

1 I WOKE UP suddenly. Something had startled me, but what was it? I got up as quietly as possible and went to the cabin window. It was snowing outside. Large, soft white snowflakes were sifting to earth.

Then I saw it—a face, a boy’s face, looking straight at me!

I saw him for just an instant. He seemed to be all huge dark eyes, wild hair and smoky skin.

Then he was gone. For a minute or more, I stared at the empty window.

My stepfather was suddenly by my side. I hadn’t seen him get out of his sleeping bag or even heard him approach. Yet there he was, wide awake.

‘Tricia?’ he said softly.

I was mixed up and frightened. I wasn’t sure what I’d just seen. I thought maybe it was a bad dream. Deep down inside, however, I knew I’d really seen someone at that cabin window.

My stepfather asked, ‘What’s the matter, Tricia? You’re shaking.’

‘I don’t know, Lonnie,’ I said.

My stepfather’s name is Lonnie Boone. A weird name, Lonnie, and one of the smaller things I don’t like about him.

But mainly I don’t like Lonnie because he is my stepfather. Ever since my father died when I was seven, it had been just Mum, Doug and me. Doug is my twelve-year-old brother. It seemed to me we managed just fine by ourselves.

Inside were huge old wooden chairs, rugs and stuffed animal heads everywhere. Doug pointed to a deer's head mounted on the wall. 'Hey, look! I bet they shot that around here!'

'He must have been a beautiful animal,' Lonnie said. 'Can you imagine how beautiful he was when he was alive?'

Doug looked sad. 'Yeah.'

'But somebody had to shoot him for fun,' Lonnie said.

I didn't like agreeing with Lonnie about anything, but I had to agree with that. Hunting made me sad, too.

Lonnie took us up to the desk and introduced us to Rusty Dunsmuir, an old friend of his. Rusty owned Snowy Mountain Lodge. I didn't pay much attention during the introductions until I saw his son. He was a young, good-looking guy with dark brown hair.

'This is my son, Ben,' Mr Dunsmuir said.

Ben grinned at me, and we seemed to hit it off straight away. He was one of those people who makes you feel good immediately. It was as if we were old friends. I hoped he was the ski instructor at the lodge.

Ben soon answered my unspoken question. 'I'm the cross-country guide at Snowy Mountain,' he explained. 'Actually, I'm a jack-of-all-trades here.'

Lonnie smiled. 'Well, Ben, I might just ask you to do some guiding for me. The last time I went hiking here I got lost!'

Everybody laughed but me. Then I noticed the look that Mr Dunsmuir and Ben exchanged. I don't think Lonnie knew it, but I could see that they were laughing at him!

While Lonnie showed Doug around the lodge, Ben and I went to the restaurant to get some hot chocolate.

'Do you like it here in the mountains?' Ben asked me as we sat down.

'I didn't want to come,' I said. Usually I don't admit things like that to strangers. But Ben was so friendly. He didn't seem like a stranger.

'I can tell you're not very happy,' he said.

'You can?'

3 IN THE WEAK light of the moon, I saw the same dark eyes I'd seen before. Now they were wet, as if he were crying. Slowly, I made out the rest of him. He was small and thin, sort of like Lonnie. Shiny black hair fell in a tangle around his shoulders. He wore a ragged shirt and pants—and only a thin jacket.

He was crouching, making himself even smaller. He held out his hands as if he were asking for something.

'Who are you?' I asked him. My own voice frightened me. I scarcely recognised it as mine.

The look in his eyes never changed. The night was so still that I could hear him breathing. He was panting, as though he couldn't get enough air.

He was between me and the cabin. I had to get past him, but I was afraid to make a quick move. I took one small step and he leaped a little. He jumped like a rabbit, animal-like.

His mouth was open, but he didn't say anything. I don't know why, but that frightened me more than anything. It was as though he was as scared as I was.

Suddenly, in the distance I heard Doug singing. I turned and looked in that direction. I wanted to scream for help but I couldn't make a sound.

Then I heard a crashing sound in the bushes. I turned and saw the ghostly figure was gone. I thought that Doug's singing had scared him away.

‘Mr Boone,’ Ben said, ‘don’t you think it would be safer if Dad and I took a quick check around?’

Lonnie smiled at Ben. ‘No need to bother. I’ll just tell Sergeant Somers and let him look around.’

‘Sergeant Somers will take a month to get to it,’ Mr Dunsmuir grumbled. ‘Better let us handle it.’

‘I said no thank you.’ Lonnie’s voice was hard. He and Rusty Dunsmuir stared at each other for what seemed like along time.

Suddenly I saw that the two men really didn’t like each other much. I hadn’t noticed that before. I knew they had known each other a long time. I’d just assumed they were friends.

Mr Dunsmuir finally muttered, ‘Suit yourself.’ He turned and strode away, Ben at his heels.

I asked Lonnie, ‘Why didn’t you let them look around? I thought it was a good idea.’

‘I don’t want trouble. People running around with rifles can end up hurting someone.’

‘But what about the prowler?’ Doug asked.

‘I said I’d call the police.’

‘I don’t think you care if we catch the prowler or not,’ I said.

Lonnie seemed about to answer me, but he stopped. He turned and asked Doug to go buy a newspaper. Then when Doug was out of earshot, he asked, ‘Tricia, why did you say that? Do you really believe I don’t care about the prowler?’

‘I don’t know.’ I couldn’t get that crazy dream out of my head. I kept seeing the ghost boy’s face turn into Lonnie’s face. It gave me a funny feeling. Especially now that it seemed Lonnie wasn’t very eager to investigate.

‘Tricia, I wonder if you know how people like Mr Dunsmuir really are,’ Lonnie said.

‘That’s a strange thing to say. What do you mean?’

Lonnie’s eyes turned dark. ‘Violent people who let their emotions get the better of them.’

‘What do you mean? Maybe Mr Dunsmuir isn’t the kind of person you are, so you don’t understand him. But I do. He’s like my dad

I found Ben and we went to his room to listen to CDs. I was glad for the chance to be alone with him. After we'd talked for about an hour, he said he'd drive me to the cabin.

On the way back, Ben laughed and said. 'Your stepfather really is chicken. He looked like he was going to faint when Dad mentioned rifles!'

'I suppose he's afraid somebody will get hurt,' I said. I wanted to tell Ben about my fears, but I couldn't. Even he would laugh at me. Lonnie turning into someone different by the light of the moon! It was like something from a horror movie.

Maybe it was all my imagination, I thought. I disliked Lonnie so much that my mind was playing tricks on me.

I tried to put Lonnie out of my mind. 'Doug seems to like you a lot, Ben,' I said.

'He's a great kid. He's got guts.'

'He's like our dad.'

'He wants to learn to shoot,' Ben said.

'I know. He told me.'

When we got to the cabin, Ben said, 'Would you mind if I looked around here on my own? I could come around this afternoon. No need to tell anybody.'

I smiled. 'I'd like that, Ben.'

'Good,' he said. Then he looked very serious. 'Tricia, did your mum go out with Lonnie for a long time before they were married?'

It seemed a funny question for Ben to ask, but I answered anyway. 'No,' I said, 'they got married pretty quickly. They met when Mum took a ceramics class—he was the teacher. About eight months after they'd met, they decided to get married. Why do you ask?'

'I just wondered how well you know him.'

'Is there something wrong, Ben?' I was feeling nervous again.

Ben hesitated. I could see he had something on his mind but didn't want to say it. He finally sighed and said, 'Dad has known Lonnie a long time—they were kids together. Well, last night Dad told me something about Lonnie. I was really shocked. I think you