

Missing

Janie's eyes shot open, a cold sweat trickling down the back of her neck. She had heard it again. Shakily, she climbed out of her bed and tiptoed over to the window. The figure still stood outside, staring at her as if frozen solid, its long hair billowing in the cold wind. Janie shivered and drew the curtains and tried to block out the thoughts racing through her head. She had heard the screams before, but this one sounded different... closer, maybe. Even though she had heard the fearful shrieks at night for weeks now, it wasn't any less terrifying. Janie lay back down but knew she wouldn't sleep again that night. There was always the risk that she could be the next one screaming.

The next day was cold and overcast, and Janie huddled by the bus stop with her friend, Carla, watching the thunderclouds draw nearer. Carla and Janie hadn't seen each other in weeks, as they had both been away on holidays. Now that they had finally re-united, however, something was different between them, more serious. Janie supposed it was the fear of what had been happening in town lately.

Every night for months now, children had been disappearing. Police were overrun with pleas from desperate families, but there was nothing they could do. Just last week Janie's neighbour had disappeared, a trail of blood leading from his house. Janie shook the feeling away and turned to Carla, who was absent-mindedly kicking rocks across the footpath. Carla shuffled her feet awkwardly and glanced up. 'Do you ever want to find who's doing this?' She mumbled. Janie was shocked. 'No! I've never even thought of it. Who knows what they'd do to me?!?!' Carla had never been the brave one, let alone the one wanting to chase a killer! 'I'm just saying, if you knew who was doing this... well, would you ever forgive them?'

'Never' Janie replied without hesitation. The things that this person could be doing to the kids were too horrible to even imagine. Why would Carla even want to talk about this? Shaking her head, Janie stepped away from the bus stop. She would walk to school today.

That night when she got home from school, Janie ran straight to her bedroom. As she opened the door, she noticed something underneath her bed. A slip of paper was wedged between the blankets. Janie walked over, picked it up and unfolded it. *Tomorrow*, It read in faded ink. Janie gasped. She knew what had left the note, but didn't want to think about it, but she had to stop whatever was happening tomorrow.

Later that night Austin, Janie's brother, drove her to piano lessons. Before they got home, Austin pulled into an unfamiliar driveway. Janie stared confusedly at him. 'What are you doing here?' She asked. Austin didn't answer, but instead got out of the car and motioned for Janie to stay where she was. He walked around the back of the house and disappeared from her sight. Despite her brother's warning, Janie was curious. She loitered in the car for a few minutes before following Austin's path. When she reached the backyard, she could hear talking through one of the windows. One voice was unfamiliar, but the other was Austin's.

'... Tomorrow night? Is that good?' Came the unfamiliar voice.

'Perfect. Meet at the corner of Turner St. Keep your torch off.' Austin replied. They spoke in hushed voices. Janie stifled a smile. They wouldn't know she was out here listening to them as they spoke.

'Anyway, I'd better get home.' Austin said, louder now. This was Janie's cue. She ran to the car, shutting the door as quietly as possible. A few seconds later, Austin appeared and got into the car without a word. Janie stared out the window, thinking. What could they be doing tomorrow night?

'You're doing WHAT!?!?!?' Carla cried. It was recess the next day. Janie had thought about what the boys were doing that night and decided that the only way to find out was to follow them. She knew it was crazy, but she had to do this. She didn't want to admit it to herself, but she was scared, and this was the perfect opportunity to get out of the house. Carla obviously didn't agree, she looked terrified. 'Janie, do you even realise what you are doing?' Carla said slowly. Janie nodded, she knew Carla would say this. Carla shut her eyes and took a long breath. When she opened them, she looked directly at Janie. 'I'm coming too.'

It was cold, and Janie huddled on the corner of her street, waiting for Carla to arrive. She was already ten minutes late, and Janie was getting impatient. Finally, a silhouette turned the corner, and Janie walked towards it. 'Carla, where were you?' Janie asked frustratedly. Carla cleared her throat but didn't reply. Janie looked at Carla, confused. 'Are you ready to go?' she asked. Again, Carla stayed silent, and averted her eyes. Janie shrugged, maybe Carla was just scared. She looked at her watch and began to walk, beckoning Carla to follow.

As they walked, Janie sneaked glances at Carla. Something seemed... wrong... about her. The way she held herself was completely unlike her. She seemed afraid, even guilty. Janie shook her head. She couldn't be worrying about Carla at a time like this. Both their lives depended on it. As the girls rounded a corner, they heard voices. Austin! Janie strained to make out what they were saying, but their voices were drowned out by the screeching of late night traffic and birds.

Silently Carla and Janie began to follow the boys until they turned onto a twisting, steep path. Janie halted. The path was almost too overgrown to walk through, and a bent sign read *Keep Out, Private Property*. Just as Janie was about to continue, Carla shoved Janie out of the way and ran up the track, disappearing into the darkness. Janie cried out as she landed in a sprawling blackberry bush, then quickly silenced herself, uncertain now that she was alone. Hesitantly, she stood up and continued up the track, jumping at the creak of branches or the rustle of leaves on the ground. She couldn't see the boys anymore but could guess where they'd been.

A bloodcurdling scream ripped through the forest just ahead. Janie stopped in her tracks, heart racing. Carla was still gone. She was all alone. Janie clamped her eyes shut and tried to control her breathing. Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes. She had to think straight, for Carla. Looking around, Janie spotted a faint light in the distance. This could be her only chance to get away from whatever was out here. She stepped towards the light, before quickly breaking into a desperate run.

As she got closer, she realised the light was being emitted from a window in a huge, rotting house. Beams of wood hung from walls, and crumbling window frames fell into the wild garden below. This place looked dangerous, but if help was inside, Janie would find it. When she reached the front door, she noticed that it was already open. Peering inside, she saw dusty, sprawling furniture, some tipped over as if there had been a fight. As Janie stepped inside and looked closer, she noticed a dark liquid splattered on the floor. She felt it. It was still wet, as if it had just been spilled. Janie headed over to a flight of steps; the light had been coming from upstairs, so this must be the way. As she rested her hand on the rail, a sudden cold chill enveloped her. She shouldn't be here. She wasn't alone... Thump! Janie jumped. The sound had come from just behind her.

In the middle of the room behind her was a dusty, rusting cupboard. She hadn't noticed it there before... As Janie edged closer, she noticed a piece of paper stuck in the door. *Open the cupboard* it read in scratchy red ink. She couldn't do it. She wouldn't. But something inside her forced her hand to reach out and turn the handle. Janie screamed and fell back onto the floor, scrambling on her hands and knees away from the cupboard. Inside was a body, covered in blood, stomach sliced open

and a knife sticking out of the chest. Austin. Janie ran to the front door and pulled the handle, but it was bolted shut. She stopped. She was trapped. Janie dropped to the floor, her entire body trembling, and gasped. A cold breath billowed down the back of her neck, making her hair stand on end. Janie clamped her eyes shut, refusing to look behind her. A small, cold hand closed onto her shoulder and forced her to turn. Janie opened her eyes. Behind her stood Carla, a blood-stained knife in her hand, leaning over Janie. She laughed. 'I hope you don't scream as loud as your brother...'