

DYING TO TELL ME

Sherryl Clark

CHAPTER ONE

I didn't want to sit in the front seat of our car – that's where Mum always sat – but Dad was pleading.

'Please, Sasha,' he said. His voice caught, and he cleared his throat. 'We promised a new start.'

His face was so creased with sadness that I couldn't say no. I forced my foot and then my leg into the car and slid onto the dusty blue seat, yanking at the seatbelt. My hatred for Mum burned through me all over again.

'Bye, house,' Nicky said, waving out the back window at the familiar cream weatherboard we'd lived in all our lives. I refused to look back.

All the way to Manna Creek, I hunched down in the seat and listened to my iPod. Nicky sat in the back seat, clutching his box of magic tricks, staring out the window. Every now and then he'd go, 'Wow,' and point, but it was only something dumb like a cow or a sheep. I hated how enthusiastic he was, and knew it was mean, but meanness seemed to have replaced blood in my veins.

The removal van followed us like a lame dog that was scared it'd get lost before we made it to our new house. New *old* house. I'd already seen a photo of it, and it was beyond renovation. It needed demolition.

'Manna Creek hasn't had a policeman for six months,' Dad had told us. 'This is a golden opportunity to put the dirty, nasty city behind us and make a new life.' I'd blocked him out – I didn't want to leave the city. But I'd lost my vote when I'd gotten into trouble and ended up in the Children's Court. If moving to the back of nowhere and becoming a country cop would make Dad happy again, I'd have to give it a try. I owed him that.

'Here we are,' Dad announced, trying to sound cheerful. 'Looking good, kids.' A big sign flashed past that said *Manna Creek*.

'Watch out!' I screeched, my feet digging into the floor.

Dad slammed on the brakes, and I banged against my seat belt. Behind me, Nicky's box of magic tricks clattered all over the back seat. A mangy yellow and brown dog skidded and leaped sideways off the road, then ran into the long grass.

My heart skittered inside my chest. The acrid smell of burning rubber filled the car. 'Did you hit it?' I asked, sitting up, searching for the dog. What if it was injured?

‘No,’ Dad snapped. ‘Don’t yell at me like that again. I saw it before you did.’ He loosened his grip on the steering wheel and accelerated again, checking his mirror for the removal van.

‘Sorry,’ I mumbled. Out my window, I caught a glimpse of a skinny guy with long, greasy hair shaking his fist at us. The dog cringed against his legs.

Nicky leaned forward between the seats. ‘Is this it? This is all there is?’ He pointed ahead, disappointment tingeing his voice. My eyes followed his grubby finger.

A single street lined with old-people shops, a pub painted dirty-brown, another pub that’d been turned into an antiques place with a big CLOSED sign in the window, and a small supermarket with the windows painted over. There was not a single person in sight. If we’d been in a Western movie, a tumbleweed would’ve rolled across in front of our car.

It was even worse than I had imagined. I groaned.

‘What’s the matter? Are you carsick?’ asked Dad. He patted my arm. ‘We’re nearly there.’ He turned left, drove a short distance down a narrow street and stopped. ‘Here we go.’

I couldn’t bear to look, hunching down again. I turned my music up louder, drowning Dad out, but he pulled the buds out of my ears.

‘Sasha, stop being silly and get out. The movers want to know where to put our stuff.’

I shoved the buds back in, then slowly dragged them out again, one at a time. I was being a pain, but I couldn't help it. My life had turned into a huge, weird disaster area that I had no control over, and I spent every day feeling anxious and stressed out. And hating Mum. At this rate, I'd have an ulcer before I was fourteen.

I pushed at the car door and stepped out onto spongy green grass that squelched under my feet. An icy wind nipped at my ears and nose. The house in front of me was like the photo, only worse. At least in the photo the rose bushes had been blooming. Now they were bunches of thorny sticks. The curtains were bedraggled, the front steps tilted sideways, and paint peeled off the weatherboards. My skin puckered at the thought of thick, grimy dust and corners filled with huge, hairy-legged spiders.

The front door opened, and a blonde woman strode out, her heavy Blundstone boots ker-lumping on the verandah boards. 'Hello!' she cried. 'The kettle's on. And I've had a few local girls here cleaning up for you.'

Dad marched up the path and shook her hand. 'Senior Constable Dennis Miller. We really appreciate this, don't we, Sasha?' He turned to me and frowned, his eyebrows angling down.

'Yeah, great, thanks,' I muttered. Had they sprayed for big, country-type bugs?

Nicky had finished picking up his stuff from the back of the car and joined me. His mouth gaped. 'It looks like it's going to fall down any minute,' he whispered loudly.

Dad frowned harder. 'It'll be fine, Nick,' he said. 'A coat of paint and it'll look like new.'

Nicky pushed past me and nudged the mailbox that was leaning forward on the end of its pole. It toppled over and crashed to the ground. 'Oops.'

'I'm Cass Sullivan,' the woman said, ignoring the mailbox. 'From the CWA. Come on in and have a cuppa. I've made a sultana cake.'

As I stepped up onto the verandah, I saw the stained glass door panels and the light, airy hallway, and my gloom lifted a little. Everything was clean and smelled fresh, even the toilet that we all had to use straight away. The movers started carrying in our furniture and placing it where they could find a space, and Cass Sullivan helped us to lug in boxes. The cup of tea had to wait.

The house was small, our bedrooms only big enough for our beds and one chest of drawers. The lounge room couldn't fit both of our armchairs, and we had to leave the door open to get the couch in. Dad kept smiling the whole time, saying how great it all was, until I was ready to scream.

After we'd filled every available space, the rest of our furniture had to be stored in the big shed in the back. 'Here,' Dad said to me, 'take this key and

unlock it, will you? And make sure our other boxes are put at the front, or we'll never get them unpacked later.'

I opened the back door and discovered that our house backed onto the brick police station in the next street. Between the house and the station stood a large, corrugated iron shed, and over to one side, a falling-down stone building. Its roof was a rotten-wood skeleton and half of a wall was missing, with ivy and blackberries winding in through the gaping window holes. The moss clinging to the stones was like disgusting fridge mould.

As soon as I stepped onto the scraggly lawn, my stomach started churning, tightening up and twisting around, and I could taste something sour and sharp in my throat. My head spun, and my vision blurred, with red tinges at the edges. I thought I was going to throw up, and I took a couple of deep breaths, reaching back to steady myself on the porch rail.

What had I eaten at our last stop? A doughnut and a hot chocolate. Maybe the milk had been off. I took more deep breaths, one hand rubbing my stomach, and slowly the blurring went away. I straightened and swallowed hard, trying to get rid of the foul taste.

'You all right, love?' One of the movers had come through the side gate, and he gazed at me, his face filled with concern.

'Yeah, just a wonky tummy.' I tried to smile, but my mouth felt stretched and tight at the same time. I held out the key. 'Can you open the shed?'

‘Sure.’ He unlocked the padlock and pulled the sliding door across; it made a piercing screech. The shed was empty, the floor made of rough concrete, and it smelled of oil and dust. The other man arrived, carrying a large carton. ‘Where do you want this?’

‘At the front,’ I said, and followed him into the shed. As soon as I stepped over the door sill, the sick feeling disappeared. *Bizarre.*

I helped the men sort out where to put everything and made sure the big box with my name on it was put inside the house. I needed my collection of stuffed toys and my patchwork quilt that Grandma had made me. They had to be put out on my bed as soon as possible; they created my haven, my safe place, my fortress against the world.

In less than an hour, the truck was unloaded and the men gone, Cass had thumped away home, leaving us the cake, and Dad had scratched his head at the mess of furniture and boxes and said, ‘I might just nip over to the station.’

‘What about us?’ Nicky said.

‘Normally, I’d say keep out of trouble,’ Dad said, grinning, ‘but around here, I doubt there is any trouble.’ He sounded happily confident, as if we’d moved to Wonderland among the good fairies.

‘You told us that bad people can live anywhere,’ I said. ‘That means Manna Creek, too.’ Although judging by the desolate main street, the worst that could happen here was jaywalking.

‘This is different,’ Dad said. ‘You’ll see. We’re all going to love it here.’

The last bit was said with a tinge of desperation. It crept into Dad’s voice every time he thought he wasn’t being a good dad. But he was fine. He tried hard, and we muddled along. Not like Mum, who just cut and ran. Coward.

After Dad had left to open his new police station and check it out, I found the box with sheets and towels, and Nicky and I made up our beds, although I had to help him. ‘You’re nearly eleven,’ I said. ‘Time you were able to make your own bed.’

He shrugged. ‘Who cares? I just sleep in it and mess it up again.’

When my animals and quilt were arranged the way I wanted, with my stuffed tiger and wolf on my pillow, I sliced a huge piece of sultana cake; I was starving, and it was way past lunch. I expected the cake to taste dry and bland, but it was moist and spicy, and I devoured another piece.

‘When’s Dad coming back?’ Nicky said, helping himself to cake. ‘He said he’d help me set up my computer and find out about the internet here.’

I peered out the kitchen window – I could see between the shed and the stone building, right in through the back window of the police station. There was Dad, sorting through a huge pile of papers, filing cabinet open and two pens stuck behind his ears. My eyes veered left to the decrepit stone building, and my heart bumped against my ribs. Dizziness buzzed in my head, and I turned away quickly. What was happening to me?

‘Let’s get out of here,’ I said. I didn’t want to stay in the house another minute. ‘Go and check out this dumb town.’

The sky was dark gray, and a wintry wind chased dead leaves along the road. We put on our warm padded jackets and walked up to the main street. I’d been angry for months – at Mum, at my so-called friends, at the whole world. I’d let it energise me. But as I gazed down the dreary street, the sodden gray sky felt like a heavy cloak, and my shoulders sagged. Two cafes. No Maccas. No music shop. The supermarket had a pile of empty cardboard boxes stacked in the front. Even the antiques place with *Art Gallery* painted across its awnings failed to lighten my depression.

Nicky skipped towards a corner shop that looked like something out of *The Man from Snowy River*, with carved awning poles and tiny-paned windows. ‘Hey, it’s a milk bar,’ he said. ‘That means good stuff to eat.’

‘You mean junk food,’ I said, but my mouth watered at the thought of a big, comforting bar of chocolate.

The shop door, covered in a mosaic of product stickers, made a loud *ping* as we entered. Inside was jam-packed with fridges, racks for magazines and newspapers, two long counters with glass windows, and a pie warmer full of pies and sausage rolls. I breathed in a combination of fresh bread, coffee and a cloying sweetness.

The shop was empty, and I wondered if we should ping the bell again, then something behind the counter moved, and a woman stood up. I stared – I couldn't help it – she was as wide as she was tall, with long red hair in two plaits and a hand-knitted jumper in about a hundred different colors. She never said a word, just stared back at me.

Nicky poked me in the ribs, and I jumped. 'What?' I snapped.

'Look at the lollies,' he breathed, leaning down, his nose almost pressed against the glass. 'There's more lollies here than ... a lolly factory.'

Finally, the woman behind the counter smiled. 'Biggest selection outside of Melbourne.'

Nicky fished in his pockets and found a dollar coin. 'Can I have ... um ... there's too many to choose from. I can't decide.'

She laughed, a raspy cackle that was like claws down a screen door. Goosebumps jumped up along my arms. 'Do what my little lad used to do – start at one end and work your way down. You've got plenty of time to try them all out.' When I scowled at her, she added, 'Well, you are the new cop's kids, aren't you?'

'Sure are,' said Nicky.

'Maybe that'll be two kids in town I won't catch shoplifting then, eh?' She cackled again.

My scalp prickled, and my mouth tightened. I'd had enough of people who made assumptions about me and Nicky because of Dad. What did she know about me? Nothing, that's what. I edged away from the counter and pretended to be interested in the magazines. 'Hurry up, Nicky,' I muttered. 'Or I'll go without you.'

He chose snakes and jelly babies, paid and followed me outside, the white paper bag squashed into his hand. 'What's the matter with you? She was nice.'

'No, she wasn't. She was rude.' He offered me a jelly baby, but I shook my head. 'Let's go that way,' I said, pointing to a sign that said *Bungalow Falls Walking Track*.

Nicky followed me along the street, chewing on a red snake, while I inspected each shop we passed. Crafts and souvenirs, bakery, butcher, church op shop, supermarket with painted-over windows, secondhand books. The place was for old people; four of them were bunched up by the butcher's shop, gossiping. The only two kids in sight were about five years old. By the looks of the last shop, *Magical Moments*, Manna Creek also had hippies who wore beads and tie-dyed shirts. Ugh.

But it's a great place for Dad, I reminded myself.

At the end of the main street, a well-worn path carried on and then forked. One way was the falls walking track, the other stopped abruptly at a rock monument that said it was part of a historical trail. I wanted to see the

waterfall, even if it was only a dribble. The track was slick with recent rain and a thick layer of leaves muffled our footsteps. The bush closed in around us, silent and dark.

In five minutes we were at the falls; the water rushed down the narrow creek and poured over a high stone weir, spilling into a large brown pool ringed by low hanging trees. 'Cool,' said Nicky. 'I wonder if people swim here in the summer.'

I spotted a rope hanging from a tree. 'I think so. Now what?'

'Let's walk along the river a bit,' he said.

'It's not big enough to be a river,' I said, but he'd scooted off without me, and I jogged to catch up. 'Stick to the track.'

'Yes, bossy.' A few minutes later he stopped suddenly, and I bumped into him. He held up a hand. 'Listen.'

Thump, thump, thump. 'Look!' he cried. On the other side of the creek, four large grey kangaroos jumped away through the bracken, their heads bobbing like stringed puppets. Nicky's voice went all squeaky with excitement. 'Were they real?'

'Course they were.'

'Wow, I saw real kangaroos!' He bounced up and down, looking like a kangaroo himself, which made me laugh. 'They look weird when they hop.'

Maybe we'll see some more.' He kept going, faster now, following the track down into a hollow and around some rocks.

As I scrambled to catch up with him, my foot slipped and I fell, lurching sideways. I grabbed for something, anything, to stop my tumble, but my fingers scraped uselessly at the rocks beside the track. Down I went, falling, then sliding on my back, swamp grass lashing my face. 'Help!' I yelled, panic flashing through me, my hands clawing at the muddy earth. Then I hit a tree branch on the bank with a huge *thwack* that knocked the breath out of me; I catapulted over it and into the water. The last thing I remembered was my head cracking against a rock in the water, and an icy blanket sliding over me.

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