**Prologue**

**By Colin Foulkes**

“Wouldn’t it be so brilliant?” said Katie, “We could get some chips and some drinks and just hang out for a while. What do you think?” she said, swinging her whole body to face him; her trombone case, swinging with her, banged against his leg as it had countless times on the walk home from school, as it does every day, a physical punctuation in their conversations. She stared directly into his face, her eyes pleading and cajoling. “Come on, it’ll be brilliant,” she said.

“Be careful, will you, that hurts,” he said. But he knew it wouldn’t change anything. Katie was a ball of energy; her backpack weighed a ton and the trombone case was heavy - she’d shown him the calluses on her palms from carrying it - yet she bounced around like a puppy, eager and excited.

“Come on, Alec, it’s on our way home. We just have to go down the back lane and in through the back door; it’s not even locked. Everyone does it. Everyone. Chloe and Jess were there last night; the door’s not locked, so it’s not really breaking in. It’ll be so brilliant.”

“I don’t know, Katie. What if we get caught? That’s trespassing. We’d be in big trouble, and my mom’ll kill me, and your mom’ll kill you. And stop using the word brilliant, will you?”

“You are such a chicken, Alec Hargrave,” she said, this time she stared straight ahead as she spoke, and, picking up her pace, left Alec behind. “If you’re not going to go, I’ll go on my own. Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant, brilliant!”

“Ah, Jesus, Katie. You’re nuts,” he said, slowing down to let the gap grow, then he followed, as he always had; unwillingly hooked into another of her schemes. Though driven in part by concern for Katie, Alec mainly wanted to see her back out of the dare; her words had stung him, and he wanted the chance to throw them back at her.

Across Park St. then Elm, then Morton, the usual route home. Alec stayed a constant distance, about a block, behind Katie, and she didn’t look back once. Then, between Morton and Maple, instead of continuing straight on to their own street, she turned left down the back lane.

“Ah, Katie, you idiot!” said Alec. Hi picked up his pace, breaking into a slow jog, his backpack bouncing, its zippers rattling and the last inch of water sloshing around in the bottle in its side pocket.

He reached the back lane, turned in, walked a few paces and stopped. Just a few yards away was the well-lit street he’d come from, and just a block away were busy stores, shoppers and early rush-hour traffic; but here, it was dark and quiet, and, well, a little bit creepy. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, the houses were dark, most people were still at work, and light from the street lamps on neighbouring streets painted weak orange stripes across the lane where it passed between the houses.

He couldn’t see Katie, and he wasn’t sure which house she was headed for, they all looked different from the back. He walked slowly, stepping carefully, almost silent. He didn’t want her to know he’d followed.

Then a movement caught his eye, a couple of houses further down, on the right; that must be her, he thought, as he crept closer. An old gate squealed and the shape moved again, this time into a yard; he recognized the sound as the trombone case banged against the something solid, and heard her shoes scrape on the path. Then nothing. She must’ve stopped. Alec crept forward, stepping lightly, trying hard not to burst out laughing. Yeah, right, this will be brilliant, Katie. She’d only gone a couple of steps into the yard; she was staring hard into the shadows, a dark corner at the back of the house where the back door must be.

“Shhh!” she said, barely a whisper.

“You heard me?” said Alec.

“Shhh!” this time louder.

He stared ahead, into the dark. Nothing. What does she see? “What is it?” he said, just a whisper, his head pressed close to hers.

“Over there, in the corner, do you see anything?”

“No. Nothing. Come on, let’s just go.” He grabbed her arm and started to pull.

“I heard something, over there, against the house.”

“Probably a squirrel, or a – I don’t know – something else. Come on, let’s just …”

It moved. The shadows split and a new shape formed, big, dark, coming fast, straight at them, howling.

Alec was thrown back, once, then again, pushed hard as the shape ran through them; he saw Katie fall, heard her land, heard her groan, the clatter as the trombone case as it skidded across the ground; then he tripped, his shoulder slammed in to a garage door, he heard the boom, saw the figure disappearing into the dark, then his head struck, and he didn’t see anything.