

17: Del in the Night

Del woke. She'd slept leaning into the cliff? Somehow the day had almost slipped away and it was becoming night. Her neck hair rose when she realised the keening came from down in the picnic place. *That's my baby?* "Lilly!" she screamed. Heart thudding, she goat-leaped down the stony slope. *I mustn't fall. I musn't fall.*

She reached the scrub then lurched along the little path. "Joe! Pan! Stella!" she shouted, almost breathlessly.

Lilly's wailing became ordinary crying as soon as she saw Del. The child almost burrowed herself into Del, crying softly now.

Del could see no one else in the clearing.

"Daddy didn't say don't touch," Lilly said between hiccups. She clung like a baby possum while Del searched for the others.

She listened for clues. Night crickets chirruped. A breeze played through the trees surrounding the clearing. She didn't believe that Joe would've hidden while Lilly was so upset. Anyway, why would two adult men and even a teenager like Stella hide from a baby like Lilly?

"Were you playing hide and seek?" Del said. "I need you to show me the hiding places." She encouraged Lilly to slide down. Had someone been bitten by a snake? Had one gone for help and the other was performing resuscitation? "Joe! Pan! Stella!"

Still sobbing, Lilly dragged Del to the big log across the rear corner of the scoop. "Daddy hides here sometimes. I didn't see where he went. He didn't say don't touch."

There was no one there. At the bushes at the left corner of the scoop, Lilly said, "Stella is in a tree. I didn't see where Uncle Pan went. I hid from everybody." She demonstrated with her arms hiding her head.

Meaning Lilly kneeled and hid her face against her knees, arms around her head. What she used to do a couple of years before, when she still believed that then she was hidden, Del thought. She shivered. If the event, whatever it was, had the power to drive Lilly's understandings back to those of her toddler time, it must've been a very frightening.

Del saw a couple of small trees and shrubbery and that was all. Neither of the trees were big enough for a teenager to have climbed into. "I'm stumped," she said to the last of the light. "Let's go to the ute. Maybe they're there, laughing at us."

Lilly tightened her grip on Del's wrist. Also a habit she had formed way back because Del nearly always had her hands full.

"Good thing Uncle Pan cleared the track," Del said in a chatty tone meant to convey she was in control of the problem. The track didn't feel any flatter. There had been no extra running to and fro, in other words. The ute was as empty as the clearing. "Let's wait in it. I've got a good mind to go home and leave them to it. Let them walk home."

Lilly sobbed aloud. "We can't go home, Mum. Uncle Pan took the ignition unit out in case of

little fingers.”

Too bad Uncle Pan goes through life in a dream. The dark seemed to advance twice as fast. *Why do the damned hoveroles come with removable ignition units?* “Well, we can cuddle up along the back seat and sleep. The night will pass the sooner. They’ll come out of hiding when they are ready.”

But she couldn’t stop thinking. Might they be in the paddock below the clearing? Down by the creek? One hurt? Two hurt? Surely one of them could’ve come back? Or called? It wasn’t that far. No houses in the nearby scene didn’t help. Nowhere to easily get help.

They would have realized by now, she hoped, that her first consideration must be Lilly. She had to believe that one of the three, or a search and rescue person, would turn up after daybreak. She found Lilly’s gardening pants and shirt on the back seat. “Lucky we left these in here.”

She helped Lilly into them. “They’ll help to keep you warm.” The poor child had bumps and lumps covering her knees, her elbows and her feet. Mosquitoes that fierce up here.

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Halfway through the night, Del got to thinking about the ignition unit. It was way too bulky for Pan to keep in a pocket. She now remembered him fiddling with the picnic pack on Stella’s back while Stella held the cake for Del to get out of the ute. The backpack that pinned down a corner of the red-and-white-checked picnic cloth.

She glanced at the moon still idling up the sky. It would give her enough light to supplement her torch. She slipped from under Lilly, and arranged her so that she wouldn’t fall should she try to turn over. The leaves glittering in her hair would also have to wait until daylight to be removed. Del closed the hover hatch silently, without engaging the lock.

The moonlight shining through the side window showed Lilly asleep, thumb in her mouth, like the baby she still was. Del climbed the bank carefully. If she slipped and made a noise, and Lilly woke, that would be the end of anything tonight.

Her trusty torch came into play since it was important not to have sticks cracking under her weight. Only the last little bit of the path was black-dark, where the untrimmed trees, planted by Joe and Pan when they were boys, cast an impenetrable shadow over her way.

She stopped. All she could hear were little animals rustling in the undergrowth. Mice and bandicoots, perhaps. She switched off the torch. In the clearing there was enough moonlight to see by. What she hadn’t noticed before was the way the bush had started to invade the clearing.

Like that pair of little trees where Lilly thought Stella had hidden, that stood to the left in front of the log. Another small tree grew quite near the well. The backpack squatted on the picnic cloth like a dark animal.

Del folded the flannel-lined picnic cloth and stuffed it into the backpack. The new, shrubby-looking trees niggled at her. Why had they even been left to grow? Joe weeded out everything not in his picture of how it all should look.

Approaching them, she pulled a branchlet to eye level. Glossy lilly pillly leaves. She smiled. She would've left these trees herself—they were too lovely to cut down.

Dark fell over the clearing. *Like the moon's been switched off.* She looked around and up. Clouds? A breeze, night-time cool, stroked her face.

A glimmer in the well drew her gaze that way. How could the water be glowing with no moon to reflect? She fumbled the torch from her pocket and drifted to the well, hesitant in the dark.

In the well, which was no more than a concrete collar set over a natural spring, silver streaks slid languorously over one another like a nest of water snakes. Yellow light glinted between them. Del bit her bottom lip. *This can only be spillage of Joe's magic mix, it's so alive seeming.*

A roiling whooshing wind bustled through the clearing. *Sign of a storm about to hit!* She grabbed the bag and crossed the clearing in five big steps, then the track in ten hurrying paces. Her torch beam jerked through the dark. She jumped down the bank, threw herself at the ute hatch, stepped in and pulled it shut. *Thunk.*

A downdraft of wind screamed down the face of the cliffs. The ute rocked violently. A downpour sheeted over the tray cover and rattled against the cabin. She would've been bowled down the hillside if she'd been out in it.

Poor Stella, if she is still in the open. Mostly by feel, to save the torch battery, Del wriggled down beside Lilly and draped them both with the picnic cloth. She'd taken the lumpy bag for a pillow. She couldn't feel the ignition unit in it anywhere.