

26: The Silver Dog

In the late afternoon, Del sat legs out, leaning against the log across the corner of the scoop in the hillside. Lilly slept on her lap, clutching Del's shirt. Del stroked Lilly's hair, leaves and all. They're the least of my worries.

She cricked her neck and stared at the wind-bitten brown rhyolite cliffs. They looked like the edge of a two-hundred-meter-deep grave with her and Lilly sitting insignificant at the bottom. She couldn't imagine now why she'd so loved the cliffs.

Joe, Pan and Stella still hadn't come back. She dropped her gaze to the leafy canopies of the little trees Lilly believed to be Pan and Stella. Del had searched from first light and not found a sign of their people on the slopes above, the sides of the camp site, nor on the slope below the creek.

She'd thought up every possible reason for Joe and Pan and Stella to be missing, including the ridiculous and unbelievable that she had nevertheless included in her searching. But she hadn't found any evidence whatsoever. No secret campsite, no accident, or no footprints other than her own on the road to the creek.

"They're not anywhere there, Mum," Lilly had said over and over, everywhere Del looked.

Finally, all Del could think of was that she and Lilly were the victims of one of Joe's unfunny practical jokes. She moved impatiently. There must be somewhere I haven't looked yet.

Lilly woke and clutched Del tighter, frantically.

Lilly's poor knees and ankles were now too swollen for her to walk comfortably. Mosquito stings would've made sense, but there were no bite or sting marks. A separate mystery? Or a feature of the larger one? Has she had an allergic reaction to Joe's mix? Have Joe, Pan and Stella died of anaphylactic shock? So where are the bodies? Del wanted to scream. Where are you, you bastard? But she'd only frighten Lilly even more.

Lilly put her trembling hand in Del's. "The berries, Mum."

"Weren't they great?" Del said. They'd plucked mini egg-shapes from one of the little trees, and little tub-shapes from the other. Both were bright red and crunchy like apples but tartly sweet like all lilly pilly berries.

Lilly shifted her hand to Del's cheek and directed her gaze. "There's more," she said, staring rigidly into the canopies above them. "Uncle Pan and Stella are looking after us."

Del focused on the leaves where the berries might hang. Many more berries hung from both the little trees. She swallowed. "I guess I didn't see them before."

"Thank you, Uncle Pan and Stella, for dinner," Lilly said. She rose and stood pointedly waiting. "I can't reach?"

Dinner? Del looked around with a shock. Yes, the light in the clearing said it was late in the afternoon. Dusk would be soon. Lilly was too heavy for Del to carry her up and downhill to the nearest house, a possible seven or eight kilometres distant, and so it was too late now to start walking out. We'll need to camp in the ute again.

“I can’t reach?” Lilly repeated.

Del smiled grimly. So normal. She rose and started picking more berries. She dropped them into Lilly’s cupped hands, recognizing their worth for a Lilly-sized distraction. Wish I had a Del-sized distraction. Maybe try to describe the event we’re in for when I’m reporting our adventure to a newsblogger?

Facetious thought, but what the heck? She needed something ordinary. “The Rest of the Party Went Home Without Us” didn’t have the hysterical overtones of “The Rest of the Party Disappeared” or “The Rest of the Party Vanished Inexplicably.”

But what if there was something to Lilly’s idea? If she hadn’t had Lilly with her, she might’ve given way to hysterics. Still, she should question Lilly about that world-view. Might throw up a useful clue? “Do I have a tree sprouting anywhere?” Del said.

“Of course not,” Lilly said. “You’re still you.” She shuffled round so she could cling to Del’s legs.

“Does Dad have a tree?” Del said.

Lilly sobbed inconsolably. “He didn’t say don’t touch!”

“So Dad has a tree?”

Lilly put up one arm to cover her eyes, pointed with the other. “He’s near the well.”

There was that little tree in front of the water trough. She’d checked it out last night. “Maybe I should go over and see what kind it is.”

Lilly screamed. “No, Mum! No!” She clamped herself so tight to Del that Del would’ve overbalanced if she hadn’t grabbed a nearby branch of the Pan and Stella trees. “Why not go over there?”

“I don’t want him angry,” Lilly sobbed. “He’s guarding the well so I don’t go there. He’ll chase me! Tangle his branches in my hair! Because I spilled his pretty water and Stella sprayed him!”

This time Lilly cried so intensely that she became quite distressed. Del took her back onto her lap and patted her until she fell asleep again. She folded the picnic cloth around her and wriggled herself from under the child. She couldn’t not investigate Lilly’s claim that her dad was a tree guarding the well.

Though for the life of her she could not imagine how that could be. Looking back to check on Lilly, Del saw the dark green foliage of the Pan and Stella trees glimmer at her. She laughed silently. You mean you thought you saw that. There is no breeze.

The tree in front of the well—no way could it be Joe—had three stems growing from a short thick trunk. A cobble of roots sprawled in every direction. If you believed a root might purposely trip you, you wouldn’t negotiate any of the ground near the well.

But could it be that Joe is influencing the tree from wherever he is hiding? That had to be possible in this day and age. I haven’t a clue what technology he’d be using. She didn’t try to

get really close—she did feel spooked by Lilly’s insistence and the fact that the circular concrete trough glowed. A sickly, yellow-green blob bulged on the surface.

“Joe, my mate,” she said, “This time you have overreached yourself!” That should raise his ire, should he be in hiding with some kind of remote gadgetry. It’d be Joe all over if he suddenly jumped ...

Lilly screamed. “Mum! Mum! Where are you?”

“Over here,” Del called over her shoulder.

“Mum, come back! He’ll get you!”

Del strode back. “Stop it, Lilly! If that is Dad’s tree, then that is him trying to stop you going to the well the best he can. He’s still looking after you!” Straightaway she felt guilty that she’d encourage the child by getting into her fantasy with her.

Woof! Woof! Woof! A silvery, medium-sized dog sat in the entrance to the track. It was barking, but not fiercely.

A more than welcome, real-life, distraction. “Looks to me like that dog is trying to get our attention,” Del said.

The dog sat down on its haunches and held its left front paw limply off the ground. It beseeched them with a sad-dog smile.

“He’s got a sore paw,” Lilly said.

“He might be hoping we’ll help him,” Del said.

“Come on, Mum,” Lilly said, seizing Del’s hand and pulling her along. “How can we?”

“Have to have a look at him first. If he’ll let us.”

Lilly fell to her knees in front of the dog and hugged the animal round his thickly furred neck. “He’s crying. He really hurts.”

The day was so different already that Del didn’t even worry about Lilly’s fear of large dogs and her own fear that the dog might bite Lilly without warning. The dog seemed to trust them absolutely. Del dropped to her knees by his other side and after a quick pat, bent his paw further under so she could see the pads underneath.

“He’s like a lion with all the neck hair he has.” Lilly buried her face in the dog’s fur.

“I wonder where he lives?” Del said. “We surely would’ve seen him before, if he lives anywhere around here?”

The dog flinched slightly as Del ran her fingertips over his pads, but did not pull away, growl, or stand up.

“Good boy,” Del said. “Yes, I feel it. A prickle in the crease between your toes and the ball of your foot.”

“Get it out, Mum.”

“I’ll try. Though I don’t have my tweezers.”

“Do it with your nails, Mum.”

“You’ll need to hold his paw, Lilly pet. Round this side of him.” She’d feel safer with Lilly beside her, could thrust her behind if necessary.

Lilly let go of the dog’s neck and shuffling around right under its muzzle, took the paw in both hands. “Good boy, Silver. Good boy.”

Del stretched the dog’s toes apart as far as they would go. “You are a good dog.” She dragged her fingertips along the inside of the fold to find the prickle again. She took hold of it between two nails. Pulled. “Got it, I think!”

The dog slurped his tongue over Lilly’s face and then licked Del’s hands. He flopped down and started licking the injured paw.

“His name is Silver,” Lilly said.

“So you said.”

“What sort of dog is he?”

“Mmm. Well, he’s about the size of a dingo. And he’s got the same shape under all that hair. The same upstanding ears,” Del said.

“Good for listening with.”

“Yes. The same sort of tail, except it’s bushier.”

“Good for wagging with,” Lilly said. “I love his neck fur best. It’s soft and slippery, sort of. When you clump it all together and touch the top, it’s silver and flat and bristly.” She demonstrated.

“Let me feel that,” Del said. “Strange. Almost like a bundle of optic fibers.” The characteristics of the dog’s hair suggested something cyborgian. Perhaps the animal was a biotech construct?

“What else can you do, Silver?” Lilly said.

He stood up and stared at Del with a silvery metallic gaze. He swiveled his ears toward where the cliffy ridge broke into the wild valleys behind. He appeared to be listening to something.

“I hear them, Dog. The yip yowling of wild dogs,” Del said.

Silver growled and pulled up his top lip to bare his incisors.

“Mum. His name is Silver!”

“I hear them, Silver. We should be organizing ourselves for the night,” Del said. Without proper mealtimes the day sped by without notice. “We’ll camp in the ute again.”

She went about gathering things. The picnic cloth she rolled up and slung around Lilly's neck. She put the two bottles—the champagne bottle and Lilly's water bottle that she'd re-filled with creek-water during the search—into the backpack and that on her own back.

Supervised by Lilly and the silver dog, she harvested a couple of cups of berries.

Lilly patted the trees to thank them.

Silver led the way to the ute.

Del blinked. The dog, and Lilly with her hand on his back, glowed silver. Both.

Just another unreality. Don't go there.

The ute sat dark as a toad by the side of the track.

"That's funny," she said. "There should at least be the sentinel LEDs glowing." She squeezed the hatch hasp into its seating.

The hatch did not click open and swing up.

She squeezed down the hatch hasp again; then a couple of times in quick succession. In the cab, something on the dashboard flickered. In a barely lifelike voice, the ute said, "Casual access denied."

"Casual access denied?" Del had never heard such words in relation to this vehicle. That was the trouble removing bits of a machine—such as Pan taking out the ignition unit—the forgotten effects.

She dredged up a few more facts. Taking the ignition unit out shuts the hoverole down bit by bit over a period of thirty-six hours. Any time the unit was replaced before the last things to go into stasis—the sentinel lights and the hatch-locking mechanisms—the live-mind would boot back up in the same order it shut down.

Beyond that, she recalled, she would need the back-end of the ignition unit to unlock the automatic lockdown. "Huh! And the stupid ignition unit is still a no-show!" She stumped around the vehicle to check for something, a panel, anything, out of alignment that she might be able to ...

Lilly hurried after her, never more than half a pace behind.

"Give me a gap, somewhere to shove a sharpened stick." Del made it a joke though she was never more serious. "Lever the bastard open!" She studied the coin-sized, coin-shaped access plate on the lower right corner of the hatch. What if she pressed something malleable down onto it, shaping it in the required series of bumps and grooves and somehow forced the lock to open?

But we've got nothing malleable and no time because the feral dogs will be here with the dark. She would've screamed and cried except that Lilly stood by ready with the same strategies. "Open up, you stupid machine!" She kicked it in its least structurally sound panel. *A dent, what do I care?*

We could run. She sobered. *We'd be prey. There can be no running.* They had no food, no

shelter, no protection, and no weapons. She had her brains and that was all. She laughed. Her brains. *Right*.

She flashed her gaze to and fro looking for the dog, her partner in the defense. No dog. "Silver went home?" she said, feeling flattened.

"He went to get help," Lilly said.

Breathe deep, Del. *You can do it*. She swung the backpack onto the ute tray lid and lifted Lilly up to sit there too. Handed her the bottles, one by one. "Hold them so they don't spill, Lilly. We don't have time to get more."

She up-ended the pack. 'We'll see what we've got in here.' She meant with which to save us. She usually left the non-perishables packed from picnic to picnic. "Yes! The gas-gun! We'll have a fire!" She re-packed the bottles, stuffed everything back into the pack around them and lifted Lilly down. "We'll have to hurry now. Find lots of wood and dry leaves."

"Ordinary wood," Lilly said.

"Yes of course ordinary wood. From the scoop and from the track." She bent and began wrestling dry branches from under the mown-down herbage.

"Get some little branches, lilly-bud." Del dumped the bag and the armful of fuel in the best place for a campfire, where they'd picnicked what seemed like a thousand years ago. She ran for more wood. Lilly shadowed her every move.

She broke, kicked and wrenched off dead roots from the big log athwart the clearing, stacking branches in Lilly's arms and a sling she'd made of her own shirt. "Next time we go for a picnic, we'll definitely pack a hatchet."

When she next looked up, dusk had leached the colour out of the clearing. The grass was black, the sky a lighter grey than the trees and shrubs outlining the scoop's borders. The new trees watched on.

A large malignant eye glowed in the well.