

# CHAPTER 1



## In the Headlights

VAGGGHHRRRROOOOOOOOOOM!  
Milo Fisher flew back in his seat as his father floored the accelerator. The boorish rev of the cobalt blue sports car echoed across the Dentalia mountains.

Mr Fisher switched gears and they zipped round a bend, dissipating wavy columns of mist rising from rust-coloured leaves blanketing the forest floor.

“What did I tell you about the cornering on this machine?” Fisher flashed his son a toothy grin as they continued down the deserted dirt road winding through Nu Co.’s vast forested

property. “Have you ever felt so alive?”

Milo swallowed the sick creeping up the back of his throat. *I wonder how alive Dad would feel if I vomited grapefruit juice and poached eggs all over his ridiculous new car?* “This is great,” he said, trying to sound cheerful rather than terrified. He gripped the edge of his seat as they raced down a steep incline.

Mr Fisher had purchased the Aston Martin to celebrate the launch of his company’s latest moneymaking venture. After the public relations disaster caused by Nucralose, a pine-sap sweetener that turned out to have some rather unfortunate side effects on the local populace, Fisher was “pivoting” Nu Co. in a fresh direction. All Milo knew about the endeavour was that it was keeping his father extremely busy. So busy that he’d cancelled their trip to Vancouver for a wildlife photography exhibition that Milo had set his heart on. *Figures.*

As a consolation prize, Fisher had woken his son before dawn for a surprise ride in the flashy

two-seater. “Driving a fast car down an open road is as American as apple pie,” Fisher winked.

*Aren’t these things made in England?*

Milo stared out the window. A flock of crows took off cacophonously from a tangle of naked branches as the coupé zoomed past, forming a speckled swirl of darkness across the pink clouds.

*If only I could fly away, too.*

The sun peeked over the jagged mountains, illuminating a landscape scarred by recent deforestation. Nu Co. was in the midst of expanding its operations in Sticky Pines.

“Could you slow down a bit?” Milo rolled down the window.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Fisher scoffed.

“I’m starting to feel carsick.”

Mr Fisher slowed the vehicle. “That better?”

Milo offered a feeble thumbs-up. This was the first “quality time” he and his father had shared in over a month. He’d always enjoyed their special outings, but lately things between them had been ... complicated.

The strange events that had transpired several weeks ago skipped through Milo's mind in flashes of sticky golden goo, hideous hairy beasts, and the determined face of a girl with glasses and purple hair – a face he tried not to think about these days.

Mr Fisher braked hard in front of a hiking trail. "Think we can fit through there, sport?" With a glint in his eye, he trundled the compact car on to the footpath. They drove through a grove of indigo-needled pines, their twisty grey trunks glistening with the unique black sap from which Nu Co.'s products were made.

*Is Dad showing off or what?* "Aren't you supposed to stay on the road?" Milo stuffed his hands into the pockets of his black pea coat.

Mr Fisher reached over and mussed his son's sandy brown hair. "This is private property, kid. The rules don't apply here. And besides," he added, "this forest won't be here for much longer. Consider this a farewell tour."

Milo looked around the dappled hillside. "Do

you really have to cut it all down?"

"Nothing lasts forever," said Fisher. "Sticky pine sap is worth its weight in gold. The stuff can be used in construction, medicine, technology, you name it. What's a few trees, compared to all that?"

Fisher checked the time on his wrist, where he was wearing two different watches. One was his usual platinum Rolex, but he'd recently been sporting a black digital device as well. Instead of telling time, it displayed a high-security password that changed every thirty seconds. Milo didn't know what it was for.

"I suppose you have to go to work soon?" said Milo.

"I'm afraid so."

*If Dad couldn't take me to the photography exhibition, he could at least have taken half a day off.* "I'd better get to school, then."

Milo slumped in his seat. School was an emotional minefield these days. He'd started eating lunch in the debate classroom so he no

longer had to run into his former friends Lucy Sladan and Tex Arkhipov. Which was fine. He didn't need them. He had a very respectable array of acquaintances. Acquaintances who, sure, were maybe not as interesting, fiery or funny as Lucy and Tex, but who were much more compatible with Milo's goals and interests. "Popular", "sporty", "fashionable" acquaintances, who didn't suddenly stop caring about their supposed principles and betray his trust when he stuck his neck out on the line for them.

"Ah, there it is." Mr Fisher steered the coupé off the dirt trail. "We just finished the road up here."

Bumping over a patch of purple ferns, they exited on to a stretch of fresh asphalt that meandered along the edge of a ridge overlooking Black Hole Lake – the always steaming, near-perfect circle of deep, murky water at the centre of the Big Crater Valley.

"Tell you what," said Fisher, accelerating

up the smooth roadway. "Why don't you skip school and hang out here, by the lake? I can have Kaitlyn bring over the jet ski."

"It's freezing out," said Milo. "You'd have to be crazy to go on the water right now."

*That sounds like one of Lucy's insane ideas.* Milo smirked as he remembered the peculiar girl running fearlessly through the woods, violet hair flying, chasing an honest-to-goodness monster. His smile faded as he remembered where she'd ended up that day: on the cold factory floor, his father's hands around her throat.

"Then tell me," said Fisher. "What do you plan to do today?" He kicked the car into high gear, leaning into a corner that was perilously close to the ledge.

Milo grimaced. "Just take me home. I'll watch a movie or something."

"You've been sulking indoors for over a month," said Fisher. "It's not healthy."

"Someone's throwing a Halloween party in town," said Milo. "Maybe you could drop me

off this evening?”

“I have to work late.” Fisher gripped the wheel. “Your stepmother can take you.”

“I see.” Milo crossed his arms.

Fisher turned to his son. “Look,” he said, “I’m sorry I’ve been so busy lately, but you have to understand, it’s—”

BAM!

There was a massive bump as the car collided with something big. Milo felt the shock of the impact through his bones. The car lost control and veered towards the cliff, the view from the windscreen rapidly filling up with sky.

“Son of a—” Fisher frantically steered the fishtailing automobile away from the precipice, but he overcorrected and they spun out of control.

Milo screamed as they reeled into the open forest and then, with a horrendous CRUNCH, slammed sideways into a tree, airbags deploying on all sides.

Smoke drifted out from under the hood of the

car and the engine was making an unsettling popping sound.

Groaning, Fisher switched off the motor and unbuckled his seat belt. He stretched his neck stiffly from side to side, but appeared largely unharmed.

Milo’s head felt fuzzy, his heart pounding in his ears. The accident had seemed to happen both instantaneously and in slow motion. The air smelled of rubber and his cheek felt as if it had been burned. When he moved, bits of broken glass from the shattered passenger window fell from his lapel like small chunks of ice.

“Are you all right?” asked Fisher.

*Good question.* Milo fumbled with the vanity mirror. The right side of his face was red from where it hit the airbag, but he didn’t see any blood. “I think I’m okay.” He took a deep breath to slow his pulse. “What happened?”

A look of horror washed over Fisher’s face. “The Aston Martin.” He peeled himself out of the vehicle to assess the damage.

Milo's door was pinned against the trunk of a surprisingly sturdy tree. Pushing the flabby airbags out of his way, he climbed out the driver's side door after his father.

Mr Fisher surveyed the scene, his hands buried in his buoyant salt-and-pepper hair. The small automobile had collided with a burly oak. Its right front wheel was propped up on a massive gnarled root that stuck out of the soil like a bony knuckle.

Milo rotated his smarting right shoulder. "Do you think it's totalled?"

"No." Fisher's jaw was set. "Anything can be fixed with enough determination."

Milo walked round to the front of the car. There was a big dent in the hood. "Dad, what did we hit?"

"Stupid deer," Fisher muttered. He bent low to check the wheels. "Came from nowhere."

"You hit a deer?" said Milo, aghast. "Where is it?" He looked back towards the road for the injured animal, but couldn't see anything.

*Maybe it fell over the edge?* His throat felt tight.

"That dumb animal hit us," Fisher barked.

"I told you you were driving too fast!" Milo raced down the road and peered over the ridge, scanning the steep slope that ended at the lake's shore. *Where did it go?* His breath formed a smoke signal of distress in the cold October air.

At last, he spotted something. There, about fifty metres down, a white stag lay at the foot of a boulder. It didn't appear to be moving, at first, but then Milo saw it lift its head.

"I see the deer," he called to his father. "It's hurt, but alive!"

"Leave it alone," said Fisher, typing on his mobile. "Injured animals are dangerous. There's nothing we can do, anyway."

*I thought anything could be fixed with enough determination?* "We have to help it," Milo insisted.

Carefully, he picked his way down the embankment, sending loose veins of dirt

crumbling down the slope. When he reached the bottom, he slowed his pace to approach the fallen deer. It was much bigger than it appeared from above, nearly the size of a horse. Milo was struck by its unusual, ghostly beauty.

The animal was breathing heavily and its forelimbs were bent at an odd angle. *Its legs could be broken.* As he approached, Milo was increasingly aware of the stag's formidable antlers. They'd need to get the poor thing to a veterinarian, but how?

"I'm not going to hurt you," said Milo, taking a step nearer.

Abruptly, the stag scrambled to its feet, snorting plumes of hot air into the cold wind.

Milo stumbled backwards and fell on to the gravel. The immense animal took a clumsy step towards him, its knees shaking. For a moment, the boy and the deer watched each other warily.

Then Milo broke into a grin. "You can walk," he said. The stag cocked its head, its ivory antlers catching a ray of sunlight.

"What are you doing?" Mr Fisher's voice boomed down the hillside. "I told you, that animal is dangerous!"

Milo looked up at his father who was peering down from the road. "Dad, wait, you'll scare it!"

But it was too late. Fisher was already barrelling down the slope. "Get away! GO!" he shouted, waving his arms.

Panicking, the deer reared and staggered across the shallow beach towards the water's edge.

Mr Fisher slid to the base of the hill and helped Milo to his feet. "What happened?" he asked. "Did it charge at you?"

"No, I'm fine." Milo glanced back to see the animal plunging into the lake. *Oh no. Deer can't swim, can they?*

Father and son watched as the stag swam out towards the centre of the broad body of water. It appeared to be heading for a small mist-shrouded island about as big as the Fisher family's eight-bedroom lodge.

*That island's too far away.* Milo's heart sank. *It*

*will never make it!*

His worries were justified. After a minute, the stag appeared to be in distress, its head dipping under the water again and again. Was it simply struggling to swim? To Milo, it almost looked like something was trying to pull it under...

Hands behind his head, Milo watched as the animal's magnificent pale antlers suddenly disappeared into the deep, leaving nothing but a faint swell on the inky water.

It did not resurface.

Milo released the breath he'd been holding. It was gone. There was nothing he could do.

Mr Fisher cleared his throat. "It wouldn't have survived anyway, son," he said, gently. "That's just the way of the world. These things happen."

*But it only happened because you crashed into it.* "I think we should make a donation to a wildlife sanctuary in its honour," said Milo.

Fisher chuckled. "Sure." He pulled his son close. "I was a bit of a hippy at your age, too. Don't worry, you'll grow out of it." He gave him

a squeeze. "It's you and me, kid. Us against the world. Same as always."

"Right," Milo replied. "Same as always."

*Is it, though?*

They stood quietly as the rising sun slowly burned the morning mist off the lake. Briefly, Milo thought he saw a large dark shape under the water's surface where the stag had disappeared. It was too big to be the deer, though. *Must be the shadow of a cloud...*

"Come on," said Fisher. "Murl will be here any minute with a tow truck. Shall we get you home?"

"Just take me to school."

"You sure?" said Fisher.

"No," said Milo. "I'm not." Without another word, he trudged back up the ridge, gripping fistfuls of dirt as he climbed.

Fisher followed close behind, keeping his hands free in case his son slipped.

Behind them, off in the distance, a songbird darted over the water, then dipped down to pluck



a floating insect. In a flash, a dark, slimy tentacle emerged from the murky depths. It gripped the bird and hungrily snapped it underwater, leaving nothing but a flutter of loose feathers on the steamy surface of Black Hole Lake.