

**THE
GREAT
DIVIDE**

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*To the child once deemed unworthy of a place in this world—
as promised, your story is told. You can let go now.*

PROLOGUE

The boy plunged deeper between the rows of vines. Blackened branches nipped at his clothes. The air was thick with tiny particles of ice that tore at his throat.

Only the rough cry of a crow had cut through the silence as he'd snuck away from the family's tent at first light; otherwise, all was still.

He'd climbed a tree, then a rotting wooden fence, to reach the vineyard—such long, straight traces to run along. It was ideal. Lost to the pumping of his legs, he'd grinned with pleasure.

He hadn't counted on the carpet of decomposing foliage betraying his feet, causing him to slip. Nor had he expected the enormous shadow that loomed suddenly beyond the desiccated limbs and twigs.

He'd stopped, narrowing his eyes. He wasn't supposed to be here—was this a grown-up come to scare him off?

The boy peered closer. No, the shadow was too large, the shape somehow wrong...it growled and moved toward him.

Heart pounding in his ears, he'd turned and started

running again, darting from one row to the next. No joy in the movement now, only panic.

Tears blurred his vision as he sucked hard at the frosty air. Where was the fence? The campground? His mum?

Clammy, hairless flesh smacked against his ankle. He fell hard, head bouncing on the decaying leaves. He opened his eyes a fraction and whimpered.

An unmoving hand lay near his feet, the fingertips bloodied and raw. Fold upon fold of dark cloth enveloped the body beside him and a second withered, bleeding hand rested on its chest.

Tilting his head back, he met the sightless gaze of a corpse. His scream emerged as a croak as he scabbled at the ground to escape the icy stare of the old woman.

CHAPTER ONE

DUNTON, TASMANIA

Friday, 7.42 a.m.

Detective Jake Hunter responded to the call-out for a missing child with a sense of reprieve. After four days of sitting idly in the station office, blanketed by midlands fog, a sense of deflation had set in alongside the bone-chilling cold. He had wanted this new posting to afford him time to catch his breath, not to ossify with boredom.

As he dressed in the weatherboard cottage next door to the station Jake searched his phone for directions to Dunton's campground, the last known location of the lost boy. He noticed more missed calls and texts from Melbourne. They would have to wait.

Slamming the door behind him, he crunched down the gravel driveway, legs brushing against the low-cut box hedge. His heart beat a little faster as he turned the ignition—this was his first search and rescue in years.

Hurting through billows of mist, flashing blue light on the dash, he narrowly avoided a beaten-up hatchback that failed to yield to the police vehicle. The driver flipped him the bird as he overtook. Jake made a mental note to identify her later.

Visibility through the haze was so poor that he almost missed the turn-off to the campground. Arriving at a scantily grassed clearing, Jake paused to observe those gathered through his driver's side window.

A crying woman and a shouting man paced next to a lurid blue tent, both of them splattered in mud and fear—presumably the parents. A straggle of curious campers still in their sleepwear huddled against each other, steaming mugs in hand. And a well-coiffed woman in corporate black bent her head toward a uniformed officer, her gestures authoritative.

Jake picked up his phone and wallet, opened his door and entered the fray.

'Murphy,' he called to his offsider as he strode across the car park, mud sucking at the soles of his boots.

The young man's head whipped around. 'Detective. This is counsellor Kelly.'

Kelly? The same family as Jake's new commanding officer? 'As in the local council, or legal?'

'It's Evelyn, as in Dunton's Victims of Crime Services counsellor,' Ms Kelly responded as she extended a hand.

Jake shook it once, aware of bone and sinew beneath heavily moisturised skin. She certainly resembled his new station head, Aiden Kelly.

'It's good to have you along. Right then,' Jake said, 'tell me what we know, constable.'

'At seven oh nine this morning Jamie Taylor, ten years old, was reported missing by his parents, mother Diane Taylor'—Murphy gestured toward the distraught woman—'and father James Taylor. Due to the steep terrain nearby and current low visibility we've asked the parents to remain

at the campsite while we search.’ Murphy paused. ‘An ambulance should be here in less than twenty.’

‘Have you interviewed the Taylors yet?’

The constable shook his head. ‘Only briefly.’

‘Who else is on the way? Who’s your regular search and rescue team?’

‘Local firies. All volunteers. I’d say a few are away with school holidays, but we should get eight or ten here soon,’ Murphy said as a car containing three men in orange hi-visibility vests rolled through the campground entrance.

Volunteers. They’d either be well-trained and disciplined to the task, or a windstorm of bravado; Jake could only hope for the former. ‘Start assembling them into teams of two as they arrive. Await my instructions. And make sure no one leaves the site until I give the go-ahead.’

Murphy nodded. Jake walked toward Jamie Taylor’s parents, aware that the counsellor fell in step beside him.

‘Mrs Taylor?’

She looked up as they approached, eyes bloodshot, cheeks streaked with tears.

‘Mr Taylor?’

‘James and Diane,’ was the gruff answer. ‘Why aren’t you out searching for Jamie?’

‘I’m Detective Hunter; this is a support counsellor, Ms Kelly. More people are on the way and we’ll begin the search shortly, Mr Taylor. But first, we need you to tell us what happened.’

‘We woke up and Jamie was gone. We looked around the place but couldn’t see anything in this bloody fog, so we called you ...’

‘It would help if you could find a recent photo of Jamie

on your phone for us, please.’ Jake indicated the device clutched in Mr Taylor’s hand. ‘And you, Mrs Taylor. Can you add anything? Who discovered Jamie wasn’t at the campground?’

Through broken sobs she said she’d woken early, discovered her son missing from the family tent and assumed he was in the ground’s grey besser block building of toilet facilities. When he hadn’t appeared after ten minutes she began looking for him. Calling frantically, she’d roused the entire campground—Jamie had apparently vanished without a trace.

‘Did you see anyone else when you were looking for Jamie? Anyone out of their tent or caravan?’

She shook her head.

‘What was Jamie wearing? Had he changed into day clothes?’

‘His tracksuit and sneakers aren’t in the tent.’

‘What colour are they?’

‘The tracksuit’s silver. The runners are orange.’

‘Were they his only shoes?’

‘He has crocs to wear to the toilet block,’ said James Taylor, ‘but he’s obsessed with those bloody sneakers. Never takes them off.’

‘And how long have you been camping here?’

‘Bout a week.’

‘While you’ve been staying here, has Jamie gone off on his own at any point?’

‘Yes! That’s what I tried to tell them on the phone,’ Diane Taylor cried. ‘He’s really into Little Athletics and he goes off looking for places to practice running all the time.’

‘Has he been practicing here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where?’

The grieving mother’s forehead crinkled. ‘The footy oval in town and some of the tracks round here that go into the bush.’

‘Any one in particular?’

‘He likes to explore a new place each time.’

As Jake painstakingly extracted the information he needed to set up the parameters of the search for Jamie, both parents became increasingly agitated.

‘Why are you asking all of this?’ Mrs Taylor wailed.

‘Now, now. Try to stay calm,’ said Ms Kelly.

Jake noticed the husband’s jaw clench. ‘Do you have that photo of Jamie?’ he asked.

The man’s expression darkened further. His wife huffed, pulled a phone out of her tracksuit-pants pocket and showed them a photo of a gleeful, dark-haired boy with his head thrown back in laughter.

‘Thank you.’ Jake reached for the phone. ‘I’ll send this to my own phone to show to the search party.’

‘Don’t worry, Mr and Mrs Taylor, we’ll find Jamie,’ said Ms Kelly.

Jake glanced warningly at the counsellor. ‘We’ll do everything we can,’ he said. ‘I’ll ask you both to stay with Ms Kelly while we organise the search.’

Wondering at the unwise promise the counsellor had offered the Taylors, Jake returned to Murphy and the milling crowd of volunteers to organise a systematic search of the nearby area. Personnel would check every tent, caravan and car in the campground for signs of Jamie, and log the details of those present. Teams of two would search

the shoulders of the dirt road outside the campground in both directions, and into the surrounding bush and paddocks in a grid pattern, paying particular attention to any tracks the boy may have run along.

‘Meet back here in an hour. You all have Jamie Taylor’s photograph and details of his clothing. Call me immediately if you find *anything*.’

The volunteers proved to be well-trained. They dispersed rapidly to their assignments and began calling Jamie’s name, their summons echoing across the campground as they waded into the mist and trees.

‘We need to start door-knocking as well. When will Sergeant Kelly be here?’ Jake looked up at Murphy.

‘Said he had to check out a report of gunshots. Place is on the other side of Dunton. He’ll be a while.’

Jake stood a little taller. ‘Right then. Apart from some large building over there that the Taylors mentioned’—Jake waved a hand vaguely south—‘any other houses round here? Or permanent camps?’

Murphy narrowed his eyes in thought. ‘They’d have meant the old Campbell place on the other side of this paddock and up the vineyard. Next nearest place after that’s about half a click past it.’

‘That makes it easy. Let’s go.’

*

A derelict orchard and a smattering of disinterested sable cows later, Jake and Murphy reached the far fence of the paddock. They could hear multiple search teams calling ‘Jamie’, insistent but unanswered.

‘So, Evelyn Kelly, she’s . . .?’

‘The boss’s daughter. She mostly helps out when there’s women or kids involved.’

They clambered through the crumbling barrier, careful to avoid a rusty barbed-wire strand at the top, and found themselves at one end of a row of wizened vines. Murphy’s longer legs were a distinct advantage.

Jake could see other rows to his left and right receding into the fog. ‘How big’s the vineyard?’

Murphy shrugged. ‘Four, maybe five acres? But it’s wider than it is deep. The manor house is at the top of this slope,’ he said, gesturing uphill along the rows of vines. ‘Normally you’d be able to see it from here.’

The long, straight paths between the vines looked like they would be enticing to a particular type of kid. ‘Think our missing boy might have gone for a run up here?’

‘I would’ve when I was his age.’ Murphy pointed to his right. ‘I’ll go up that one. See you at the top.’

Jake walked a few rows to his left then turned into one to pace up the gentle slope calling for Jamie. Distant swearing wafted across the estate—Murphy had apparently found a puddle, no doubt sullyng his perfectly creased trousers.

After slipping in a patch of brown sticky clay himself, Jake began to second-guess his decision to walk rather than drive to the manor. But after another fifty metres or so a hint of regularly spaced indentations in the leaf litter caught his eye. He crouched to inspect them. From a certain angle, they *could* be tracks left by a small, running child.

If Jamie had passed this way, perhaps they would find him at the top exploring the house grounds, oblivious to the trouble he had caused . . .

What was that? Jake froze, straining to hear.

A hint, the tiniest sigh of exhalation.

Jake rose silently then padded forward, edging toward the minute sound. It became more definite... a gasp, then nothing.

Someone was holding their breath.

Jake continued to sneak along the row, carefully avoiding the unkempt branches that snatched at him. One particularly gnarled vine seemed to contain a void, a darkened space formed by concave boughs. A hint of orange peaked from the hollow. The toe of a sneaker?

Jake kept his voice low and steady. 'Jamie Taylor? I'm Detective Jake Hunter. Your mum asked me to come and find you. Would you like to go and see her?'

A flash of silver and the fragile arms of a pre-pubescent child clung to his leg. Jake leaned over and gathered the boy to him, lifting him up on to his chest. The arms shifted to wrap tightly around his neck.

'Are you okay?'

A small head nodded against his jacket. Jake was elated to find the boy unharmed.

'Can you tell me why you were hiding, Jamie?'

Something unintelligible was mumbled into his chest.

'What?'

The boy turned his head just enough to whisper, 'Monster.'

*

Jake carried Jamie out of the vineyard and across the abandoned orchard, but he made sure the boy was walking on his own again by the time they entered the

campground. He didn't want to embarrass the kid or worry the parents.

The reunion was sadly predictable. James Taylor reached down, grabbed his son by the shoulders and began shaking him, 'Where have you been? How could you put your mother through this?'

Diane Taylor pushed her husband aside and wrenched Jamie into her arms, clutching him to her ribcage. 'It doesn't matter now,' she said. 'Are you all right? Are you okay, love?'

The boy shrugged off both parents and said he was fine, then looked at his feet, uncomfortable as the centre of attention.

'We'll have the paramedics check him over ...' Jake began.

Diane Taylor inhaled.

'Just a precaution, Mrs Taylor.'

Constable Murphy seemed uncertain. 'Jamie. A lot of people came out to search for you today. Didn't you hear them calling?'

The young boy stared at the ground.

'Jamie?'

'Yes.'

'So if you could hear them calling, why didn't you answer?'

Jamie looked up just long enough to flick his eyes toward Jake. 'I was hiding from the monster.'

Evelyn Kelly bent over in front of Jamie, a tiny cross on a fine, gold chain around her neck dangling in front of his face. 'Now Jamie, you're a big boy. You know there's no such thing as monsters.'

Jamie was adamant. ‘There *is* a monster in the vineyard and it was after me.’

‘Why would a monster chase you?’ his father scoffed.

Ignoring everyone else, Jamie looked up into Jake’s eyes and said, ‘Because I found a dead lady. The monster must have hurt her and didn’t want anyone to know.’

Ridicule and condescension swirled around the boy. His father threatened punishment for telling tales and the counsellor tsked. None of them seemed concerned with what Jamie might have seen.

Jake glanced at Murphy, indicating the constable should follow his lead.

‘Let’s not worry about any of that right now,’ he said brusquely, silencing the adults. ‘Jamie, let’s get you and your parents to the paramedics and make certain you’re all right.’

‘But ...’

Jake patted Jamie reassuringly on the shoulder. ‘Even if you feel fine, your mum’s a bit shaken, okay? She’ll feel a lot better once you’ve been checked out. And we’ll get you some bikkies.’

‘But ...’

‘We’ll talk again soon, I promise.’

Jamie pressed back against his mother. ‘K.’

‘Constable Murphy, please follow the ambulance and take Jamie’s and Mr and Mrs Taylor’s statements at the hospital.’

Murphy nodded.

‘Ms Kelly will accompany you to provide support.’

*

By half past nine, a small convoy was en route to the hospital. Jamie waved to Jake through the back window of the ambulance as it pulled away.

Uncomfortably aware that his clothes were saturated by the moisture in the air, Jake looked forward to a hot shower at the station. The electricity still wasn't connected to his cottage despite daily wrangling with the power company. But warming up would have to wait.

Jake returned to his car, relieved he'd been able to convince the others to leave so he could search the vineyard by himself without argument or distraction.

After checking the map on his phone, he drove a short distance back toward town then took a dead-end side road. He parked on a weedy lap of gravel in front of the entrance leading up to the front of the sandstone manor, not eager to risk opening the rusty gates. They were as dilapidated as the building that peeked through the rambling gardens at the top of the driveway.

This time, he grabbed a jacket from the boot of his car before ambling down a rocky slope to the left of the manor and into the vineyard. A lowing cow droned in the distance, reminding Jake of a morning alarm someone had failed to switch off.

As he walked, he glanced east toward the still obscured mountain range. His fingers and toes itched to search the concealed rock surfaces for holds that would allow him to scale the range's cliffs; all frustrations would melt away as he lost himself in the challenge of the climb.

Uncertain of where he'd located Jamie from this angle,

Jake began to search for signs of recent footsteps in the marshy ground. Fifteen minutes of wandering the lanes between the vines and he was no closer to finding where he had been, but he *was* significantly colder. Perhaps Jamie had imagined a body after all.

Turning to trudge back to his car, a strangely-shaped lump on the ground one row over caught his eye. He ducked through the vines, twigs scraping at his jacket, leant over the mound and exhaled heavily.

It looked as though the old woman had been tumbled on to the ground from standing height there were no signs of her being laid out with any care. The dark grey robe wrapped around her was three or four sizes too big, drowning her in rough, abrasive wool. Her bare feet were a crazed map of veins and broken capillaries, her toenails blackened.

Donning a glove from his jacket pocket, Jake checked for a pulse. Nothing. Her body was cool, not cold, and her limbs pliable. She couldn't have been dead for more than three or four hours.

With her blueish lips agape, eyes sunken and sightless, and strands of white hair plastered to the side of her face, no wonder the boy had been spooked. While there was no obvious cause of death, it was clear that the woman had endured significant trauma in the hours surrounding her death.

Jake lifted one of her hands, the fingertips globules of congealed blood. The fingernails of every digit including the thumb had been ripped from the bed.

It was the same on her other hand.