my shoulder. "Bye, Dad!" Probably won't hear me anyway. Most likely getting ready to drive into the city, again. "Wish he'd tell me why he's been spending so much time there, lately."

I'm searching for a spare seat near Joanie, trying not to appear too obvious. A guy can't rush these things. Then Joanie beams up at me and moves over, but it's a bummer trying to squeeze into small spaces when you're my height. So, as the bus slowly moves away, I look out the window, and what do I see? Dad standing there, minus his boots, clutching a tea towel, and waving. "He has to wave me off, every day." I explain to Joanie.

"Yeah. Aren't parents blind, sometimes? If they had their way, we'd never grow up."

I turn to face her, because she sounds as if she really understands. This girl is not just cute, she's actually got

something going on inside. “Yeah.” I nod, amazed at how alike we think. “I asked him once why do I always go in for dangerous sports, like mountain climbing, white water rafting, and sled-dog racing? He says, 'Because you're an adventurer. Like your grandfather and his father before him. It's in your bloodline.' ”

“I'm an only child too.”

“How did you know I was?”

“The high expectations thing. I recognize the symptoms. Mine are always giving me reasons why there's something I have to live up to in my family, too. Like my future's all mapped out before I even get a vote. They're all in the medical field, see.”

“I guess that means you want to do something else.”

“I want to be an investigator.”

“You mean like the police?”

“Yes. Solve mysteries, and all that. You know how many unsolved mysteries are laying around?”

“Never thought about it much.”

“Hundreds. No, thousands, maybe. But I figure, if I don't make a name for myself solving a couple of those before I get to uni, then I'll solve animal mysteries by being an aquatic geneticist. That way I can still solve mysteries and keep my parents happy, too.”

“I guess that wouldn't be so bad.” I roll my eyes until only the whites show, and I must have have executed it brilliantly, because it not only gets a laugh from Joanie but from a few others, as well. And I'm thinking, does anyone else on the bus know what an aquatic geneticist is? Because I sure don't.

Even though we just met, I think she gets me. But I decide to keep it light since the guys on the bus are tuned in. Then next time I look at Joanie, I get a shock to see she isn't laughing. In fact her face looks kind of deadpan.

“You're really serious about all this, aren't you?”

“Well, solving mysteries was just a hobby until I fell into a full-blown mystery going on right in my own...”

“Go for it, Williams!” The loud familiar voice of one of my mates hangs so heavy with sarcasm I can feel it two seats away. So I shoot him my best stink-eye glare before turning back to Joanie.

“Just ignore him. He's being a jerk,” I tell her. “But, hey. I got a few mysteries in my family, too. We ought to compare notes, sometime.”

She blows a curl from her eyes, staring at me like she doesn't know if I'm joking or not.

“Seriously,” I answer, as if she flat-out asked me. “I never know what I'm gonna' find when I get home lately. One minute things are sweet as, then the next I'm like, what's going on? Dad's on the phone all the time, lately, and I don't know why. Maybe we're being sued, or something. I keep asking him but he says, 'Don't worry—I'm handling it.' Drives me nuts!”

“Oh, I so totally get it, Riley.” She closes her eyes, and purses her lips, like she's concentrating hard. “Would you believe my Dad's gone weird, too, ever since we left the Outback? I love him heaps and I'm proud he's a medical research doctor. But right now, I

just don't get him. We used to be so close I would almost know what he was going to say next. Now, half the time Mom and I don't even know where he is."

She looks at me as if she's trying to decide something about me—which is when I come to a shuddering halt. Usually I'm not so good at reading women. But this time I'm so positive she's going to ask me something that maybe I don't want anyone else to hear, I give her an answer totally off the wall before she gets another word out. "You tried the youth group out yet, Joanie?"

I could almost see the wheels stop rolling in her brain while she switched to a new gear. "Didn't know there was one. Our family's not the Church-going kind."

"Neither is mine. I've lived in Perisher Valley my whole life and never went. Then one of my mates started going, so, I tried it out. The Leader is a really cool guy. He listens, you know? They meet every Tuesday night down at the community hall."

All of a sudden she grabs my arm—like she just got this brilliant idea. And just when I thought I had slipped that one in pretty smooth. Would a youth group meeting count as a first date? That's what I'm wondering when she smiles the sweetest smile I ever laid eyes on.

"Okay. I'd like to give it a try. Would you sit with me?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll let you know what time they start, and see you there."

“Sounds good. Hey, do you have your license? Because there's something I'd really like to do, afterwards, but I—” She stops dead, gets this embarrassed look on her face, and takes her hand from my arm. “I don't have any way to get there.”

“Yep. My license, and my own wheels, too. Wanna guess who gave me my wheels?”

“Uh, your Dad?”

“Wrong!” Now I'm on a roll. I love telling this story. “No. Dad's been pretty broke since he put himself through medical school. It was Mr. Never. That neighbor we sold all our dogs to. He owns the only sled-dog ranch in Australia now. We're practically the only place far enough south with mountains that see any real snow.”

“Far out! He gave you a truck, just like that? With no strings?”

“Nope. He just comes home in this big new dog-truck one day, and tells me he's got no need for the small ute, anymore, so if it's cool with my Dad I can have it. Otherwise it's just gonna' sit there doing nothing. I was massively stoked, and Dad couldn't believe it, either. Mr. Never always treats me super-awesome. Makes me feel like family.”

“Interesting how some neighbors can be that way. Especially if you live next to them long enough. Then there are the other kind. My family's moved around so much, you'd think we were in a witness protection program. Then the only person that even came close to being a good neighbor to us totally up and

disappeared.”

I waited for her to go on but she didn't. “You mean like moved away, right?”

“Umm...” She looked up at me with those green eyes turned all mysterious. “Not really.”

If the bus hadn't pulled into school right at that moment, I would have asked for a better explanation. But people were already pushing and shoving past, so I stood up to get her backpack off the overhead shelf.

“It's one of the most important cases I'm working on at the moment.” She was talking fast, now, since we only had a few more minutes. “But I've sort of hit a brick wall. In fact, I could really use some help on it, Riley. So, I was wondering if—I mean if you're not too busy or anything—if you could give me a ride to this...” I stood back so she could step into the isle in front of me. “...place that's too far away to walk to. If you could, I mean.”

I should have thought twice about what I was getting myself into. But instead, I just said, “Sure I can help you out there.” Like it was no big deal and I helped out with unsolved cases every day. But by that time, we got swept away and lost in a crowd of kids, so I figured we'd have to continue this conversation on the ride home after school.

Except she never showed up, when it was time to go home.

3

Everything she said that morning keeps replaying in my brain, and I'm trying to figure out what could have happened. Maybe her Mom picked her up and they had to go somewhere, or maybe her Dad came back. You dork, Riley Williams. Why didn't you at least ask her where she needed to go?

When I finally get home from school, I've just finished making one of my special creations, when I hear a car driving down the long road into our property. Carrying my favorite sandwich—a triple peanut butter and jam feast, topped with strawberries—I stroll outside, heading down the front steps with the soft tap tap of paws behind me. Ding is curious, too. “Maybe Dad's made it home in time for dinner.”

Except it wasn't my Dad's car. Instead it's a flash

four wheel drive I'd never seen before, which comes to a screeching halt outside our farmhouse. Hey! I don't know how I know it, but I figure it's got to be Joanie's Dad. He sticks his head out the car window, and nails me with the same color of green eyes Joanie has, with the exact same expression I last saw on Joanie. Then I get a feeling in the pit of my stomach, like maybe something happened to her.

So I freeze right there on the bottom step, with jam oozing out my sandwich and trickling down my hand before he turns the motor off. Finally I get a word out. "G'day. You're Joanie's Dad, aren't you?"

"Yes, and you would be Riley Williams, right? My daughter tells me you've grown up in Perisher Valley, and that you're familiar with the Outback area around here."

"Outback?"

"Outback—rain forest areas, whatever you call your local wilderness areas. I need some information about rain forests, and the local tribes."

"Sure thing. You want to come inside?"

"I'd prefer to talk in the car, if you don't mind."

"Okay, but I don't know all that much. Some rain forests I've gone into a few times. Once with my dog, when I saw something I wasn't supposed to. So we high-tailed it out, real fast. Places like that are dangerous for white folks who got no business being there. You know? Just like my family's always told me. But I so get it now."

Mr. Thomas pushes the front passenger side door

open for me, so I take one last bite of my sandwich, then enter car-heaven. Man, the leather seats in his car are triple-awesome. So I'm floating as I listen. Or I would have been, except my attention is drawn to the way Mr. T is clutching his steering wheel, like it's a life raft—and sweating away like a bush pig.

I'm trying not to laugh, but it's so weird. He's a total chrome-dome on top, but makes up for that with masses of black curls beginning halfway down the back of his head. I wonder if anyone has noticed he looks exactly like one of the Three Stooges. “Get down, Ding!”

“No. No. It's okay, Riley, I don't mind. Good dog, Ding.”

Sure is difficult to keep a straight face—but I can't offend Joanie's Dad—he's being so nice to Ding, who's lapping up the attention like they've been friends forever. Other people aren't always so cool about petting a Dingo. Dad told me he has seen Mr. T (that's what I call him in my mind) at the hospital a few times and that he's some kind of genius in the medical field. Dad and I talk about everything, and I mentioned we had a new girl at school the first day I met her. We don't have any secrets. Except for lately, when he's been acting weird off and on. He still hasn't said much about that.

Anyway, something sure has spooked Mr. T in sort of the same way and it has my curiosity-meter ticking. “It's nice to finally meet you, Mr. Thomas. Dad says he was introduced to you at the hospital the other day.”

“Yes, he was. Nice to meet you too, Riley. I'm hoping you can answer a few questions for me.”

“I'll sure try. What do you want to know?”

“I'm told you're a fairly active young man who regularly runs dogs through the woods.”

“Sounds about right.” Suddenly I get excited. Could this be another area of life opening up for me? Like helping to discover some new scientific breakthrough, for instance? Oh man, that would be so cool. “Would I be helping you in your Research, Mr. Thomas?”

No answer.

Probably because now the guy is occupied winding all the car windows up tight. while Ding's still trying to lick his fingers. “Riley, whatever questions I may run by you, I must ask you not to discuss with Joanie. She would insist on being involved, and that is not a good idea.”

Uh-oh. So maybe Joanie isn't as great at handling the oldies as I am. I better warn her to learn fast, or her old man is gonna tell her nothing about all this. Maybe even shut her out of some of the stuff she likes.

“I had someone else working with me until recently, you see. My partner, Ted. But he left town suddenly, and I don't know if he intends to return. He was more familiar with the area around here. That's put me in a bind, since time is of the essence with the project I'm working on. Now I need someone I can trust to help me.”

Someone he can trust? Is that what he thinks of me? Epic. Now he's wiping his brow with a hankie, which

is so wet it looks like it needs to be squeezed through a wringer.

“Riley, did Joanie tell you our family has spent all our lives in the Outback, until recently?”

“Yep. She said she'll always be an Outback girl at heart. Says you been taking her on day trips ever since she can remember. Out west, where it gets so hot you have to live underground, like the Opal miners.”

“That's right. My partner was working with me in the Outback then, so sometimes he would come along on those trips, too. Like to Uluru. Or I would go alone. I went to collect plants I needed in my research. Have you ever heard of the 'Bone Pointers' of Uluru?”

“Don't think so. Who are they?”

“They're the ritual killers of the Outback. Appointed by the local tribe to hunt down their victims, no matter how long it takes. When they do, they shake cursed bones at the unfortunate person, then leave that poor individual to die an agonizing death. Threats like that were made on my life at Uluru, which Joanie knows nothing about, you see. I've made every effort to keep this information from both her and her mother. I don't want them frightened.”

That's when I start thinking that Mr. T doesn't know his daughter very well. The Joanie I know didn't seem to be frightened of anyone or anything about the Outback— except maybe of being too bored living away from it. But, by this time, all this stuff is beginning to make me feel like I've been beamed up to mars and back. So, I barely even blink when Mr.

Thomas suddenly jerks bolt straight up in his seat—like a startled koala crossing the road.

“Who is that driving onto your property? Do you know them?”

“It's just our groceries being delivered, Mr. Thomas. My father shops online.”

“Online? I find that hard to believe. Are you sure?”

“Yep. Most folk in the Valley shop online. Saves driving all the way into town for less choices. Anyway, what did you do to annoy these Bone Pointer dudes?”

“Oh. Well, I..” His voice drifted off while he continued to watch the car getting closer. “Their land is sacred to them. They see anyone who takes from it as a criminal. Including the plant life apparently, and they know I did that. Our modern advances in science obviously mean nothing to them.”

Then I have listen to his gravelly voice being cleared, while inside I'm spewing, because I've just had a horrible thought. What if Dad comes home and shuts the whole deal down, before Mr. Thomas finally spills? I'm real interested in how this all spins out.

“Well, you should be safe in Perisher Valley, Mr. T,” I tell him. “Even if they're still after you. But maybe Joanie could at least keep helping you here in the Valley in some way, so she wouldn't worry so much. I reckon she misses helping you with your research by the way she talks about it. She's real smart—knows all kinds of stuff.”

“That's true. Joanie knows the name of nearly every plant I work with. Never forgot a single thing I told

her. Several species grew at the base of Uluru, others around the Mutitjulu waterfall. She used to keep lookout for me while I collected whatever I needed.”

Wow! Maybe Joanie has a photographic memory. Next minute, a hiss of brakes has Mr. T. nearly jumping out of his skin. The delivery truck is turning around, which he seems to find suspicious, because he peers down the road and watches til it's gone. “Do you need more plants for your research, then? Maybe you'll find what you need close to here.”

“Yes, I believe there are some things that grow in a certain rain forest near Perisher Valley. That's why we came here. And if you don't mind, I'll pick your brains about a few other locations, too.”

“Sure. I can tell you pretty much about all of them. Except the one where Ding and I went that time we shouldn't have. Wouldn't want to go back there. The local tribe was having a special kind of meeting that night. That's when I learned why Dad always tells me to leave the local tribes alone and not snoop into their business.”

“Can you drive, Riley?”

It was a question that set my curiosity meter ticking, again, because it was the exact same one Joanie asked me, this morning. I had sort of relaxed about not seeing her on the bus. If anything had happened we wouldn't be sitting here talking so calmly about business. But then all of a sudden I felt like there was something about all this neither one of them was telling me. The way he was looking at me was a dead giveaway, too.

Way too intense for simply being curious about whether someone else can drive, or not.

I could have told him I'd been driving all over the farm since I was ten, had my own truck, and could handle it on any kind of terrain for a hundred miles around. Like it was an extension of my own body. But I didn't. Instead, I kept things as casual as he was and answered, "Dad's clocked up a lot of teaching miles in my Learner's book, so I could pass the test early. So, yeah, I have my License, Mr. T. It's just not 'Provisional' yet."

"Good. I realize you're quite a young kid to be driving, but it may come in handy if I need your help."

Young kid? Who is he calling a young kid? I don't look that young. "Well, I'm happy to drive you to some of the rain forests if you like. This four wheel drive should handle the bush real sweet."

"No. This vehicle is too well-known. At least it was in the Outback. And I don't want anyone knowing where, or when, I'm about my business. My wife's car is new. It won't be recognized."

He was quiet for so long I thought he was finished then. Which was good, because this conversation was starting to give me the creeps. Except the dude was just getting started.

"You see, there's a certain degree of danger in my work, Riley. Most people know the Australian rain forests hold the key to the cure for some of the world's worst diseases. The problem is the Aborigines hold the key to those rain forests. All the traditional owners still

practice their ancient ways. And once they start following you...”

He drifted off, again, and I let my breath out long and slow before I realized I was holding it.

Then he shakes his head as though to free himself of something. “You won't be aware of when they will strike. No warning signs. No sound. Suddenly, they're just—there. And by that time it's too late! Anyway, I'm glad we've had this talk.”

Looking at the guy's face, I'm not sure if I am. What a transformation. His features looked twisted, his eyes narrowed to slits, and he was wearing an expression that looked like it could slice through concrete. Then he snapped out of it as quick as he slipped in.

“It will be a great help if you could make a list of the rain forests you know. Perhaps draw me a map?” Back to normal, again. Like he was asking directions to the best place to eat, or something.

“Okay. Sure. Is that all? Mark out where the rain forests are, and draw a map of each?”

“That's a huge help to begin with. ”

So I nod, and he gives this big grin. But I'm waiting for more. Because after everything he's just told me, the favor seems too simple. Then the bomb drops.

“In the meantime, Riley, don't say a word to anyone about our conversation. Especially Joanie. She'll be a lot safer if she keeps out of everything connected with my work from now on.”

Next minute he shoves a business card at me. “If you will text me the minute you've done that list, I'll

return your call immediately. Prepare it as soon as possible, will you? We've got no time to lose!"

4

Seated together on the bus the next day, I fished for an answer to where Joanie disappeared yesterday, by telling her I missed her.

Instead, she just says, "Yeah, me, too. Sorry I couldn't make it."

I sneak a look at her, wondering what she would think if she knew her Dad visited me. Heck, maybe the guy was only acting like an over-protective parent by keeping stuff from her. He sure had my creep meter going, though. After he left, I had to play a couple of computer games right through without realizing it, before I could totally chill.

Which didn't work that long because the next thing I knew I was surfing the web to see what "Mister Google" thought about Bone Pointers. Like maybe Mr. T was out of his tree with all the crazy stuff he told me

about them. But the computer backed up every word. What's more, it looks like all that bad business had been going on for decades practically in my own backyard. Now, all of a sudden I've got something a whole lot worse than red-backed spiders to worry about.

The only relief I got was knowing I hadn't promised to do anything but draw a couple of maps. Except for the driving part. But maybe he only wanted me to drop them off somewhere safe. Like secret agents, or something. All I knew was—if I didn't get more information—I wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything else all day long.

Next thing I know, I've spent—I don't know how long—just staring at Joanie.

“What.” She finally has to come right out and ask before my brain gets in focus, again.

I had been thinking how Mr. Thomas sure was a freaky sort of guy. But I couldn't help liking him. That doesn't mean I want to be his wing man, though. Maybe it's because he's a Scientist he acts so weird. Anyway, it all sounded a little loony to me, if you get my drift. Right now I just want to forget him and concentrate on his sweet daughter sitting beside me.

“Met your neighbors, yet?” I ask.

“Not really. That place is so big we can't even see their house from ours.”

“Mr. Never likes his privacy, and old Arthur has a cabin behind the dog yard. You'll meet them both soon.”

“Sounds mysterious.” Then she leaned closer and said, “Mr. Never and old Arthur!” in a spooky sort of voice that made me laugh. “What’s the dirt on them?”

“His daughter is a close friend of my dad’s—they grew up together. And Arthur married into the family, so we’re all sort of related.”

“What do you mean sort of related? Either you are, or you aren’t. Right?”

“I don’t really know. It’s like this huge secret nobody talks about. Pretty weird, actually.”

“I love secrets. They’re my specialty. They’re like putting the best kind of puzzle together, backwards.”

I was thinking she probably inherited the same kind of brain as her genius dad, and solving this kind of stuff kept it occupied. The next thing she said made me think she almost read my mind.

“That’s how I solve mysteries. By working backwards. Why don’t you give me some background on them, and I’ll see if anything jumps out at me.”

“Well...” I tried to decide how much I should actually tell her, since my family was one of the oldest out there. “Mr. Never, Arthur, and my Grandfather Charlie Williams, were all born right here in the Valley, so Dad and EG were pretty much raised together.”

“Not that far back. Just anything mysterious you can think about recently. Who’s this EG person?”

“Mr. Never’s daughter. She works at our High school. Doesn’t care much for the sled-dogs. She can’t stand any dogs, actually. You met her the other day,

right?”

“I don't think so. I'd have remembered a last name like Never.”

“That's right, I forgot she doesn't use it at school. Everybody calls her Miss N.”

“Hey, she coaches us for basketball. She's really beautiful. She's Mr. Never's daughter?”

Beautiful? Who, EG? Well, not that I've noticed. But a gentleman doesn't comment on stuff like that. “Yeah. His only child. Apart from me, that is.” I laugh, so she'll know I'm joking. “Fair dinkum, he treats me like royalty—even better than EG in some ways. Probably because we're both guys.”

We crack up and I have to correct myself. “Have so much in common, I mean. All the main things in life. Food, the outdoors, and sled-dogs. Not to mention he and my Grandfather were mates. Arthur, too. The three of them did a lot of climbing together.”

Seconds later, I feel gentle fingers on my arm, and hear a whisper which turns my stomach to mush. “I was thinking about what you said about your dad, yesterday, too, Riley. Try not to worry about him so much. Things may feel like they're crashing down at the moment, but maybe all this is connected somehow and we can figure things out. ”

Then she smiles at me like an angel—so put an arm around her shoulders and give her a squeeze. Didn't even think twice about it. That's how natural it felt. I'm thinking how I particularly like Joanie's voice. It has this silky tone, like liquid chocolate, you know? No

way you can argue with a chick attached to a voice like that. But luckily, she doesn't seem to have a clue how she affects me, and maybe she's just thinking about us being good friends. Either way, I'm feeling better about everything. Including my dad. Things are definitely looking up for Riley Williams. Then it flashes across my mind how much of all this happened since I started to pray regularly, like they'd been talking about in youth group. Although I'd been too shy to admit it, I sure feel more at peace when I pray about things.

"When Dad gets home tonight, maybe he'll tell me more," I said. "Ever wish you could snap your fingers, and make your life totally simple?"

Surprises the heck out of me when she hesitates, opens her mouth, but says nothing, just sits there biting her lip. Now that really spins my wheels. Joanie stuck for words? It hasn't taken me long to learn she won't quit talking if she has something to say. She's nodding, but I sense she's holding back.

"Yes. It would be awesome if life ran smoothly the way we expect it to." She blows an invisible curl away. "Bit of a surprise that Miss N is the mysterious EG Never though. Split personality?"

"She's mysterious, all right. And acting different lately, too. Maybe she's just worried about her dad. I know Mr. Never was feeling real crook a few months back." It feels peaceful, talking with Joanie in the near-empty bus, and I look up to see that we're nearly at my stop. "EG was named after her dad."

"Named after him? How?"

“She told me he named her Edwina Grace Never which was the closest he could find to his own name. Edward. The middle name, was for her mom. But she didn’t like Edwina Grace much, so she shortened it to EG.”

“Edwina Grace Never? Yuk! What a mouthful. I don’t blame her for changing it. Maybe he wanted a boy.”

“Maybe. That way, they could have called him Well-eye.”

“Well-eye?”

“Yeah. Well-Eye Never.”

She laughs, again, and I realize I love making her laugh, because it brings out that dimple on her chin. Never fails. I’m learning a lot about Joanie. For instance, mostly she comes across as nerdy-serious, but I see a different side to her—which keeps me interested. I never know which Joanie she’ll be when we’re together. But either one is cool with me.

“You’re home, Riley. Bye. Catch you tomorrow.”

A few minutes later, I’m back to reality, checking the mailbox outside our rambling Queenslander-style home. Dad and I both think it’s perfect for us, although he still talks a lot about the little cabin he grew up in, back when our whole family raised sled dogs. I was too young to remember much of that, except it sure hurt when we had to part with all our dogs. Except for Ding, of course. Ding is family. But at least the rest all went to Mr. Never. He’s the best. Anything you have to learn about dogs, he already knows it.

Actually, I'm lucky to have sort of an extended family. I've known Mr. Never all my life. But, come to think of it, I don't know much about his life. I've never heard him talk about his parents, doesn't even mention a wife. EG doesn't either, which seems totally weird, since that was her mom. Dad says she died young, so it's probably too painful for them to talk about.

Anyway, I head over to the sled-dog ranch, with plenty to ask Mr. Never, today. He's in the dog-yard as usual when I arrive, which means old Arthur, who's also been like a grandfather to me, won't show his face. Arthur can't stand Mr. Never. And they usually work it so they're never within cooee (that's shouting distance) of each other. In spite of the fact Arthur lives and works right here in the dog yard, in a little cabin Mr. Never built especially for him. Go figure! When I get close enough I catch him shoveling the dog yard, and his gray head lifts up when he hears me call to him.

“Hi, Mr. Never. You busy?”

“Always got time for you, son.”

“You shoulda' left the poop scooping for me or Arthur. You look like something the cat spewed up, today.”

That makes him laugh. He taught me that one last year when he was real crook, but he's grinning as he straightens up, then leans on his shovel. “I've written down some notes on the dogs for you, Riley. Come into the house for a snack, and I'll give them to you.”

A snack? Now he's got me. Mr. Never's snacks can fill a growing teenager for a week. “Sure, I'm always

ready for some good tucker. Busy season soon, eh? You gonna' buy any more dogs?" Walking across the dog-yard, he's got his arm around me, chatting away friendly as usual, when he flat out hits me with it.

"Riley. I've decided to leave some land to you. Some you're familiar with. Another parcel way out further, you may want to investigate, one day. Over where you run the dogs, there's maybe one hundred acres of prime property, which EG doesn't want. She only wants a clear ten acre boundary right around the house. I've talked it over with her, and she's happy with that arrangement, since she hasn't got the same interest for dogs in her blood, like you do."

When he says things like that I get confused. And honest, it's no wonder I feel like a grandson.

"Well, um... thanks, Mr. Never. That's awful nice of you. So I can have free run of the whole woods and surrounds, and EG sticks close to the house?" I have no idea of when all this is supposed to happen (maybe he's writing up a will for when he dies someday), or even what's so different about it, because that's pretty much how everything works, now. All I know is that Mr. Never is trying to do something nice for me, again. So I totally make sure he knows I appreciate anything he does. No matter if I don't see any of it till I'm middle-aged.

"Yes, that's the arrangement. Those one hundred acres in the woods, plus the other fifty acres further out—they're all yours. Paperwork's done already."

Just what I thought. A will of some kind. Maybe

even a map to show exactly where all this stuff was. I don't know why all the hassle, though. Heck, it seems so unnecessary, considering you can't get EG out in them woods even if you paid her. Whatever. I decide to tease a little more information out of him. "Maybe EG will show an interest in the dogs a few years from now."

Something that makes him laugh so hard, I join in too, because we both know it ain't gonna happen. "More likely, she'll get interested in travel," he finally answers, "and won't want to spend another day with her old father in his boring farmhouse in Perisher Valley. Ah, Riley. We're all created different, but we're still the same, under God."

That sounds nice. Except I got no idea what the 'under God' part means.

Anyway, we walk back to the farmhouse together to eat whatever he's prepared for our snack. I'm excited to see the list he's written out for me, too. Mr. Never has been raising sled-dog teams for ten years, now. And being practically the only one in Australia, he knows how to get the best out of any dog.

Funny thing happens as we approach his house though. For the first time, I notice he's walking much slower, and he never takes a step without his arm around my shoulders. I don't know if that's because he loves me, or he needs to help balance himself. Whatever the reason is—I feel like something's coming. Something everyone knows about except me.

5

The following day Ashlee's car pulls into our driveway. She's a friend of my dad's who's a cook in one of Jindabyne's top restaurants, and she's always happy. Short blonde hair. Pretty too, in a country girl kind of way. No surprise, she often comes by, so definitely no need to stop chomping away on my apple. She winds the car window down and calls out, "G'day, Riley. That's about the biggest 'Granny Smith' I've seen this season. You won't be hungry again, anytime soon." She grins, then extracts herself gracefully from the small car.

"Wish I could do that. I usually manage to fall out in a heap."

“Well, you've got two extra-long legs to organize. So it might take you more practice.”

Ding sidles up looking for a pat, which he gets, no trouble, because Ashlee loves him. She can be a real joker sometimes, too—suits her friendly personality. Wears Jeans and blouses, mostly. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen Ashlee in a dress.

“Want an apple, Ash? They're good for you. Or how about a sandwich?”

“No, thanks. I'll pass on that most generous offer.”

“Dad's not home yet.”

“Actually, I came to see you, this time. Can we go inside?”

Uh-oh. Trouble. I get a sinking feeling all of a sudden.

Ding curls up on the floor nearby, while Ashlee and I square off against each other across the kitchen table. I'm starting to freak out. My apple is gone and I'm still hungry, but until I hear what she has to say, I'm off my tucker. She looks serious, too, and I've never seen Ashlee not smiling.

“Riley, your dad called. He's decided to stay over in Canberra for a few nights, instead of driving home every day. He's got a lot of important appointments lined up, so he thinks it's best if you hang out at my place until he's done.” She nudges my arm with a wink. “How about it, buster? I can introduce you to the wonderful world of domestics. Mending, ironing, cleaning. You'll love it.”

“Very funny. Is there something wrong with Dad

that you're not telling me?"

"Your dad is fine, nothing to worry about. And he would have told you himself except you were at school. He intends to phone you at my place, later tonight. He can answer your questions then. So, how about throwing a few things in a bag, and let's get cracking."

I'm rinsing out cups in the kitchen sink when she says that, and whirl around fast. "But, Ash. Why can't you tell me why Dad needs all these special appointments? Is he in trouble?" I look her directly in the eyes so she can't avoid the question—so relieved when she shakes her head. "Okay, well... I'm too old to be babysat. I'd rather just stay here on my own."

"Your dad figured you'd say that, but it would stress him out too much worrying about you here alone. And why would you think he's in trouble, Riley? Maybe it's something good. Ask him yourself, tonight."

Funny how Ding can always sense when something is going on, which is why he ambles over to me now, and nudges my hand. "What about Ding?"

She nods, so I give up and fill a sports bag with stuff. Not long after that I'm leading Ding up Ashlee's front steps. I've never been in her house before, so I'm cruising the layout of what's going to be my bedroom. She gestures Ding can come in, too, so I'm good. If my dog is included, you got a deal. But it feels sort of strange, later on, when she's showing me around her house.

The bedroom is okay, except for the frills. I sit on

the bed, scuffing my heel on the carpet, until Ashlee sits down beside me, and I worry about Ding. What if he jumps up on the bed? But he crawls underneath, instead. "It's gonna feel weird, living here, Ash, when I've got my own home. Heck, if I can stay out all night in the bush and cook my own tucker, what's left to take care of?"

"I understand. But I'm hoping you'll treat my place as your own, for a short while. It will be fun. Now let's go check out the kitchen"

Later, I'm standing next to the phone, and scoop it up on the first ring. "Dad?" I don't even wait for an answer just starty, so I'm staying at Ashlee's like you wanted. What's going on? Where are you?"

"I'm in Canberra, Riley. I know this arrangement must have surprised you, son, but I don't want you to worry. Everything will be finished with soon and I'll be home again, before you know it. Ashlee's a good neighbor, and a very nice lady, so just relax and enjoy the visit."

Dad sounds stressed to me. Like maybe he's going through some major stuff. A son should have his dad's back, but how can he if he doesn't know what's going down? "Okay. But this is me you're talking to, remember? I can take anything, so I'd rather know than be left in the dark." Well, I sure hoped I could take anything.

"It's nothing to worry about, son. In fact, it could mean a big move up in my career. Only, there's lots of details to be ironed out, before I can tell you for sure.

Special appointments, routine tests, boring, but necessary. I have to meet several people and go through a series of interviews. It would mean moving away from the Valley, though. So later I'll ask you to give me your thoughts on how you'd feel about that. ”

“Oh yeah. Like you don't know I've been wanting to migrate to somewhere warmer for centuries. So, where will you stay in Canberra?” He's told me nothing, yet —only made me curious. “And why can't you drive into Canberra and back, until it's all done?”

“I don't know where yet, Riley. And it's not that simple. I'll be making one more quick trip back to Perisher Valley, but that will be while you're in school. I need to pick up some more clothes, and I intend to visit Edward. After that, it's easier to stay over in Canberra until it's all completed.”

“When will you know exactly where you're staying?” But he clams up. Don't be so impatient. I tell myself. Except how should a guy react when his dad decides to crash somewhere else for two weeks, but refuses to say exactly where? Okay, deal with it, Williams. He'll tell you when he can.

“You working extra hours at the sled-dog ranch, now we've had more snow, son?”

“Yeah, I am. I mean what with all the snow, and EG up to her usual stuff.” I stopped before it sounded like the same old complaints when we might only have a few minutes to talk.

“EG still not helping with the dogs?” He picked up on it, anyway. “Well, she has a job, and not everyone

loves dogs as much as you and Edward do. Just help out where you can, Riley, and I'll have a talk with her when I get back."

"Guess what, Dad? He made me Pavlova and Lamingtons for a snack. "

"Wow! Still treating you like royalty, isn't he. Okay, so don't go stressing over all this. It's just that I really need to focus so I can nail this thing."

Oh, sure—easy to say. I glare at the phone, because I get a feeling he's about to hang up and I really don't know any extra about what he's up to than before he called. "Okay. Well, Ashlee's place is cool. After I moved in, she made me some scones with jam and cream, plus a really wicked cocoa. Better watch out, Dad—maybe I'll get to liking it here."

A deep belly-laugh booms across the line and I remember how I've always been good at acting. Wouldn't hurt to take in a few lessons before I go to University, in case I decide to give acting a whirl at some stage. The guys are always saying Australian TV and films are desperate for new faces.

"Hold the line a second, son."

And, just like that, he starts talking to someone at his end. So my mind wanders back to something Joanie told me. Her folks intend to enroll her at a top University south of Sydney. I guess that's better for Mr. T's work, living near our largest city. But, it's gonna' mean another change for Joanie, and worst of all—we won't be together. Unless that happens to be where Dad relocates us, too.

“You there, son? Sorry about that.”

“Dad, why don't I come visit you? The old ute still runs sweet as, and she's all gassed up.”

“I don't think so, mate, because I'm going to be really busy hopping from one place to the other around here. We can talk on the phone every day, and you've got Ding.”

Well, that's true, and from the sounds of snoring coming from the direction of the bedroom, Ding isn't going to mind staying at Ashlee's too much, either. “I know. But I'm gonna miss seeing you in person.”

Silence.

Well, I scored zero with that one. “Okay, I won't ask anymore questions. I'll be busy myself, soon. Got some short trips in the ute coming up.” I'm keeping it casual.

“I trust your driving son, but don't speed or take risks. You could ask Arthur to drive you.”

“I don't like asking Arthur for favors. He usually says no, anyway. I won't do anything stupid.”

“Arthur's okay, Riles. He's just hard to get to know.”

“Well I wish he'd hurry up and let me get to know him, then. How long do you think all this stuff will take, Dad?”

“Not too long, I'll be back home before you know it. Now, get some shut-eye.” Stalling. The man is stalling.

But I'll give him a break. “Well, don't worry about me. You know I'm one of the good guys.”

A buzzing noise in my ear, and my heart sinks to my boots. Did someone interrupt our conversation on his end? I wait awhile, then slowly replace the receiver.

Dad would never hang up without saying goodbye.

6

It's cold next morning. We got more snow than expected, so deciding I wouldn't need a coat might have been a bit dumb. Rubbing my bare arms doesn't help much, either. Ding and I will swing by home—grab Dad's mail, and a few extra-warm clothes. Standing silently in the empty kitchen, the house feels strange to me, now. Sterile, lifeless, with a creepy atmosphere. I'm glad Ding is with me. Weird how a guy can feel like an intruder in his own home, after only a few days away.

“Might as well lift some weights while I have the chance, Ding. Skinny arms won't convert to muscle lifting pencils,” I tell him. And I'd only been at it for about thirty minutes, when the ring-tone of my phone on the kitchen table, scares me half to death.

“Hello?”

A male voice, probably middle-aged. “Mr. Williams?”

“Uh ..Yeah.” Wonder if I'll ever get used to being addressed by my father's name.

“G’day, mate. This is Darren from Shark Heads. Arthur gave me this number when he left, and a good thing he did, 'cause he left something behind, mate. A book you write in, not the kind you read. I’ve mailed it to your address, so you should get it soon. How is the old bugger, anyway?”

“You mean Arthur who lives here in Perisher Valley on the sled-dog farm? He’s doing all right. Did you say you’re calling from Shark Heads? Wow! Is that where Arthur got to on his vacation? ”

“Yeah, mate. Me main office is Shark Heads, but we keep busy stringing safety nets around the beaches all over the country. The shark situation's getting real serious, lately. Local councils lost too many swimmers and surfboard riders. Tigers and Great Whites, mainly. Yep. We've had a record number of fatalities, this year. The last few we caught were over sixteen feet long, fair dinkum. So we got a cull on Tigers starting' soon.”

“What? You mean old Arthur was catching sharks on his vacation? I know he was gone longer than usual, this time, but I didn't know he went to such a cool place. You having me on, Darren?”

“Nope. Ridgy didge, matey. And call me “Dazza.” will ya? Everyone else does. Funny talking to someone in Perisher Valley. What’s your moniker?”

“Riley. You’re calling my phone, but I'll give

Arthur the message. He don't like talking on the phone much.”

“Thanks, mate! And tell him if he gets sick of dogs, there's plenty of work for deck hands. We're chasing mackerel at the moment, then we head out after Bluefin Tuna further north, before hittin' them big old crocs in the Northern Territory. Flat out as lizards drinkin,' we are.”

Great whites, Tiger and Bull sharks, giant crocs—plus all that mackerel, sunshine and beaches. And I'd heard plenty about those giant Blue fins, and the fighting marlins of the Northern reefs. Who hasn't? To a dude shivering in snow most of the time, this phone conversation had turned awesome.

“How old does someone have to be to get a job with you, Dazza?”

“As long as he's old enough to know better, mate.” A deep, scratchy laugh booms across the line. “Tell Arthur I bought two bigger boats to catch the buggers in, 'cause the ocean's so full of sharks lately.”

And Arthur had left all that to come back to Perisher Valley? Is he nuts? Oh man, I am so onto this. In my mind, I'm right there on that boat with them.

“The East coast of Australia's lost eleven swimmers this summer, mate, and no wonder. The last three Great Whites the Government wanted caught, were proper monsters. I kid you not.”

Oh no! All those poor people who had met their end between a pair of huge jaws. If I were to be catching sharks with Dazza—I'd be doing humanity a great

service—saving lives. And I'd be perfect for it too, because one thing Aussie men know, is how to catch big fish.

“That’s awful. Hey Dazza, When I finish school, can I give you a call? ” Holding my breath, I'm thinking, I so want to do this. Maybe Arthur can put in a good word for me. I have to make Dad see we need to swing by Dazza's, this summer. I'll have climbed Perisher by then, and be ready to take on an even bigger challenge.

“Sure, mate. Keep me number, and give me a call. I’m branching out into the Northern Territory, soon, so I’m always looking for extra help. They got monster crocs up that way just about takin' over the place. You got an interest in catching the biggies kid, you come work for '*Dazza Down Under,*' which is what I call me company.”

Unbelievable! My first-ever job offer. And a guy needs to keep all his options open when it comes to employment. Soon as that diary arrives I think I'll read it before I give it to Arthur. There's sure to be lots of useful stuff about sharks and giant crocs in it, I bet. Truthful accounts, too—not some watered-down reviews written especially for tourists.

That night, I lay awake in Ashlee's spare bedroom, with my hands folded underneath my head, staring up at the ceiling, and imagining Dazza, living in a completely different world than mine. “Gosh, Dad. How come you've never taken me anywhere? You've traveled the world—even used to climb mountains. But

it was all before my time. Well, things are about to change. Shark Heads sounds perfect! Oh man! I am so going to lose Dazza's number—not!”

That night, I had a nightmare.

In my dream, I'm on Dazza's boat, fighting fiercely to hang onto a large fishing rod as I haul in one gigantic shark after another. I'm bare to the waist, with arms like tree trunks, and a wicked suntan. Best of all, the ocean is alive and churning with fins and blood, with me tossing one biggie after another into the boat like they're sardines.

Then I feel myself being dragged into the blood-red churning surf, clutching my fishing rod, and screeching all the way like a girl. The dream was so realistic, I wake up with my chest heaving, and my pajamas drenched.

And that's when I have the brainstorm.

7

A loud banging on the front door wakes me next morning, and one of the Apocalypse zombies staggers out to answer it. Through the glass door panel, I see Joanie's face, her mouth silently forming my name. "Joanie? What are you doing here? I guess I overslept."

Around about then is when the zombie morphs into me. "What's time is it?"

"Seven-thirty. Can I come in, Riley?"

I hold the door open.

"Seven-thirty? Ashlee will have left for work, then. She starts at seven today." Yawning, I shuffle out to the kitchen to switch on the percolator, hearing the familiar clomp clomp of cowboy boots following. "FYI, I'm having trouble waking up. I just had the wildest dream about sharks."

"Sharks?" She yells, like she's accusing me of

something—almost takes my head off. “Tell me!”

So even before she explains why she's camped out on my doorstep so early, the girl wants to dialogue about sharks? Whatever. So I waffle on about the call from Dazza and last night's catch, when she starts to turn green, then holds her hand up like a traffic cop.

“Enough!” she commands, while I'm still only halfway through my coffee and my story. Weak coffee, and my only one each day, as per Dad's rules. Didn't hear a single complaint from Joanie when I hand her one, but she hasn't touched it since I dropped my dream bomb on her.

“One day I'll tell you about my dreams of sharks.” She whispers, like I've stumbled onto one of the most sacred rituals of life. Then she drags out a photo, and lays it on the table face down. “Are you planning on running the dogs today, Riley? ”

“Yep. Mr. Never's gonna' give me some more tips on sled-dog racing since the Winter Carnival race is coming up soon, and I have plans on winning it.”

“Good, I hope you do. Well then, when I show you this photo and explain why I'm here, can I go with you?”

“Go with me? To run the dogs?” Now I'm getting excited, because I'd love to have Joanie helping me run teams. Everyone knows Arthur is gonna cark it one day, and when that happens, Mr. Never and I will need all the help we can find.

But she shakes her head for 'no,' then turns the photo over. “I've been looking through some stuff at

home, and found a photo of Ted.”

“You mean your dad's partner—the one that disappeared?”

She looks up at me like I said something wrong. “How did you know that?”

Oh, man, not telling her about me and her dad is going to be harder than I thought. So, I had to think quick to cover my tracks. “Just put two and two together. You said you were working on a case. Right? Just so happens our dads work at the same hospital and bump into each other now and then. Anyway, mine said yours was swamped with work because his research partner took off on him. So, I figured that's who you were looking for.”

I picked up the picture and gave it a squiz—like I was studying it hard. “Cool. It's gonna' be a big help, knowing what the guy actually looks like.”

So, that was the big mystery she needed my help for: searching for her dad's partner who disappeared. Not that it mattered to me what we did, as long as I could spend time with her. I gotta say spending time with Joanie Thomas was a lot more exciting than hanging out at the local Pizza Arcade and zoning out on the games.

Then I take a closer look, just because her eyes were drilling into me like she could see some hidden truths there. “That's Mr. Never standing next to him. Looks like it was at his last birthday party. ”

“Riley!” Total change of expression, and now she's looking at me like I'm Sherlock Holmes in person.

Well, maybe not Sherlock, since she's had a lot more practice than me at solving cases. But at least his famous sidekick Dr. Watson. Yeah, I could go with that. Medical mysteries. Now, there's something I could get excited about studying at Uni.

"That is a huge help." Her voice breaks into my imagination. "It gives us a date and time frame—something concrete to go on!"

"Well, we know Ted and Mr. Never know each other, anyway. Hey, it looks like our mysteries just bumped into each other—how mysterious is that?"

"It's amazing. Like it's destiny, or something."

"That was his seventieth-fifth birthday party. You can tell by the cake. There were heaps of people around that night. Dad and I, too. That's Mr. Never's handwriting on the photo, right there. I've seen enough of it to recognize anywhere. *Faithful Friends.*' Wow."

"It's the best lead, so far. Especially if you recognize Mr. Never's handwriting. Faithful friend..." She runs a finger over the letters like they could communicate something to her through touch. "We have to talk to Mr. Never—there's no time to lose!"

That was the exact phrase her dad had used before he drove away the other night.

"Absolutely! Hey. Give me five, and we're gone. If Mr. Never knows where Ted is, we could have this thing solved before the police do. Awesome!" I snatch up a sweater from where I left it hanging, then rush into the bedroom to throw on my dog-mushing pants. "Today's usually a good day to catch Mr. Never at

home, too.” By this time I’m back in the kitchen, pulling my boots on.

“If you were at the same party, you most likely even met Ted, yourself.”

“Dunno. There were so many people there. I want to say yes, because there is something vaguely familiar about the guy, but maybe I’m only imagining it.” Then I come up with an idea. “Hey, you knew Ted too, didn’t you?”

“Of course, I did. He and Dad have worked together for years. But every time I saw him he was with Dad, which meant they talked shop the whole time. Nothing but medical stuff. Boring.”

“Gotcha. Okay, let’s go ask Mr. Never. Dad said he was gonna drop by to see him while I was at school, but he probably hasn’t left Canberra, yet. We might run into EG I don’t know what she’s got going today. No worries there, though.”

“I hope it isn’t too early for Mr. Never to talk to us.”

“He’s an early riser.”

“Well, it shouldn’t take up too much of his time. After that, you can stay and do your morning chores, and I’ll walk home. One good thing about living so close to each other in Perisher Valley—we don’t always need a car.”

“You walked here?”

“Of course, unless you think I’ve got my broomstick parked outside.”

Now I’m trapped. I don’t want Joanie wandering alone through the woods, but I’m not ready to go

sprouting off about Tasmanian Tigers to her, yet. “Man, you had to be up before six. I’ll run you home in the ute, and that way it won’t take so much time.”

I can’t just blurt out she could be attacked by a Tasmanian Tiger if she didn’t watch out. Especially in view of the fact that everyone else thinks I’m nuts, I’m in no hurry to bring up the subject with Joanie. But nothing logical comes to me on the way, so I figure I’ll just skip it. Better to rack up a few more ‘good-boyfriend’ points before losing any on phobia confessions. I was seriously starting to think about her as my girlfriend, now, even though we hadn’t actually mentioned the subject out loud.

“Hey, the garage door is open,” I say as we pull into the yard. “EG must be gone already.” Just then Arthur comes out of the garage. “Hi, Arthur.” I say, and he gives a slight nod, then hurries away.

“Friendly soul, isn’t he? What’s he doing in Mr. Never’s garage?” We stand together outside the front door, watching Arthur hurry back to the dog yard.

“Oh, EG keeps some electrical stuff in her garage.”

“Should we knock first?”

“Did you knock on any of your neighbor’s doors when you lived in the Outback?”

“No.”

“Around here, we don’t either. I usually just call out first because he’s a little hard of hearing. Then go right on in.”

“Mr. Never?” I’m calling as I open the door to his house, then take a step or two towards his study, with

Joanie following about as close as Ding behind me. Slowly. In case he's still wearing pajamas and gets embarrassed in front of a strange girl. "Hey, Mr. Never, you there? It's Riley! And I brought a friend with me!"

No answer.

So, I whisper to her. "He'll definitely be awake. Like I said, he gets up early for the dogs."

"Mr. Never, it's Riley! I'm here to start work!" I yell louder, this time as we stand outside the closed door for a minute.

"If he was in there, he definitely would have heard you by now," she whispered back.

"He might be writing, though. He writes all the time, these days. The dude's got a yellow folder full of pages. It's okay if we go inside. Me first, though."

I enter the study, still calling his name. Then finally I see him at his desk. "Oh—hi, Mr. Never, you asleep?"

I'm thinking I better wake him slowly. Maybe he's been up all night writing, or something. Especially since I've got a person of the female gender standing at the door, and him still in his pajamas. I hear Joanie come a few steps in, and gasp, but I walk forward bold as brass, right up to his desk. Nothing left to do except man up and shake the poor old guy awake. If he's had a rough night, I'll persuade him to leave the dogs to me this morning. "Mr. Never, you okay?"

I put my face close to his. Gosh, if he's had a heart attack because I frightened him, I'll never forgive

myself. So I tap his shoulder a little. No response. Then I get this sick feeling in my gut, grab him by the shoulder, and shake hard.

Still no response.

I quick feel for a vein in the side of his neck. Nothing. Then I try his wrist. No pulse there, either. I press my head against the left side of his chest. No heartbeat! Swinging around to face Joanie, I see her standing rigid a few paces back—eyes wide with horror. Her mouth is open, but no sound is coming out.

“Joanie, he's dead! Mr. Never's dead!” I shout the words and reach for the phone in my pocket at the same time. Then we hear a noise behind us, and spin around to see EG standing there. Neither of us heard her come in.

“What are you doing in here, Riley? Why aren't you out in the yard, feeding the dogs? And why is Joanie here?”

I'm so shocked I can't speak. So, I pull away from Mr. Never's chest and stand upright, which causes him to slump forward onto his desk. I still can't speak, just stare helplessly at EG, until I suddenly come to my senses, snatch up my phone, and start to punch in Triple Zero.

EG screams, and rushes at me. “What are you doing—get out of my way! Dad? Answer me! Oh, Dad!”

Joanie bursts into tears, and now I don't know what to do. “We should start CPR!” I'm almost begging EG, though I know in my heart it's too late. Much too late.

“How long have you been here!” She is still

screaming.

“Only a minute,” I try to reassure her but she's getting more hysterical by the minute. “We only just walked in. We thought he was sitting at his desk, writing.”

Then all of a sudden she makes a total flip-flop. Now, she seems calmer. Like the EG I'm used to, again. “Yes. Yes, it looks like he was writing. I'm sorry I yelled. You two go and call Triple Zero from the kitchen. I'd like some time alone with my father.”

I watch tears fill her eyes. Up till then I've been there, but not really there. Now, I feel about to burst into tears, myself, as the truth finally hits me. Mr. Never—dead! It can't be! I'm so not ready to face it. Not yet, I can't. An icy chill starts creeping into me.

Joanie's hand reaches for mine, and I snap out of it enough to lead her into the kitchen. “You're probably in shock, same as me, Joanie.” I pull a chair out from the table for her. “Sit down while I call Triple Zero.”

Instead, she collapses against me, still sobbing, and for a minute I want to cry, too. Then I'm furious. How could this have happened? I want to kick something, and swear. But I'm a Williams man, and we don't act like that. We look after our women, first.

But all I can think to do for Joanie is reach into the cookie jar, and hand her one while I wait for Triple Zero to pick up. They look homemade, with tiny red pieces of fruit on them, which she immediately picks off. But she's settled down, nibbling away at the cookie, while I answer questions and give the address,

Shale Kenny

Her mug doesn't have anything in it yet but she's clinging to that too, saying nothing. But she gobbles up another cookie minus the fruit, and she's stopped crying. Me? I loved that old man so much, I don't think I'll ever stop crying. But it's all bottled up inside.

8

To get to Mr. Never's farmhouse from Ashlee's, you need to cut through the dog-yard, and that's where I was headed the day after Joanie and I made our horrible discovery. Dad called last night, to see how I was taking it, and asked me to offer EG our condolences. It helped a little just hearing his voice, but I felt like the living dead heading back toward the ranch, again.

Seeing how awesome the Huskies looked, cheered me up a little, and I hung back a while, in no big hurry to leave them. The Snowy mountains, with Mount Kosciuszko and Mount Perisher, are just about the only part of the Country where people can ski, or rent sled-dog teams. Mr. Never's teams get reserved months in advance. And as soon as we get enough snow, more customers than you can poke a stick at turn up in droves, waving their money around, and ready to spend up big. That's why he always keeps his dogs in top condition.

We got fifty-six dogs right now. Each connected on a swivel chain to their collar, secured to a post outside their dog-house. Their chains need to be long – so they have lots of room to move around, but still out of scrapping range. With Ding tagging along behind me, I pet as many of the dogs as I can as I go by. But I can't run them today, and know they're gonna be disappointed.

Most of the yard dogs are curled up inside their houses anyway, snoozing away on beds of fresh straw. The rest are perched on their roof-tops, howling in protest at being ignored. The white huskies earn top money as rentals, and the way Mr. Never always confided to me how everything works, made me feel part of the business, too. It's like he thought I'd be running sled-dogs with him forever. Always reminding me what a spectacular show the white huskies made all harnessed up and ready to run. Then it hits me how he won't be there to see me race in the Winter Carnival, or anything else for that matter.

I have to snap back to the present and get a grip, especially when I knock on his front door and realize he isn't going to be home, anymore. Ever. When the door finally opens, it's EG, of course. She's wearing reading glasses and carrying a steaming hot cuppa.

“Hi there, Riley. Are you feeling all right? You're not looking too good.”

“I just can't believe it, EG, that's all.” Cut it out, Williams. Put your own feelings aside. “Anyway, it's gotta be worse for you—and I'm sorry to disturb you—

but are you busy?"

"No, it's okay. I've been wanting to see you, too."

"Stay there, Ding," I command, and he growls. Probably because he knows she isn't ever gonna invite him in. She won't let any dog indoors. When I get my own place, I'm going to have at least three house dogs. I bet Mr. Never tried to talk EG around to having a house dog lots of times, but he had no luck. Women!

"Sit down, Riley. Give me a minute to make another tea, and we'll talk." Of all things, it's her dark hair I notice. She must have been to an apprentice shearer to cop a haircut like that. Poor EG. The haircut looks awful. Her features pinched and narrow, like she only has half a face. Is it a sign of respect to have your hair cropped short when someone dies?

Anyway, the cuppa she brings in hits the spot. Which reminds me how Dad is talking about his promotion and moving somewhere warmer. Awesome! Maybe they'll switch him to the Gold Coast, where the Meter Maids parade around in golden bikinis, feeding parking meters. Guys my age spending all day surfing and tooling around the beach.

My thoughts are scattered all over the place. I know it. Probably because it's the first time I've seen EG since...I can't finish that thought. She returns from the kitchen carrying two refills, and we sit together sipping away seriously, as if drinking tea is the most important thing in the world.

"I came to tell you how sorry Dad and I are about Mr. Never. And I'll help you with the dogs as much as

I can. I'll work as many extra hours as you need me.”

“Good. I was hoping you'd say that, Riley. Dad always understood I didn't have much interest in dogs.”

My eyes follow the steam rising from her tea. I've finished mine, and would really like another refill, but I'm too shy to ask. The room is so cold. Oh, just ignore it. EG's like a robot, though. Just keeps sitting there, staring at nothing. Staring and sipping. Sipping and staring. What does a guy do in circumstances like these, when neither of us has anything to say.

I think hard, but get nothing. “I usually work more in winter, anyway.” Brilliant conversation.

“Yes. I'm going to need you to do that...with Dad gone, now, and Arthur starting to slow down.”

“No worries.” I instantly realize that wasn't the best way to say what I mean.

There is also something wrong with what EG said, but I'm not sure what. So I just sit there, crossing, then uncrossing my legs for something to do, gazing idly around the lounge room, and wondering what it was. Then, finally it hits me, and I drop like a dead donkey. Of course he's gone. We both know he's gone.

“You mean really gone?—like to a funeral place?”

“Yes.”

Gross. So now I'm feeling hot—and cold. Both at the same time. Waves of nausea wash over me, and my head begins to pound. “I can't believe we're talking about this, EG.”

“I can't either. Let's change the subject. I saw your father in Canberra.”

“You know Dad's staying in Canberra?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” No way am I going to ask her where my own dad is hanging out. Or why he told EG, but not me. She probably knows about the interviews, too. But I still think Dad should have told me first, instead of treating me like a little kid. I decide to change the subject. “I saw Mr. Never yesterday, and we were talking about lots of stuff. He didn't seem sick, then.”

“No. He wasn't sick recently. But he wasn't young anymore either, so I guess he just...died.”

This was a nightmare. It was like we were talking about someone else, not Mr. Never. He was going to take a team out with me today. Show me how to get the best from my guys for the Winter Carnival race. He wrote out those notes for me. And he must have expected to buy more dogs too, since he told me he had extra land to run them on. Gone? Dead?

“I don't get it, EG. If he wasn't sick, then why did he die?”

“I don't know, Riley. The Police took tests, but they haven't turned anything up yet. So you two arrived just before me?”

“Yes. I didn't realize what was wrong, at first. Do you think it was just his time to go?”

“Maybe. I don't know.”

“I'm sorry, EG. I wish he was still here. I loved your father.” I'm hoping it's okay to say that.

“I did too. But we have to accept it. Dad was a decent man. Kind, honest, and very forgiving.”

Well I certainly knew he was kind and honest, so if he was very forgiving too, that wouldn't surprise me. Suddenly she goes quiet—not looking so good. Her lips are trembling. Should I get up, make my apologies, and leave? I know zilch about comforting grieving women. So I stand, ready to tiptoe out, and make a run for it, when she finally speaks.

“Riley. It would be a big help if you stayed with me for a couple of weeks.”

But what about Ding? That's my first thought. Don't even bother to ask, is my second. But how can I refuse? “I don't need to actually live here, EG, I can work the dogs the same from Ashlee's. Besides, I've got Ding to take care of and I know you wouldn't want him here.”

“I suppose so.” Then there's a long silence. She's drinking more tea. Just sitting there, staring and sipping, which really gets my creep-meter ticking. Next minute I'm babbling away about nothing. Mental note to self: when dealing with bereaved ladies, don't spill your guts, just change the subject.

“I saw a Tasmanian Tiger out on the trail, recently.” Are you nuts? Don't change it to that! Somebody stop me! If only EG would speak, instead of parking herself there in stony silence, while I have to fill in the awkward gaps by transforming into a motormouth.

“I wouldn't think so. But I guess no-one really knows for sure what's in those woods.”

“Yep. I gotta' go now. Just came to say we're sorry

for your loss and I'll help more with the dogs.”

“Thanks Riley. Dad always said I could count on you.” Then she walks over to the door and holds it open. Apparently, we're done visiting and I've been dismissed. Maybe she wants to be alone with her grief. Needs time to cry, or something.

I head down the steps not feeling so good, myself. Mr. Never is dead, and I'll never see him again! My whole life he's been the closest thing to a Grandfather I've had. Then I'm thinking if I keep dwelling on all this, I'll explode. I'd rather talk to someone—anyone—than sit around by myself somewhere.

There's always Arthur. But Dad has never been close to him, and I'm not either. Not the way I am with Mr. Never. Arthur treats me okay, and makes me laugh, sometimes. Although I hope he doesn't realize I'm usually laughing at him, not with him. Yeah, I'll swing by Arthur's.

On my way to his cabin, the ground is still soft and swampy from all the sleety-type rain we've had recently. Cold water seeps into my boots, and they get soaked, super-quick. But I hardly feel a thing. “Dad would have your hide for not dressing warmer.” I remind myself.

Closer to the cabin, I catch a glimpse of Mount Perisher through the trees. Epic. I imagine how one day soon I'll take my first steps up there. Actually, make that four little paws and two large, size thirteen boots. A lot of things need to be sorted out first, but it will happen. And just thinking about it cheers me up. Until

I remember I can't share my news with Mr. Never. And now, at the very worst time in my life, my dad wants to take a vacation from living with me. I can't process all these changes. Life shouldn't throw so many curve balls at you all at once.

"No matter how long it takes, you are going down, Perisher!" I announce to the solitude of the woods. "Your picture's gonna' be on the front page of the newspaper alongside one of me and Ding." I dial Joanie's number as I'm walking, and guess what? Her voice on the phone sounds as silky smooth as when we're talking together in person.

"Hey! How are you? Got a sec?"

"Yeah, sure. Where are you, Riley?"

"Just left EG's, and now I'm heading for Arthur's cabin. I still can't believe it, Joanie. "

Her voice drops several tones. "I know."

"I'm gutted! Mr. Never, dead? And I won't see him for the rest of my life? No way!"

"You're probably still in shock. Do they know what he died of?"

"EG says the Police tests don't show any definite cause, yet. She was right behind us, and there he is, dead in his study. Maybe writing his pages right to the end, but she didn't mention his manuscript folder."

"But, Riley. Didn't you say he kept his pages in a bright yellow folder on his desk?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Didn't you notice? When we found him, there was a bright yellow folder open on his desk."

Perisher

“I guess I was too stunned to notice much of anything.”

“Well, his right hand was resting on top of it, and he was holding a pen.”

9

I have to wind up my call to Joanie because I've reached Arthur's cabin, already. Actually, I'm feeling a little better after talking to her even for a few minutes. The cabin is located just behind the dog-yard, and there he is—sitting on his front steps like he's been expecting me.

Arthur has been around forever. He was family too, many years ago, when my Grandfather was killed in a horrible accident. I don't know much about it, and nobody's talked about it for years. Dad says Arthur stepped up to the plate, took care of him and his mom, and even married her later. But even though Dad was practically raised by Arthur, he can't remember him ever showing any affection to anybody. Not even once. I gotta hand it to him for hanging around all these years, though.

Maybe some people are just that way.

Still wearing his mushing gear, the old fellow is perched on the top step, legs spread out, and puffing away on his pipe. I haven't seen him since he left for

his vacation, and it suddenly hits me how much Arthur has aged. He sees me coming, and stands up with his hand outstretched, which is when that familiar doggie odor drifts out to greet me. Arthur always stinks of dogs—like he's been rolling in poo, or something. And his breath smells like nerve gas. Anyway, it helps remind me to take a shower if I plan on seeing Joanie.

I take one hard look at him, and can't believe the old guy is capable of catching Great White sharks. Dazza must have been taking the mickey out of me. After all, Arthur has to be at least eighty, by now. So if—and I repeat “if” it's true—then Arthur sure is one tough old Aussie battler.

“G'day mate. Long time no see.”

“Heard you were back, Arthur. Enjoy your vacation?”

“Yep.”

Arthur isn't the type to talk much, and he never brags, but I'm wondering if it can possibly be true. Could he actually have landed a shark? Still, Arthur is Outback born and raised—a real boy from the bush. Which means he has a bit of the old mongrel in him. He's tall and skinny, with gray hair and a beard. But these days there's so much facial fuzz, his eyes are practically all that show. His jeans are old and ripped, and he still wears that same faded old flannelette shirt every day.

“It were okay,” his eyes close, like he's deep in thought. “But I don't reckon I got too many fishing vacations left in me. Think I'll just stay put from now

on, and keep an eye on you and E.G.”

Sitting beside Arthur, listening to him talk through gaps in his front teeth, I'm wondering why the old guy keeps twitching and fidgeting. His long-time nicotine habit, maybe? Then, when his fingers begin to strum a tune on the step, it seems so bizarre, I have to choke back a laugh.

“Saw your dad in Canberra, boy.”

That brings me back to earth with a jolt. “You did? Where in Canberra?”

“Oh, out in the eastern suburbs.” So now both EG and Arthur know where Dad is staying? How come other people can know, just not his own son? But I can hardly admit that to Arthur.

“I got a call from Dazza in Shark Heads,” I tell him. You forgot a book when you left, so he's mailed it to you care of Dad. Can I read it when it arrives?”

“What for? Better let me have it first. You gonna put in more hours to run the dogs, now?”

Idiot! Why did you even bother to ask? I sit there watching his long, bony fingers play the step. “That's good, boy, because I'm too old to run all those dogs by myself, these days.”

It doesn't surprise me that he still hasn't mentioned Mr. Never's passing. Okay, so the two of them didn't get along—but still. I'm nice and relaxed talking with Arthur on his cabin steps, and he starts reeling off stories about my Grandpa and the little cabin they'd lived in.

For a few happy minutes I forget the awful news,

and I don't know if I ought to even bring it up. I need someone to talk to, but maybe it shouldn't be Arthur, since he hated Mr. Never. Oh well, Dad will be home to mag with, soon. "Hey, Arthur, do you have any photos of my grandmother? I'd really like to see one. Dad doesn't have any."

"Nope! I got no pictures." Then he leans back in his chair, and closes his eyes. "I did me best to take care of her and your dad after your Grandpa died. Been missing her, lately. One reason I went to Shark Heads for such a long spell this summer. Trying something different."

Nothing I haven't heard before, so I watch the old guy's feet doing a jerky tap-dance on the step below. Does he even realize he is doing it? Maybe he's developed a serious muscle condition. Ignore it, Williams. You can't go around asking old people if they've got serious muscle conditions.

"Your dad and EG grew up together. They was pals from the time they was little, ya' know?"

"Yeah, Dad told me. He still talks about those days." Watching Arthur's lined and weathered old face, causes fuzzy slivers of memory to percolate through my mind. Then next minute I'm back to thinking of poor Mr. Never again, and only half-listening.

"Me, 'n Edward 'n Charlie, and your Gran, did everything together. Your dad was a good kid. And when you was born, you was right nosy. Had to know what everything was— and how it worked."

"Haven't changed much, Arthur. I'm still nosy. Any

secrets, cover-ups, or legends you want exposed, I'll solve 'em all—for a fee!" Sticking my chest out, I pound on it for dramatic effect, then sit back to enjoy Arthur's raspy cackle. You so need to take acting classes when you get to Uni, dude. You're good.

"You sound just like Charlie when you talk, boy. I'd sure like to see the old cabin again, one day."

"I'll take you there sometime, now that I have the ute to drive around. Go on—ask him where he saw your dad in Canberra. But how can I? I guess it must have slipped his mind to let me know." That would drop a bomb on the conversation, no worries.

"I was thinking, Riley. You don't know much about the accident that took your grandpa's life." The strumming increased, as Arthur flits back and forth between his favorite subjects—but I'm used to that. "Like I told you, it were a horrible disaster." He breaks off suddenly, to swat flies. "Yeah, now Edward's dead, time you learned some history. I'm probably gonna die here meself, 'afore too long."

Yuk! I can't stand anymore talk about dying. "I wish you would tell me more about Mr. Never. How come he was always so good to me? He treated me like I was family. Heck, he spoiled me even more than he did EG, sometimes. Do you know why?"

"You don't need to know more than that—and don't go making anyone out to be a saint, 'less you know for certain they deserve it."

"I suppose so. Anyway, I like hearing about my real grandpa, too."

“Well, let me tell you Charlie Williams was a decent, God-fearing man. Tough as nails, and strong as a bull. It weren't fair what happened to him, and since I'm getting' ready to pull the plug myself, one of these days, I figure to fill in the details for you and your dad.”

I try to arrange my mouth into a smile. “Sorry Arthur. My mind's kind of fractured with all this death and dying stuff.”

“Okay. You head home, then.”

I was halfway to the door before I realized I hadn't even asked him the other important thing, so I turned back around. Just in time to catch him tapping his fingers and doing the foot-shuffle thing both at the same time. Sort of startled me, like maybe he was halfway to being crazy, and just pretending to be normal the rest of the time.

“I forgot to ask you something, Arthur.”

He stopped dancing and tapping and glared at me. Made me wonder if he was looking, or just listening.

“I was wondering if I could look in the equipment shed.”

“Why?”

“Well, EG says if I see anything I like in the shed, I can keep it. You seen any guns in there?”

For a minute he didn't say anything. And I'm like, oh man. He's really sizing me up now. “Don't think so. Whatcha' want a gun for anyway, boy? You don't need firearms out on the trail.”

I took a deep breath. “Not unless you run into

something dangerous, like I did. Then you might.”

His eyes bore into mine, and his voice when he speaks sounds like grinding concrete. “Which trail was ya' on? What was it you seed, boy?”

“A wild animal nobody's heard of for ages. At first I thought it was just a really huge Dingo, but you know what? I'm pretty sure it was a Tasmanian Tiger I saw. True blue, Arthur—I did.”

He gets a totally perplexed look. “Oh, yeah? And where do ya' think you're gonna' stow this rifle, at the same time you're trying to hang onto a team of sled-dogs, goin' at it spit for leather?”

“I got it all figured out. I'll carry the rifle in a sling on my back, see. So, when I'm standing on my sled, if a wild Dingo or a Tassy Tiger suddenly charges at us, all I have to do is—take my gun out of it's sling on my back—load it—take aim—then boom!!”

Arthur just shakes his head, and from the back I see his shoulders heaving. He reaches for the door handle, and I'm thinking—okay, whatever! You hardly ever get a sensible reaction from the old guy, these days. A dude his age has to be a little dead in the water mentally by now. He probably doesn't even know how Tasmania was once joined to mainland Australia, so it was easy for Tasmanian Tigers to migrate across. Gosh, hundreds of the buggers are likely to be still hiding out in the deeper parts of the rain forests around these parts. It's only logical.

So when he stops and turns around to face me, I pick up where I left off. “The Internet says they're big

as a wolf, only more wild and dangerous. I did see one. No mater what anybody else thinks, I definitely did.”

Arthur stands there like he's thinking that over, too. Then he nods. Which makes me feel better even though I still don't know if he really believes me, or not. Ever since I saw that thing way out on the trail on the land Mr. Never is giving me, my creep-meter starts ticking whenever I take a sled team out there. Gives me the creeps even to walk home between our house and the ranch, sometimes. Especially if it's after dark.

Then it hits me if Arthur's being so agreeable about the gun, I could maybe just slip in another—even more important—question. Play it cool, Williams, I tell myself, or he'll clam up again.

So, I ease into it, trying to sound real casual. “Tomorrow's Saturday, and I thought I'd take the ute into Canberra to see if I can catch up with Dad. Mind giving me some directions? Canberra's not all that big but I don't want to get lost.”

“Ya gonna take ya lady, with ya?” He's asking, while scribbling a page of directions for me.

“You think I should, Arthur? Is it a nice drive out that way?”

“Oh, yeah, boy. You take ya lady for positive sure. You're gonna love the drive!”

So with tomorrow's directions nearly burning a hole in my pocket, I decide to drop by home to check on things before heading over to Ashlee's place. That's when I discover the diary in our mailbox. It got here! I'm fair dinkum pumped and ready to read it, but first I

have a call to make.

“I'm going to Canberra tomorrow, Joanie.” I tell her when she picks up. Wimp. You're too much of a wuss to come right out and ask her to come with you. So I shove my trusty blue pen in my mouth and commence chewing. Dad says I'll pull my fillings out one day, but chewing it gives me confidence. “Just wanted to tell you what I'm up to.”

Go on. Don't be such a chicken. I look down at Arthur's directions I pulled out of my pocket, and man! They're so jammed up. No paragraphs, no punctuation—nothing! The way he was acting, today, I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't make any sense at all.

“Did I hear you right?” Joanie's voice broke into my sudden distraction. “Riley, would you mind chewing on the other side, for a minute?”

“Uh, sure. I said I'm driving into Canberra.”

“You're driving into Canberra? Alone?”

“Well, no. That's what I wanted to...”

“Can I come with you? I know the ute only has a front seat, but if you're not taking anyone else, and you don't mind me coming along for the ride, I'd be grateful. Mom and I are so worried about Dad, I want to try and find Ted. Maybe even persuade him to come back to work, if I can.”

“If you want your Mom to come, too, it might be a squeeze.” Not exactly what I meant. “Although I'd love to be squeezed in with you.” Man, that isn't what I meant, either. What was going on with me? “I mean it would be nice to have some time to talk without an

audience. There's always someone around when we're trying to talk this stuff over. Oh, yeah, and I'm hoping you can interpret Arthur's directions he wrote down for me. They don't look like they're even in English, and I know that's the only language he speaks.”

“Well, I'll try, anyway. And don't worry about Mom. She won't go anywhere, lately. Hardly leaves the house, anymore. But she will be cool with me going.”

“How are you with early starts? Can you be ready by eight?”

“Yes. See you then, Riley. And thanks.”

Wow! Things are working out perfect even in spite of my mistakes. And I know after I talk to Dad, tomorrow, I'll feel better about everything. Even though I pretty much already know what he's going to say. He'll expect me to take it on the chin, like a real Williams man, so I will. Except I never heard of a job interview for a promotion being so full of stress, or having to live somewhere else for two weeks till it's over. Something's off, and I aim to find out what. Sometimes you have to smash your way through whatever life dishes out just to get at the truth of things. I only wish it would let up for awhile.

Ah ha! At least now you're talking like you got a bit of the old mongrel in you too, dude. And about time. Because you got Perisher to climb, remember? And not only that, you're gonna be a hero and help Joanie find Ted. Or at least uncover some clue as to why he took off so fast.

That's if Ted's still alive, to find.

10

Driving to Joanie's house, I enjoy the warmth of sunshine on my arms—spring trying to break through. Sweet. And when I pull up, I just have time to slide across the cool leather seat to give her a little extra room when she opens the car door. “All aboard for Canberra!” I bellow, and she laughs as I throw it into gear.

Then I'm lost in the feel of the motor as it leaps to life. Next I slowly release the clutch, and feel a buzz at the power of the take-off. Man, what a totally smokin' sensation. The wind in my hair, my favorite CD blasting away, and my girl beside me. That all adds up to making me the happiest driver in Perisher Valley. I've been dying to show off the ute to Joanie.

Troubles? What troubles? I'm chilled—no holding me back. “Isn't she a beauty, Jo? And it's so typical of Mr. Never that he wouldn't let me drive around in a heap of junk. See how well she responds to the slightest touch of the steering wheel.”

Joanie laughs again, while I rave on, as the ute powers us down the dirt road, obedient to my every command. I've got one arm hanging out the window hugging the outside door, toolin' along - totally killin' it. Until the cold air sucks the warmth out of the cabin, and Joanie shivers.

"No worries. I'll turn the heat to high for a few minutes, then drop it back to medium when you warm up. What a magic day! I've got wheels again. I'm stuntin.' I'm the man!" I tell her, excited as a kid.

"Maybe a little less wind, please." She's holding her head, trying to keep all those curls from blowing in her eyes.

There's no-one around and I know the road well. So when the old girl stalls for a minute, I gun her back to life, then take off with an impressive burn, followed by a donut. Man, my hands are caressing that steering wheel like she's made of gold.

"Wow! You're really into this, aren't you?"

"You bet. Pity we got no audience."

But the fun and games are over as soon we're on the highway, and I settle down to merge with the other traffic heading into Canberra. Joanie and I talk about anything and everything. Totally comfortable with each other. No need to rack my brain for conversation starters.

Anyway, that long drive felt like almost nothing. Next thing I know we're already on the outskirts of the city limits. That's when it dumps on me all over again, how insane that Arthur and EG know where Dad is—

but I don't. He already told me what he was up to, so what's everybody trying to protect me from? I pull Arthur's directions out of my pocket and hand them to Joanie.

"Think you can read that thing?" I ask when I see her frown.

"Oh, wow." Then she locks onto it like she's trying to decipher some kind of code.

Which is another thing I like about her—she's up for almost anything. Especially if it's something she has to figure out. Which gives me a chance to think about Dad, and hope he won't be too rattled by my just showing up like this. That's if I can even find the dude.

Maybe he'll be glad to see me—maybe he won't.

Every once in a while I throw an admiring glance over at Joanie when she isn't looking, totally stoked to have her along, whether she can help me find Dad, or not.

"I don't think we're quite to where his directions start from yet, Riley, but I'll figure it out."

I have to smile and admit, "I'm sure glad it's you and not me trying to read it. We make a good team, don't we?"

She nods shyly, and we drive along in silence for a bit, until I sense she's ready to talk, again. It's nice to have someone helping me search, or I'd be pulled over to the side of the road scratching my head.

"This area seems to be less suburban," I tell her. "Fewer houses, and the road we're on looks like it's the only paved one for miles." My eyes narrow to a squint,

which usually helps my long-distance vision.

“Sort of seedy though,” she says, looking around. “More like an industrial area, than anything else.”

“I took the right road, didn't I?”

A nod, and a sigh, and I notice she's holding the instruction page upside down. When she sees the shocked look on my face, we both crack up.

“I've never seen worse writing,” she finally admits. “Anyway, how come you have to surprise your Dad with a visit?”

Suddenly my heart is racing, and an uneasy sensation churns around in my stomach. How much should I tell her? “There's a lot going on in Dad's life right now, Jo. At least that's what he tells me. I'm thinking if I surprise him with a visit it might coax him to fill in the blank spaces, that's all.”

“Weird, isn't it, how we're both more focused on our fathers' lives than we are on our own?” She has this way of cutting straight to the bone. And when it comes to figuring things out, I find Joanie Thomas is way ahead of other girls. “What's that in the distance? A building?”

“Yes, it looks like an Airport terminal, or some sort of Military Base or something.”

I slow down, and we're both peering at a large sign in the parking lot up ahead. “Maybe it's a hospital. Dad says he's got all kinds of tests and interviews to get through.” I glance across at her, and when she doesn't answer fear gobbles up my excitement.

“What is that place? For Pete's sake, would it have

hurt Arthur to dole out a scrap of information along with his page of chicken scratches? Any buildings on it?"

She's mumbling, really straining to read the thing, then slowly she shakes her head. "No. But I think I can make out a cluster of something ahead. Could be warehouses?"

"I don't think it's warehouses."

I have the heat on, but I'm shivering—probably from tension. "Sometimes I don't get Arthur. He can be so stubborn. Has to give me everything the hard way." I cut the motor as a sign rolls into focus, Then I'm out of the truck in an instant.

By this time I'm so anxious I start running towards it, with Joanie right behind me. I get there only seconds before her. Then I just stand still, reading. Face facts, dude. Unless there's some mistake, this is your new reality. And I only have one question.

Why?

"No way!" I couldn't help the outburst, hating the wimpy trembling in my voice, and wishing Joanie wasn't here to see what all this was doing to me. "No! Not my dad!"

Standing motionless, I suck in air, my eyes still glued to that sign. I'm totally gutted. If this turns out to be true, I may as well bail right now. The empty ute waits patiently back there for us. What was Arthur thinking to suggest I bring Joanie?

"Sometimes that old man can be totally heartless!" I couldn't help saying it out loud.

Joanie says nothing, just moves closer and reaches for my hand. That simple gesture gives my wobbly legs the strength to carry me back to the ute. Then, while she gets settled, I heave myself inside, feeling like my body belongs to someone else and my head doesn't know them.

Steady, man, this could turn out to be a captain's call, I tell myself, trying to put my emotions back in place. Better prepare yourself. This is the truth you were running so hard after, and now your life's about to change. It was your idea to come. You nagged Arthur to show you where he was.

"I just don't buy it." I close my eyes and whisper.

Joanie doesn't answer, just lays her head gently on my shoulder. Only the two of us, alone in the ute, which for the moment is our own little world. No need for any more words. After all, what else can either of us say? Maybe I better take a short walk in case I'm tempted to start bawling—but I make up my mind that's not going to happen.

Next thing I know, my foot touches the accelerator, and I'm driving away slowly, willing myself to stay calm. "How long has Dad been here? Can't have been more than a day or two since he was genuinely staying in a motel in East Canberra somewhere. Busy with appointments, just like he said, so whatever happened, it just happened. I knew something was wrong—I could feel it!"

Poor Joanie, I'm venting on her, and she doesn't have a clue how to help me. A few minutes later, I

drive into the parking lot of the building we saw in the distance. When I come to a full stop, she looks me straight in the eyes. I try to avoid her gaze, reluctant to see pity there—and I can't afford to allow that silky chocolate voice to weaken me.

“We can turn back, Riley. We can head for home right now if you like, and we won't tell a soul.”

Joanie's words are kind, and she offers me her heart in that promise. But I'm already unbuckling my seat belt. Then I feel her hand grab my shoulder, and gently squeeze it while she lays her soft cheek on mine.

“It's okay. I have to finish what I started. Will you be all right waiting in the ute on your own? There's plenty of people around, or you can go inside and wait, if you want to. But you should lock the doors if you want to stay in the truck.”

She nods, and now, I see tears in her eyes. Nothing can make either of us feel any better, so I drag the cardboard replica of myself out of the ute. My footsteps slow and stiff, as though I'm heading to my own execution, but I march myself right up to the front entrance.

“Get a grip, dude,” I say out loud to myself. “You think this is hard? Try swapping it for running across a battlefield on some foreign beach, dodging bullets, with your dying mate on your back.”

Once I'm inside the building, I report to the reception desk, where a middle-aged lady is working on her computer. She looks up and smiles, and I'm floundering. Haven't a clue what to say.

“I’m here, I mean...uh..can I see my dad, please?”

“Name?” she asks.

“Williams. Riley Williams.”

Tap tap on her computer, frowning at the screen, big sigh, then she fixes me with a look like she is a magnifying glass and I'm an ant. “I’m sorry. We don’t appear to have any Riley Williams here.” Big emphasis on the name.

“Sorry, ma’am. I mean can I see Preston Williams, please. I’m Riley Williams, his son.”

“Oh, I see. Well, you’re in luck. Visiting hours commence in twenty minutes. Got some ID?”

Identification? Is that all you need when you want to visit someone, but your heart has just been stomped on the floor, and needs to be shoveled up before it gets squashed? Locating my High school ID, I obediently shove it across the counter. What if it's too late and she's sus?

What if she refuses to let me in? I can't simply go home now—after this. Arthur probably won't be able to answer all my questions even if he tries. The smile she gives me is stiff and starchy like the rest of her, but maybe she has a heart after all, because my ID is returned. I pick it up, then stagger over to the seat she gestures to.

“Someone will come and fetch you when visiting hours commence. Drinks in the machine.”

The lady is all business. So I grab a soda, holding it, unopened, as I wait for what feels like an hour, but is maybe only ten minutes. An older couple nearby,

another middle-aged man slump in a seat, further along. We're the only visitors, apparently.

The old lady keeps sniffing into her tissue, while I sit there woodenly, trying to decide what to say when finally I come face to face with my dad. All my life I've had it drummed into me that I'm a Williams man. I come from tough stock, and my dad expects me to be brave—so I will be. But my mind is a blank whiteboard, and I have no clue what to write on it.

Finally, a different lady appears at the door, then signals everyone should follow her. So I half-shut my eyes, then shuffle along behind everyone else, on my way to the hangman. Tunnel vision, seeing nothing, until we are shown into a room containing some tables and chairs. I choose the nearest, and a dummy never sat so still. What does a son say to his dad who's in prison?

A stray tear has taken up residence in my eyes, so I blink it away, but it returns a few minutes later with some friends. That's when I first sight the proud figure of my father, head bent over, shuffling slowly along in a line, behind a dozen other inmates. My dad in jail? It isn't possible! Heck, you'd think the guy had failed humanity the one time he forgot to vote. These others may be guilty but there is no way my dad is.

And it gets worse when I have to see the expression on his face as the line of men is ushered into the room, and Dad looks up to see me standing there. Forgetting about everything else, I rush forward to hug him. It must have been a big shock, considering he thinks I'm

safely back in Perisher Valley, with Ashlee. Even more of a shock when I hug him, since we don't usually do that, anymore.

When we're settled, I try to stay strong. "Dad, please don't be angry. Nobody would tell me what happened—I had to see you!" I'm still hanging onto his strong hand. "I asked Arthur for directions."

He nods, so I slide the can of soda across the table, where it's scooped up quickly. While he's drinking, I look around. Everything shiny steel. Cold, sterile, with the whitest floor tiles imaginable, even the grout holding them together, is white. The whole place resembles an operating theater and it's ripping my guts out.

"Are you okay, Dad? Why are you here?"

"I'm fine, son." He finally gets a word out. "And I'm real sorry about Edward's death. I know how painful it must have been for you and I wish I'd been there to help. I was trying to sort this out myself." Then he looked me straight in the eyes and I could see a glimmer of my old dad back.

"I guess this means no promotion."

"Everything is definitely on hold at this point."

"Arthur said he'd seen you in Canberra, so I kept on at him about it."

"Yes, well I asked Arthur not to tell you, but he always does what he feels like doing. Anyway, I guess it had to come out sooner or later. Now it has, I can't say I'm sorry you know. So, what do you want first? The good news, or the bad?"

“The good news.” I can almost feel two deep lines furrowing their way across the center of my forehead.

“I’ve been charged with theft.”

“Theft? How can that be good news? What do they think you stole?”

“Edward’s money and his manuscript. He had ten thousand dollars in his safe and the manuscript was on his desk when he died. I went to see him, a couple days ago, just like I said I would, and he was fine when I left. But since it turns out I was the last person to see him alive, they’ve decided I’m the thief.”

I felt better already. “Man, is that all? Because that idea is so totally screwy it shouldn’t be too hard to blow it right out of the water. What’s the bad news?”

“The bad news is—there’s another charge also, Riles. A more serious one.”

I wish I’d smothered my gasp, forced myself to sound cool with what I was hearing. But I didn’t. So when I see his hand whip out, snatch up the soda can, and drain it empty in one gulp, I know I better prepare myself. Then he slams the can back down hard, and the noise when it connects with the table, thunders across the visitors’ area.

“The charges against me are ridiculous! The Police say the shock of the theft contributed to Edward’s death, so as well as the theft charge they’ve added involuntary manslaughter to it. Which...” He hesitated on the last part but there was no more soda in the can to buy time. “Which carries a ten year jail sentence.”

11

My ears are ringing and I feel like I'm about to burst inside. "Ten years? Are they serious? You wouldn't steal anything from Mr. Never. You guys were good friends and neighbors—it was someone else! You're just the easiest sap to pin it on!"

Oh boy, am I confused. But I'm reminding myself to show Dad my total support. Inside though, I'm still reeling, so it's not easy. And I'm spewing because what if they send my father to jail for ten years? Mr. Never's gone—and they take Dad away too? Has the whole world gone nuts? Steady, Williams, dial it back a little.

"You might not have been aware of the book Edward was writing, Riles. It was still just a pile of handwritten pages when he spoke to me about it. But he told me, and all his friends, that what he was writing was the most important thing he'd ever done in his life."

"But why you? Most folk probably knew he was writing a book. Stealing big bucks from his safe—I can

understand that. But I can't wrap my head around anyone stealing his manuscript. It's not as if he was a hot author. They need to find the true cause of his death. Mr. Never didn't seem old to me, but like EG said—he was. And old people just up and die sometimes. Even him.”

“Yes, the whole thing's a mystery, Riley. I have no idea what his manuscript was even about. But I agree with the Police on one point. It would have absolutely devastated Edward to have someone steal the money he needed for his sled-dog business, and then to take his manuscript, as well. So I can see why they think the theft could have contributed to his death. Anyway, I'll be released on bail soon, but only until the full court hearing.”

What? Home soon, but already talking about going away, again? Now I'm really feeling sick. “How long will we have before that happens, Dad?”

“Brad says it could take a couple of months to get to court, but, don't worry. EG is going to bat for me, and her testimony ought to blow holes in the prosecution case.”

Don't worry? Oh, sure! “Well, I'm glad EG has your back, and don't worry about me, Dad. Ashlee's really cool.”

Dad's face changes. Did saying that make him sad to think someone else has to take care of me? Making small talk in prison isn't easy, and my legs bump into his under the table. Having long legs is usually an advantage I've found, but right now I feel cramped. So

I squirm around, while sneaking a discrete look at the other inmates.

“This has all fallen hard on EG,” he said. “Being so close to her dad it must have been an awful shock to find him dead. And it was a terrible situation for you to be in, too, Riley.”

“The worst moment of my life,” I admitted. “Can't believe I didn't lose it. Having Joanie with me, helped.”

“I'm glad you have someone in your corner, son. I know how much Edward meant to you. ”

I glance at my watch. Visiting is nearly over and Dad hasn't blasted me for turning up uninvited. Which is amazing, since I know from experience how adults can turn temperamental real quick, and rarely for any sensible reason. “I'm running the dogs a lot more hours for EG now. Mr. Never's left me extra land in the woods, too. So we don't need to go near the house. Plus some more land further out, he said. I don't know what that's for. I don't even know why he did all that.”

Dad looks as puzzled as I was when Mr. Never told me. “I can't say I understand it either, Riley. Except everything Edward did for you was in your best interests. It may have been unnecessary though, because EG won't want to run the sled-dogs near the house, in the woods, or anywhere else. ”

“Yeah, Mr. Never thinks she may leave Perisher Valley one day, because she doesn't like dogs. Hey, Dad. You gotta' be outta' here by Winter Carnival time. So you can watch me race.”

It's nice to talk about something happy, again, and I

hope I've cheered him up a little. I don't like where he is, but at least he's not missing, anymore. A guy can cope with just about anything, once he has all the facts. Dad's is acting sort of distant but I can't blame him. Like he isn't plugged in to discussing anything that has a tail, for one thing.

"You know what, Dad? My team knows me, now. They come back when I call them, too."

For the first time I get a half laugh, and even a lingering smile out of him. "Riley, how many times do I have to tell you? Sled-dogs are born to run. They don't know when to quit, and they come back for no-one."

"Oh, well. Anyway, I told EG I'd work for nothing if she's short of cash."

"That's the spirit, son. Give her my love, and tell her I'm glad you're helping with the dogs."

Note to self: skip the love part. But go ahead and tell her Dad approves of me working the extra hours. "I guess I don't have to worry about EG being broke, either, on account of Mr. Never always kept way more cash in his safe than he needed just to buy dogs at odd hours. He told me all kinds of stuff like that when we walked the dog yard, together. Like how he's even had an offer to train Police dogs on his land."

"Edward told you he kept money in his safe? Is there anyone who didn't know? I wish the Police knew it was such common knowledge. As for Police dog training, Edward sure can be full of surprises."

Dumb red hair kept escaping from under my

baseball cap, so I shove some of it back impatiently, then change my mind, and yank the cap off, tossing it on the table. Suddenly I feel panicky. This is my life—I've hardly even started it yet but it's all going wrong. What if our lives stay screwed up forever? Angrily, I shove my cap aside, until it falls to the floor. So I stretch out one long leg in an attempt to retrieve it, but miss.

“I'll get your cap, son. I only wish I could help you with all you're going through right now.”

And what do I see when he bends down to rescue the cap? Double disaster! The first signs of a bald patch. So now I know I can look forward to being skinny and bald in my old age. I shouldn't have trusted what my friend Callum said. He probably only invented his big scoop about redheads never going bald.

“Thank Ashlee for helping us out for me, too, will you?”

The words were the right ones, but the look in his eyes said he wanted to do everything he used to do, himself. “We're nearly out of time, Riles, but I'm glad you came, although I would have preferred you didn't find out this way. It's all a terrible mistake, but one that will be rectified.”

A watery smile got dredged up from somewhere, and I just sit there scrounging around for the right words. Today's been an emotional roller-coaster. Now all I want is to talk to Joanie, and chill. “Okay, Dad. Oh, yeah, and Ashlee looks after me swell. She's

always doing nice stuff. But she's not you, and I'll sure be glad when you're home again."

When a long arm reaches out to ruffle my hair, I know I've converted a try. That is, until I check out the visiting room. "There's some really big dudes here. You think any of them could be murderers?" A shudder goes through me. My poor dad, locked up with dangerous prisoners.

"What if one of them sneaks into your cell and knifes you, some night?" Did I really say that? You shouldn't be allowed out in public, Riley Williams. "Sorry. That's just me, dumbing down. No chance of that happening, because God knows you're innocent."

Funny, the peaceful feeling that creeps into my heart as I speak those words. It's so cool to know I'm not helpless, any more. "Only believe, and pray." The kids at youth group are always reminding me of that scripture, and it's true. I stand to leave. "You'd beat the stuffing out of any of these guys, anyway. Except maybe for the bloke in the corner, jamming with the guy with the tattoos. He looks mean. You eating enough?"

At last you're being a little more subtle, now. There's no need to worry your dad.

"Yeah, they're feeding me good, but it's better if we don't stare at anyone in here, son."

"Oh, yeah. Gotcha. So, is there anywhere you can work out? Not that you need to—but I mean, just to keep your strength up. I'm still doing my weights, so I know it really pays off."

No reply. What is wrong with him? Why is Dad just sitting there like a stunned mullet? Eyes totally blank, and looking like he's taken a dart to the heart. "Dad?"

"Uh huh?"

"I have to leave, but I just gotta say something." It's difficult to think, with my father so out of it. I sure hope he's not having a meltdown, disappearing inside himself somewhere. I mean I want him to have peace—not paralysis.

"Go ahead and get it off your chest, Riley. You can tell me anything."

Well at least he can still speak, even if it's with this new, robot-type voice. "Okay, well like I said, I have a new friend of the female gender."

That gets me a chuckle.

"You know, Joanie Thomas? Her dad is Dr. Thomas, remember? Well, she has some mysteries in her family, too. So we're keeping busy trying to solve them together."

"Joanie Thomas? What sort of mysteries do they have in her family?"

Wow! If he only knew how difficult that would be to explain. "Well, we're trying to locate that partner of her dad's that we talked about before. The one in medical research. One thing we're not happy about though, is that Joanie's dad enrolled her at a Uni South of Sydney. Totally no good because we want to go to the same one."

"Well, that's a coincidence. It just happens my promotion is in a large Hospital South of Sydney. That

is if I still have a promotion after all this is over. When this is behind me, Riley, we can move away from Perisher Valley. That's a long time off, though. Meanwhile, good luck finding Ted. I remember Dr. Thomas mentioning how they were right in the middle of a project, when his assistant left unexpectedly."

"More than unexpected, Dad. He's done a runner. Disappeared off the map, in fact. Anyway it would be awesome to live somewhere sunny when everything gets straightened out."

"I can't say for sure yet though. Just concentrate on your schoolwork, and don't let too much of this get you down. I'll be home on bail before you know it, and we're gonna get a defense prepared that will knock this whole business right outta the park. Right?"

"No sweat, Dad. Bye."

Five minutes later I'm back in the farm ute, cruising along the highway, heading for Canberra City, when Joanie hands me a lemonade. "Thanks. You're spoiling me. It's nice having you along." She doesn't say anything, just snuggles up close, and I'm definitely feeling better now. That old Williams wonder power returning.

"I hope you still think that after you hear what I want you to do for me."

"Well, I guess now's the time to tell me. I figure you've got a lead on Ted, right? That's cool."

"Why don't we chill awhile and grab something to eat before I explain. Okay?" She sighs, and I think. Uh oh. I heard a sigh like that an hour ago, from Dad.

"I could go for a pizza or a burger. How about you?"

She nods, and gives me a big smile. Well, maybe half a smile.

"The address is right across town. That right?"

"Yes. And I'll tell you where we're headed, after we eat."

"You think it's so gross it'll make me lose my appetite?"

She doesn't reply, just flashes an address at me. It's printed in really extra-large print so I'm not distracted from my driving. But when I read it, I slam on the brakes hard, and pull over immediately. I'm horrified and stupefied both at the same time.

"Are you kidding me? We can't go there!"

12

Her tone is so calm it makes me feel like a kid having a major tantrum. “Riley, we agreed to have lunch before we discussed it, remember? Come on, there's a cafe right up the street. Besides, I'm starving. Then we can talk about it as much as you want.”

Which is a lot easier for her to say than me. If something's bugging me I like to face it and get it over with, not find something else to think about for a while and hope it might get better all by itself. I don't know if I've got a half hour of small talk in me when I'm trying to figure out what we're getting ourselves into all of a sudden.

“Want another milkshake?” She asks me a while later with one of her sweetest smiles.

Next thing I'm thinking is a person can take anything for half an hour, and try to force myself to chill. “No thanks, I'm good.”

“Everything work out with your dad?”

Which helps a little, too, since talking about that situation helps me figure things out in my own head as I go along. I wonder if she knows that. Then I wonder

if she can read me as easy as I think I can read her. Anyway, I just give out the basics—not any of the tangled up details—because I'm not so sure dad being in jail for such serious stuff (even though he's innocent) might make her start to wonder if there's anything wrong with me. Like what kind of a family does this dude come from if half of them died under mysterious circumstances, and the other half were accused of doing it?

“He didn't do it, Riley.”

Like she could read my mind. “Yeah, I wish everybody else thought that.”

“Maybe we can make them believe it. You know, by digging up the clues everyone else refuses to consider. You and I can help him win his fight.”

“Great concept, Jo, but how do you reckon we go about it?” Wow, how did that phrase slip out? I better be careful what I'm thinking since sooner or later it pops out my mouth without warning most of the time.

Then she gets this look in her eyes that tells me she not only doesn't mind, she likes it. Like this is how it's supposed to be with us and everything just fits. Only a flicker that was gone as fast as I caught it before she's back on track, again, and it changes to that ultra-serious expression she gets when she latches onto something important. A look like nothing better dare to defy her because her mind is made up.

“We can do this,” she insists. “We can make a difference, I'm not kidding.”

Which is about the time I get a picture in my head

of this seventeen-year-old warrior-girl we had been reading about in history class last week, and I can just see Joanie tacking around with a shield and sword, and people backing off just to keep out of her way. So I look her straight in the eyes and say, “Yeah? And who do you think you are, Joan of Arc?”

“Correct!” Doesn't even crack a smile. “Wasn't she amazing? Just think what we could do if we had half that kind of courage. We could do anything!”

“Yeah, but look what it cost her.” Which suddenly brings me back to wondering what she's really on about. What's she trying to talk me into? I reckon this errand of hers is way more than an errand. I'm also thinking what Dad told me about treating girls won't work with Joanie, because she isn't like other girls.

If today could officially be classified as our first date, what's the next one going to be like? So far every feeling I own is on some kind of fast-moving roller-coaster ride, and something tells me hanging out with Joanie Thomas is going to be more like living a movie instead of just going to see one. I hope I can hang on.

“I'm ready if you are.” She gets to her feet and starts gathering up the trash to put in the bin.

We return to the truck and take off. “Canberra is a neat little city, don't you think?” She reaches into the backpack she brought along and pulls out a folder filled with papers. “Colorful autumn maple trees, lining the streets. Pretty.” She's not even looking out the window when she says that.

“Yeah, I like how they they meet in the middle—a

canopy of colors covering the road.” We were past the trees, already, but I wanted to see if she was really paying attention. “Not too big either, for being the capital of Australia, which I dig.”

She drops something on the floor and picks it up, again. For a few seconds I watch her fiddling with what looks like a drivers' license—some form of I.D., anyway.

“I figure that's not yours.”

“I wish. Another thing Dad never gets around to is driving lessons for me. If it wasn't for you bringing me into Canberra, I mightn't have got here at all. Lucky our school runs a bus.”

“Yeah, that bus comes in handy. Are we on the right road?”

“Yes. We go right across town to the other side of the Canberra, but it shouldn't take too long.”

“Then maybe you better tell me what kind of lead you're following here. Especially if we're going to be pulling into a mental facility in about five minutes. What did he do—volunteer his services at a looney bin on his days off? Hey...” My next thought gives me a shudder. “Maybe something bad happened to him in there and he never came out.”

“Half right, anyway.” She holds up the I.D. “This is his driver's license.”

“Wow.” Suddenly I feel pumped. I guess she wasn't kidding when she said she had a knack for following cold cases. “How did you get that? If he's a missing person shouldn't it be with the police?”

“Yes, but because the government department he and Dad work for have tight security, the Federal Police were called in. They took copies of all Ted's paperwork, then eventually returned a few of his personal items to Dad.”

“What—he doesn't have any family, or anything?”

“He's never been married, and his parents died ages ago. We don't know any more than that. He and my dad were great buddies, though, so it was totally out of character for him to take off without saying anything. Besides, he left all his personal belongings behind. What few there were. Anyway, they were right on the verge of something big in the project they were working on. So, it had to be something really drastic for him to let Dad down.”

“Weird. But that still doesn't explain how you got hold of all that. Unless rifling through personal belongings is part of your investigative tactics.”

“Of course it is. Looking into things is just another definition for investigation, right?”

“Depends on who's doing the looking, I guess.”

“Well, it's not like I broke and entered, or anything. It was in my own house, in my own father's office. I have to keep things organized in there. Especially when he's on a big project. He scatters stuff all over the place, and I don't think he'd find anything if I didn't help him. Hey—I think we're officially on the other side of Canberra, now. Better turn right at the next intersection.”

I glance in the rear-view mirror and change lanes.

“So, what gave you the idea to come here?” For a minute she doesn't answer, so I look over at her. Just in time to catch some hesitation on her face.

“My mom got a phone call from them.”

“You mean your mom knows about this? Well, that makes me feel better. At least we're not out on a limb all by ourselves on this thing.”

Another silence, so I have to look over at her again. I must have drifted a bit because someone honked at me and I had to yank myself back to where I belonged.

“They must have been hanging back in your blind spot,” she offered.

“I'll tell you who's hanging out in my blind spot—how come I get the feeling you aren't telling me what we're really up to? I mean, how can we be partners on this—case, as you call it—if you don't give all the information. What if I get caught off guard, or something? What if we get separated in there?”

Somebody else honks at me, but this time it was for not seeing the traffic light change. Dude! I tell myself—keep eyes off girl and on the road! If I get pulled over, Dad will take my driving privileges away no matter where he is at the moment.

“Anyway, we got a phone call yesterday from somebody asking to speak to Dad. Well, Mom and I would like to talk to him, too. So I asked the caller what it was about.”

“Quick thinking.”

“They must have thought I was Dad's wife, not his daughter. So I decided to trade up with information if I

could, because the worst he could do was shut me down, right? I tried to sound officious, like I had every right to be asking.”

That strikes me as funny, so I laugh, and then we're both laughing. Concentrate on your driving, Williams. “What did they want to talk to him about?”

“Ted Griffiths.”

“Far out! Maybe he was from the Federal Police, and they've got a new lead.”

Her voice goes soft, and I can feel she's hovering. “No. It wasn't the Federal Police. But they did identify themselves—even gave me a number to call so I can verify everything they told me.”

Then she stops dead.

Oh for Pete's sake, that's exactly what her old man does. “Okay. Hit me with it. So you can verify, what?”

“That they were who they said they were, I guess. The call came from the Fairmont Mental Facility. They just wanted to know if Dad had received any recent communications from Ted.”

It's hard to understand, but I try. The realization we're trying to track down some guy escaped from a mental facility gives me the creeps. Luckily I got an extra few seconds to collect myself because we're turning into the parking lot, already. Next minute we're staring at a huge brick building of the same name, and I pull into the nearest empty car space.

“Well...” She blew her curls out of her eyes but they weren't really in her eyes.

I don't think she even realizes she does that

whenever she gets hooked on something. But by this time I could almost read her like a book. That's how I knew—no matter what she was saying on the outside—she was scared on the inside.

“I should come in with you,” I said the words like I hadn't just been choking my own worries down.

“Better not.” She was in total control, again. “Two of us underage wandering around here would attract even more suspicion. I may get kicked out pretty quick, but I'm hoping I can find some kind of a clue—any kind of a clue—before that happens.”

“Okay. But if you're not back in half an hour, I'm coming in.”

13

“You were gone longer than that,” Joanie said.

“Not the same. All I had to do was sign in as a visitor, then get pointed to the visiting room along with everyone else who had someone to see. But they catch you poking around off-limits in a mental facility, you might never get out.”

For a second her eyes registered a trace of panic, but then got replaced just as quick by something closer to determination. “All right. If I don't come out in twenty minutes, do whatever you have to.” The door opens with the familiar squeak as she lets herself out.

So now I wait. Sitting there like time stopped all of a sudden and I'm hoping she knows not to pick a fight with anyone in charge of a mental hospital. I start fiddling with the radio, trying to pick up some music. She works fine and the sound system is magic. Thanks, for the swell music system in this ute, Mr. Never. And I'm so into it that I jump when the car door opens again, only a few minutes later.

“I’m back.” She sank down onto the seat in a cloud of disappointment. “There’s a big sign over the reception desk that says all under-age visitors must be accompanied by an adult. Maybe if you try.”

“Joanie, seriously. Do I look like an adult?”

“You’re six feet tall and you’ve got a driver’s license. Chances are, if you flash it real quick, they’ll only glance at it then let you in..”

“Well, I’ll give it a try. What do you want me to say if it works and I actually get in to see him? What if they ask what my relationship to Ted is? And why I want to visit him.”

“Say you’re a close friend. That Ted’s like a father to you.”

Inside I’m panicking, imagining getting locked up in the place instead of Joanie, this time. “OK. Let’s say I can convince him I’m ridgy-didge, and I get in? What if he doesn’t remember me from Mr. Never’s birthday party, and freaks out? After all, I don’t remember him.”

Her soft hand reaches out to clasp my arm. “It would be wonderful if you get to see him, Riley. If you do, talk about Dad and me. Especially Dad. Tell him how worried we’ve all been about him.”

“Yeah, I guess that will be good enough.” I opened the door halfway but didn’t get out. “Then what?”

“Then tell him Dad will come see him as soon as he can. Oh, and ask him if there’s anything we can do to help.”

“Anything we can do to help.” I parrot the words, sealing them in the vault. “You want me to say that.”

“Yeah, it's perfect.”

“Right. Can't promise I'll stay long if he asks me to do something crazy, though. After all, the bloke is locked up in there for a reason.”

“Don't be silly. If it is Ted, he probably just had a nervous breakdown, or something.”

I climb out of the ute, straighten myself up, and give the imposing building another once-over. Then I turn back and open the door, again. “Definitely lock the doors this time.”

Two minutes later, I'm standing at the reception desk, feeling more confident. The guy was probably long gone, anyway, or they wouldn't have called for Dr. Thomas in the first place. I have to admit I was looking forward to Mr. T's best helper coming back in time to do all that dangerous work, instead of me, though. I flash the lady behind the desk a quick look at my driver's license. “Can I visit a patient, please?” I ask her.

“Certainly.” She answers like she sees teenagers trying to pass themselves off as adults, every day. “Which patient would you like to visit?”

“Ted...” I stumble over his last name and clear my throat to buy time. How could I have forgotten it that quick? Then it comes back to me like I sent out an emergency call to the Almighty. Maybe I did. Under the circumstances it was that natural. “Ted Griffiths.” Whew!

“You came to see Ted Griffiths?” She stopped smiling.

I start to waffle on, like I usually do when I'm in a jam. Next thing I know she snatches up the phone and talks to someone. Soon as she mentions Ted's name, I get a feeling I'm going to be joining him in lock-down any minute.

“Follow me.” she orders, then leads me in the direction of a small office located in the corner of a large room. The guy seated in that office has a sign marked “Tom Shipcott” on his desk, and he waves me into the chair opposite him.

“Good afternoon, Riley Williams. I'm told you requested to see Ted Griffiths.”

Uh-oh. My cheeks are firing up, I can feel it. Not a good sign when you're trying to prove you're one of the cool bunch. And sane. “That's right. I'm a friend of his father's.” Did I get that right? Now, I'm really packing it.

“Well, that's odd, since both of his parents are deceased. May I ask what reason you have for visiting Mr. Griffiths today?”

I say the first thing that pops into my mind. “For the reason of helping him get out of here.”

“I beg your pardon?” The man's glasses slide down his nose, which reminds me of Miss Walker, and I'm thinking—as long as he doesn't push them back up, again...

He pushes them back up. Uh oh. Major blue brewing. “What I really mean is...” What the heck did Joanie say? “What I mean is, I can help him.”

“Help him what.” Mr. Shipcott leans across the desk

to freeze me with a look. I glance out into the larger office, just in time to see a stray sparrow flying around, and a man in a white coat trying to capture it with a net. That triggers some kind of warning in me, but Mr. Shipcott has my attention now, because he has me pinned down, under the force of a venomous glare. “You want to help Ted Griffiths leave this Hospital, do you?”

Sounds right, so I nod. “Yes, I want to help him.” I repeat.

Uh-oh, the man with the net is coming closer, except I can't see any sparrow. Mr. Shipcott looks like he's about to leap to his feet, and come charging around the desk any minute. He bends over me, with his face only inches from mine, and I feel his breath, which definitely isn't peppermint. What he said next was deadly quiet but it effected me as if he yelled it. “You're too late, Riley. Ted Griffiths left this Hospital yesterday, without our knowledge.”

He towers over me, and I suddenly remember something Dad told me. “Riley, if someone wants to argue sitting down—you sit down, too. If they want to argue standing up—you stand up. Evens out the playing field.” So I stand up, and now it's me that's towering over him.

“Mr. Shipcott,” I'm thinking fast, now, like my brains thought better of deserting me in my hour of need and finally came back to fight. “Maybe you've heard of Dr. Thomas. He's one of the most noted Medical Research Scientists in Australia. Well, Ted

Griffiths, is Dr. Thomas's Personal Assistant. Same as me." I add that last part with a prayer.

Then I haul out the business card Mr. T. gave me, which happens to still be in my pocket. "Here's Dr. Thomas's card with his personal mobile phone number. I'm sure he'll be happy to answer any of your questions." Then I begin punching in Mr. T's phone number—slowly—when a hand clasps mine.

"Maybe I have been a little hasty, Riley. You seem very young to be one of Dr. Thomas's P.A's. However, I accept your explanation. Under the circumstances, I'm sure you can understand my hesitation."

"Oh sure. Definitely." I stop dialing, suddenly desperate to get out of there and back to the ute. "Dr. Thomas will want a full report on everything that's happened. Have you got any idea where Mr. Griffiths is now?"

Mr. Shipcott begins to fill me in about Ted, but it's all pretty vague, and at the same time he's walking me back toward the door. By the time we get there, I'm pretty sure he's hiding something and just wants to get me out of there in a hurry. Total turnaround.

"Thanks for that, Mr. Shipcott." I cut off his story as I open the door, just to let him know I'm not buying it. Then I grin at him as I leave. I figured that was more of an adult reaction than my next one, which was to sprint across the lawn and make a bee-line for the parking lot.

14

“Hello. Williams' Crap Services!” I say as I answer the phone.

“Very good, Riley. I'll pay that one. I'm glad I called when I said I would.”

“Yeah, me too. Hey, Dad, that was an amazing drive to Canberra yesterday, and after I saw you it got even more interesting.” I'm doing my best to cheer him up from now on—all done with coming across stressed and down to him. Gotta' lighten us both up.

“You sound a lot better today, son. That visit did me good, too. Took a lot off my mind.”

“Any more news about when you might get paroled?”

“Not, yet. But they're letting me work in the infirmary part of the day—they've got a few guys here with respiratory problems. So, at least the time is going by faster.”

“Hey, that way you won't have forgotten anything when you get back to work and that promotion comes through. Oh, yeah, Ashlee and I are driving in to visit you day after tomorrow.” We talk positive, but deep down I'm a little worried about his promotion. Will it still be waiting once he gets this all sorted? Man, How much does a guy have to be punished for something he

didn't do?

“You got enough help managing the dogs, son?”

Okay, think fast, dude. Don't come across too heavy. You know the man is totally square, so he'll never go along with what you have in mind, unless...“Uh, yeah. Sure. Except if Arthur slows down much more, he'll rust. But, as long as you're asking about the dogs, remember how cool everything was on the trail last year, until...”

“Until what?”

“My team ran into something that really freaked them out. Me too. I told you all about it—remember?”

“No. I don't recall your telling me about that. What was it?”

“I hollered, and it took off before I could get a good look at it. But I'm, uh...pretty sure it was a... a Tasmanian Tiger. There's supposed to be a few left in this area, since we're so close to Tasmania where they used to live. I looked it up on the Internet. Anyway, I circled the trail, then headed back in. The important thing is—whatever it was— this year the team freaks out whenever we go that way. So, they must remember it, too. 'Course I won't let fear stop me running them, so no worries there..”

“Good. Don't let fear get a toehold Riley, or it could end up sucking the life out of you. But it might make you feel better to know I've never heard about any Tasmanian Tigers in the area. Still, running a team through the woods can be risky. Like a lot of other things in life are risky. But I'm pretty confident you

have what it takes to overcome anything life throws at you.”

Yeah, I'll try to keep that in mind next time I run into a Tasmanian Tiger. Then again, a guy can't let himself turn into an emotional minnow with such awesome examples in his own family. So I try to at least sound confident, even though I'm not dinki-di. “I'm just trying to think of the best way to protect the teams, that's all. You know, from wild dingoes...or any other dangerous animal I might run into on the trail.”

“Wild Dingoes? Shouldn't be too many of those this far south. What other dangerous animal are we talking about? The Tasmanian Tiger you think you saw?”

“It was a Tasmanian Tiger.” Should I tell him I spotted one right here in our own woods, too? My mind is racing about a zillion miles a minute, trying to decide.

“Look, Riles, I'll be home, soon, and we can talk more about this then. Right now, I have to go, because others want to use the phone. And tell Ashlee I'll be looking forward to seeing her.”

“Sure, Dad, I'll tell her.” I'm thinking this could be my last opportunity to convince him, and I wanted to, but something stops me. Oh, well—I'd sure like to be able to tap into some of the old Williams confidence all the others have, especially when I really need it. Except I don't have a clue how they do it. I heard somewhere if you're afraid of something, it helps to picture yourself overcoming it. But all I can picture when I think of running into some ferocious Tassy

Tiger when I'm out there alone in the woods, is I'm gonna have a fight to the death on my hands.

Something like that makes me wonder how long a guy has to lift weights before he starts seeing some improvements. So, I peel my shirt off after I hang up, and head for the mirror. No results within cooee. Bummer! No wonder my confidence has bombed, lately. Some of the guys have joined a Gym, and a few are ripped already. Flexing my biceps in a few poses, I try to convince myself mine are just dormant, or something. When are you gonna decide to get more serious about working out? Can't tell when you might have to depend on some Wonder Williams Workout Power.

Two days later, when Ashlee and I visit Dad, again, I selected my T shirt because of its tight, short sleeves, which helps show off whatever slight bulge in the biceps I might have developed. But on the drive to the prison, I notice Ashlee flash me a funny look, like she's holding back a laugh.

“That's an unusual color combination you're wearing today, Riley.” she's fiddling with the heat control when she says it, so I can't catch her expression, but I look down to check myself out.

“Blue shirt, blue jeans? What's wrong with that?” Sometimes I wish Ashlee wouldn't offer stupid comments. I usually dig her sense of humor, but not this time.

“Green shirt, green jeans.” she mutters. Again with the jokes.

Later, when we join Dad in the visitors' waiting room, she hugs him, then says. "Preston, you look like you're bursting with news." They sit down together, and the way she leans forward across the table so she's real close to Dad and can't wait to hear what he has to say, impresses me. Dad seems to be really into it, too.

"Are you sure that chair isn't too hard, Ashlee? There's a more comfortable one over there." He's half-standing, ready to make the swap, but she smiles, and shakes her head. Dad's manners with women are cool, and I totally get the way they seem to dig it. I like Ashlee. Apart from some of her failed attempts at being funny, she's cool—always got a smile on her face. It's like she knows some wonderful secret she can't wait to share with you.

"Yeah, Dad. You look like you got promoted, or something." That gets me a laugh.

"And you look like you're trying not to get lost, Riley," he answers back.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Nothing, son. Only with bright green jeans, and the lime green shirt, it certainly makes it easy to spot you in a crowd." Now they're both taking the mickey out of me. Okay, my jeans may be bright, but they're blue – perfect match for my blue shirt.

"But I do have some good news. Something I've been trying to organize for my cellmate's son finally come through."

Trying to organize? One really good look at Dad, and I see Ashlee is right. The man is practically

bursting. “The boy's eleven and suffers from cystic fibrosis. He's been accepted into a special trial program I nominated him for. Now he has a fighting chance—pretty terrific.”

“Heck, yes, Dad. It's awesome. But how did you pull it off from in here? I'm impressed.”

“I am too.” Ashlee pipes up.

Looking across at her, I get this sudden flash. Just for a second, with all of us focused on the good news about a kid we don't even know, I'm thinking we make a great threesome. Sort of like a family. I was so young when my parents split I can barely remember my Mom. Never had a word from her since she took off to see the world, and neither of us talks about it. Dad hasn't had it easy raising me all these years but he's been one of the best. Whatever hard things come our way, he just straightens his shoulders, and takes one for the team. In that case, me.

“Just lucky enough to have the right contacts, Riles. So all I had to do was write a few emails.”

It's great to see him so pumped. But the visiting hour's almost over, and there's still something I want to say. Except I'm on the shy side about saying personal stuff in front of others. Then Ashlee hangs back to blow her nose, or find the ladies' room, which gives me my chance.

“You know what, Dad?” I keep my voice low. “I bet other guys write letters from prison all the time, but most are probably only after stuff for themselves. So you trying to help that kid—and actually doing it—is

really cool. More than cool. It makes me think you've got God on your side. ”

“Thanks, son. Words like that mean a lot to me, especially coming from you. ”

It felt weird to be talking like this to him about stuff I've only just been learning myself from youth group, but something urges me on. “Maybe there's a reason for everything, Dad, and God can make something good come from even bad things. Like saving that kid's life. I reckon it's all part of a bigger plan. That's the way I look at it, anyway.”

I don't know how I got the guts to say all that, and it was strange how rejuvenated I felt after saying it. Peaceful, even. I guess I'd been drowning in my own troubles for so long, I hadn't been thinking about much of anyone but myself, lately. But that little piece of insight propelled me back to the surface where I finally felt like I could breathe easy, again. Like saying something I thought would help my dad was effecting me, too. In fact, I knew it was. Because all those angry places in my heart that were driving me crazy over all this prison stuff, were starting to melt away like butter. How cool is that?

On the way home, Ashlee and I stop for dinner at the *Burger Wagon* in Jindabyne. Everyone loves it there, with those tantalizing aromas simmering away in the background. *The Wagon* (as we call it) is actually a large motorhome set up in the main street of the town, and serves fantastic tucker all day long. Painted purple, she's decked out with tables, chairs, and a take-away

counter. Not bad for a small town. Anyway, Ashlee and I had already chowed down big, when she looks up from the list she's writing.

“I've got to stock up on groceries, mate. Want some more soda?”

As if I'd refuse an offer like that, but we get separated at the mall as usual, and she eventually locates me checking out the climbing gear. “What do you want that stuff for?” she asks. But I can't tell Ashlee about my big plan before I run it by Dad first. Only she doesn't let it go and on the drive home, starts firing off more questions. Ashlee runs pretty high in the curiosity stakes. But I stay zipped, because usually it's better to go along with the adults in my life on the small stuff, if I'm trying to soften them up for a biggie. And taking on Mount Perisher is gonna be a biggie.

“Dad says he's cool if I go missing for a day now and then, Ash, but don't worry, I'll always be home before dark.”

When I say that, she throws me a quick look, which I take to mean, “whatever.” We're almost home by then, and she's driving up the street towards the house, when a dark shape steps onto the road right in front of us. Ashlee slams on the brakes, hitting the horn at the same time.

“It's a Tiger, Ash! And a big one, too!”

“A Tiger? What are you on about, Riley?”

“A Tasmanian Tiger. It's the same one I saw in the woods behind the house a couple weeks ago.” I throw a nervous glance sideways, and don't have long to wait

for a reaction.

“You can't be serious! They've been extinct for the past fifty years.” She tosses her blonde head like she's trying to shake off the thought, and starts moving along, again. Only slower this time.

“Maybe not. I hear there's still some left in the wild. They're bigger and more dangerous than a wolf, you know.” Congratulations, Williams! You've just been accepted into Nerd school! But there's no further reaction from Ashlee, and all I can hope is that she thinks I'm a motormouth, and not a nutcase.

At home later, I snatch up Arthur's diary, then flop down on the bed to read some. The handwriting is awful. Relax, dude. Focus. This is important. The writing could be Arthur's scratchy scrawl—but there's something strange about it, because it's written in a way I never heard him talk before. Still, whoever was the author, it has me from the start. I only read one paragraph, though, before my hands start shaking and the air feels like it's turned suddenly cold.

When the book slides out of my grasp and falls to the floor, I remember our youth group leader has warned us about reading that kind of stuff. It can fill your mind with graphic images of evil. It was the last thing I expected to run into in Arthur's diary, though, and if I wanted answers to some of the things I've been wondering about for years, I couldn't just ignore it.

But I was sure about one thing.

“I'll never get any sleep if I read any more of this stuff, tonight.”

I jump out of bed, and stow the diary in the side-flap of my schoolbag, because I've got a feeling there's something important in it. With everything that's going down in my own family right now, I need all the help I can get solving mysteries. "Another cold case for Jo and I to nut it out. She's been following clues longer than I have, so she'll probably jump at the chance to figure out this one, too. We can read it together.

In the daylight.

15

Today Dad was released on bail, and that first night home was pretty special. He said he missed cooking, so for dinner we have roast lamb, vegetables, and a salad. Even a Pavlova decorated with berries, for dessert. Awesome. Later that evening, I'm reading in bed and feeling good for a change, when the door opens.

“Just wanted to say goodnight, Riles.”

Man, how long has it been? I look up, grin, then pat the bed. “Take a load off, Dad.” I hold up my Bible. “Homework for our church youth group. Oh, and did I tell you the kids there believe you’re innocent. They told me so.”

“That’s good. I'm glad your friends believe me.”

“No sweat. I'm finding out the hard stuff is a lot easier to take when you have someone on your side.” Have I said too much? Dad seems to appreciate it, but he isn't used to people talking about him, even if they are on his side.

“You're a good kid, Riley.”

“You're probably one of the few who think that.” I

yawn, and set my reading aside. “Most everyone else thinks I'm sort of crazy. Except Joanie. She seems to like me.”

It's nice to hear Dad's laugh, then feel the familiar squeeze on my shoulder as he got up to leave. “Hey—you been working out?”

“Trying to, but it's slow going for all that effort.”

“Feels like progress to me. You're just too close to notice it.”

“Thanks. Oh man, I'm glad you're home again, Dad. Everything feels back to normal, you know?”

“Well, almost, anyway. Night Riles.”

The next day he's back at work, and I'm wrapped that things are finally settling down. Until the court case, anyway. I've decided to keep as cool as I can, and not talk about anything except positive stuff till then. That's the least I can do for him.

I even manage to make it through Mr. Never's Memorial a few days later without too much trouble. Other than the fact I had to show up all on my own because Dad said—under the circumstances—it would make everyone uncomfortable if he came. He's like that everywhere, since he got back. Hood up, hands in his pockets, head down. Like *The Phantom*, or something. Like he just wants to get away from them all.

So, I just sort of wandered around feeling lonely, all by myself. Seemed to me everybody got quiet whenever I came close. What—did I grow another head, or something? I've known most of them all my

life but now they're staring at me like I morphed into some kind of alien. Then it dawns on me they aren't looking at Riley Williams, they're probably looking at Preston Williams' son, and wondering if the bad gene runs through our whole family.

Then I figure I'll get a little to eat just to have something to do. Up until Bert Thistle, one of our not-so-friendly neighbors, says, "I heard they let your thief of a father out on bail a few days ago." Loud enough for everyone within cooee to hear. Which makes me furious. Especially since almost everyone in Perisher Valley has turned up today.

They're crowded in the lounge room and the study. More in the kitchen, and a few spilled out onto the front porch. I wasn't exactly sure how to act at a Memorial, or why so many people I didn't recognize came. Free tucker? Enough grog to get sloshed? Most are simply chatting away like they're here for a visit. All of a sudden I feel trapped, and I don't like it. Where's my blue pen? I pull it out of the pocket of my jeans and shove it in my mouth so it dangles from one corner, then start to chew.

But only for a minute, because I hear something that stops me in my tracks, makes my mouth drop open, and my pen fall on the floor. In fact the whole house goes quiet for a second. Ever since Mr. Never passed, the dog-yard regularly erupts into an eerie symphony of mournful howling. Ashlee says she can even hear them from her place. Most times Ding joins in too, which really creeps me out. Sometimes they keep it up

for hours. You'd think I'd be used to it by now, having lived around dogs my whole life. It's pretty much normal behavior when a much-loved master dies.

Anyway, that's what I'm tossing around in my mind, as a faint scent of fresh spring flowers wafts my way. Next thing I know Joanie is beside me, locking her arm through mine. Which makes things feel instantly better. I notice her Dad talking to someone across the room, and feel relieved she didn't walk through the woods on her own.

"They're at it again, Riley. It's so weird. What do you think they're saying?"

"Who, the dogs?"

"Yes."

"We will not forget you—our dying King."

"What?" She has a stunned look on her face.

Replacing the pen in my pocket, I use more emotion, this time. *"We will not forget you—our dying King."*

"Oh, that's so beautiful. You must like poetry, too. Lord Tennyson, isn't it?"

No. From the *JFK* movie. And not an exact quote, either. "It fits, don't you reckon? Mr. Never was a good guy, and he loved all those dogs. I guess that out there proves it."

"Oh, there's Miss N, Rye." She lets go of my arm as EG comes into the room. "Don't you think she dresses weird sometimes? That long black skirt makes her look skinnier than she really is, and sort of like a vampire."

"I get what you mean. But actually, it helps me

understand what Mr. Never meant. He used to tell me 'Riley, everyone is different, but we're all the same under God.'

Joanie pauses like she's considering what I just said. "That's so true. I think I'll go pay my respects to her."

Now, I can't stop staring at EG with her short black hair and pale face hovering above all that black. It does make her look kind of vampirish.

Probably why I nearly jump out of my skin when Mr. T moves in close as soon as Joanie is out of range, and talks in my ear. "Thanks for the list, Riley. Can you be ready at five am on Sunday?"

"Yeah, sure, Mr. T. I'll be waiting when you drive up." Wow! So it's finally happening. He got the list, and we're going into the rain forest.

"Remember—not a word of this to anyone."

"No worries." I answer just as Joanie comes back to join us, but then she's off again to talk to one of her friends.

"Can we give you a ride home afterward?" Her father asks like we had just been exchanging formalities.

"Yeah, thanks Mr. Thomas."

Finally I escape, and go sit on the the front steps to wait for Joanie and her dad. There's no-one out here, now. The dog-yard out back has gone quiet, too. Everyone else is waiting for the Pastor to say a few words. I guess even people who don't go to church expect to hear some words of comfort or remembrance on occasions like this. It's chilly, but I feel numb to it.

I'm sleepy, yet wide awake. Sad, yet disturbed. I hear a noise, but there's no birds, no wind—nothing. I'm totally alone out here on my step and it feels creepy. Like eyes are watching me.

I swing around abruptly, but there's no-one there.

Then I take a long sweeping glance across the bushes at my right and there he is. A tall, skinny black man—standing on one long leg, with the other tucked up so high, it's invisible. We stare at each other as he stands there. And then it starts up. The sorrowful drawn-out notes of a didgeridoo. Next minute the guy has vanished, and I walk over to check out where he stood. That's when I see Mr. T. and Joanie heading my way. But I can't move. I'm frozen to one spot, staring at it.

Joanie speaks first. “Riley, what's wrong? What are you looking at?”

I can't answer. Just keep gazing at that one, solitary footprint. The Aboriginal Emu Dance. One footprint. The didgeridoo. Mr. T takes a step closer, and knowing how superstitious he is about this kind of stuff, I can't let him see. So I start scuffing away at the footprint with the heel of my shoe. Then from out of nowhere, the didgeridoo starts up again. Mr. Thomas has seen enough of the footprint, though, and I can tell by the look of frozen fear on his face he knows what it means, too.

Imminent death.

Something that keeps coming back to haunt me even when I'm trying to think of other things. Which is

way too much weird stuff going on for this dude, so I'm thinking I better man up and face some of it. I decide to tackle the diary, first, since it's the only thing that doesn't seem to be pointing directly at me, personally. That and I've already decided to share it with Joanie.

So, next morning, I'm sitting beside her on the bus, reaching into the side-flap of my backpack, and I actually have it in my hand, ready to show her, when she buries her face against my shoulder and starts to cry.

“Riley, something terrible has happened. I was looking through Dad's desk, again and found this note that had something awful on it!”

“What was it?”

“I can't tell you, here.” She sniffed and tried to pull herself together before we turned into the major drama of the bus ride that morning.

Except I could care less anymore—she's my girl—and I didn't mind who knew it.

“But it must be true because he's been so stressed I'm worried he's going to do something crazy. Like—like take off all by himself. Maybe even into a rain forest!”

It bugged me I couldn't tell her I had this covered. Mr. T had arranged things—just last night—for us to check out one of my map locations. But I promised him I wouldn't tell Joanie, and I had to admit he was right. Knowing her so much better, now, I bet she'd go hiking after her dad all by herself if she had any idea

where he was headed.

So I put my arm around her, instead, and try to think of some other way to get her mind off it. “You have to have more faith in him, Jo, he's a smart guy. He knows what he's up against.”

“That's just the thing!” She sniffed, again, and reached into her pocket for a tissue. “He's smart about scientific things, but he's incredibly foolish in others. He'd forget to eat if nobody cooked for him—he's not like normal people!”

“Well, then it's a good thing he has this big project to keep him busy, right? Meantime, we can step up our own search, and—who knows—we might be closer than we think to cracking our first case.”

That caught her off-guard and next minute she is smiling through the tears.

“Don't worry,” I keep talking, at the same time wracking my brains as to how I can be on her side and Mr. T's at the same time. “We'll figure things out. I'll go through Mr. Never's desk, again, too. That yellow folder has to be somewhere. Which will be a major clue all by itself. Because whoever has it now is possibly our thief. I'm thinking we should write up a list of suspects.”

She gives me such a hopeful smile, my heart does a flip-flop.

“You know, I think we should take some time out for a little fun, too. Just to get our minds off things. Hey—want to come with me when I run the teams this afternoon?”

16

After school, I'm getting the sled ready for two in front of the shed next to the dog yard that holds all our racing tackle. "About time you proved you weren't chicken." I tease Joanie as she walks around inspecting it.

"Hey, it's just my size. Can't be too scary with only a few dogs pulling it along."

"Wait till you see," I laughed. "These guys take off like rockets. You bring an extra sweater? It gets cold out in the woods."

"It's in my backpack."

She heads off to the ute to get it and meanwhile I check one more time to make sure all my dogs are secured properly and the carabiners are tight. It still feels strange doing all this without Mr. Never looking over my shoulder. But I don't have long to dwell on that thought before Joanie's back, following along behind, taking it all in. A last inspection of the little hollow I've made for her to sit in—anything loose

could turn into a missile if the wind gets behind it. Then I step aside and gesture for her to get on.

She takes a deep breath and laughs as she climbs onto the sled. Her cheeks are pink with pleasure, and I'm thinking what a beaut girl Jo is, and how having her around has been a ray of sweet light cutting through all the dark stuff I've had to wade through, lately. I tuck the blanket firmly around her, then tie the protective waterproof tarp to the sides of the sled.

"It can get a bit bumpy on the trail but I reckon you're gonna enjoy this." I jump up onto the step behind her—no sitting down for me—it's a real workout to hang onto a six-dog team and keep everything under control when they're in a flat-out run.

Now the dogs are jumping up down and straining against their harnesses. Six beautiful white Siberian Huskies that Mr. Never picked out as this year's winning team if I knew my stuff well enough and didn't hold them back. And Ding in the lead, who looks pleadingly at me. He's past ready to take off but won't budge an inch until I tell him. They've all had enough waiting, though. They're giving that funny double yip noise they make, a kind of half-howl.

"Okay, Jo. Hang on tight, and snuggle down further under the cover if the wind gets too cold. These guys are ready to take off."

"Can we go slowly at first, Rye?"

Which makes me laugh, again. Was she kidding?
"Nope. Sorry. There's no slow with these guys. They have two speeds. Stop. And full throttle."

“How can you tell them which way to go?”

“That's easy. 'Mush' for go. 'Gee' for right, and 'Haw' for left.” I'm feeling super excited myself by this time, too. Especially that she's about to experience something I love.

“So you actually drive them? You're in total control?”

“Of course.” Most of the time, anyway. “And I drive real careful when I'm carrying precious cargo.”

I lean forward and shout “Mush!”

We shoot forward and she half squeals and half screams. Next thing I know she's laughing out loud as seconds later we're tearing along through the woods, lightning fast. The dogs hyped up, their tongues hanging all the way out. Doing what they were born to do—run. For a moment it seems unreal I could be standing on a sled behind Joanie. Then we negotiate a bend in the trail, and slow down briefly, before cranking it up to full throttle again a few minutes later.

“Joanie!” I lean forward and shout close to her ear so she can hear me. “Stay with us! Whichever way we lean, you do the same!” Okay, dude. Remember everything Mr. Never taught you, or you'll end up eating snow—and worse—you'll have Joanie eating it with you. You're the musher—it's all on you.

My guys are in top gear now—too fast to be twisting and turning in and around trees. But the trail is wide enough. I've run this route for years and I know every inch. A minute later, the team veers slightly to miss a fallen tree branch, so I lean to the right, and

Joanie comes with me. Good. She gets it.

Six rockets whooshing along in front of us. The noise from the sled runners is deafening as we glide and bounce over snow which I know from experience covers sections of glare ice—deadly slippery to slide on. The runners are spewing snow out from both sides, and we're totally killin' it.

“Mush, guys!” I bellow.

Man, what a ruckus we're making. Suddenly, Ding veers to the left.

“Stay with him, fellas!” I yell, so they do. The sled only just manages to avoid a rough spot, bounces up, then lands safely back down with no more than a thud. How Ding knew that would happen I have no idea. But that's why he's lead dog.

Somehow we manage not to spill—but still it slows us down, so I apply the foot break with a steady even pressure to rein them in until we're steady again and the sled stops swaying—one inch too far and we're over. I ease off, then, and the crisp mountain air fills my lungs as we approach our final run through the woods. This section is the thickest, most densely forested section of Mr. Never's property.

Suddenly I notice Joanie has twisted her head around to shout at me. “Riley, stop the team!”

My heart freezes. Stop the team? Is she joking? Why? This is our favorite part of the run, where the dogs really let go and give it all they've got.

“Please make them stop!”

Oh man, I should have explained. I can make the

guys do anything—except stop. And I'm flat out stumped as to what she wants to stop for. A bathroom break? That's all it can be. So I'm looking for the biggest tree for her as I throw out the emergency hook, then stomp down hard on my extra footbrake.

“Whoa, fellas, whoa!” I order, with no clue what will happen.

Surprisingly, the emergency hook slows us down enough for me to jump off the sled, and anchor it firmly into the ground. Then I get back on my step real fast so the dogs don't take advantage, and bolt. I told Dad my team wouldn't run off, but today I'm not so sure. Then I watch as Joanie climbs calmly out of her sled-bag, looking blissfully happy.

“You need a tree, Jo? There's one over there.” I point to the suitable tree, and she follows my glance with a blank look on her face.

“A tree? What for? Oh...I get it. No, thanks, Rye. I can wait until home.”

“Well, why did you need to stop?” I feel dumbfounded. “What's the emergency?”

“There isn't one. It's just so beautiful out here, I thought we might stop and have a picnic. I brought some muffins.” she offers me a smile, and treats me to that heavenly dimple.

But I don't get it. Not until she climbs up on the sled step and puts her arms around me. How am I gonna explain this to Ding? Jo has just committed the worst of all sins. Stopping the team in full flight—for a muffin break?

“There's no hurry to get back, is there?” she asks. “It's so awesome out here I don't want this moment to end.”

Oh, man. Now she's got me. What guy in his right mind could pass up that kind of opportunity? Until I look across at Ding, and he isn't smiling. In fact, he looks super pinged off. Which is why I go for one of those fast but intense hero-type kisses reserved mostly for danger scenes. For one split second Joanie melts into my arms, and our combined warmth in such a cold environment is like fireworks going off before I let go.

“Totally stunning.” I give her a wink and a smile. “But unless we want these dogs to take off without us—”

Ding gives an insistent yip and the others take up yapping and howling right behind him.

That gives her jolt of reality and she hurries back into her sled-bag. After which I talk sweet to my team while I dig out the emergency hook, and leap back onto the step.

Then we're off again, with Ding and the guys going at it like greyhounds chasing a lure. The loud swishing of sled runners makes anything less than shouting impossible. Then I forget about everything else, while we swerve to miss a low-hanging tree. Now I'm totally locked into the final run ahead of us.

I look behind me—just in time to catch a glimpse of a slim, dark body hurrying from tree to tree, as though trying to hide. Is someone spying on us? Oh, get real, Williams. What's so special that someone

Shale Kenny

would want to spy on you and Jo running the dogs?
Big deal! No worries, though. Nobody on foot can
keep up with my dogs when they're in a flat-out run.

Nobody.

17

We head to my place after the ride because, as usual, I'm cold to the bone from getting the dogs back in their yard and all the gear stowed away in the shed. So, I can bet Joanie won't be turning down my usual hot chocolate I like to warm up with after a run. Besides, we can eat those muffins she brought that I'm fairly starving for now that all the excitement's over.

I push our front door open, then stand back to allow her to enter first. "Dad's working nights, so make yourself at home while I whip us up a mug of cocoa. You'll love my special recipe."

I'd been just about to head out to the kitchen, when I notice she's taking the knit hat off she was wearing. Wow! Her beautiful long black hair cascades freely down over her white sweater, and since her hair is always worth a second look—I'm looking.

"How's your Dad?" she asks.

"Dad? He's turned into Mr. Invisible, ever since he got home. Sure is good to have him back, though. Even if he does work nights and I hardly see him at all.

Except on his days off. It's like old times around here then. Hey, Joanie..." I hesitate for a minute, trying to think of the best way to bring up the subject of the diary.

"Yeah?"

"I hope you like your chocolate real sweet." I motion for her to follow me and we head to the kitchen. What are you, Williams—chicken? Just spit it out and get it over with. But instead, I pull a chair out for her to sit on, like I saw Dad do for Ashlee the other day.

She smiles at the gesture—hey, it works.

"I love it that way."

"Then I guess I'll have to remember to do it more often," I tell her.

She laughs. "Like my chocolate sweet, I mean."

"Oh, yeah. Right." How much cocoa did Ashlee usually put in? A heaped teaspoon, and a dash of sugar? Or the other way around? I'd been making it her way ever since I stayed there. Then I wonder if Joanie prefers cream or milk. Finally I get finished and set a thick blue mug down on the table in front of her, where she's already got a couple of muffins set out.

Her eyes are bright and her cheeks still rose-colored with the cold. Next thing I know I'm thinking back to that kiss we shared on the trail and wishing I hadn't been in such a rush. Then my heart starts pounding the same way all over, again, so I guess maybe I better say something—anything before my emotions run away with me like those dogs I was

trying to hold back. So, I say the first thing that pops into my brain.

“Since you were so good at figuring out Arthur's chicken scratch handwriting the other day, care to give something else he wrote a try?”

“Why, are we going to Canberra, again?”

“No. It's his diary.”

“He wrote a diary? Gosh, he doesn't seem the type.”

“I'm learning Arthur's a lot deeper than he looks. Anyway, he left it where he went on vacation, and they sent it to us. I guess he wrote Dad's name down for next of kin, in case something happened to him. Anyway, I was trying to read some of it, last night, and got the creeped-out feeling it was some kind of confession. In fact...” I got up to pour us a second cup but she'd barely taken a sip of hers. “I'm almost sure of it.” I get it out of my backpack and hand it to her.

“Well, diaries are usually so truthful they can be used as evidence in court. Except...” She turned a few pages ahead to compare. “This handwriting doesn't look the same as the directions he gave us.”

“Could have been written a long time ago. Before he got the shakes so bad. He's constantly moving. Even when he's trying to sit still his hands are tapping all the time, like he's playing music on some invisible instrument. It's hilarious to watch, but no joke if you were the one on the other end, most likely.”

“It could have been written by someone else.”

“Except he told me it was his, and he wants it back.”

I thought it was going to be about his vacation but it looks more like a climbing notebook. Sort of a record of each climb. Except—the way Arthur is now—I can't see him ever being that organized.”

“Hard to remember all the old timers were young once.” She turned back to the first page. “Okay, let's look. No introduction, no name, no date...when you're keeping a record of something, you usually put all that stuff down. First few pages could have been torn out for some reason, though.”

“Like I say, Arthur's not the organized type.”

“Okay, here we go.” Joanie clears her throat first. She's such a polished reader, dramatic—almost hypnotic, and she has me at the first word.

“Perisher. We made it to the summit okay, but about halfway back down the earth cracked open and swallowed Charlie whole. One minute he's walking behind me and the next I hear him cry out, and turn around just in time to see him go into the ravine. Next thing he's clinging to the rim—with just his forehead and eyeballs peeping out over the edge.

“It's okay.” He yells—his face ashen with shock. “I've landed on an ice-shelf strong enough to support my weight.”

I'm standing maybe six feet back from the edge, so I can see a little way into the ravine. “Don't panic, Charlie. The sled-dog team is close by.” I remind him as I quickly dispatch the emergency signal. A few minutes later my mate arrives with the sled and our four dogs.

“What happened?” he asks, as we ground the hook tight. It has to hold Charlie's weight when we pull him out, and he's heavy. Six feet four and big boned.

“Poor bugger's hanging from the rim like one of them sides of beef in his Butcher shop. Probably freezing down there too, cause he's coughing bad.”

“How deep is it, Charlie?” my mate shouts down.

“Real deep, mate. And I got company. Three of 'em. Reckon you can pull me up?”

I looked at my buddy when Charlie said that. Bet we were thinking the same thing—those three missing climbers. “The edge where you went in looks real unstable.” I tell Charlie, and cop a look of disgust from our buddy.

“Listen to that.” I whisper.

“What—I don't hear nothing.”

“That drip drip sound. The snow on Charlie's ice-shelf is melting like a time bomb ready to go off. It's death music mate.”

He ignores what I said. “Hang on, Charlie! I'm coming!”

My teeth won't quit chattering, and I need to distract myself, so I focus on Charlie's hands. Large, strong hands that had slung heavy cattle carcasses around his Butcher shop like they were feathers. Folk used to say Charlie Williams had the biggest hands they'd ever seen. A working man's hands. How different they look now—arms stretched out wide to steady himself. Fingers dug into the edge of the ravine. Amazing he could even hang on that long.

I sometimes wonder how long his ice shelf would have held out for if I'd acted differently. Could I have got him out before it gave way? I stepped closer. That face, gazing hopefully up from a border of white ice. Eyes staring out from a crystal cocoon, into the bright, blue sky. Again I looked into the ravine, it's white stalagmite-covered walls forming what I felt sure would be Charlie's grave.

I knew if it was me down there, I could let the dogs pull Charlie back up, then walk myself up the wall of that ravine like it was a routine climbing trip. "There's a trick to it." I used to boast. But there weren't no trick. Just something I could do well, and they couldn't. If my mate went in, then the dogs would need to pull two men up, and that whole edge could go. "No use two of you carking it, is there?" I ask myself. That's when I began to back away.

Charlie was a God-fearing man, and I knew he'd be praying. Probably for his family. He had a kid to raise. You ready to tell that kid his daddy's gone? Oh yeah, we had everything covered—but the mountain had other ideas. I thought about that real hard.

"How bad ya' hurt, Charlie?" my mate called.

"Pretty bad. One leg's had the richard, I reckon. Jammed into a crack in the shelf but I can't move it enough to pull free."

"Bummer!" My mate groaned. "His leg's busted."

We wasted precious time debating back and forth, but I held firm. The edge looked too risky to tie into, so it wasn't me who went over the rim on a rope tied to

the sled.

“I’ll need to lower myself underneath him, and get that leg free. There’s no other way.” Then my mate is gone, and the clock’s ticking.

“I’m coming to get you, Charlie!” I heard him call, then a few minutes later he shouts to me. “Line on! Just need to work his foot free before you haul us out!” I heard him okay, but I knew that wouldn’t work. My buddy didn’t realize it yet, but I reckon Charlie would.

One man, no worries. Two? Hardly. Not with Charlie and him being such big boys. The last time I looked, I saw Charlie let go one of his hands and touch a finger to his forehead in a military salute. That’s when I knew he understood everything and it near broke me.

Then I heard it. First a thump, thump, thump as my mate tried to kick him free. Then a noise like a waterfall and I knew the shelf had broken away. Suddenly the sled began to slide backwards, taking the dogs and me with it. Heading right for that gaping hole.

“Pull, guys! Mush! Mush!” I yelled, and they did. Those dogs gave it everything, but they were steadily losing ground. So I leaped off the sled—ran up to the leaders—grabbed their harnesses and pulled right along with them—but we were still slipping backwards. Closer than ever to that greedy ravine.

I tried—God knows I tried. But all we had was four dogs, pulling a huge weight straight up from a long drop. My mate told me later that seconds after the ice-

shelf gave way—a second before the bottom of the world fell out—Charlie cut himself free, so the whole lot of us wouldn't get sucked in. Fair dinkum, I cried when I heard how he fell in with all that water and got swept away, like a barrel on the Bering sea.

Only one man came out of the hole that day. Should have been me went down to rescue Charlie. I knew it then—and I know it now. But I was scared spineless.

Perisher locals know that if the mountain can't get who it wants, it will take someone else, instead, and I figure the best one of us died, that day. A big, kind Aussie bloke who ended his life with courage Wouldn't surprise me if sometime the mountain makes me pay for what I didn't do that day.

Perisher always wins.”

Joanie and I sit opposite each other at my kitchen table—shocked senseless. Like we just witnessed the whole thing ourselves, right then.

“What a terrible thing to live with,” she finally says. “To think you could have saved somebody, and didn't. That someone else died because of it is almost as bad as...”

“Killing him?”

“No law against cowardice, I guess. But...” She glances up at the clock. “Oh, my gosh. Look at the time! Mom totally loses it if I'm late.”

“I'll drive you home.”

By then there's a hollow turning into an ache in my stomach. Because it was my own grandfather who

Perisher

didn't come back that day, and I'd never heard the whole story before. Charlie was my grandfather. I knew who the other men were, too.

Except I didn't know which one was the coward.

18

Sunday morning, I'm still asleep when my phone sounds a wake-up. Yawning, I turn it off, then roll over to check the time. Five am. I drag my reluctant body to the bathroom, doing my best to return to the land of the mentally alert faster than usual. My oldest jeans will do. In a rain forest as thick as the Amazon, they'll be cactus by the end of the day, anyway.

“Let's go, Ding.” I order the tail protruding from under the bed and he's out like somebody rang a starting bell. No worries about him needing a slow wake up, he was born on alert. I scribble a quick note for Dad, who won't be home from work until late tonight. A slight protesting squeak from the kitchen door, and then we're outside. Zip your coat up, and pull your hoodie way down, mate. Rain forests can be cold in winter, although the hard yakka Mr. T wants you to do ought to warm you up. A high-necked skivvy,

fleecy-lined sweater, and boots ought to be enough.

Still dark, with no sign of an approaching car as I cross the yard, trying to stay upright on patches of slippery ice. Before I'm halfway, I can hear one as it purrs down the drive—headlights off. A slight breeze has sucked some hair out from under my hoodie, so I shove it back under as the small black Subaru pulls up. No lights inside, but I can see the shadowy form of Mr. T behind the wheel and climb in. Straight off I'm fighting back a grin, because he's dressed totally in black, like *Dangerman*. It's a wonder he doesn't have his face blacked out, too.

“You get enough sleep last night, Riley? I should warn you that gathering specimens isn't as easy as it sounds. What I need tends to live only in the most difficult places.”

“Yeah, I'm good, Mr. Thomas. I don't go anywhere in the woods or forests without taking my gear along. Ready for anything is what I always say. Are you sure it's okay about Ding coming? Dogs aren't really permitted in the National Parks but he's worth his weight when it comes to trekking through wild places. We're sort of a team.”

“An important member of the expedition as far as I'm concerned.” He reaches around to pat Ding, and I'm amazed how he's not the least bit afraid of Dingoes. Maybe because he was Outback born and raised. Probably seen enough wild Dingoes to actually believe me when I say Ding is tame. I'm thinking it will be him trying to keep up with me rather than the other way

around, though. Because Mr. T does not look like the athletic type. I give him a sly glance. Short and thick, a waist nearly the same width as his broad shoulders, and legs that seem to bulge out of his black, track pants. If you called him 'stocky,' you'd be being kind.

“Nice warm beanie you're wearing, Mr. Thomas.” Still a bit of wild long hair sticking out the back but it was good cover for that shiny chrome dome of his.

“Haven't got used to the cold here in Perisher Valley, yet.”

He could say that, again. The heat was blasting so high I had to slip my hoodie off the minute I climbed in. “Where we headed first?” I figured if it was too far away I'd be shedding everything except my underwear before we got there.

“Farthest one out. Bit of a drive but it will give you a chance to take a good look at these photos.” He tapped a yellow manila folder on the seat between us that reminded me of the one Mr. Never kept his manuscript in that was still missing. “Most of the plants I need are small, so I've enlarged the prints to help you identify them better when you're looking out there in the wild.”

I switch on the interior car light and reach inside. Nothing but a pile of photos, just like he said. Not that I expected anything else, but I'm feeling relieved just the same. I start flipping through, taking my time to study each one before I go on to the next so I can lock the images into my vault for later.

“We need plenty of every variety. Especially those

with seeds. There's a large backpack for each of us to put our samples in, and plastic bags to protect any with seeds.”

I was glad it was only plants we were after since I'd be packing double along with my own backpack filled with a few hiking tools and some stuff in case of emergencies. Not to mention a damper for breakfast I brought along, too. Being out on a trail always makes me hungrier than usual.

When I'm done looking through the photos, I shove them into the deep pocket of my jacket I've got laying on the seat instead of wearing, now. By that time light is beginning to break. A perfect moment to see the rain forest coming into view. It had a low mist hanging overhead giving an eerie sensation of having just gone back in time. Like you could maybe catch a glimpse of some dinosaur munching away at the edge of some tropical pool somewhere in the middle of all that green.

There were palm trees of every description, too. Kauri Pines, Crepe Myrtle and Black Wattle trees. Plus the true Aussie “man killers”—towering gum trees. Some of them are giants you can't even see the top of once you start walking around underneath. I look over at my partner in this expedition. “Rain forest green has a calming effect, don't you reckon Mr T? It's almost hypnotic when you're in the middle of it.”

“Has quite the opposite effect on me, I'm afraid.” He smiles, driving slow now, as the road begins to wind and we enter into that mysterious green world that makes me feel like a giant mouth just opened and

swallowed us up. “I should warn you I have a tendency to get a little over-excited when I get out into all this, so don't worry if I snoop around a little while you're busy digging up some of the plants.”

“Whoa, I wouldn't do that, Mr. Thomas. There's rules about staying on the trails in here and we really should stick together. Know what I mean?”

Ding must have sensed the sudden worry that hit my gut because instead of laying quiet on the back seat, he was up all of a sudden, licking the side of my face and leaving a trail of slobber in my ear.

“Oh, I won't venture too far,” he promised. “I know there's a local tribe nearby. It's just that a rain forest like this is a gold mine as far as medical research is concerned. I never know what I might find.”

“I guess so. But the tribes get awful touchy if they think you might take something. So, we're pushing it actually taking this stuff out.”

“I heartily agree. Which is why we had such an early start. We' should be in and out before most people have even finished breakfast!” Then he laughed like he'd just pulled a fast one that only the two of us knew about.

Except I didn't think it was so funny. “Down, Ding.” He dropped back onto the back seat, again, but started up a soft whine that let me know he wasn't so happy with the situation, either. It's a fact that Outback people—especially ones that spend any amount of time with the tribes—can not only survive in places like this, but know a lot of the ancient secrets, too. The

really brilliant ones get famous all over the world. They don't give those secrets up easy, though, which is probably why the tribes trust them. But, man, Mr. T didn't fit the typical description of those types.

I was born and raised in Perisher Valley and only made occasional treks into places like this. Then it was mostly around the edges, and I pretty much stuck to the rules. I might not know any of the ancient secrets but I sure enough knew how dangerous it could be for anyone who went cross-wise to the local beliefs. No matter how ancient they were. Now something told me I was about to find out, first hand, why Joanie was so worried about her dad going off on his own to these places.

I have to admit it was hard not to catch some of his enthusiasm, though. Even what we could see from the road, the place was totally awesome. I mean at the same time I'm worrying about keeping Mr. T on the trail, I can't help gawking at the white mountain boulders I could see out the window, covered with moss so moist I can practically hear the water dripping from them. I'm feeling almost lost in all that beauty until I suddenly start to wonder if whatever spell came over him, just now, might be catching.

“Up there!” He said it so sudden I almost jumped out of my skin. “Is that the the small cabin that's half falling down you marked on your map?”

“Yeah, that's the one. It makes a good landmark to start out from.”

“Or in case we get lost. I'll make a note of the

compass settings from there.”

“Hey, you don't want to get lost in a rain forest, Mr. T, that's for dead certain.” Ding was up on his feet, and licking me again.

“The last thing either of us want to do, I'm sure. Now—variety—Riley. That's the important word for today. I need more than a single plant of each kind. Try to get old, young—oh, yes, and a few with roots please. Some whole mature plants if they're not too large. As many with seeds or flowers as you can find. My gosh, do you realize the significance of what we're doing? My early attempts indicate...” He breaks off mid-sentence, which blows me away, because it leaves the most important part up in the air. He does that a lot, which totally yanks my irritation chain. Like he just got the brainstorm of the century, or something.

“I'll do my best, Mr. T. Won't be half as good as Ted because I don't know much, but I can at least follow directions. Probably won't get any new ideas to consider, though. When you and Ted worked together, did you argue back and forth over ideas? I mean, that's how I always thought scientists figured things out. They argue their ideas. I hope you don't mind my asking, but...” This next question's for Joanie. Let's see if there was any jealousy between these two guys. “I'm curious how you decide whose idea is best.”

For some reason the question makes him laugh. “No, I don't mind your asking, Riley. That's how scientists work, you know. By asking questions. Ted and I always seriously consider each others' ideas. Or

rather, we did.”

I tear my eyes away from the scenery for a minute and search his expression for signs of how he really feels about Ted's disappearance. But instead, he doesn't go there.

“Tests would rule many of them out to begin with,” he went on. “Often we would have trouble convincing the other of the solid worth of one of our concepts. But eventually we would come to an agreement on which idea should proceed to the next stage.”

“Did you ever get yours mixed up with his?”

“No chance. You see we even had a bit of a competition going about that, so we were always keeping score.”

Uh-oh. Red flag.

“But in all seriousness, we were careful to label each idea, then give it a number. For example, we might identify Patrick, five, for one of my concepts and Ted, number one, for his.”

“Gotcha! Have you guys come up with any major stuff, yet?”

I wasn't meaning to be funny, but it sure cracked Mr. T up when I asked that. I couldn't see the humor. All I could think was Joanie's old man was definitely the strangest character I'd ever met. Mad as a hatter one minute, then the genius everyone says he is, the next.

“Anything major? I tell you, Riley, if we can pull this off today, we have our best chance of ...”

Then he quits right in the middle of a sentence, again, as he pulls carefully off into a turn around and

looks behind us. “We better stop here.”

I look back, too. “Yeah, we're nearly at the end of the road, anyway.” The dilapidated hut we passed a few minutes ago, was now almost hidden by undergrowth. Any farther and it wouldn't help as a landmark.

“Think of it, Riley! Today you are doing something to help rid the world of a devilish scourge that kills millions every year! We're working on several types of cancers, but one in particular. It's one that attacks Aussies more than any other population in the world. Skin cancer.”

Strange, I didn't think of that one as deadly. Definitely not one of the majors. “Uh...didn't someone find a cure for that already?”

He turns the ignition off, sets the hand brake, and turns to face me with eyes so wide they're almost bulging. Which sort of creeps me out until he breaks into a smile. That reassures me big time, because I've seen smiles like that lots of times—in church. So I'm totally cool with it.

“If only they had found a cure already. But we're desperately short of research doctors. There have been several highly regarded hypotheses under review recently which, unfortunately, the press got wind of a little too soon. But I'll let you in on a little secret...”

“Yeah?”

“Mine is the best!” The words practically explode out, then launches him into a real, full-bellied laugh.

Wow! This has to go down as Riley Williams'

weirdest day ever. Helping a mad scientist who transforms himself from a nut case, into a good old Aussie bloke every other minute. Next he jumps like someone pinched him and darts a look in every direction. Then Ding gives him a sloppy lick in the ear and sets him to laughing, again. Except by that time I feel like maybe I'm catching the jitters off him, too, because I'm starting to feel jumpy, myself.

It was that uneasy feeling you get of being watched.

Anyway, this rain forest is spectacular, and being a local I know them all pretty well, but I haven't been very far into this one before. It's closer to the coast, so more tropical than the others. Daylight is filtering through pretty steady by the time we get out of the car. And the way the raindrops seem to hang suspended from the tips of giant stag-horn trees make me realize those glossy pictures on *Beautiful Australia* magazines aren't always photoshopped after all.

The surrounding mountain range offers some protection this far down into the valley, so the air is not freezing. No snow down here. Just cold and crisp, and so heavily scented with pine cones I find myself taking deep breaths to hang onto the freshness awhile. No wind in this secret emerald city Mr. T and I are sharing. It is totally still.

“Okay Riley, Let's you and I and Ding head down to the two Billabongs. You take one, and I'll do the other. It looks like quite a hike from your map but I assure you I'm a lot more fit than I look.”

“Yeah, well the landscape is extra wild down there,

so take care. I have no idea how deep that water is—don't wade out too far if you can help it.”

“Point taken. I may not be familiar with this particular rain forest, but I definitely feel at home in the environment.” Then he slips off one of the limp, empty backpacks he had been carrying over one shoulder and hands it to me. “Here's yours. Did you bring a phone?”

“No. They don't work so good out here, and I usually end up losing it somewhere or dropping it in the water. Dad says the next one that goes missing I have to replace myself.”

He pulls one out of some pocket and drops it as he's handing it over to me. Just when I'm thinking it's a good thing we weren't off the path, yet, I notice his hands are shaking.

“What's wrong, Mr. Thomas?” I bend down to get it for him. “You okay?”

“I—er—oh, yes. I'm just a little anxious never having been around these people before.”

Which sets my creep meter ticking, because as far as I can tell we're the only ones out here. What—is he seeing things? I'm thinking we should stick together for awhile, so try and drag things out a little.

I tuck the handle of a small ax through a special loop in my belt, then stick my head and one shoulder through a coil of rope I pull out of my own pack. Out of the corner of my eye I can see he's looking at me wondering what I'm up to, so I explain. “I like to have some stuff more handy than in my pack. Never can tell

when you might need it quick. Like slipping into a quicksand, or something.”

“Good thinking,” he answers.

Next, I start tearing pieces off a roll of duct tape and wind them tight around the bottom of my jeans and shirt sleeves. “You better have some of this, too, Mr. T. Does a great job of keeping the ticks and leeches out. I brought an extra pair of heavy gloves, too. Joanie will be asking all sorts of questions once she finds out we've been out here if I don't bring her dad home in good shape.”

“With a little luck we'll be home before she realizes we're gone.” He wound the tape around his cuffs and I cut it off for him. “But I see you've discovered she's quite persistent at getting information out of people. Wouldn't surprise me if she went into some form of law one of these days.”

She's already there, I thought to myself. And considering I pretty much jumped in with both feet as the other half of some kind of *Williams and Thomas Detective Agency*, I had to agree with him. Now, Ding keeps licking me, which means he's anxious to get going. So, I smile down at him—trying to make out like I'm soooo chilled—except I'm not.

“Ready to go?” Mr. T asks.”

“Yeah, except we should both be wearing our Akubras for falling bush ticks and stuff.” The Aussie bush hat is the last thing I pull out of my backpack. “You got one, Mr. T?”

“Of course. It's in back of the car. Just a minute.”

“I'm starving already and we haven't even started yet.” I laugh. “But I got a cure for that. Some damper we can eat while we hike. Want some?” I hold the doughy, scone-like Aussie delicacy out toward him, and immediately Ding moves closer. “That's it, boy. You might be lucky and catch a crumb or two.” I tease.

“My gosh, how long it's been since I've eaten damper. Did you make this yourself, Riley?”

“Yeah. Dad cooked us a bar-b the other night, so I baked it in the hot coals. Tastes better with golden syrup poured all over it, though.”

“Ah, yes. Syrup on damper. The traditional feast of the Outback. It was a regular favorite with the opal miners, and Mrs. Thomas and I have eaten it most of our lives.”

“Sticks to your belly good. We won't be hungry for ages, now. Here, Ding. I saved you a piece.”

So Ding gobbles up his share, and we're off, with him and I taking the lead as we follow the last bit of road to where we can pick up the trail to the Billabongs.

Then next minute a big old red comes hopping across the track in front of us. “No, Ding! Stay!” I warn him. “That bloke's a giant. Bet if he stood up, and he'd be at least six feet high. I know you're a fighter, boy, but don't go taking him on. Boxing Kangaroos are bad news.”

I look down at him a few minutes later and feel it again, only much stronger this time. Mr. T was right.

We aren't the only people in this rain forest.

19

It isn't long until we're about halfway down the rough track leading to the two Billabongs. Mr. T is a few yards behind me, and I'm fighting off a zillion miles of tangled vines and creepers, while trying to avoid being decapitated by low branches. That's when I hear a loud bang and turn around to see what it was, thinking it would really freak the old guy out.

“Don't worry,” He reassures me. “It's probably only a heavy branch falling.”

Then I return to the real fight. Clinging vines have wrapped themselves around my boots so I trip over, falling into some thick undergrowth that tries to make me it's prisoner. And as if that isn't bad enough, I think I've just landed on a black snake. “Or a Taipan.” I mumble to Ding, who's stopped to sit and watch me. Man up! Go pick your plants, and then you're done!

Funny the things that run through your mind when you're totally occupied with un-strangling yourself. This isn't exactly what I had in mind when I was

thinking of helping to find a cure for cancer. There's a possibility I could get more famous for this than climbing Perisher. Sure makes a boy from the bush stand tall and proud among his ancestors.

Then I'm thinking something's not quite right because after walking nearly an hour we still haven't reached the Billabongs. Some of the undergrowth is a nightmare to get through, and Mr. T seems to be having a battle on his hands, same as me. I don't want him to fall any further behind so I slow down some, take off my sweater, then wrap it around my waist. The worst part is that I'm convinced I'm stepping on snakes the whole time.

Oh, get real Williams. If that was a Taipan or a Death Adder, you'd be dead by now.

“Can you see how much further it is?” Mr. T shouts at me, and I shake my head. Then just as I'm wondering how the heck I'll ever have the strength to climb all the way back uphill again when we're done, I see it! A beautiful Billabong dead ahead, covered in waterlilies which look like the ones in the photos even from here. Oh man, I was beginning to worry we might have tramped all this way for nothing. Now Mr. T is so excited, he rushes past me and next thing I see him wading enthusiastically out to the middle where the plants grow, looking as pleased as punch.

But I won't be too far behind him. The other Billabong is maybe another hundred yards away. “Better not drop those photos. If you get the wrong ones, he'll probably send you back again. So make a

good job of it," I tell myself.

The small plastic bags are a lifesaver for the plants with root systems attached, and I'm being real careful not to disturb any of the seeds like Mr. Thomas told me. If only I wasn't positive I could feel the fangs of water snakes stabbing through my boots every few minutes. A bloke will be lucky if he makes it out of here alive. "They're not snakes pea-brain, so don't even... this is important, and you're not gonna stuff it up!" I keep telling myself things like that, mainly to stay alert.

Then I chant Mr. T's orders as I work so I won't forget them. "New growth, old growth, some with flowers, lots with seeds, big specimens, baby plants, roots and all, and careful with the seeds." Then, biff! I'm finished, and look for Mr. Thomas in the other Billabong to let him know my bag is full. But wouldn't you know it? The dude's vanished!

All I can do now is trudge through mud and slime back to land, and keep looking around until I find him. At the same time I realize I'm starving already, and start trying to figure out how many hours it has been since I chowed down properly apart from the damper. "The subject of food seems to occupy a lot of your thinking, don't it? Yeah. Well I'm a growing boy, and because of that Mr. T owes me one massively huge steak when we hit town."

That makes me feel better as I look around for where Joanie's Dad is supposed to be. At least now I'm out of the water which means I have a better chance to

spot Death Adders and Red Bellies before I step on them. It's not easy, but finally I manage to wrench my mind away from snakes and food so I can concentrate on Mr. T.

“Darn it, Ding!” I tell my super-calm dingo, who thinks I'm moving so slow he takes a moment to rest under a palm tree. “I told him not to wander off. If he gets himself lost we might never find him.” I call out louder, this time.

No answer.

I keep shouting but still no reply. Toughen up, dude. Head down, bum up, and just keep looking—he's around here somewhere. But by the time I hit the winding trail we used to get this far, I'm breathing hard and beginning to get really worried.

“This is what happens when you swap footy training for running dogs.” I remind myself. “His large backpack is starting to get real heavy. I sure am glad Mr. Thomas doesn't collect rocks.”

Gasping for breath, I sit down at the water's edge, wondering why I'm wheezing.” If I end up with tuberculosis, you'll have to find yourself someone else to help you next time, Mr. T.” I grumble a half-hearted threat, then call his name again. He should be within cooee, so I keep at it, listening for any reply. Ding seems to be watching the goings on with interest, but there's no sound except for the familiar noises you hear in most rain forests. Kookaburras and whip birds mainly, accompanied by a cacophony of assorted bird songs. Just your average, true-blue Australian rain

forest.

My eyes squint against the sun, as I think I spot something in the distance. Is it a male figure? Mr. Thomas? Of course. It has to be him. “Darn it, Mr. T. You could have got yourself lost.” I turn to Ding. “I tried to warn him, didn't I?” I complain to him. “Yet he still takes off without telling me. Scientific nerds drive you nuts!”

I'm picking up the pace heading in the direction of the figure I think I saw, but now it's vanished again. Ding hasn't picked up a scent either, or he would have bolted ahead of me. Maybe it wasn't Mr. T. Or could the guy be so focused on a new discovery that he's forgotten I even exist? Yeah, that sounds about right.

“Track Mr. T for me, Ding.” I give the command but Ding just keeps trotting docilely along beside me. He looks up at me and smiles but that's all he does. If he had the scent, Ding would have taken off when I said that.

Closer now, and I'm sure I can make out Mr. Thomas talking with two men, both taller and leaner than him. Uh-oh. Two Aboriginal blokes, with strange white markings painted all over them. Not good. One is standing on one leg—totally still—and holding some type of club. My head swims and I feel my heart start pounding away like crazy in my chest. What's going on?

When the chuff-chuff noise starts up, I nearly lose it. I didn't notice, at first. A sound similar to music, yet it's not exactly music, if you know what I mean. That's

the only way you can describe the deep, long, mournful notes of a Didgeridoo. So faint at first, that it blends in the background, but the closer I get to the three figures, the louder the music grows. And this time no-one vanishes.

“Hey, boy! See those dudes ahead?” I point in their direction, but Ding shows no interest. Can't Ding see them? Am I just imagining it?

The guy standing in that familiar one-legged pose has begun to dance around Mr. T, waving the club at him. And the whole time this is happening, I'm still jogging as fast as I can towards them. Totally weird, how they look like rubbery figures in this distance and not real people at all. That must be why Ding isn't reacting. Or am I so exhausted that my mind is playing tricks on me? After hours in a jungle full of Death Adders, that could be it.

I keep plugging along in a dreamy state, not so much in a hurry now because at least Mr. Thomas isn't missing. That's until it dawns on me exactly what's taking place, and then I'm pulverized into action. Oh no! Now I finally get it who those guys are, and I feel sick with terror. Next second I'm running—desperate to reach Mr. T, with Ding racing ahead of me, yipping and growling all the way.

From all around I begin to hear an eerie, high-pitched chanting, and the stamping of many feet. That definitely was the last thing I ever wanted to hear again in my life. “Remember Ding?” I shout to him. “The same guys we saw the night of that secret meeting. It's

the Bone Pointers, Ding!”

My whole body feels like a tub of slimy quicksand has just been dumped on it. My reflexes grind to a halt and things start happening in slow motion. Joanie's Dad is in trouble but I'm still too far away to help. I pick up the pace, then run as fast as I can, horrified when I see one of the Aborigines shake something in Mr. T's face, and he staggers forward to crash heavily to the ground.

Those guys mean business, and they have spears. I almost made it. Just a few seconds too late as Mr. T hit the ground. Unbelievable! The thing Mr. Thomas had always said he feared most has happened. The Bone Pointers have got him.

“Ding! Get them, boy! Get them!” I bellow—and at the sound of my voice—Ding goes charging at them. Dingoes. Feared for centuries by Aborigines more than anything else, and now one of them is heading straight for the dude with the club. If I had time, I would have loved to laugh at the look of terror on his face as the two men took off into the bush.

Both Bone Pointers almost made it to safety, but Ding catches up and attaches himself to the leg of the nearest man just as I reach Mr. T, and drop to the ground beside him. There's a noise of enraged growling as Ding rips the flesh from the man's leg. Screams of pain.

But it does nothing to help Mr. Thomas. He's not breathing, and there is no sign of a pulse. Turning him on his side, I check to see if his airways are clear, then

commence CPR. If Mr. Thomas dies, Joanie will lose her father, and the world might miss the best chance it has to rid itself of cancer.

“You can not mess this up, Williams.” I vow, as I offer up a silent prayer.

Dingoes can break a sheep's neck in seconds. That's a fact. And if I had time to look, I knew I'd most likely see something similar happening behind me. But there's no time for anything except working over the unconscious Mr. Thomas. I don't have time to say it aloud, but mentally I'm thanking God for the recent CPR lessons our youth club gave us. I'm too busy starting the compression count the way we were taught. Stay focused. Maintain the rhythm. Somehow I managed to catch a spare second to cast a quick glance sideways where a serious mauling was taking place. But what I saw made me wish I hadn't. One of the men raised his club high.

“No!” I bellow, as I am forced to watch the club smash into Ding's skull, and it takes every bit of self-control I can muster to keep working over Mr. Thomas. Nothing I can do for Ding. Not now. But I felt that club like it had been smashed into my own heart. Mr. Thomas is still unresponsive though, and when I do look again a few seconds later, it's just in time to see Ding—totally stunned—then staggering off into the bushes. Not dead then. At least not dead.

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It was brutal to keep going, but somehow I continued the CPR. Then it's not until I hear a hiss of expelled air that I'm able to sink back gratefully onto my heels. For the first time I feel my own face wet with tears. "That's it. You're okay now. Can you hear me, Mr. Thomas? Wake up!" A pitiful groan, so faint I only just hear it. His eyes are open, but he's staring blankly at nothing.

Another groan, and I can't help the faint whisper that escapes me, "Oh, Lord. Please don't let Joanie's father die!"

The guy looks like every drop of blood has been drained out of him. What did they do to affect him like that? Joanie's Dad is highly-intelligent. A man of science. It was just a silly curse. They can't be real! Maybe shock and fear gave him a heart attack. It had to be something logical like that because superstitions and sorcery can't kill you. Still, Joanie has explained to me more than once how her Dad still half-believes all that junk, even though he fights against it.

Whatever it is, though, it's got him sliding downhill

fast.

So, I've got to keep my head straight and stick with the first aid stuff. Just do the next right thing.

“I'm gonna roll up my sweater and put it under your head, Mr. T.” Keep talking to him, Williams. Remember how they said just the sound of a voice can sometimes keep a person from slipping away? “Listen, I don't want you to worry about those guys. They're gone, now. Can you hear me? They're gone. Ding went after them like a regular hero-dog, and they took off like a couple of...”

He's trying to speak, so I bend low, my ear close to his trembling lips but I can't hear.

“What did you say, Mr. T? Just a bit louder—I can't hear.”

He raises an arm, like it takes every last ounce of strength he has, and one weak hand makes a slow journey towards my shoulder—to pull me closer. “Bo....Bone Pointers!” Barely a whisper but I catch it.

Mr. T's gonna be okay if he can say that much, but what about Ding? My eyes close, and I talk to a mate who can't hear me. “I'm coming, Ding. You know that. I'll be there as fast as I can.”

“Okay, just lie still, Mr. T, and I'll go get the car. The keys still in it?” A slight nod, so I stand to stretch my back and shoulders in preparation for what I have to do next. “You waiting for a taxi or something, dude? Get moving!” One last look at the man on the ground, ghostly white, eyes closed, as though trying to shut out something bad, and I'm worried. He keeps clawing at

his chest, then pointing to me. Is it shock? How can I tell if he's having heart problems?

I fall to my knees, again, then put my arm around those wide shoulders to lift him up a few inches off the ground in a hug. Kind of a nerdy thing to do to the poor guy, but I have to try something. "I'm listening, Mr. T. Are you trying to tell me something? Is it that you don't want to stay here on your own? One hand clutches at my sleeve, and I get it.

"You're afraid they'll come back?" Just the slightest nod of his head, while in my mind, I hear Joanie pleading with me.

"Riley, please take care of my dad!"

"Okay. Where I go, you go. But first I gotta get you back to the car. Let me feel your pulse. Wow! It's racing a zillion miles a minute. You gotta try to relax, Mr. T. The danger is past now, and you can help yourself by staying calm." That's another thing they taught us in First Aid class. Don't stop telling them everything's gonna be OK.

He's still clutching at his chest when I lay him flat on the ground again. Can a skinny, country boy somehow get you into the car? Weird, how right at that very moment I'm thinking how my Great-Great-Grandfather, the Anzac, once dodged bullets to carry a dying mate across a bloody battlefield. I couldn't picture him sizing himself up to decide if he could do it, or not. He just did what he had to do.

If he could do it, I can, too. But first I'll make a stretcher to drag him uphill. Nothing says you have to

do everything by brute strength if you can figure out something better. “Lucky I brought my hatchet, Mr. T.” I keep talking to him as I step a short distance away to cut down two young saplings and tie my emergency blanket from my backpack between them. Next, I reinforce the knots and edges with duct tape. Mr. T is no small dude, and it would not be good for the thing to rip before we make it back to the car. Maybe there will be enough signal for the phone to work up on the road.

But what about Ding? If he's injured and hears me call, he might hurt himself trying to come to me. He went into those bushes to the right, so that's where I'm going. The bushes are so low to the ground, I bang my head and face up pretty bad crawling underneath to search. No sign of the Bone Pointers. They took off in a major hurry after Ding gave them a taste of their own medicine.

It's pretty dark under the dense undergrowth, but I crawl in even further to search. Now and again I pause and listen in case Ding picks up my scent. And would you believe it? That's exactly what I reckon happened, and I feel a warm tongue lick the top of one hand. “Ding? You're here? Good boy, Ding. Let me check you over and see how you are.”

By this time we're both a little closer to daylight, and I can see he has blood on his head, but not too much. “You're like me, boy. You got a hard head.” I congratulate him, and for the moment I even forget about Mr. Thomas, I'm just so darn happy Ding has

survived. "Can't say the same about the leg you chewed up, mate. And I can't say I care all that much."

Ding sure did smile when I said that, and I think how Dad refuses to admit Ding can smile. "Dad can be stubborn sometimes, can't he boy? One day you'll convince him. Now let's get back to Mr. Thomas and you can help me get him to the car."

Mr. T's eyes seem to light up when he sees me approach with Ding. And while I'm busy getting prepared, he seems peaceful, his breathing definitely regular again. Good. I got enough troubles.

Just then, Ding walks to the top of the Indian-style make-shift stretcher I've made, and sits down.

"What are you trying to tell me, boy?" Ding licks my hand as I bend to talk to him. "Is it this?"

I take the lead I'd brought along in case we ran into a Park Ranger, and clip it onto his collar. "Do you want to help pull? Is that it?" Well, of course that's it. He's a sled-dog, isn't he? A team leader, which means he was born to pull. "Aren't you, boy?"

I wrap his lead around the pole so he can pull too, and he manages to jump up and land me one heck of a giant lick right on my mush—in spite of his bloody head. Maybe it looks worse than it really is. I sure hope so.

"Okay, Ding. I'm a sled-dog too, today. You're on that side, and I'm on this. Let's see how fast we can get Mr. T. to the car."

Things went real easy with Ding helping. In fact, I was struggling to keep up with him some of the time.

Once I tripped over when some clinging vines attached themselves to my boot, and nearly dropped Mr. T off his stretcher. “Hey, Williams. This is Joanie's Dad you're lugging around. You need to get him back home, so stay with it—keep the pace, and you're there.”

I'm talking to myself, but that's cool, it won't bother Mr. Thomas. A quarter of the way up, my shoulders are screaming for release and I wonder how Ding's feeling. Another five minutes and my legs have joined them, but I plod along and Ding stays with me. He seems okay, almost like he's getting better by the minute. My dog is tough.

Not long after that, I'm gasping for air. “You hanging in there, Mr. Thomas?” I shout over my shoulder at our patient.

Silence.

“I reckon I can see the car up ahead. Won't be long now.” I tell him.

Still no reply.

“You awake, back there? Talk to me, Mr. T.”

This last section was the worst. Man, by then my whole body is begging for relief—and I think even Ding has slackened off. His side is occasionally behind mine now. Low branches are whacking me in the head every few yards, and my face gets even more banged up, as I cop a mouthful of leaves. Then it happens. I stumble and fall—but a second later, I'm clawing my way back up although I swallow something that felt like some disgustingly big bug.

“Are you with me, Mr. Thomas? Make a noise if

you are. Just grunt—anything.”

No response.

Now I've got no energy left for conversation myself. Instead, I send a message to my legs. “You're robots. Keep moving, left, right, left right. Don't stop, don't think, just keep moving. No slowing down. Keep going! We'll get there.” The hill is steep but now I can see the car.

“God, please let Mr. Thomas live. Nothing looks wrong with him! But I don't think he believes that, so I'm gonna need your help to convince him. We can't let some wacky curse take Joanie's Dad out.”

A few minutes later, and I'm slumped beside the car. “We made it Mr. T! Just have to rest for a few minutes. Good job, Ding.” I reach out to give him a pat before the bloody side of his head reminds me he's been working on nothing but heart when he'd really rather crawl off somewhere until he heals. That part of the wild is still in him. But it sends a shot of energy all through me to think that he did all this for me, in spite of his wild instincts. Anyway, it's enough to stow the backpacks in the car, and notice the keys are still in the ignition.

“You doing okay, Mr. Thomas?” Weird the way the guy does nothing but stare into space, but at least he's breathing, now. I grab his wrist. “Oh man...” Now, his pulse was too slow! “Okay, let's get you in the car where you can rest. Then I'll treat you to some of my excellent driving. That's gonna' jazz your heart rate up—guaranteed.” I'm totally too exhausted to stuff this

hefty, stocky-built guy up in front, so I open the rear door, sweep the junk off the back seat, then dump him flat out on it.

“Okay, we're outta' here.” Mr. T. slides halfway to the floor, which is no problem. Seat belts aren't the priority, today. I just want to put as much distance as possible between him and this place. The motor starts first kick—and it has manual gears—same as my ute. Before we take off, I turn around to the back seat.

“Listen up, Mr. Thomas! You're not sick, and you haven't been injured. Those guys didn't get a chance to do their curse. Hear me? Because Ding ate half of one guy's leg, then chased them both into the bush. There's nothing wrong with you. Keep telling yourself that.”

No answer.

So, I try another tack. “You just have to man up and deal with it!”

I hate being disrespectful to Joanie's Dad, but I'm ready to try anything at this point. I tap my head. “It's all up here Mr. Thomas. In your mind. There's nothing stopping you sitting up front with me right this minute and enjoying the scenery.”

More silence. Okay. We're all in, everything's safe. Time to split.

With Ding sitting up front with me, we stay off the track the car made earlier in case it's gone soft. Can't afford to get bogged. But now we're on our way, and my mind is whirling. How can I help Mr. T come out of it?

“Joanie and her mom are gonna go nuts if I deliver

you home looking like a zombie, Mr. T. So I'm warning you for the last time. You better snap out of it—fast! Hear me? Your women are gonna give you curry if you don't get with it before I deliver you home to them. And that's the honest, fair dinkum truth!”

I hear a slight noise coming from the back—like maybe he's trying.

“Lucky we had Ding along. He marched their butts right out of there. You should have seen him, he was terrific!”

“Ding?” It was the barest of whispers but plenty enough for Ding to know when he's needed and hop over into the back seat to lay with him.

Then I feel a feather-like touch of fingers on my shoulder. “No worries, Mr. T, he looks a lot worse than it is. He's one tough Dingo, that's why. A true-blue hero.”

Next thing I hear is the sounds of gentle snoring, and I'm stoked. We did it! But as we're nearing home, I get kinda worried in case the local cops pull me over and find out I didn't bring my license with me. So I start thinking of what explanation I should give. Because there's no way they're gonna' buy it, if I tell them, “My girlfriend's father just got cursed by two bone pointers and I have to drive him home, so his family can snap him out of it. Oh, yeah, and watch out for the dingo back there because he isn't feeling so good, either.”

It's dark when I finally reach Joanie's place, and the way she and her mom race out to the car before I even

get a chance to turn the motor off, tells me they must have been maxed out, too.

“Riley, Mum and I were so worried, we... hey what's the matter with Dad ? Why is he just lying there?”

“Uh, we've just been getting some plant samples he needed. Had to drive a long way.” No sense worrying the women if we didn't have to. I don't have to hear any whispers from the back seat to know how Mr. T feels about that. “Digging away all day, so we're totally blasted.”

I notice Mrs. Thomas staring at her sleeping husband, and I figure she can tell just by looking there's more to it.

But I stick with my story and try not to look Joanie straight in the eye, either. “Mr. T let me drive in case he fell asleep at the wheel. Good thing I did, too, because he slept nearly all the way. Well, Ok. maybe he's heat struck, too.” You make a horrible liar, Riley Williams, I say to myself, knowing this is a 'oncer' to protect Joanie and Mrs. T. I don't usually tell lies.

Next minute, they're helping Mr. T out of the car. He's trying to shuffle but he's mostly just dead weight, Which is when Joanie pins me with one of those looks.

“I'm totally beat,” I answer so only she can hear as I get out and help them inside. “You hear me, Jo?” We can talk about it tomorrow.”

For once, there's no objection. She just takes in my filthy clothes then looks across at Ding who's not jumping out to say hello like usual, just gives her a

half-smile before he lays his bloody head back down. I'll tell her everything later—without the Bone Pointers. Because a Williams man keeps his word. And because tonight I'm so beat it's entirely possible she could break me. Mr. T's making a valiant effort, so I pat him on the back and say, “A hot meal, a good sleep, and both us will be rockin' tomorrow! Right, Mr. T?”

“Joanie, take your Dad inside, please. I'm going to drive Riley home. Next minute, Mrs. Thomas is shuffling me back into the car—on the passenger side—then she climbs behind the steering wheel.

I watch Joanie navigate the front steps with her Dad, while her Mother starts the car. “You want to take the backpacks inside, first, Mrs. T? We worked our butts off to get them.”

“Trust me, Riley. I will take good care of them because I know how important they are. In fact, I won't let them out of my sight. But they will be safe enough until I get you home.”

Fair enough. Although I'm not sure if I'll have enough strength to drag my own weary body up the steps and into my house. When we finally pull up, she surprises me by reaching across to plant a kiss on my cheek.

“You're home, Riley. And I can't thank you enough for all you did today. I can see it must have been very rough going.” Then she takes off in her Subaru, while I'm standing on the bottom step wondering if it would be too weird for me to spend the night on the steps.

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That nearest step looks pretty good to me, right now.

Only problem is, Dad will be arriving home from work late tonight, and I don't want to freak him out by thinking he's just tripped over something resembling his son's dead body.

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By ten am I've had enough sleep, so I'm awake, fed, and dressed when I hear a knock on my door.

“Thought you might still be asleep.” Joanie says when I open it and see her standing there looking fresh and pretty, and suddenly I'm pumped.

“No. Ten hours, and I'm good. Had breakfast?”

“Yes. And I packed some lunch for us. Are you tired? I don't know how you did it yesterday, Riley. My Dad's no lightweight, but you managed to chase away those Bone Pointers then drag him a long way to the car. Plus you talked him down from that curse nonsense. Dad says you saved his life, and Mom and I can never thank you enough.”

“You're welcome. But since school vacation starts today, we don't want to hang around indoors, do we? How about we spend some time outside?”

“Okay, awesome. Probably better if we drive though. You must be sore. Are we taking Ding?”

“Yeah. Come on, boy. ” Ding jumps up eagerly,

crosses to the door and stands there waiting.

“He's keen to go out. “ Joanie laughs.

“Yeah, Ding's me mate. Wherever I go, he goes. Besides, I want to swing by Arthur's place on the way home to see if he wants a ride out to the old family cabin, tomorrow.”

We were walking down the steps when I say that, then—I kid you not—Ding pulls up suddenly, and trots back inside through his doggie door. “What the—hey, Ding! Come on, boy. Come for a ride.”

“What's up with Ding?” Joanie stares at the doggie door like he should come bounding out, again, any second.

I open the passenger side door of the ute for her. “Beats me. Tomorrow I'm supposed to be taking Arthur to see the old cabin we used to live in. But today is strictly for us. We have a lot to talk about, right?”

“Yes, we do.” She sighs deeply, like she's got something on her mind she doesn't want to tell me.

I start the ute, put her into gear, and I'm waiting for the punchline. “Go on, spit it out,” I finally tell her. “It can't be that bad.”

“Okay. Well, I was thinking how long we've been looking for Ted, and we still haven't found him. That's all.”

“Nope.” I shift down to navigate a bumpy curve. “Not good enough.”

“What?”

“I can see right through you, Sherlock. You're

hedging.”

She blows the curl away—but it wasn't even in her way, that time—and looks out the window.

“Am I right?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Finding that diary of Arthur's threw us off-track. I haven't even had a chance to look through Mr. Never's office, yet. Not to mention my not-so-little rain forest adventure with your dad.”

“You're right, Rye. I'm just over anxious. I don't know. I'd feel so much better if he at least sent a note like, 'Sorry I left so fast, but...' Or something.”

“We have the photo of him and Mr. Never. Proves they're friends, right? That's something to go on.”

“Yes, but maybe we're reading too much into Ted being at that party. Small town like this everybody probably gets invited to a birthday party.” She closes her eyes and thinks for a minute. “I have a feeling the whole mystery might revolve around whether Ted had some kind of relationship to Mr. Never. You've known him all your life—what did he do before sled dogs?”

“I hardly know anything about his life before sled-dogs. Heck, I don't even know much about my own Mom. Dad met her in France and brought her home to Perisher Valley. But he said she didn't like it here. Left when I was five. Since then, Dad's raised me all on his own. Did a pretty good job, too don't you think? ” I tease, trying to distract her from the discouragement I can see written all over her face.

Her voice goes soft. “Yes, your father did a

fantastic job, Riley. It's sad when marriages break down and people leave. My own family seemed perfect when Ted and Dad were working together, I mean..." She pauses, like she doesn't know how to explain what she means, which I so get, because I've been there myself so many times.

"I know Ted is only a business partner, which is not nearly as bad as losing family. But in Ted's case it's different. Australia—the whole world, in fact—would miss out if they can't do their best work together. And they work best together. What one doesn't know the other one figures out. They sort of spark each other's brains."

"And they have great brains," I added. "I figured that out, yesterday."

"Apparently not enough to stay away from Bone Pointers," she answered. "Hey, Rye, do you think maybe... Oh, my gosh! That's it! Makes perfect sense!"

"What? That he got kidnapped by Bone Pointers? If that's true, then why did the mental institution say he escaped? They even gave your dad his things. They were that certain he'd eventually end up back there."

"I don't think so."

"Okay. So, what makes you not think so?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. Just a feeling, I guess."

"You mean, you keep telling me we have to lay out all the facts and connect the dots, and in the meantime, you're going on pure feelings?"

"I guess so. Anyway, it's how I feel right now."

“There's no way that can work, Jo.” We came to the sign at the entrance to the closest rain forest park but I passed it up. “Feelings are all over the place. At least that's what Tanner at youth group always says. Start following one, then another pops up and you're suckered into that one. Pretty soon you're wiped out.”

She was quiet for a long time.

Man, I never knew how hard it was to cheer somebody up who was trying to resist. “I know. Easy to say and hard to do.” Then I jammed a finger in the air like a mad scientist trying to convince someone to go to the moon. “But it can be done!”

That did it. She cracked up, so I joined her. So, I figured it was now, or never. “What was in the note?” Simple as that. But you'd have thought I threw a bucket of cold water on her.

“Two are better than one,” I reminded her. “Isn't that what you always say? So, maybe it's time to tell me everything you know, then we can get back to the clear path of logic, again. Deal?”

“I'll try. But sometimes it seems my brain's got a mind of its own. It keeps ending up in places I don't want it to go.”

“Which is why we go back to the plain facts. Right? The facts, ma'am. Just the facts!” I picked that up off some crime show. “Well, I do have something we can add to our stash. I know Mr. Never was in the War. Because I remember he used to travel to Sydney every Anzac day to meet his Air Force mates – he even showed me his medals, once. Oh man, I still remember

the look in his eyes when he'd talk about the War.”

“He was in the war? Gosh, so many brave Aussies fought to protect our Country.”

“Yeah, but Mr. Never believed we should always support our Allies, too.” I'm thinking as fast as I'm talking. “He was in the RAAF. Aircraft Maintenance. Once I watched him repair a neighbor's plane used for spraying crops. He had it fixed so fast you wouldn't believe it. So, I asked him where he learned to do that.”

“In the Air Force during the Second World War?”

“Yep. He said our Kitty-Hawks used to fly in for repairs and re-fueling, and I guess it was his job to get them fixed then back in the air ASAP.”

“See, Riley? You knew more than you thought. Can you recall where he was based?”

“In Milne Bay, New Guinea. He only talked about it once. Mainly about how we protected Darwin from there. It allowed us to safeguard our Northern shores.”

“Okay, so when you search Mr. Never's desk next time, keep a lookout for photo albums or anything that may connect Ted and him to the War.”

“You got it. Except Ted is about thirty or forty years too young to have been in that war with him.”

“Doesn't matter.” She flashes me one of her “*Hawkeye*” looks. “At least it gives us something else to go on.”

“Why don't we just come right out and ask your Dad? He'd know if Ted was in the War.” For some reason that makes her laugh, again, and I get to admire the dimple.

“I don't think Dad and Ted ever stop talking research long enough to swap family histories. Which is why I decided to go through all the stuff he put in his desk drawer. Then I figured as long as I was there I might as well look at everything. Now, I wish I hadn't.”

She fades away with the last part. By this time we're on another road that winds around the back side of Perisher, through a little patch of woods where our cabin is. Still some snow around.

“Because I feel guilty about it. But since Dad's desk was where I stumbled across that photo, I figured it was worth a second look. See, Ted is like a part of Dad's brain, and Dad is a part of Ted's. They might argue over work, but together they get top results. So, if I can help Ted find his way back to us, it would be the best present I could ever give my Dad. Believe me.”

“I believe you. But you should probably tell me what was in the note, first.”

“I will after lunch—I promise. It's awesome out here—let's just enjoy it for a while.”

There she goes with the wait till later tactic, again, but I'm starting to realize that's how she gears herself up to face things. “Okay, I agree. Enough drama for a while.”

The little log structure we pull up to a few minutes later is starting to show it's age, but it still feels special to me. “Well, here it is. Haven't lived here since I was too little to remember much. Only been back recently

since I started to drive. I'm pretty sure Dad would rather just forget about it. Too involved in his job and..." I turn off the motor and the quiet makes the forest all around us seem huge. "Other stuff."

I show her the place but there's really not that much to see. Two big rooms make up the lounge area and the kitchen. Stone fireplace that goes all the way to the ceiling. There's a couple of bedrooms and a bath in the back, too, but the furnishings are simple. Two rocking chairs in front of the hearth and an overstuffed chair and couch along the walls. We gravitate to the kitchen. It feels nice, just the two of us hanging out together—sitting across from each other at a wooden table that is so old it sways whenever you try to wipe it down.

"Here's your sandwich, Riley. I hope you like chicken."

"I like anything that's food." When she flashes me a smile I can tell she's feeling better already.

"Oh, and I brought a Thermos of tea but I forgot cups. Do you have anything we can drink out of?"

So I rustle up some mugs and we sit there sipping tea, as content as any old Ma and Pa, when she reaches in her bag. Uh-oh. Here comes the dreaded note and I'm hoping it doesn't knock her mood down, again. Her hand trembles as she hands it over, then her head drops to the table like she doesn't want to face me.

"Okay. You chill, while I process." I decide to read aloud like she does, only my gruff voice isn't half as intriguing as hers. "Decided to eliminate Ted! His no good." Then I immediately get this vibe that something

is way wrong. Eliminate Ted? No wonder she's been all worked up about it. Except it doesn't really fit my impression of Mr. T. Not even a little.

“What do you think?” She sits up straight, again. “I don't know if Dad could forgive me if I confronted him about something like this. But what if he did something... Oh Riley, Dad's an honest, kind, and decent man. It would break his heart to think I snooped around because I didn't trust him.”

“Something doesn't add up, all right. Let's go for a walk. I don't know about you but I think better outdoors.”

Actually, I'm hoping a walk will clear both our brains. I'm even starting to wonder if talking about the cases so much is having a bad effect on us. Except I'm pretty sure solving just one of them would pretty much send us to the moon. So, I try to get back on track and process. “Don't sweat it. I know first-hand what it's like to have your father falsely accused. Listen, there's no way your Dad would suddenly just up and decide one day he didn't want Ted around. Especially with something as important as they have at stake. FYI. You don't shoot your wing man!”

“Exactly.”

Good. She's smiling again, and we're holding hands.

“I'm glad we came outdoors, it's so relaxing. Anyway, now you know why I haven't been myself the last couple days.”

“No wonder. Well, for a start, one word is wrong on that note. 'His no good?' Did he mean to write 'His is

no good?' or 'He's no good?' Except I can't see it being a typo because your father is such a fussy dude."

We're strolling along until I say that, and she suddenly grinds to a halt. But then cheers up again, and sports this big, happy smile. "You're right! It's not like Dad at all. He lives in a world of precise science, so every word he uses has to be exact. I'm ashamed I ever doubted him."

"Cool. But we still don't know what he means. *'Eliminate Ted. Eliminate Ted, he's no good.'* I start reciting. "Something is on the tip of my tongue—but I don't know what." We jump over a fallen log together, still holding hands. Cute.

"It will come to you."

"Anyway, how can we really be sure he escaped from that mental place? We only know what they told us and we never saw him ourselves. This whole thing is getting stranger than a movie script. And here's another news flash for you. As long as we're including our feelings along with everything else, I have to admit I've got a strong hunch Ted's not just connected to Mr. Never. I think this whole thing ties into the other cases, too. Like they're all related. I bet if we solve any one of them, the rest are going to fall like dominoes."

"Rye! That's it! But there's still a great big missing piece somewhere. The last piece of the puzzle that has everything else making sense."

"I'm thinking there's something I have to do for Mr. Never that's tangled up in all this, Jo. Like he needs defending, or something, and I'm the only one who can

do it.”

Okay, that was my own truth-bomb. Now, we had both shared something we were holding back from each other. Joanie worried that her dad might be the guilty party—which was logical (according to evidence)—and me feeling I had to do something for Mr. Never (who wasn't even around anymore) which wasn't. So, I figured this was it. She would either think I'm a nut cake and want to go home—or she'd get me. I didn't have to wait long. Her arms closed around me in a warm hug, and I had my answer. She gets me.

Which—any other time—would have sent me to the moon, except at the very same instant it dawns on me that it's possible Mr. Never and Ted left around the same time. In different ways, of course, but any way you looked at it, they were both gone now.

And—all of a sudden—I knew just how that could have happened.

22

“Riley, look how far we've come.” Joanie broke into my thoughts so quick I thought she might have seen something. Like a Tasmanian Tiger. “We've hiked almost to the base of Mt. Perisher!”

“Yeah, it happens to me all the time. I can't stay away from this place. Hey, did I ever tell you how Ding and I came out here once, and I had to chase him halfway up Perisher when he took off after a squirrel? Happened before I even noticed. Sort of spooky.” I turn back just in time to see she's uncomfortable about something. “Now here I am again, dragging you along. Notice anything different?”

She looks around. “Only how far we've come. Different how?”

“Just a vibe. Like someone following us. You ever get the feeling someone is watching you?”

“Not counting some of the crazies at school? Hardly ever. Do you?”

“Yeah. I'm feeling it now. Sort of like at the

memorial service. We were outside Mr. Never's house, and I saw that Aborigine standing on one leg—then he disappears into nowhere, but leaves behind a...”

“A footprint?”

“Yeah. So you saw it too? Did you hear the music in the background?”

“The didgeridoo music? Yes, I heard it.”

“I'm pretty sure your Dad did, because he looked totally bombed.”

“He was. But he managed to get a handle on it that time. It's hard to put those superstitions behind you when you've been raised in them the way he was. Moving away from the Outback has actually helped a lot.”

We start walking again and my eyes lock onto a spot up ahead where the trail makes a turn. I already know what's around it—a place where you catch your first full-on view of the Widow's Peak from this side. But even if I didn't know, I could still feel it. Because the cold, clean breath of that snowy peak was drifting down enough to breathe the chill in right in from here—so I breathed it in.

That's when I realize having someone along doesn't change the effect the mountain has on me. In fact, the feelings are getting stronger—almost urgent—and I'm thinking if it looks good up there—if the mountain's in the right mood instead of dark and threatening, what was to stop us from—

“Riley, let's turn back now,” Joanie says all of a sudden, breaking the spell. “It's a long way back to the

cabin. Besides, after putting yourself through so much with Dad, yesterday...”

For a second I can sense traces of fear in her voice but that's all she says. Man, what was I thinking to drag her this far? It's a workout even if you're used to it. I actually might have hauled her to the top if she hadn't said something just then. So, we turn around. But it's weird because I feel almost like a deserter. Like maybe the mountain doesn't hand out personal invites that often, and I might never get one, again. How weird is that? Next thing I'm wondering if I just had a personal head-on with the curse and almost gave in to it.

It isn't until Joanie pulls me to a stop that I realize how fast I was trekking. “Hey—is there a cash prize for this race?” She bends over for a second, takes a couple deep breaths, and her long hair almost touches the ground as she leans down. “I mean I know I'm out of condition, but—”

“Sorry, I wasn't thinking.” I put a hand on her back until she catches her breath. “Want to sit for a while?”

“How far to the cabin?”

“From here I'd say a couple of miles. It was getting steeper with every step but so gradual it sort of sneaks up on you.”

“No, I think I'm okay, now. But...” She stood up straight and smiled. “I'm going to need some training to keep up with you, Riley Williams. You've got incredible endurance.”

“Well, I've been doing this kind of stuff all my life so I...” Now I'm distracted by the flush of rose on her

cheeks and those amazing green eyes looking at me like I'm some kind of *Superman*. "Guess I never noticed."

She must have caught herself just then because she looked away to break the connection. "Maybe you should just go on, and—"

"Hey, I'm not going to leave you, Sherlock. What kind of partner do you think I am?"

She looked back at me and smiled, again. "I mean it doesn't look that high, and you could probably climb it in less than—"

"It's not so high as it is rugged, once you get up past the halfway point. Besides, my climbing gear is back in the ute, since I was thinking of this day just for hashing over the cases without an audience."

"Wow, I've never had a partner to work things through with, before. Always been sort of a loner, you know? After what you did for Dad, yesterday, though, I don't think I'll ever take for granted how great it is."

"Me, either. Yesterday was a real wake-up call for me, too. Not to mention I have a hunch we're actually about to crack our first case. I just have to figure out a way to get Arthur to explain some things."

"Can't you come right out and ask him?"

"Not really." I took her hand—it didn't feel right walking without holding her hand, anymore—and we started to head down. "Arthur seems to enjoy keeping secrets and making people squirm. I hope he's pleased with himself sending me off to find Dad without warning me, and insisting you come, too. Probably

hoped you would dump me. Still, when we're at the cabin tomorrow, I hope he's gonna' be in the mood for memories. If it isn't too late."

"Too late for what?"

"Well, I've kept the diary for so long, now, it's a dead giveaway that I read it."

"Why don't you ask which of those climbers stayed back with the dogs?"

"He won't tell me. But he's been asking for his diary every time I see him. So when I drop by tonight, I'll have to give it to him." Just thinking about that diary can stress me out without even opening the thing.

"Maybe you shouldn't bring up the subject then, Rye. I mean there has to be something wrong with anybody who would write out their crime in so much detail. That's if they're the ones who wrote it, or..."

"Or what."

"Or if they want to use all that detail to catch someone else." She glanced up at me with a worried look in her eyes. "Do you think he's dangerous?"

"Enough that I don't want to have to confess I read the thing behind his back. Arthur's complicated. He's okay if you're on his good side, but he's got a cruel streak for anyone who gets on his crook side."

She's still slightly winded, so I slow the pace down some more.

"Charlie was my grandfather," I finally confess. "Which is probably why it creeps me out so much."

"Oh, my gosh—did he die in a climbing accident?"

"That's what I reckon. For years Arthur's been

leading up to telling the details, so the diary might be his way of spilling his guts before he carks it. Dad isn't in a hurry. He's heard enough bits and pieces over the years. I reckon he just wants to ignore any more gruesome details.”

“Then most likely that's the way it happened, don't you think?”

“Yeah, except it doesn't name anyone but Charlie. Author says it's his diary but it's written so different from the way he talks.”

“Not to mention he has a habit of leaving out important words till you can hardly figure out the meaning even if you do manage to decipher part of it. Like he does it on purpose because he's trying to hide something.”

“It's no secret Arthur blames Mr. Never, he's been raving on about everything being his fault for years. And it would explain why Mr. Never gave him a job and let him live free on his place for the rest of his life when they didn't really like each other. Mr. Never was true-blue, you know? Which means he was so not that kind of person. Arthur's the only one of them I could picture doing something like that.”

“Me, too.” She said it so quiet it sent a chill through me. “I mean, he says the meanest things sometimes. Even to perfect strangers.”

“Just lately. Ever since...” I couldn't make myself say it.

“Ever since Mr. Never died?”

I nodded. She was right. One minute Arthur's the

same old bloke I'd always known, and next thing he's talking his head off or stirring for a fight over nothing.

“Think about it—nobody even has a clue what Mr. Never died of. Hey, I can see the ute from here! Still a long way down, though.”

I'm thinking I might have an idea what he died of, but I don't say anything. Instead I offer, “We can cut over from here, if you want. It's steeper, but shorter. We don't have to go all the way back to the cabin, either, if you don't mind picking up your thermos tomorrow.”

“I wouldn't mind,” she admitted. “I really don't know what's come over me. I'm so tired I feel like Dorothy in *The Wizard of OZ*. You know, that part where the witch cast a spell over them in that field of flowers and...”

Well, that rattled me, big time. I've never quite believed that curse thing about how every team who climbed all the way up to the ragged peak of Perisher always came back minus a man, even though I've heard it all my life. I always figured the deception was in how easy the climb looked when it really wasn't. In fact, it took some pretty advanced climbing skills the closer you got to the top.

I knew from experience it wasn't so much how high - it was more about the shifting, changing hazards of ice and rock. Plus some weird-type crevasses that could show up unexpectedly—or be totally covered over—depending on the weather.

Still, I had to admit there was something that sort of

rattled my cage every time I came up here. A sensation that grew stronger the higher I went. Joanie must have felt it, too, except in a different way. While I experienced a powerful urgency to go on, she felt tired—almost sleepy—and wanted to turn back. I wonder if maybe the mountain didn't want her up there. But, hey, not everybody likes to climb, so that part's explainable.

Except Mr. T told me she used to trek around in the Outback with him and Ted sometimes, and she could go all day without slowing down. There's the real jolt. There could have been a lot of ancient Aborigine business going on up here in the past. So likely the place had some sacred meaning to the tribes, way back then, and they just plain didn't want any of us around. We already knew their laws forbid anybody taking anything from their land, which is exactly what Ted and Mr. T had been doing. Probably made no difference to them if it was for a good cause—it wasn't the tribe's cause.

Then I realized I was just as guilty as they were because I'd been taking stuff, too. Maybe the reason I felt someone was watching us now, was because someone really was. And they knew who we were. In fact, this was pretty much the same situation I had been in with Mr. T yesterday. Except for one thing.

This time I had left Ding at home.

23

We take the first trail we come to get off the mountain, even though it isn't the one I expected to use. I just wanted to get out of there as fast as we could and the slow pace was starting to aggravate me. Which is probably why when we went round a corner and came up against this giant head of an Aborigine dude carved into a rock, I almost lost it.

Joanie let out a half-scream and pressed her hand to her mouth as we scooted around it, trying not to brush up against the thing. It was covered over with a lot of green moss that I guess had crept up from the forest floor, although none of it was on the dude's face. He had long hair, with a beard and a mustache. His head was tilted up but his eyes were such dark hollows I couldn't tell if they were open or shut from that angle. All I knew was he sure looked dead to me.

"Don't worry," I try to sound cool but I can barely keep my voice steady. "There's carvings like that all over the place. The tribes must have used this trail, once. We better hurry and get out of here."

Perisher

The rest of the trail is so crowded and overgrown with ferns, you'd swear we were in a tropical rain forest instead of coming down a mountain. Already we're below the snow line. Now the trees are so tall and oppressive it makes me feel like a bug about to be squashed. I've lost sight of the ute, but I figure as long as we're headed down, we'll come out on the road sooner or later. Funny I've never explored any other area except for Perisher when I'm out this way. No clue this spot even existed, so the surroundings are totally unfamiliar to me.

I pull a compass out of my pocket and read the setting, trying to remember how many turns we took since we left the trail to the cabin in case we needed to retrace our steps. Or had to choose a direction at a fork in the trail before we came to the road. I hoped not, though. I was so not up for being lost out here, especially when I was stupid enough not to bring Ding. What was I thinking, letting him make the choice? If I'd have commanded him, he'd have done anything I told him.

All of a sudden the sound of didgeridoo music starts up like a pulse pounding in my head, and this time it's Joanie who picks up the pace.

“Hurry, Riley! Go—go—go! We've got to get out of here!”

Next thing I know, we're both running. And I'm praying, inside. Please God, help me make the right choice to get us out of here! Help us get back to the ute! I slow down and look at the compass, again,

because we've made another turn. Then another. And just when I'm starting to worry I'll never be able to remember all those turns if we need to go back, there's so many trees we can't even see the mountain, anymore—I catch a flash of color through a maze of green. I know it's the ute. Don't even think twice before jumping off the trail and heading for it.

We're both panting and out of breath by the time we get there. More from fear than the run, I reckon, as I fumble for my keys then step aside to let Joanie jump in ahead. But I sure didn't take my time leaping in after her. So much for formalities and unlocking the passenger side like a gentleman. I lock the doors to get out of there before somebody pops out from the trees to bash the blazes out of the windshield, or something. Which doesn't happen.

Except a little ways further on, we see a tall Aborigine dude standing beside the road as we drive by. He gets a good look at us too, and boy is he staring. No way he won't recognize us next time. Joanie exhales long and slow like she'd been holding it in until we passed by.

“That was close!” she whispers, like maybe we weren't the only ones in the truck. “We can't ever come back here, again, Riley.”

Now, whose being superstitious? “Not come back? Hey! Don't forget my family owns a cabin not far from here.”

“I meant right here in these woods. It's obviously a sacred place—we can't ever come back.”

I don't say anything because I don't know what to say.

On the drive home, she stares out the window most of the way and I know she's still scared.

“You're not going all quiet on me like your dad did, yesterday, are you?” I ask, keeping a lookout for Tasmanian Tigers. I'm remembering how Ashley and I spotted one from the road the time we went to the city.

“No, I'm not like that. But I know how serious it is to offend the local tribes and I think we just did.”

“Well, I know your dad did, or they wouldn't have come after him like that. Might be what happened to Ted, too. Seems like once they single somebody out, something always happens to that person sooner or later.

“We have to resist believing in it. That's the only thing that helps. Gets pretty hard sometimes, though. Riley—what's that!” She grabs my arm and I nearly run off the road. “Over there—running into the bush! I don't believe it!”

“Where—I don't see anything.”

“Over there—to the right! It's one of those tiger things you've been talking about—I'm sure of it! Darn—he's gone, now.”

My eyes search the bushes along the right side of the road but I still don't see anything. “I guess I missed it.”

Joanie didn't, though. Instead, she seemed so freaked out I pull off the road for a minute and turn off the engine. Too many scares for one day, I guess. Then

I stare out the open window hoping to see better with my head hanging out. The bushes a few feet away rustle, and then part. Heart attack alert!

“Look at that.” My voice comes out way cooler than I feel, which seems to make her feel better. “False alarm! It's only a scrub turkey.”

“But that isn't the same thing I saw, Rye. Oh, let's just get out of here.” Now she's clutching my arm so tight I reckon I'll have bruises. “You were right all along. There are some of those things still left in the bush.”

“You mean the Tasmanian Tigers? You really think that's what you saw? ” I start the engine, again, then look over at her before easing back onto the road. The look on her face says it all.

“Oh man, is that ever a relief.”

“A relief? Is that all? If you'd seen what I saw you wouldn't be so calm. It looked seriously dangerous!”

“I meant I'm relieved I'm not going nuts, after all. Truth is, I've seen them a couple times, too.”

“Shouldn't we report it?”

“Yeah. That'll put Perisher Valley on the map, no worries!”

“Do you think there could be any up on Perisher? Maybe we're being foolish hiking around these parts when there could be one living up there.”

“I think they're more likely to run off, than attack, or someone else would have had trouble with one by now. But don't worry. I'll bring Ding tomorrow—nothing messes with him. Wouldn't want to scare you out of

coming. Besides...”

I pull onto the main road and head for home. “With three of us stomping around and making noise—plus staying on the designated trail,” I add, when I see a look of dread come into her eyes. “I don't think there will be a wild thing within ten miles of us tomorrow. I'm not expecting the Bone Pointers to turn up for a while, either, because Ding delivered some serious pain to those two dudes, yesterday.”

Then I look into her eyes, squeeze her hand and give her a smile. I'm just beginning to realize that having someone to protect, gives you courage. It was the first time being within a twenty mile radius of a Tasmanian Tiger didn't scare the blazes out of me. Nothing like how I felt at the thought of Bone Pointers coming after us, though. What if there were more than two? Not to mention I was the one who set my dog on them. That's guaranteed to put me high on their list of future recipients of a pretty good bone bashing.

“I've never heard of any of the tribes staking a claim on Perisher. If they ever did, it had to be a heck of a long time ago. Centuries, maybe. My family's been climbing up here forever, and we've had no trouble with the locals.”

“Okay. But be careful, Rye. I mean, what if...”

She's quiet for so long I have to look over at her, again.

“What if...” She blows the curl off her forehead and then blurts it out. “Knowing what's in that diary, what if Arthur turns out to be more dangerous than the

tribes? I've had a scary thought about him, lately.”

“Ding can handle Arthur. What's the scary thought?”

“Well, the police are checking on everyone who was in Mr. Never's house the day he died. Did anyone tell them Arthur was there?”

When she says that, I'm just about spewin' and then she keeps talking, so I get a chance to recover.

“I mean, I certainly hope Ding will be over his mood by tomorrow,” she says. “We may need him.”

“Ding will come if I tell him to. Dingoes are funny. Sometimes they'll wander off for no reason and disappear for weeks. Now wouldn't be the best time for him to go on one of his Walkabouts.”

I pull up in front of her house and she reaches for the door, then turns back with a grin. “Oh, and if we're all going to be sharing this ute tomorrow, you better remind Arthur to take a bath and clean up. Maybe even brush his teeth. His breath smells like nerve gas.”

“I'll try, but I don't think he believes in it. Is six am too early for you?”

“Mornings are my favorite time of day. Be careful over there, will you?”

“Yep.” Then she kisses me on the cheek before I even realize she's going to do it, and gets out. I watch her all the way to the door until she turns to wave before going in.

Then I head out toward Arthur's place.

But not to talk about cleaning up.

24

I pull up around the back of his cabin, and head for the small storage shed. The door is wide open. It's not that late, so I figure maybe he's doing something in there. Probably just got involved in something else and left it open. Which reminds me I've picked up on a lot of things Arthur's been forgetting, lately.

I look at all the junk and decide I might as well look around while I'm here since EG said I could. So, I go for the top shelves first, because I'm thinking any personal stuff of Mr. Never's would probably be stored better than Arthur's pile of tools and junk at the door. That's about as far he looks when he needs something.

I pick up the closest wooden chest full of who-knows-what and carry it over to the shelves to stand on. As soon as I get a hand up high enough to rummage around a bit, it's only a few seconds before I feel it. The cold round smoothness of a gun barrel.

Quite a surprise since guns have been off-limits to locals for a long time now. Unless you have a special permit, that is. Still, I couldn't pass up the temptation to

at least check it out. Then right about the time I'm wondering if a relic from the past—something that had been handed down in your family—might qualify for one of those permits, the weight of the thing caught me off balance that high up and it slipped out of my grasp. I went for a quick save—and caught it—but not before I lost my balance and tipped over the chest.

I jumped clear of the crash of stuff spilling out but I didn't drop the gun. Better check to make sure it isn't loaded while I'm at it.

It was loaded.

Man, if it had gone off, Arthur would have been out here screaming blue murder for scaring the daylights out of him. I took the shells out and stuffed them into my pocket. Then I realized whoever used it last hadn't bothered to clean it, either. They must have just shoved it back on the shelf like...

Like they expected they might need it in a hurry.

I stood there figuring all that out, wondering if I should put it back. For one thing, my heart was pounding away like it was trying to warn me something was seriously screwy about all this. Then the diary I had stashed in my inside pocket gave me an idea. If someone had let a person die once before, they might not think twice about doing it, again, if they had to. Especially if they felt like the truth was closing in on them. But what exactly was Arthur afraid of?

Get a grip, Williams—Arthur could have just shot at something snooping a little too close to the dogs. Maybe even that Tasmanian Tiger that has you so

spooked. The dogs were sort of helpless if something stronger came along when they were chained up. It's true, keeping them chained to their dog houses when they weren't being worked kept them from fighting with each other, but it sure puts them at a disadvantage against other predators.

So, I'm still standing there wondering if I should leave it where I found it, when my foot backs into some of the junk that fell out of the box. I set the gun aside and bend down to shove it all back in. But not before I catch a glimpse of something that scares the pants off me. A cardboard box of money spilled all over the place. No big deal. I figure I've found Arthur's stash. Whatever he's been hiding away over the years. Never could understand why old folk have such a hard time trusting banks. But when I shove it all back in the chest, I see something else at the bottom.

I have never snooped around this shed for much more than a tool I needed, or to get the suitcase down from the the rafters that Arthur took on his trip to Dazza's. But I sure enough knew what I was looking at the minute it caught my eye, because I'd seen it so many times before.

Mr. Never's manuscript.

A bright yellow file so stuffed with pages it looked about to burst, except it was tied up tight with string. But who put it there? EG? Arthur? Oh, man.

Okay, this is unbelievable. "Practice what you preach, mate," I say half out loud. "Haven't you and Joanie decided that everything should be spread out on

the table in front of you? Well, this is everything. And two brains working on it are better than one.”

So I put the gun back, tuck the manuscript under my arm, and lock up. Then I head straight for the ute, carrying it real careful. Last thing I need is to drop papers all over the place. Not to mention this stuff may be needed as evidence. It's fair dinkum freaking me out, and I can't relax until it's wrapped tight in a hessian blanket on the floor behind the bench seat of my ute.

Next minute, I'm tapping on the door of Arthur's cabin and letting myself inside, just like usual. And there he is—sitting at his kitchen table—strumming away on it with his fingers.

“Hi, Arthur. Hey, I'm taking a drive out to the old family cabin tomorrow. Want to come along?” In my head I got it all planned. When he gives me his answer, I'll just casually hand him the diary, then straight-out ask who the climbers were. He's always been totally open about anything I ask, so shouldn't be a drama.

“Are you now, boy? Well okay, I just might take you up on that. What time you heading out?”

“Can you be ready by six?”

“Course I can.” He starts strumming away, and it's so peculiar how right away I get mesmerized. For one awful moment I think I'm going to burst into hysterical laughter at the nonsense rhythm his long fingers are making on the tabletop. But not this Aussie rugby player. Too risky. What might have been good for a laugh with the old Arthur, might seriously freak this

dude out if any of my suspicions are true. Maybe dredging all that stuff up he wrote in the diary is sending him bonkers or something. That new thought sets my creep meter off, again, until it's like a boomerang in vertical take-off.

This is no time to chicken out, Williams, I tell myself as I hold the diary out to him. "Thought I'd give you the book Dazza sent, too. I, uh... kept leaving it back at the house."

He stretches, slowly straightens up, then shuffles over to take it.

But finding Mr. Never's manuscript and knowing that gun had been fired recently has pretty much blown me away. Well, enough to want to make tracks, anyway. Forget the tough talk I was going to hit him with. In fact, right then I was thinking the whole thing was getting way too serious for Jo and I. What were we thinking? For all I knew, the reason nobody heard from Ted—might be because he had interrupted something that was going on between Arthur and Mr. Never around the time of that birthday party. He was at the house the day Mr. Never died, too.

Oh, man—I so had to get out of here.

By the time I got home, I was seriously wishing Dad didn't have to work nights. We hadn't had a decent conversation since I don't know when and this was something I really needed to talk over with him.

Not being able to talk to him when I needed to was starting to effect my brain. So, I decided to wait up till about one in the morning when he usually got home. A

decision that didn't last much past eleven because I was too tired to go the distance. I guess all the stress was starting to do weird things to me, too.

Next morning I'm at Joanie's house right on six. Well before daylight. I had called her when I got home, last night. Told her everything went okay with Arthur, although I hadn't found anything more out about the diary. I didn't mention Arthur was acting crackers, again. The timing didn't seem right.

Instead, I just filled her in about the manuscript. So we agreed to look it over sometime today when we could break away by ourselves long enough without making him suspicious. Even if we had to hike halfway up Perisher to do it. Although Jo reminded me we better stick to the trails this time. That dude from the tribes had gotten a real good look at us. I didn't blame her—I was plenty nervous about that, too.

“Rye, I've been thinking about the manuscript and I have an idea why it ended up in the shed.”

“Okay, spill. I've been thinking about it, too, and it still doesn't make sense. Other than Arthur is turning into a total wacko, lately. Dad's not afraid of him—just says Arthur's got his ways. He's been good to me in his own way, I guess. Like, we take care of the dog-yard together, and we get along okay.”

“Well, it couldn't have been EG, because if she found it, I'm sure she would have turned it over to the police for evidence. She probably had other reasons, too. I mean that manuscript was so important to her father. He poured his heart into it, and I doubt she

would hand it over to just anyone. It may turn out there wasn't anything related to the case in it, other than it was stolen along with the money. And I can't see her leaving it in a work shed that hired help use."

"She might have wanted to leave it in a really safe place while the police were still investigating, though."

"It would have been a lot more secure in a safety deposit box. Don't you think?"

"Not necessarily. Not if you knew Arthur. He doesn't even use the shelves of his own kitchen, anymore. He only comes into the shed for the tools we need for the dog yard, and those have been blocking the doorway and accumulating dust for years."

"I guess so. But, Rye..."

She got so quiet for a minute I looked over at her, but it was still too dark and I could only see her silhouette. "Rye—what if the diary was Mr. Never's, not Arthur's? What if both the manuscript and the diary were stolen? Could Arthur have stolen it from Mr. Never ages ago, then took it with him to Dazza's to read through?"

"Yeah, but he left it there way before everything of Mr. Never's got stolen. Unless... Oh, man—what if it was Mr. Never's? Arthur could have sent it to Dad on purpose after he tampered with it, then hoped to put it back before anyone found out. That could make it a vital piece of evidence, and I just handed it back—we have to get it off him, again!"

"Okay, but we're still not sure who really wrote it, yet. Or, exactly was in the rest of it. But we do know

Mr. Never was working furiously on his manuscript. You think maybe he was trying to detail what actually happened on the mountain, while he still could?"

"Yeah, that makes sense."

"Gives Arthur a perfect motive for stealing the manuscript then, too. He needed to know what Mr. Never had written about. Was Arthur in the house that day?"

"Now why didn't I think of that? Dad said EG had evidence that could prove him innocent. But if she knew the manuscript contained something that would free Dad, she must have read it. Oh, man!"

"What if she didn't? She could have just assumed what was in it. But, who knows? The manuscript may turn out to be just an end of life statement, like a will. It could answer a lot of questions, Rye. How much did you read, last night?"

"None. I never brought it into the house. I'm not the only one who would recognize it in two seconds flat. I didn't want Dad to get a hold of it before you and I checked it out, today. Arthur mustn't see us with it, either. Not if there's any chance of what's in it affecting the trial. We have to tread real careful there."

For a minute, we were both quiet. Then, just as I was pulling into the drive that led to Arthur's cabin, Joanie grabbed my arm and said, "I got it!"

"What?" I slowed down almost to a stop.

"Park as close to the cabin as you can today and I'll leave the lunch basket in the ute. That way, you can get Arthur talking, and I'll come back out and start reading."

If I have something to report, I'll signal you.”

“That could work.”

“If only we can turn up something soon—anything, to show if Arthur's the good guy, or the bad guy.”

“If you do, nod yes to me if he's good, and no if he isn't,” I suggested. “And if you're only trying to say you haven't found anything at all, yet—just say something like you forgot the mustard.”

“Okay.”

I pulled up, and opened the door. “I have to put Ding in the back, first, on account of he's totally over Arthur.”

Ding whines a bit since he had a nice spot snuggled up to Joanie. But she reaches over the back to pet him just as we pull up outside Arthur's cabin. I keep the motor running in case he changes his mind when he spots Arthur shuffling up to the ute, because you can smell the old guy before you see him. Joanie wasn't kidding when she warned me he should clean up. Anyway, I notice she cracks the window a little before moving closer to me. Not too far down, though, so Ding can't jump out and escape. Smart girl.

“You know Joanie don't you, Arthur? Her family's only been in town a couple months. Her dad's a medical research scientist.” I'm hoping Arthur will be impressed with Mr. T's credentials.

“Good for him.” He grumbles, which reminds me that nothing much impresses Arthur, and he's acting like he's not too happy I brought someone else along, either.

“He's doing important research in our rain forests.” Joanie adds, after which I pick up where she leaves off. And then I'm waffling on about how smart Mr. Thomas is. Hope I wasn't supposed to keep that confidential. Because if so, I'm in trouble. Then it's Joanie's turn again, and I say to myself, 'we have to stop this. We're turning into a comedy duo.' But it is pretty funny.

“My father believes there's a world of effective cures in nature,” she picks up the thread right on cue. “Most of them in our rain forests. Except these days there's too many Government regulations protecting them to get the discoveries approved.”

Sunrise is finally starting to break through, and I'm watching Arthur closely. It seems like he disapproved of what Joanie just said—staring at her like she's out of her tree.

Okay, Williams, this is it. I take a deep breath and prepare for battle. “Arthur, Joanie and I plan on hiking a little way up Perisher, today while you're enjoying the cabin.”

“Over my dead body. That mountain's a killer.”

“Then you better tell me a little more than just 'it's a killer.' Because I've been hearing that all my life.”

“Well, it's like the saying goes.” he cocks his head to one side, screws his mouth up almost to his nose, and stares at me. I feel a cold chill go up my back.

“I could tell you—but then I'd have to kill you.”

25

Being around Arthur all my life, I knew it was just his idea of a joke when he said that. Especially the way he cut loose with creepy laughter right after he said it. But when I suddenly feel Joanie's hand clamp onto my leg under the steering wheel, I knew it probably scared the daylight out of her. So I cover her hand with mine and give it a reassuring squeeze.

She doesn't know Arthur as well as I do. Heck, sometime I wonder if I even know the dude at all. But I discovered a long time ago I can sometimes coax information out of him by getting him started on a subject he likes talking about. So I jump in.

“That's okay, I probably know as much about that mountain as you, anyway. I've already got all three parts of the climb mapped out. Did it weeks ago. I'm serious about this, Arthur.”

“So am I, boy. I keep telling you that.”

“Okay, then correct me if I'm wrong. From the base up—easy as it gets. Not much snow, stable, even

ground, with few trees—not too steep. Even Joanie can go that far.” My leg cops such a hard squeeze when I say that, my foot jumps off the accelerator long enough for the ute to lurch. But I keep on talking. “We can breeze through that. Second level rough terrain, more snow—patches of dangerous glare ice, terraced climbs, and less trees. Joanie will have quit, by then. The third section will be tricky. I’m the only one going up there. Late-winter snow and much steeper. Last of all, the summit, with it’s curled-over tip. Doesn’t matter if I don’t do Widow’s Peak today, got plans for that later. Just so long as I reach the summit. You good with that?”

“You can’t do it, boy! I told ya’ already. You need an experienced climber with you. It’s no place to take your lady, either.”

I like the way he calls Joanie “my lady.”

“I’m from the Outback,” Joanie pipes up. “Hiked all over the place with my dad – though I’ve never done the kind of climbing you two are talking about. So, maybe it would be better if I wait back at the cabin. I’ll be fine so long as I have something to read. I’d rather be sitting in a comfortable chair next to a fire, anyway. It’s probably freezing up there.”

“She’s right,” Arthur agreed. “Nothing fancy at Halfway Point. Just a coupla’ places to park yer butt on. A lot of snow on top for this time of year.”

A perfect set-up for what we need. Joanie back at the cabin reading the Manuscript as fast as she can, and me keeping Arthur busy on the climb. No real worries

about the weather, because I reckon the old guy won't even make it as far as Halfway Point.

“How long has it been since your last climb, Arthur?” I ask. “I guess you were super fit back then.”

“A lot of years now. But don't you worry about me being fit, boy. I got ways of conserving energy like nothing you ever dreamed of. Then he gives me the once-over, along with a heavy dose of his own fractured logic that he spits out. “I'm goin' with you!”

All this talking at least helps pass the time, and before I know it we're pulling up outside the cabin. I stand on the porch for a minute to admire my mountain—an awesome view of the peak from here—then head inside to get a fire started for Joanie. Yep. Plenty of wood stacked to keep it going a couple hours. Then we divvy up the lunch sandwiches she brought along, and I'm ready. The sooner the better in my opinion.

Except for Ding. He's gone all strange on me lately. Still, if I tell him to come on the climb, he'll obey. At the same time, I don't feel too comfortable about leaving Joanie alone at the cabin. Not only that, but knowing how Ding feels about Arthur, he might take it into his head to run off. He's cool with Joanie, though, so, that helps me decide. Ding stays. I do one more check on my gear, but now there's no sign of Arthur. Oh well, he'll show up fast enough if I start without him. So I head for the porch and ease into my backpack.

About that time, Arthur makes an appearance from around the corner of the cabin. There's a small shed

back there I haven't bothered to look into, yet. Must be full of climbing stuff, because he's all decked out with one of those old-fashioned hunting caps with ear-flaps, and a pair of wool pants that were sort of a cross between gray and green. Plus an oiled-canvas jacket over the plaid flannel shirt he always wears. Ancient gear from gosh knows when. I've never seen Arthur dressed so good. He's stopped shuffling, even got some bounce to his step now. Probably because he's going on another climb.

Man, I sure hope he doesn't overdo it and keel over somewhere. I've already hauled one full-size bloke out of the rain forest this week. That's enough. Not to mention Dad would probably kill me if I let anything happen to Arthur. He might be weirded out a lot of the time, but he is still part family. By blood, or otherwise.

"That all the gear you're taking?" I point to the few coils of rope he's got slung around his neck and one arm, the same way Dad taught me. Then he moves aside the corners of his jacket to show me two ice picks. With the handles stuck through belt-loops on each side.

My insides freeze. I'm thinking for sure I'm looking at the man who let my grandfather die in that crevasse so long ago. But I sure couldn't figure out why he never took off, instead of just hanging around.

"These are all the gear I need," Arthur's sarcastic tone broke into my tumbling thoughts. "So, if we're going, let's scam."

I can hear Ding whining and scratching at the cabin

door. He wants to come. But I stick my head in long enough to call out goodbye to Joanie. “It’s all right, boy,” I whisper to Ding. “We’re not going all the way today. You stay and take care of Joanie.” He looks back to where she’s sitting in one of the rocking chairs in front of the fire—understands who I’m talking about. I’ve been telling Ding everything for so long, I know he gets my every word.

The first thing I notice when we start walking is how blue the sky is, which gives me that same strange compulsion to climb Perisher—right this minute. Impossible to shake the belief it is calling to me, drawing me all the way up. Freaky. Especially knowing my grandfather’s still up there somewhere.

Okay, Williams. Compromise. Just go a little further each time. This is serious stuff you’re dealing with. And deep down you know you shouldn’t be taking Arthur with you, no matter how much he wants to go. That’s a no-brainer. Besides, he usually walks at the pace of a turtle having a bad day.

Except how do I stop him?

I force myself to back up. Williams, sometimes you just have to get in the way. But then I cave. Arthur is putting everything he has in it—he’s moving on up like he’s part of an experienced team of world-famous young climbers. The irresistible pull of the mountain is written all over him, too, and I sure can understand that. So how can I blame him? Not when my own heart is pounding away in my chest. I feel like an astronaut about to take his very first steps on the moon.

Like it's my destiny. Forget about compromises. This is it.

But what if I let Arthur tag along and he runs out of juice somewhere up there? We'll never make it back before dark. And I got a feeling Joanie will totally freak out if we aren't at the cabin in a couple of hours. Man, we're not even gone fifteen minutes, and I'm already feeling the pressure. Get a grip, Williams, I order myself. Take a few deep breaths of clean, mountain air, and you'll come good.

But inside, a sneaky voice torments me. Conditions are perfect. You can always slow down a little for Arthur if you need to. But if you keep mucking around too long the situation might change. Go for it! And I am so tempted. Making it safely to the top and back down from Perisher, with or without Arthur, ought to put me in the same league as the other brave men in my family.

Then another voice surfaces. Where are ya' getting your orders from, Williams? The Mother ship? Now whose talking dream logic?

The first section of the mountain is easy, even for Arthur—who is plodding along next to me like he's dropping off years with each step. The excitement's got him. Everything's perfect. Wide trail, snows not too deep, and a steady, even ascent. Twenty minutes later we reach the lower portion of the second level and Arthur hasn't even broken rhythm. “Want to take a break?” I offer.

“I can make it to the Halfway before I need one,” he

says, not even breathing hard.

“Okay. But don't you go carkin' it on me, Arthur. I haven't seen you move this fast in years.”

“Mountain's watchin' us now, boy. Don't you know she always picks out the best man? Well, today, it's gonna be me!”

“Uh oh. You're not going to start with that 'every team that climbs her always comes back minus a man' story, are you? I told you I don't believe in that stuff, Arthur. Perisher is just one dodgy old bugger of a mountain to beat, that's all.”

“Doesn't matter what you believe in, kid. We're here, ain't we? It's all up to the mountain, now.”

What a dag. If he carries on like this the whole way, it could be a mood-killer. So, I try to focus on the good stuff. How awesome the climb conditions are, the fact that I'm actually here at all. Then all of a sudden I don't care about Arthur's warnings, or anything else because I've made my decision. I'm going to the top.

That was then.

A few minutes later, when we round the corner to where Widow's Peak finally comes into full view, I glance up at the summit and suddenly I'm not so confident. Reality is setting in, and my brain starts ticking off the hazards. Glare ice traps, unstable snow capable of producing avalanches. Then I'm arguing with myself. So what? You've done your homework—studied the maps. Extra care needed, that's all.

I'm wishing Ding was here. He would sniff around ahead to see if anything looks sus – sensing when the

ice is too thin, or the ground is unsafe. It's in Ding's blood—and he's a fair dinkum genius at it. I'm a poor substitute compared to those animal instincts of his. I totally get that. Even so, my own eyes are everywhere, ears attune to any sound, as my mind races ahead. I'm finally living my dream. We haven't come far yet, but I decide we better take a break soon. Mainly out of concern for the old guy, because I can rock it. In fact, I feel like I could fly to the moon.

We stop walking for a minute and suddenly the crunching sound of snow and ice under our boots has gone silent. In those few seconds, I hear the faint cracking call of a whip bird somewhere in the distance. Then another, very different sound, which makes my blood run cold. Faint at first. But it's there. Deep. Haunting. And Rhythmic. It increases in volume, and I begin to get the creeps—big time. Because now it's transformed into a weird kind of humming, coming from somewhere deep inside the mountain, and I swear it's calling to me.

Get over yourself, Williams. Mountains don't talk.

You have to quit falling for this stuff every time you come up here. For all I know it could be a member of a local tribe—farther down—blowing on a didgeridoo. Maybe even the same dude that stared so hard at Joanie and me when we were leaving, yesterday. That thought really gives me a jolt, and I begin to worry, because I have to admit I've been way off, lately.

I look over at Arthur, who's gone still as a statue, and I can tell he hears it, too. He's listening hard. His

dark eyes locked on the summit, but then they flick across to me. He's reading me—I can feel it all the way to my gut—and I'm trying to read him, too. But not for signs like whether he can make the climb, or not. I'm looking for brainsnap. Traces of insanity taking over a mind that might be ready to break into a thousand pieces any minute.

“You're in trouble, boy,” he says to me real quiet. “I tried to tell ya. You got no business buttin' into places where you don't belong.”

26

I don't know what's been going on with Arthur, recently. All I know is, at that particular moment, I reckon I'm talking to the old Arthur, again. The man who was there for me when I was growing up. One thing I learned was that he never held back the truth—even if he did tell it hard and hurtful, sometimes. In a flash it all became clear. Like a beam of light just illuminated my brain, I could see everything as clear and crisp as the mountain peak. It's the music. That didgeridoo music is some kind of communication system.

And the old boy can understand it.

Man, if Arthur is right and even the local tribes are using their music to tell on me, then I'm in heaps of trouble. I couldn't think how it got this way, much less what to do about it. Even climbing the mountain that had challenged me my whole life didn't seem so important in the face of that. Getting in this kind of

trouble could effect a lot more people than just myself. Maybe even the whole world if Mr. T never came through with his research. The Bone Pointers might not have got him if I hadn't taken him right into their territory. Me, Riley Williams. I did that. Stupid!

Now, I wasn't certain I could even make it down off my mountain against these kind of odds. And it wasn't because of the climbing conditions, or that I wasn't skilled enough. It was because I had disrespected something bigger than myself in trade for my own games. I only hoped I hadn't dragged Joanie into the muck with me. In one split second, I saw and understood all that. But I hadn't a clue what to say.

So I didn't say anything.

Then Arthur broke into a creepy laugh and smacked me on the shoulder. “You got more guts than I thought you did, mate! Come on—let's you and me climb Perisher!”

A lot of people who climb mountains say it's a spiritual experience. It was definitely that way for me. Because once all that stuff about myself hit me, everything else I was trying to figure out fell into place, too. I saw how every action was related to the next action. And all I had to do was grab onto one piece of the puzzle, then follow the trail to the rest.

I looked over at Arthur. “Where did you learn to read tribal music like that?” I came right out and asked him as we started to climb.

“Your granddaddy. He made friends with the local people after he built the cabin. Spent a lot of time with

them back then, trying to get on their good side since they was gonna' be neighbors, and he knew how funny they was about some of their beliefs. Half the time they don't let on if you is in their bad books. I never got as good at reading the music as your Grandpa, though."

"Did the music really say something about me, just now?"

"Enough to let me know you been taking stuff away from their land when you shouldn't. You bin snooping around places that are off-limits to you, too. What's got into you, young Riley? You never done nuthin' like that before."

"I was trying to help Joanie's dad get enough specimens to finish his research on a cancer cure. Seems to me something like that ought to belong to everybody, not just a few."

"That's the same thing Never used to say. But—like I told him—it's too hard to change the old ways. You either have to go above them, or below. And neither of them places is easy to reach."

I notice there's some loose snow sliding down along the trail, and a couple of big drifts piled up steep ahead of us. This is the first place we actually make a steep climb. So I take my ice-pick out of my belt loop as I'm walking, using the handle to feel around and make sure the ground is solid enough underneath to walk on. This is no time to lose concentration.

"Best to go around those, not over them," Arthur advises. The steeper places still have open fissures at their base, sometimes. Most barely big enough for a

man to fall into, but big enough to get you in trouble. Some are fair buggers. So deep ya' can't even see the bottom. But you can tell them ones by looking at the top of the drifts. If they slant away real sharp, or look broken off – you got problems.”

“What if there's no place to go around?”

“Then you gotta just keep doin' what you're doin' and choose the best route. Except we don't have to do that, right here. I know a way around.”

He takes off to what looks like just another angle of the face, then climbs—almost as easy as crawling—the twenty feet up to the first ledge—using hand and footholds someone had already chinked in with an ax a long time, ago. Nothing a person could recognize unless they knew what to look for, though. “It's a Williams ladder, boy. We'll be following your granddaddy's trail most of the way up.”

Hearing that fills me with pride I never felt before. And when I got to the top he let out another laugh and slapped me on the back.

“Lot of those up here,” he says. “You just have to know where they are.”

“Sure does save time.”

“Knowledge is power, boy.”

“Where are you getting all this energy from? Some mind-over-matter trick you learned from the tribes?”

“Nope. Nothing mind-over-mater.” He started towards the next terrace ledge about fifty feet away. “Bush tucker's what it is. A secret I learned from the music. The rest of the world would be clamoring to get

it too, if they knew what they was missin'."

"If it's so secret, then how come you know?"

"Heard the music from a local tribe."

"The music told you about bush tucker that grows right up here on Perisher?"

"Well now, that'd be telling, wouldn't it?"

"How come the tribes didn't come after you, then?"

"You kin eat anything you want in the bush, just so long as you don't go carting it off someplace else." He moved nearer to a pale, dry looking shrub that still had berries clinging to the leafless branches, and proceeded to pull the tiny fruit from them. Red, and really small. "A man can't help it if a few of these falls into his pocket now and again."

"I think I've seen that fruit somewhere. You sure you know what you're doing? Red stuff's often poison."

"I bin around long enough to know the difference. You want to be let in on the secret, boy? Okay, see this dry bush with the pale, skinny branches looks sorta like twine?"

"I see it."

"This is Devil Twine. That's bush tucker."

He takes a furtive look around, pops another couple of minuscule pieces into his mouth, then drops some more in his coat pocket. "The tribes got their own rules about who they share their secrets with. Jest takin' a few more for energy to make it back down."

He laughs, then gets serious again. "Gotta be careful though." Take too many, and it'll give ya a heart

attack.”

“How many is too many?”

But he didn't answer my question. Instead, he just says, “Ah, that feels better. The wind just got knocked out of me for awhile, boy.”

Amazing. Eating that bush tucker seemed to have brought the old Arthur back to life. Made me forget the way he'd been acting, lately. Almost.

Made me forget why I was even here.

Almost.

“Maybe Mr. Never died of a heart attack.” I tried to keep my voice matter-of-fact and conversational like, but I could feel worry seeping into me like snow melting into my jeans.

“Lot of people do.”

“I read the diary, Arthur.”

“Figured you did. Doesn't matter. Nothin' but a pack of lies.” Now he's looking at me with a strange glint in his eyes.

“Is it?”

“Just Edward trying to set the record straight for EG before he carked it. What good would it do? Some things ain't meant to be told.”

“What did you write it for, then?”

“I didn't write all them fancy words, Edward did.”

“You said it was yours.”

“It is now, ain't it.”

We had come to the next terrace ledge. But instead of climbing up another “Williams Ladder,” he stopped in front of it, took the rope he had draped around his

neck and shoulders, and began to make a big loop in one end. Oh, man. A hangman's noose! My heart starts pounding like it's going to jump right out of my chest.

"You could say I..." He tosses the wide loop up over a craggy piece of rock sticking up at the top. "Took care of everything. The best way I knew how."

With a sick feeling in the pit of my guts, I watch him yank hard a few times to make sure the noose was set right. Get a grip, Williams! I took a few deep breaths until my heartbeat settled. And that's when Arthur turned around to pin me with a look. No smile. No emotion. Just a piercing stare as he brings his face closer to mine. Too close.

"What...what are you...doing, Arthur?"

Don't step back. Whatever happens next, Williams, stand your ground. This is Arthur. You've known him like, forever. He wouldn't hurt you.

I got my answer with what he whispered next.

"Ever hear the old saying—give a man enough rope and he'll hang himself?"

I'm frozen to the spot. "What do you mean?"

"The mountain's telling you ya done the wrong thing, boy. Now you got a chance to make it right. The mountain always wins." He goes, and turns to walk further up, ahead of me.

And what else did you think he was going to do, dude? Don't be an idiot. You could knock Arthur over with one shove, if you had to. So, man up.

This next section would gain us only about fifteen feet, and Arthur was already heading towards it. But I

was younger and quicker. It only took me another minute until I closed the gap, and was one step behind to hear him confess, “I stole that diary from Never. Didn't want to hurt EG—she's bin good to me. Now she don't let me in the house, anymore.”

“Arthur—all you have to do is take a shower once in awhile. You know she don't like dogs, and you been smelling more like a dog than a person, lately.”

“No way to treat family.”

“Stealing from family is way worse.”

“I was gonna put it back after I took all the names out. Edward wouldn't know. Then he up and died before I could do it.”

“Yeah, well, diaries are private. It isn't up to someone else to change what's in them.”

“It is if they're gonna' get used in court like EG was fixin' to do. After everything I done for that girl, too.”

By that time I had caught up but the climb was getting tougher—I was flat out trying to keep up with Arthur, now. I'm hoping he vented enough of what he's kept bottled up all this time to maybe bring him closer to normal, again. But he still wasn't finished.

“All them years I took care of your Pa and Grandma.” he was talking fast, with me staying a step or two behind him. “But I reckon she always knew. No matter how hard I tried, I wasn't your grandpa. I'm not proud of what any of us done up on that mountain. But I wasn't the only one to blame. Made for a lot of miserable years for all of us.”

“Seems to me Mr. Never spent a whole lot of his

life trying to make up for that day, Arthur.” I practically choked getting it out but I had to finish. “Instead of just covering it all up.”

“We were all young and foolish in them days. We didn't know enough about the mountain. Didn't respect it like we shoulda. Don't ever disrespect the mountain, boy. Hear me? That's the surest way of getting yourself kilt there is. Charlie should've known better than step out onto that drift with the mountain rumblin' the way it were. But he was in a hurry to get home.”

“Why didn't he use a Williams ladder?”

“Won't find any of them that far down. Just in the steep places. That's the treachery of it. Perisher's most dangerous at Halfway. If you catch her in a bad mood.”

“How do you know if she's in a bad mood?”

“Just like a lady, boy. She starts to grumble. Edward knew that, too. Came back to haunt him, though. I reckon he always wished we could have beat the curse instead of paying it that day. Been trying to make up for it his whole life. He shouldn't ever have crossed the tribes for them scientists, either. Things like that cause heart attacks.”

“EG said tests showed he didn't have a heart attack.”

“There's heart attacks...” He leaned over to spit, like he didn't like the taste of his own words. “And there's heart attacks. Never told that Scientist bloke where to find cures. The tribes blamed him for that. Could be why he died so sudden. Edward felt sort of like you did, boy. That everybody ought to have the secrets of the rain forest. Except those secrets weren't his to tell.”

Perisher

That's the way Arthur and I climbed Perisher. Me getting a first-hand look at sections of the climb I had only read about—and him showing me different routes that weren't any harder than a Sunday afternoon walk. Every few minutes he'd wander off the subject and begin waffling on about the family history. Fair dinkum knocked the wind right out of my sails, listening to him. Arthur setting the record straight—just like Mr. Never had wanted to do.

At least according to Arthur.

Next thing I knew we were at the last ascent, with the peak showing itself so close I felt like I could almost jump up onto the top from there. But the final slope was so steep you had to lean forward so as not to tip over backwards. The snow was deep, too, while other places were more like a film of ice over rock. In those parts all I could do was chip some hand and toe-holds with my ice pick. But even that wasn't a problem.

I was stoked that I would finally make it to the summit. Felt like I was on top of the world, and if I squinted real hard, I reckoned I could see the skiers all the way over at Thredbo, taking that fancy new jump they've built. But somehow I ended up ahead of Arthur for the final onslaught, and it took me a few minutes before I realized he wasn't coming.

When I turned and looked back, he was just standing there, looking up at me with what seemed like fierce pride shining in his eyes.

He said, "This right here is my stop-off point, boy. Of us three, only Me and Edward went up that day.

Wasn't till on the descent the mountain turned on us. You'll get your summit today too, boy. I'm sure of that. Take a picture so you'll have something to prove you did it."

"Sure—okay, Arthur. It won't take me long, now. I'll be up there and back before you know it, and afterward we can head down together. You're okay, aren't you?"

"Just a little winded, is all. I knackered myself getting up this far, but I can still make it down alright."

"You got any more of your energizer with you?"

"A few for emergencies. I better wait a while, though, so I don't give myself a heart attack. I'll just dig me out a seat to rest in and build up more fuel for the finish. Oh, and there's somethin' I want to explain to you, boy." When Arthur reaches out and clasps my shoulder, I'm in shock. He's not the touching kind. "Reason I told ya to take your lady along with you when you was searching for your father. I thought you might be needing her."

Truth bomb! And that was the last thing he said.

I wasn't sure how long I hung out at the summit because I was chuffed. Went totally ballistic snapping selfies, and didn't come to my senses until a blast of freezing air chased a cloud in front of the sun. Not until then did it hit me that I should have started down ten minutes ago. What are you thinking, dude? If bad weather rolls in, these walk-in-the-park conditions could turn brutal. You better hope you don't need to haul Arthur home too.

I started calling his name even before I reached the ledge where I expected he would be taking a rest. Called a few times, but got no answer. Not even once. By the time I got to the top of the ledge and looked down, my legs were starting to feel like rubber from the strain. And all I could do was hope they would get me down the steepest places. After that, maybe I could locate some muscles that hadn't quit on me, yet.

“You aren't asleep—are you, Arthur? ” I shouted ahead. “You know what they say about sleeping in...”

But he wasn't there.

Something similar to Adrenalin shot through me, and I felt my energy return. Before I knew it, I was slipping and sliding the last ten feet or so, to land on my butt at the base of the next ledge. Took the wind out of me for a minute when I fell, and the backpack stabbed into my lungs. This was no time to kill myself. I caught a look at the empty hollow Arthur had sat in, and saw footprints heading down the mountain.

I figured he was done with Perisher, and had taken off without me. Not that I was worried about descending alone. I just wondered why he hadn't thought twice about scaring me like that. What if he had keeled over from a heart attack somewhere, or fallen into one of those crevasses concealed under the ice and snow? That's when I knew Arthur's Devil Twine fruit—must have worn off. I could tell by his tracks Arthur was dragging his feet, now. Back to operating in that strangely peculiar logic of his own, I reckon.

Getting back down seemed to take longer than climbing up, although I did plenty of free-falling and sliding. There were places I had to take it easy to keep from tripping over rocks buried under the snow. Lost track of Arthur for a while—surprised I hadn't passed him yet.

Man, was I going to give him a piece of my mind when I caught up! He must have eaten his last few portions of bush tucker, because otherwise the old guy could never have kept in front for so long. Every once in a while I would find myself getting cranky at him, angrily shouting his name—but he never answered.

Wasn't long before I lost his trail in a rocky patch. Never did find it again. Then a freezing wind picked up and started throwing snow dust off the tops of the drifts. If this turned into a bad storm, Joanie would freak out for sure, being all alone back at the cabin.

I must have been almost down to Halfway Point when I heard Joanie calling me. And a few seconds later, Ding came bounding up. She had probably freaked out, and come chasing up here after us. I bet she ran into Arthur on her way and hoped he hadn't been upsetting her with a lot of rot about the old curse. It was spooky enough up here in these conditions, without adding any of that to the mix.

“Did you take good care of Joanie, boy?” I asked Ding, as I ruffled his ears. “Or did she get away from you?”

He gives me a few yaps like he might explode if he doesn't tell me something. Then he scoots back down a

few steps before turning around to sit and wait for me to catch up. That's his way of saying, hurry up.

"I'm coming," I tell him. "Where's Arthur, boy? He can't be all the way back down, already?"

Then I get the shock of my life because Ding doesn't just yap, he growls so viciously I'm remembering all the times Dad has warned me how Dingoes can turn on you and go wild suddenly. It's like they've had it with civilization, and revert to their feral Outback ways.

When that happens, they almost never return to being tame again. Not Ding, though. I can't imagine a life without Ding. We've been too close. But he sure is trying to set me straight about something, right now.

About that time, I see Halfway Point ahead, and Joanie is pacing back and forth in front of the log bench. No sight of Arthur, though. Unless he passed her along the way. Could be, Arthur was back at the cabin already, relaxing in a chair by the fire. I just hope she stashed that Manuscript safely in the ute before she took off. Then she catches sight of me, and starts jumping up and down, waving. Halfway Point looks different up this high, but I can't figure out why.

A little farther and a huge iced-over rock comes into view. Almost like one of the ledges higher up, but in miniature. Behind it—hidden from view of anyone on the other side—is a frozen bare spot, swept clean by the wind so it looks smooth as a skating rink. Joanie makes her way to the ledge, where she starts waving and shouting. That sets Ding to growling. Then, all of a sudden—he charges at her.

“No, Ding—No!” But I'm too far away to stop him. Before I even get close he takes a flying leap against her legs and knocks her backward off the ledge.

“Joanie!” I yell—I can't believe what I'm seeing—this is not happening—it can't be! “Hold on, Jo—I'm coming!”

But then the unthinkable happens. Ding turns on me—charges straight for me—making serious attack noises that make my blood run cold. All I can do is brace for impact, because he's using the strength of a wild wolf as he springs.

I'm no match for that kind of force, especially when my own strength's running on empty. The next thing I know I'm sprawled backwards on the ground and he's on top of me.

“Down, Ding—down!” I shout, and I feel him hesitate. But the minute I'm on my feet, he knocks me over, again, and this time his wide jaws clamp over my ankle like vice-grips and hold me there. I can hear Joanie crying behind the ledge and, thinking she might be hurt bad, I grab Ding by the scruff and shake him till he yelps, but he still won't let go.

“What's wrong with you!” I yell, “What's—”

All of a sudden I hear a roar like an avalanche, and for one long, sickening moment I freeze, expecting a wall of snow to come racing down the mountain and bury us alive.

“Rye—lee!” Joanie screams, and pulls herself back up onto the ledge.

But those huge Dingo jaws stay locked in place and

I'm not going anywhere. Then there's a thunderous cracking noise—like ice breaking up.

“Riley—what's happening—what should I do?”

“Stay put, Joanie!” I roar. “Get as far back on your ledge as you can!”

I try to move, but Ding's still got a death grip on me, and he isn't letting go. The tension is insane, and my heart thumps away like a thousand drums are pounding on it as I watch—in horror—the ice in front of us split wide open.

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Now, I get it.

“Joanie, look!” I call out to let her know it's okay. “If it wasn't for Ding, we'd have gone right through that ice!”

Before she can answer, there's another roar like a thundering locomotive, with ice splintering off in every direction. Ding lets go of me and is sniffing the air, already looking for a way out, as Joanie pops up from behind her ledge to see what's happening. That's when a huge crevasse opens up right in front of us. A wide, gaping hole too deep to see the bottom. The fact that I trekked right over the top of that section this morning, horrifies me. Man, it makes me want to sprint around the farthest edge, grab Joanie, and run. But I don't dare.

“We have to get out of here, Rye—hurry! Please—before it gets any bigger!”

“No—don't move!” I warn her. “We have to trust Ding. Let him use his instincts. He's a tracker dog—he

can sense where to go. He'll get us out of here, I promise."

But how he'll do that I have no idea. We can only stay still as statues, and wait.

Within the next few minutes, the entire ice cover has fractured—now it's splintering off in a circular motion, all around the perimeter. If the ground itself is shifting, not just the crevasse ice we were stomping around on, then the ravine might even enlarge further, forming a new terrace and swallowing gosh-knows-how-much ground in its way.

Joanie puts a hand over her mouth and starts to back off.

"Not yet! Stay cool. That ledge you're on is stronger than what's around it. Don't move anywhere you're not sure of, Jo."

Her face goes pale but she stops moving. "God help her not to panic," I whisper. "Give us both courage so we can get out of here!"

Then, just when I think we can't stand one more second of this torture, Ding steps out. Slowly, at first. Sniffing the ground as he goes, he makes his way around the very narrow section he decides is safe. One paw is poised lightly over each patch of ice as he tests it. Then he carefully lowers it again and moves forward. He's doing the most important tracking of his life and he knows it. I stand up real slow, and follow.

We inch our way out to the side of Joanie's ledge, then circle back up to it. The ground behind it feels solid, and she falls into my arms so limp, I'm thinking

she must have fainted. I start to lift her up but she comes to life and sobs. "I'm good—I was just so scared I thought—I thought we were dead!"

There's a cut above one of her eyes, and that side of her face is smeared over with blood, dirt, and tears, but other than that she seems okay.

"We got to get off the mountain, Jo—fast as we can!" I'm trying not to sound as worried as I feel inside. "Once this shift in the terrain starts, it can go on for days. Won't be anyplace you can feel totally safe on till it settles down, again."

"I'm okay, now." She's standing, but still hanging onto me tight. "Now, that you're here."

"Let's go, then."

We head down the trail fast but cautious, with Ding still out in front. He knows his job and he's taking it serious. Every time the ground rumbles, he stops, and we stand still, waiting until it goes quiet, again. At this rate, I figure it will take a good hour to get back to the cabin. We're both so tired and stressed we don't mind the stops - hanging onto each other for a good half hour before we say anything more than things like, "Want to sit a minute?"

"No."

"Ready?"

"Yes."

"Watch that slippery spot there."

Finally, when we've been at it at least fifteen minutes without a tremor or having to stop, I remember the beef sandwich I stuffed into my coat pocket this

morning and I'm suddenly starved. It's all squashed but we share it anyway. At least it gets my energy level up past the empty line and I start feeling better right away.

"Sorry you got stuck with Arthur, Joanie. Is that why you decided to climb to Halfway Point to wait for me? He didn't catch you reading the manuscript, did he?"

"He never came back, Riley. Didn't you know?"

"What?" I stop dead in my tracks. "He took off on me hours ago—he must be still back up there on the mountain, somewhere. I gotta go back and find him!"

"They came and got him."

"Who did?"

"The tribe. I heard them talking about a Corroboree somewhere, didn't you?"

"What was to hear? He was waiting for me to come down from the summit, but when I did, he wasn't there. I thought he must have got tired and took off back to the cabin. No sign of any of the tribe around. And after what happened yesterday, you can bet I was looking out for them, too."

I turned around and stared back up the way I'd come, hoping to see him come stumbling down dog-tired and wore out, but all in one piece. "I better go back, Jo. He was totally wiped out last time I saw him."

"But Rye, it was a long time, ago, and I haven't heard anything since then. So, I'm sure they took him."

I turned back to her. "Did you tell them we were up here?"

“Of course not.” She tucked the tangled strands of hair on the sticky side of her face behind her ear, and I could already see she was going to have a black eye.

“It was the didgeridoo music that made me think they must be having a Coroboree. I was worried about you, Rye. I thought maybe they took you, too.”

“Man—what if you got lost, or something? You shouldn't have come up here all by yourself, Jo.”

“I wasn't by myself, I had Ding with me. All I had to say was 'let's go find Riley,' and away he went. Led me right to you. Who knew everything else was going to happen?”

I didn't answer right away because I was trying to think what I should do next. Call Dad, call EG, or call the police?

“You're not mad at me, are you, Rye?” She asks gently, and I love hearing that tender tone in her voice.

I put an arm around her and pull her close to me. “Nope. I'm pretty sure it's time to call in some backup, though. This stuff is way out of our league.”

“I think so, too. I didn't realize the tribes had any of their sacred sites up here.”

“That's debatable. More likely their interest in Perisher fizzled out when it began to get so popular.”

“My parents would be disappointed in me if I got in trouble on tribal lands. We know their ways. Dad especially, would expect me to know better.”

“I can't believe you know about the music. Where did you learn to read it?”

“I'm from the Outback, remember?”

“Lots of people are from there, and not everyone knows how.”

“Dad taught me. He grew up around the tribes, and picked it up when he was a kid.”

“I didn't even know anything about it until Arthur explained. Stuff he couldn't possibly know any other way. He seemed cool with it, though. Nothing fazes Arthur on one of his good days. Hard to believe he'd just up and go off somewhere with them. Not when he was so massively tired, by then. I was worried about him getting back down in one piece.”

“Well, it might not have been voluntary.”

“Yeah, you're right. Oh, man. I gotta call Dad. Did you bring your phone?”

“Yes, but it's in my bag back at the cabin.”

“Darn. Mine's in the ute.”

We walked quiet for a while, thinking. “Did you find anything important in the manuscript?”

“Nothing like what we were looking for. Typical family history kind of stuff, mainly. But EG will want to know that. Nothing about Arthur, except what a good dog handler he was. And not one word about the incident on the mountain with Mr. Never and Arthur. You were right about one thing, though. Everything is related.”

“How?”

“Ted pops up as the son of a friend of Mr. Never's, and they seem to know each other quite well. It's only a guess, but I'm thinking Mr. Never may have had a bout with cancer, and he knew Ted and my dad were close

to a cure. It's likely he offered to trial it for them. All under wraps, of course, because they still needed to make more tests for the Government. But now Mr. Never has died, and Ted has disappeared."

"Around the same time, too." I add.

"Yes. Not too far apart, anyway. Which lines up with the didgeridoo music that guy was playing the day of the memorial service."

"Do you remember what it said?"

"Something like the men who don't keep secrets, are gone."

"Wow! No wonder your dad almost carked it if he heard them saying that."

"Yeah, especially if Mr. Never was the one who told Ted that some of the specimens he needed could be located in certain rain forests around here. So it didn't take long for the Bone Pointers to put-two-and-two-together."

"What about Arthur?"

"Other than the dog handling stuff, I couldn't find much of anything in there about Arthur. It wasn't finished, though, so maybe he was going to put all that straight at the end."

She blew the rebellious curl out of her eyes as she thought for a moment. "Oh, but I did find a letter from him, stuck between some pages. It's addressed to EG and clears up pretty much everything except for the Ted mystery."

"I hope EG doesn't mind you opening her mail, Jo. You mean you actually found something that will hold

up in court?”

“I hope so. In my opinion, it was the only major piece of evidence I could find anywhere in the whole manuscript. Although I had to skim over a lot of it.”

“Anything in it about the diary?”

“Yes. But not the part about the accident. He just talks about the business arrangement between him and Arthur, and how he was to have the dogs if EG decided to get out of the business. The ten thousand dollars that was stolen out of the safe was there, too. Stuffed into an envelope. That's why the folder was so full it had to be tied together.”

“But that might just be money Arthur was stashing away over the years. He's been living poor ever since I can remember. Hardly ever spends money on anything. So we're lacking a motive.”

“What he said in the letter was that it was money Mr. Never was planning to give to Ted next time he saw him. A donation towards their cancer research. But Dad would have told me something like that.”

“Joanie, that's it!” I stopped walking for a minute, and Ding looked back at us like he hadn't heard any rumbles, so why did we stop. “The way they kept track of their ideas and the note you found. It said, 'Eliminate Ted! His no good.' Correct?”

“Well yes, but...”

“Okay. We all use keypads. So let's say you want to put an exclamation point after 'Eliminate Ted.’” I pause to let her consider it. “If you don't hold down the shift key, what do you get then?”

“The number one.”

“Biffo! So it was only a typo. Your father held down the shift key, and wrote 'Eliminate Ted! His no good.' instead of 'Eliminate Ted 1. His no good.'”

No sign of that dimple yet.

“Take all the time you need, Sherlock. Your father used an exclamation point by mistake.” I summed it up for her. The dimple appears, and she leans over to give me the usual kiss on the cheek, but this time I don't want to break the connection.

Instead, I pull her in close and give her the kind of kiss I've been dreaming about ever since that day on the trail. What I didn't expect was some kind of electricity sparking between us and her not wanting to break it off, either.

Just in time I remember what they said in youth group about playing with fire, and I figure this would definitely qualify as one of those times. So, I decide I better be the man and do the right thing. “Whoa...” I hug her tight one last time then step back. “Danger alert.”

She laughs, and gives me a friendly punch. “No-one has to be a detective to sleuth that one out.” Then more serious, “Oh, Rye, that was a brilliant piece of detective work. What if I had confronted Dad with my suspicions? I'm so glad I didn't!”

“Delighted to be of assistance, ma'am.”

“We really do make a good team. Except we still have Arthur being the baddie, but we don't have a motive. What would he care about Mr. Never's

manuscript? And why would he steal money he didn't need? There's no law against being a coward, is there?"

I take her hand and we start walking, again. "No. But he told me on the mountain today, that Mr. Never was trying to set everything straight for EG after he was gone. Arthur may have worried that naming him as a coward on the mountain, might have turned her against him more than she already was."

"But there weren't any names in that part."

"Arthur admitted he took them all out."

She stops for a moment—like she had to do a double-take on some thought that flashed by—and then started walking, again. "I get it. Now that letter makes perfect sense."

"I'll have to read it when we get back to the cabin."

She takes some folded-in-half blue thing out of her pocket and hands it to me.

"What's this?"

"The letter."

"Listen, Jo..." I take it from her and we stop, again, so I can read it. "Reading someone's mail is one thing, but crumpling it up in your pocket and taking it mountain climbing is seriously close to withholding evidence."

"I intended to put it back after we read it."

"Tampering, then." I unfold the envelope, take out the single sheet of paper, and start to read. "Typical Arthur." I hand it back to her. "Half a page in handwriting that looks like chicken scrawl. All he did with that diary was change everyone's names to he, or

him.”

“I already figured that out. I'll read it for you.”

“Go for it.”

“It says, '*EG, here's Edward's diary, his manuscript, and the cash I stole. I was hoping the tribes would call their curse off and leave him alone if I bribed them. I hope you git what you're after in life, girlie. I know you'll want to sell the business, so you won't be seeing me again. I'm goin' bush. If I don't come back, Riley kin take what he wants of my stuff, and you kin do what you please with the rest. Tell Preston I'm real sorry he had to take the rap for me. I woulda fronted up soon, but going to jail at my age would've kilt me. Arthur.*'”

“He's gone bush—maybe he did intend to go with the tribe this afternoon, then.”

“There's another letter marked for the police.” She took a second letter out of her pocket.

“Joanie, you seriously have to put all this stuff back.”

“Of course I will. Now, listen to this. She begins to read the letter. '*Me and Never saw them other missing climbers who fell into the same ravine at Halfway Point as Charlie Williams. All of them musta fallen in like poor Charlie. I stole Edward Never's manuscript and the cash, too. You'll find them both in the storage shed. Anybody comes after me, I'll kill myself. Preston Williams is innocent. Signed, Arthur.*'”

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We called Dad and EG as soon as we got back to the cabin—decided to ask them to call the police. Plenty of evidence now to convince the Police there was no case against Dad. We figured Arthur wasn't as much of a baddie as we first thought.

I mean, if there were laws against getting old, being a coward, bad temper, and not taking baths, then half the old people in this country would have to be arrested. I reckon you could get in a bit of trouble for changing someone's private diary though, and there were definitely laws about stealing. Arthur may have landed in jail, or maybe not.

While Joanie was cleaning up, I rummaged around

in the cupboards and found some old hot chocolate mix. It was hard as a rock after sitting there for who-knows-how-many years, but it still dissolved in boiling water, and didn't taste half bad. Warmed up our insides after so many hours outside, anyway.

So, we're sitting by the fire, waiting for everybody to turn up, and I'm thinking it's a good time to talk something else over with Jo. Her hair's pulled back in a ponytail to keep it off her scratched up face, and by this time, her black eye has turned to a real shiner. Something for everyone to talk about on the bus Monday morning, anyway. But we've pulled the two rocking chairs close together and she's blowing softly on her hot chocolate, waiting for the little hard-as-a-rock marshmallows to melt. As usual, she's being a good sport about it all.

Ding's sleeping on the floor between our feet, enjoying some dream time, with his paws twitching every now and then as he chases something down in his sleep. We haven't been saying much for a while, but we've grown close enough in the last few days to be comfortable with each other in the quiet times, too.

“Dad wants to move away from Perisher Valley after the court stuff is all done with.” I finally spring my news on her. “That promotion he was promised came through. It's to a big hospital south of Sydney, and he asked me what I thought of the idea...”

A cloud of disappointment crosses her face.

“But I've been waiting to hear your family's plans first,” I explain. “You think they'll stay put in Perisher

Valley? Because what your folks decide is sure gonna influence what I tell Dad.”

“Perisher Valley doesn't have everything my dad needs, either, Rye. We came here mainly to get more specimens he needed, and throw the Bone Pointers off the scent. It was always temporary, though. Eventually we'll be moving closer to Sydney, ourselves.” She stops talking for a moment. “I hope it doesn't happen too soon, though. I'm getting awfully used to having a partner.”

“Me, too. You've even got me hooked on solving cases. Except it's one of the most nerve-wracking things I ever got into. I guess the excitement could grow on you if you can accept the fact you'll be scared out of your wits half the time. But—hey—wouldn't it be great if both our dads ended up working in the same hospital?”

“Sort of unlikely but it could happen. We'll have to see how far our 'only kid' influence gets us. Otherwise we'll have to be satisfied with phone calls and emails.”

“Yeah, and driving practically as far as the black stump and back during vacations because we still have the last piece of our case to solve. Finding out what happened to Ted. No way a successful research team like ours is gonna' be stumped much longer.”

We hear another rumble in the distance, and even Ding springs awake to trot over to the window and look outside. There's a barely detectable wisp of sunset left, but a huge golden moon is rising up over the top of Mount Perisher. There's even a few stars beginning

to appear around the dark edges of the sky, making it all seem magical. Like, who would have thought the same place could have been a scene of terror such a short time, ago?

“Oh, Rye.” she whispers, and I know it's having the same effect on her as me. “That's the biggest full moon I've ever seen—really golden— Somehow it feels like Perisher has awarded you first prize for making it to the top and back, today. No more secrets, either, now that we know what happened to those climbers. Could be you've broken the curse. The mountain is saying you did it, Rye.”

“Ya think? Anyway, we definitely make the most awesome moons in the Valley.”

Ding growls softly at something through the window. “What's wrong, boy?” I ask.

But then Joanie starts to laugh. “Over there—see? It just slipped behind that first tree at the edge of the yard.”

All of a sudden I see the tail-end of something black with white stripes on its rump. I'm thinking another Tasmanian Tiger sighting, until I catch a perfect silhouette coming out behind the other side of that tree. “Hey, that's a... I lean closer to the glass to take another squiz as it disappears into the brush. “A feral mountain goat.”

“Oh, this is too funny! I'm almost sure that's what I saw last night, too. It had those same distinct markings on its rear.”

Then we're both laughing. At everything and

nothing, really. It was just awesome to have something silly to laugh about after all the drama. Secretly I'm wondering if it was a goat that I had seen, too. Maybe not. But I have to admit they're about the same size. By this time I've started to come down off my mountain high and get tired. My legs have some new aches and pains in places I didn't even know were there, too. So we head back for the rocking chairs.

“It was so cool how you stood up for Mr. Never—found his manuscript—and discovered the real thief. You actually did what Mr. Never couldn't do for himself, Riley. Just like you wanted to.”

“Well don't let me get too much of a swelled head because most of that stuff I just kind of stumbled into.”

“I'm pretty sure that's the way most mysteries get solved. People just spread everything out on the table, then stumble into things. Has to be both of those methods, though. Following up leads, then figuring things out. They sort of balance each other.”

“Like us,” I tell her. “We're a good team, Jo. Somehow, we just work. I wouldn't have known what I was missing out on if you hadn't introduced me to the adventures of investigation. And I figure I can use the same principles to succeed in whatever subject I end up choosing in uni. I bet if we had one good lead, we could figure out what happened to Ted before summer's over, too. Especially if we get started right away.”

Her eyes light up with pleasure as she blows at the curl that annoys her. It's sprung free from her ponytail

again. I think I've come to love that curl. "We've run into a lot of trouble trying to figure everything out, though" she warns. "I guess you could say I have a knack for that. And I can't promise to change, either, because I'm always like this."

Like what? Beautiful? Smart? Caring?"

"No. Different. Stubborn. Not part of the cool bunch."

"Hey, haven't you noticed by now you're describing me, too? And furthermore..."

"Furthermore, what?"

"Furthermore, it's okay not to be part of the cool bunch."

That makes her laugh and I'm thinking how much I love the sound of her laugh, too.

"Okay. Where do you think we'll end up next, Jo? Ulladulla? Muttaborra? Oodnadatta? Woop Woop?"

"You'll be pleased to learn that if Ted shows up at all, it will be where he and Dad planned their next round of research trials. And you'll be wrapped to hear it's somewhere sunny. Also that it's far away from Bone Pointer territory."

"Go on, this is getting better by the minute."

"It's near the ocean, too, which is awesome, because I love all manner of sea life. In fact, I'm pretty sure that's where my uni studies will take me. I have to warn you it's very dangerous. Swimming there, I mean, because the place has the highest population of Great Whites in the world. That's why it's called Shark Heads."

“Wow! Dazza's Shark Heads? The place I'll be working this summer?”

She laughed and nodded her head.

“If I wasn't so crazy over you already girl, I would be after hearing that. That's the same place Arthur had the diary sent back from.”

“Riley, that's proof Ted and Arthur may have known each other! Ted was getting things set up there while Dad was working here where I could finish up the school term. But then he never showed up for the lab work, which they always did together. That's why it took a couple of weeks before we realized he had actually disappeared.”

“Hey, that's one of the biggest pieces of the puzzle, yet. How come you never told me before?”

“I never realized the connection until reading over the manuscript.”

For a minute we just sat there, listening to the pop and crackle of the fire and letting the new information sink in. Something still didn't feel quite right to me, though. It was all too easy.

“Seems like too much of a coincidence,” I finally spoke up. “Arthur hardly ever takes a vacation. I mean, what are the odds for them to bump into each other in some far-off place like that?”

“Maybe they didn't. Could be Mr. Never gave Ted the diary for some reason and Arthur went up there to get it back. He could have stolen it. The same way he did the manuscript and the money.”

“Wow. That's huge, Jo. But it makes way more

sense than old Arthur turning into a shark hunter at his age. I can't believe I actually fell for that."

"What if —oh, Rye—do you think you really could get a job there next summer?"

"Sure—I'm planning on it. Dazza said he's always looking for good help. I just have to give him a call when school's out."

"Then we wouldn't have to split up—" Cute, the way she suddenly caught herself. "The partnership, I mean. We wouldn't have to split our partnership of working through the rest of this mystery together, you know?"

"I sure do."

"And who knows? We actually could end up going to uni together. You might even get as interested in studying marine life as I am. How do you feel about sharks?"

"No worries there. A few weeks working with Dazza and I'll know how to handle them for you."

"Oh, I'm not worried about them, I like them. In fact, I think they're about the most fascinating marine creatures around."

"Are you kidding?" Now, I'm thinking this girl is so full of surprises I'll never get tired of her.

"It's true. So, if you can put up with me after knowing that and we can both adjust to life at Shark Heads... What do you think?"

"Who me? I'm Mr. Adjustable!" I give her my best "no worries wink" and a smile. "I say, Shark Heads, here we come!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



SHALE KENNY is a fair-dinkum, true-blue Aussie who loves to bring the mysteries of her heritage Down Under to life in stories. Travel with her young Outback Heroes as they discover the wonders of the largest island in the world, where the ordinary can become extra-ordinary—and when disaster strikes—a way out can always be found.

You can connect with this fascinating author over at:

SHALEKENNY.COM

NEXT UP:

JOAN OF SHARK

Continue the adventures of Outback Heroes Riley Williams and Joanie Thomas as they travel to Shark Heads, Australia. It has the highest population of Great White Sharks on the planet and holds more mysteries to solve than they brought with them. Warm beaches, deep sea adventure, and a summer Down Under that takes them way beyond fun.