



THE STINGING TREE

LUKE KING

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1

Brad walked to the end of Range Road. There was a creek here. Hooper's Creek. It was a good place to swim. There was plenty of water; and it wasn't too cold.

He pushed past the barrier and sat down on the end of the road, on the top of the wall. The road stopped here, at the creek; and there was a concrete wall, like a cliff, to the water below.

Once, years ago, there had been a bridge here. Thick beams of wood had crossed the creek from wall to wall. But they'd been washed away in a flood, a long time ago. Brad couldn't even remember the wooden bridge. It'd been gone since before he was born. And the concrete walls were all that was left.

The water was clear and cool. It rolled slowly over stones and leaves, past roots and moss-rotting logs. In the shade of the forest it looked calm and smooth and cold. And Brad could see small fish swimming across and across under the water.

It was hot.

He got up, and he was about to jump in, when suddenly, he heard something. In the forest across the creek there was a sound.

Brad looked up.

There was someone standing on the road, on the other side of the bridge.

It was a boy. A boy with blond hair.

He looked just like Brad. Exactly like Brad. So much like Brad that it was like looking into a mirror.

They stared at each other for a moment. Brad was about to say something, but the boy ran away.

He turned around and disappeared along the muddy road, and on, into the wilderness.

2

'Dad?'

'Mmm.'

They were eating dinner.

'What's on the other side of the creek?'

'What creek?'

'Hooper's Creek. At the end of the road.'

'What? Over the old bridge?'

'Yeah, down there. Do people live over there?'

'Live there. No. I don't think so. It's all just forest now.'

'The Campbells used to live there,' his mother said.

'The Campbells?'

'Yes. The Campbells. That's right,' his father said. 'There is a house down there. In the forest.'

'Do they still live there, you think?' Brad asked.

'No.'

'No,' his father said. 'You couldn't get into that house now, with the bridge closed. You couldn't drive over there.'

'They moved away,' his mother said.

Brad scooped some spaghetti into his mouth. And he saw a picture of the boy in his mind. It was like looking at himself.

3

The next day, Brad got his fishing gear and walked down to Hooper's Creek again. It was sunny. And it was hot.

He didn't really want to fish; but it would be a good way to waste the time while he waited.

Part of him wanted to cross the creek and go looking for the boy. But the idea of the forest frightened him. There were snakes and leeches, spiders and stinging trees. Anything could happen. So, he waited. Perhaps the boy would come again.

On one side of the road, beside the concrete wall, there was a huge gum with a hollow in the trunk. Brad sat down, at the base of this tree in the shade.

He figured that the boy would come back — somehow, for some reason. Perhaps he needed water. You couldn't live without water.

Yeah. He'd come back today. Brad just knew he would.

And if he didn't come? Later, Brad would go for a walk. He'd cross the creek, maybe, and go looking for the boy. Brad looked across at the dense jungle on the other side of the stream. It was dark and foreboding, tangled and twisted with creepers, vines and figs, with a thick and almost impenetrable undergrowth of wait-a-whiles, ferns and sapling, stick-like trees.

The road over there was disappearing fast. The forest grew so thickly that it had closed together over the top and turned the road into a tunnel. A thick tunnel of green through the forest.

Fishing.

Brad put a prawn on the hook and cast his line. From time to time he looked over, to the other side of the creek, where he hoped to see the boy again.

Brad wondered who he was. Where did he come from? What was he doing on the other side of the creek where it was all wilderness? And why did he look like Brad's twin brother?◆

Brad's twin brother?

It couldn't be. Brad didn't have a twin brother; he didn't have any brothers, or sisters. He knew that. It didn't make sense.

And he had looked *exactly* like Brad, hadn't he?

Perhaps he was a clone, or Brad's double from a parallel universe.

Yes. That was it. A parallel universe.

The boy was from a parallel universe. And the creek was the boundary. If Brad crossed the creek he would enter another Earth. The water of the creek was the only boundary between this Earth and a parallel world.

But then again, maybe the kid just looked like him. Maybe he was just some kid. He might be living in the old Campbell's place that Dad had told him about.

But he had looked like Brad. Hadn't he?

Well, it was hard to be sure. It was hard to remember if he'd really seen what he thought he saw, because the moment Brad had seen him, the boy had turned and gone.

Brad figured, that this time, if the boy came again, he would get a better look, because he was pressed up in the darkness, against the hollow of the old tree, and the boy wouldn't be able to see him.

He looked over to the other side, where he had seen the boy yesterday. The forest was still and quiet.

He cast his line and suddenly, there was a bite.

A big bite.

'Ah! Cut me!' Brad cried. He stood up, but the line fled away with a sudden jerk. And then it was gone. Reel, line, sinker, hook—everything had gone into the stream, dragged away by some giant, unseen fish.

Brad gave up and sat down again, in the shade by the trunk of the tree. He tossed the rest of the prawns into the water and sucked his finger which had been cut by the line.

And then he stopped, sat still, and listened.

There!◆

Footsteps.

4

Brad could hear footsteps from the other side of the creek. Someone was walking along the muddy road toward him.

He pushed himself back, into the hollow of the tree.◆

And he waited in silence.◆

He sat, absolutely still. And he watched, careful not to make a sound, as slowly, very slowly, the boy stepped into a patch of bright light on the other side of the stream. He moved forward and stood on the top of the concrete wall, looking up the road and then down at the creek.

Yes! He did! He looked exactly like Brad.

And there was something about the way he stood too, on the edge of the creek, looking down. Brad knew that if it was him, he would do it just the same — exactly the same as that!

The boy was being careful. He stood absolutely still, and he had his head cocked to one side, listening.

Nothing. No?

Brad's breath started to quicken. He could hear it rasp in his mouth. His tongue felt dry, and there was an acid taste at the back of his throat. The boy would be able to see him, Brad thought.

Slowly, he backed himself up, right in, against the hollow of the tree, and from there, he watched the look-alike boy in silence, breathing quickly, feeling ashamed.

It was like looking into a mirror. But it wasn't a mirror.

The boy's blond hair was just like Brad's. He had very red lips and pale white skin. And his eyes, like Brad's, were black.

He reached onto his shoulder and pulled something off. Brad couldn't tell what it was at first, but then he recognised it. It was the blue plastic water bottle from home. And somehow the boy had stolen it.

Brad watched him as the boy slid and stepped down the slippery bank. Sliding in the mud beside the concrete wall, he came to a stop. And then, he stepped forward to the water, and stood on the edge of the stream.

The blue plastic water bottle! Surely Brad had brought that with him today. He looked around on the dark dirty ground at his feet. There it was! He *had* brought it. He remembered Mum saying, 'Take the water bottle.' And he'd taken it.

But the boy's was exactly the same. He held it, crumpled in his hand like a towel. And he crouched down, beside the water, pushed it under the surface, and moved it from side to side, filling it with water.

He stood up again and stretched. He screwed a lid onto the bottle and dragged it out of the stream, turning his body at the same time. He pulled it onto his back and turned to face Brad. He adjusted the strap on his back and then stood still.

He stared.

He could see Brad. Couldn't he?

He was looking straight across the creek — straight at Brad, in the hollow of the tree.

He could see him!

Brad felt sick and humiliated. He tensed his muscles tightly, pushing himself back against the hard, dirty trunk of the tree.

The boy peered into the darkness.

And then suddenly, he took off. He clambered up the bank, dropping the heavy water bottle from his back. He slid in the mud and clawed at the creepers as he scrambled to the top of the road.

And then he ran. As fast as he could.

5

Brad exploded out of the tree trunk. 'Wait! Wait!' he called. He slid down the bank and slipped into the stream. Bubbles of air fled out of his runners as they plunged into the cool water. He fought the heavy water and waded to the other side.

The stream was cold and full of leaves. The bottom was slippery and wet. In the middle, he was up to his waist in water. On the other side, he pulled himself up with a liana vine, and he clambered up the steep bank.

The boy was one hundred metres ahead of him already. Stumbling and sliding along the muddy road which was overgrown with creepers and vines.

Brad moved quickly. He was a good runner, and he went as fast as he could up the slippery track that had once been a road. The canopy had grown together at the top and turned the road into a tunnel, tangled and green.

The forest was thick and dark. And the floor of the path was littered with twigs and leaves, bark; tangled vines and wait-a-while hung from the canopy and caught at Brad's T-shirt as he ran up the path.

It was wet. It was slippery.

Brad went faster and slipped. He slipped one way in the mud and lost his balance, falling the other way into a puddle of mud fouled with pig's droppings.

He rolled over and got to his feet, still running. He had to catch the boy. His T-shirt and shorts were covered with mud. A trickle of water ran down his leg as he went. The wind against his legs and chest was cold. He was breathing, heavily, and he was getting a stitch.

Suddenly, he heard a scream.

It came from straight ahead, along the path.

It was the boy.

6

Brad ran, slipping and sliding in the mud, using his arms and legs for balance.

He turned a bend in the road and could see a patch of sunlight ahead of him. In the far distance, he could see the roof of a house.

Suddenly, the forest fell silent around him. And strangely, the sun came out, shining. The insects stopped. The birds stopped, and everything went very, very still.

'Aaaaarrghh!'

Brad heard the scream again, but closer, much closer this time. He moved forward quickly, and all at once he saw what the problem was.

There was a track on the left of the road, a driveway, a house.

Brad let his hands drop helplessly. There was nothing he could do.◆

The boy had been stung by a tree.

7

At the front of a strange wooden house, Brad's double was lying on the ground, turning from side to side, and screaming in pain.

He was in the middle of a patch of stinging trees. There was one large tree in the centre, and many waist-high trees all around it.

Their lime-green leaves, covered with a million tiny spears of poison, shone brightly in the sunlight. The fine, white-sharp hairs glistened like dew coated webs, and the large, heart-shaped leaves, nodded and swayed thickly in the wind.

Brad stopped and looked at the boy.

He was in the middle of the stinging trees, halfway to the house.◆
The tropical sun flashed out from a cloud, raining heat that was bright like pain. It stung.

And the sting-lashed boy was screaming and crying in the middle of the patch. And yet still, he got to his feet and stumbled forward.

'Stop!' Brad cried.

The boy stopped. He turned around and choked a sob in his throat. And then tears burst out of his eyes. He was crying, holding his hands helplessly away from him, he cringed, drawing his shoulders inwards, the poison making gooseflesh of his skin.

There was nothing he could do.

Tears burst out of each eye with every choking sob. He moved forward, crippled by the pain, and staggered toward Brad, who had his hands held out toward him. Picking his way through the stinging trees, the boy looked up at the sky. He opened his mouth, and fell forward onto the ground at Brad's feet.

8

Brad raced up the steps to the house. He knew what it felt like to be stung. He had been stung by a stinging tree before, but not this badly.

He turned the handle on the front door and pushed it open. Then he stopped.❖

It was empty.❖

He could see one large room, and it was empty. The old wooden floor was dusty and, strangely, pieces of mud were littered all over it.❖

Still, perhaps there was a phone. He could call the ambulance. First, he had to find the phone.

He walked through the room quickly, slicing the cobwebs out of his way with outstretched arms. The sticky webs caught him in the face and stuck in his hair.❖

He walked into the hall and expected to find the telephone at the bottom of the stairs. But there was nothing in the hall except for mud scattered everywhere.

Only, it wasn't mud, Brad suddenly realised. It was pigs' droppings. Perhaps they were still in the house. Brad imagined a black-tusked boar charging down the hallway at him.

At the back of the house there was a kitchen. The back door was missing. No. It wasn't. It was lying outside on the ground, covered in mud and creepers, broken.

There was no phone.

Brad ran back down the hallway to the front of the house. He pulled the front door open, jumped the veranda steps and skidded in the mud to the boy. He was sleeping. Still.

Brad grabbed him by the shoulders. 'Where's your mum and dad?' he screamed, shaking him. But it was no good now. The boy was unconscious, knocked out by the pain.

Brad put his hands on the boy's neck and felt for a pulse. His heart was beating. He put his ear next to the boy's mouth.◆?

Breathing?

Yes!

Perhaps it wasn't so bad, Brad thought. Perhaps the stings weren't as bad as they looked. Even so, he couldn't just leave him here in the sun. It was too hot.

Brad got up to move him and a wink of sunlight flashed in his eye. Sunlight on metal. From beside the house, it flashed again as Brad moved his head. Like a mirror in the sun.

Brad stopped. His heart thumped.

9

Carefully, Brad walked along the front of the house, to the side, to where he had seen the wink of light. He imagined a friend — someone from school — hiding there with a mirror angled at his face.

But no — it couldn't be. If there was someone else here they would...Hang on.

It was a car.

A Landcruiser, just like they had on the farm, but this one was red. A dark red. Brad slid quickly round to the driver's side and opened the door.

Yes! The keys were in the ignition.

He looked at the gearstick. It was automatic. Nothing could be easier. Brad drove Dad's Landcruiser all the time on the farm. It was an old model, a farm car. This one was newer. A lot newer. But still. It would be easy. He knew how to drive, didn't he?◆

There was no time to think about it anyway.◆

He scuttled back to where the boy was, at the front of the house, and tried not to slip in the mud. But then, just as he reached the boy, he did slip. One foot collapsed beneath him and like a bull-rider, Brad slid up to the boy's head on his knees. He put his hands under the boy's back and lifted his floppy weight onto his thighs. He pushed his wrists under the boy's arms and threaded his own arms through, clasp his hands together over the boy's chest.◆

Brad struggled to his feet and dragged the boy backwards.

His feet were lifeless. They wobbled and dragged in the mud, turning from side to side.◆

One of the boy's shoes came loose at the heel, caught on a root. But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. A really bad sting from a tree could kill you. The boy could die. Brad knew that. He had to get him to hospital.

He'd drive up to his house. Mum was home. They could ring the ambulance or take him to the station themselves.

What? Something he'd forgotten.

The bridge!

There was no bridge.

Damn! He'd have to run home. But not all the way. He could drive down to the bridge anyway, cross the creek and run from there. It would take half an hour, maybe more. They would have to come and get the boy — take him across the creek, take him to the hospital in Alderton.

But, wait up. Where had the car come from? How could a perfectly good car be here if there wasn't any bridge? The other way. It must have come from the other way. The road must lead somewhere. There was no time to think about it.

Brad stopped beside the car and leant against it, catching his breath. He held the lifeless boy in his arms, sagging. How was he going to open the door? Wait a minute.

Brad slid himself out from under the boy and held him against the side of the car with one arm. He opened the door and rolled the boy's head and shoulders in. Lifting his legs, he pushed him up onto the seat and climbed up behind him. He pulled the seat-belt across the boy, clicked it into the lock and climbed back out of the car.

Brad closed the passenger door and moved around to the driver's side. He jumped in and adjusted the seat, sliding it closer to the wheel so he could reach the pedals. He turned the key and shifted the gearstick into drive. The car moved forward and out onto the road.

Without even thinking, Brad turned right toward Hooper's Creek. And then he suddenly remembered. The bridge. He put the car in reverse and spun the wheels, catching backward up the muddy path. He turned in front of the house and pushed his foot down. The four-wheel-drive slipped and skidded in the mud and then leapt forward, up the tangled road and through the forest.◆

10

Wait-a-whiles and creepers flipped and whipped against the windscreen. On the road ahead, Brad could see the tracks where the car had beat its way through the forest. It *had* come this way. There were places where the wide tires had slid and stuck in the mud. They looked like fresh tracks too. Surely, then, Brad thought, he would be able to get out, find the road to Alderton and get the boy to hospital. It would only take an hour or two at the most.

He looked over at the boy. He was conscious now. Partly conscious. His eyelids struggled to open. He groaned and turned his head from side to side.

Brad climbed a long, muddy hill. The wheels slipped in the mud and the wagon snaked from side to side up the track. At the top of the hill the trees spread out. And Brad could see Mount Rosen in the distance.

Yes! Of course! The road went to Mount Rosen. That's why it was called Range Road. And years ago, Brad remembered Dad telling him, people would drive this way to Brentwood. And if he got to Brentwood, then he would be able to get to the hospital in Alderton.◆

The boy would be all right.

Brad looked over at him. 'You'll be all right,' he said.

The boy heard him. His swollen eyelids opened. He looked at the road, lifting his head. His eyes opened wide. 'Look out!' he cried, pointing at the road.

There was a man with a gun on the road.

11

Brad panicked. He turned the wheel hard and the car slid sideways.

He was moving quickly down the hill, and he couldn't have stopped anyway, but when he saw the man with the gun, Brad panicked. He turned the wheel to avoid him but the car slid sideways in the mud. The man's angry face was suddenly right against the passenger window, pressed up against the glass. He looked angry and frightened. But it was only for half a second. His gun clattered against the side of the car. There was a bump. And the man flew away, bounced off the side of the car into the undergrowth of forest.

The back-end of the car slid further to the left, and Brad continued down the hill at a forty-degree angle. He slowed down, easing his foot, pumping the brake. And as the car righted itself, the front wheels caught.

There was an explosion, a clanking sound. Someone had fired a gun.

Brad looked in the mirror. The man was standing in the road. He aimed the gun at the car and fired again.

12

The front and rear windscreens shattered into a million tiny pieces of glass.

The bullet's whoosh of air passed Brad's ear, narrowly missing his head. The windscreens shattered, cracked white, and Brad panicked again, putting his foot on the brake. He couldn't see anything. He turned the wheel and the back of the car swerved out again, sliding off the hump of the road. Once again the car was sliding down the steep muddy hill at a forty-degree angle. They were going to tip over, Brad thought. Then — Bang! The back of the car smacked against the trunk of a tree and the Landcruiser bounced back onto the hump of the road.

Brad punched the windscreen with his fist and steadied the car. Moving his arm round and pulling at the safety glass, he made a hole in it where he could see the road.◆

He accelerated again, down the hill and onto the flat.

Perspiring, his hands shook, and he had to grip the wheel hard to control it. There was an acid taste in his mouth. He shook his long fringe of hair out of his eyes and focussed his attention on the road. He rounded the corner and eased up on the pedal.

He could smell something — a nice smell, sort of. Petrol! It was petrol.

13

Brad continued on for five minutes or so before he stopped the car to look at what had happened. He wanted to make sure that he was far enough away from the man with the gun.◆

First, he had to get some air. He walked around the car and took huge gulps into his lungs. He stopped.

He was shaking — his hands, his whole body was shaking. He tried to slow his breathing, but he knew, now that he'd stopped the car — now that he could stop and breathe — that he was going to be sick. He felt the taste in the back of his throat, and then started he to cough. He strangled a choking cough and vomited onto the brown-gold litter of the muddy forest floor.

He wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his T-shirt and shook his head, blowing his nose.

He got down on his knees and looked under the car. There was petrol everywhere. Definitely. Brad could see it on the metal work. He found where the tank was but could not see where the bullet had hit it. He figured he was wasting his time anyway. If there was a hole in the petrol tank then any petrol that was going to run out of it had already done so. He hoped the hole was somewhere near the top.

If it was, there might be plenty of petrol left.

Brad skirted the edge of the forest. He found a suitable stick (one that wasn't rotten) and smashed the front and back windscreens out, showering harmless pellets of glass onto the road and into the car.◆

They rained down on the sleeping boy.◆

14

Now that he had time to think about it, Brad realised who the man with the gun must be. The owner of the car — obviously. How else could he be in such a remote place? And he must have thought... How stupid Brad had been! He must have thought they were stealing the car.

Brad felt embarrassed and ashamed. He should have realised. He should have stopped, and the man would have helped them — driven the car, at least. But instead, Brad had panicked like an idiot and hit the man.◆

No wonder he had fired at the car.

He could go back...No. The man frightened him. He'd tell them about him at the hospital. Someone would come and get him.

He had to get the boy to Alderton. He was wasting time.◆

He climbed back into the car again and started the engine. The radio was on. Brad hadn't noticed it before. But as he pulled away from the spot in the forest where he'd been sick, he realised he could hear voices. And then he noticed that it was the radio.

It must have been on all the time.

'Hello. Silvia, is it?...You there, Silvia?'

'Yes, Ron. Is that me?'

'Silvia. You have twin girls. Is that right?'

'Yes. Two of them. Karen and Tracy.'

'And you have a story to tell us about your twins?'

'Well, yes. Just the other day, Tracy fell off her bike. Karen was inside — she didn't even see it. We were watching the TV together, and Tracy was outside.'

'Yes. Go on, Sylvia, we're listening. What happened?'

'Well suddenly Karen screamed. She grabbed her knee and started crying — right in the middle of Spongebob Squarepants. I didn't know what had happened. But then I heard Tracy crying outside. She came in through the door. Her knee was bleeding. She'd taken the skin off it. And the two girls were crying and hugging each other. It was the strangest thing I've ever seen.'

'Have you asked them about it?'

'What do you mean?' the woman said.

'Have you asked them how they feel when the other one gets hurt?'

'They say it's just the same as if they got hurt themselves—'

Brad looked at the boy. Was it possible? Could he somehow be Brad's twin brother? Brad couldn't feel any pain. And if he had a twin brother...someone would have told him.❖

Brad shrugged and looked at the boy's red-stained skin. He was sleeping again. The main thing was getting him to the hospital.❖

Brad turned the radio off.

It started to rain.

15

Brad drove for half an hour or more through the sudden tropical downpour. He watched the petrol gauge sink towards empty, and slowly, he got used to being wet and got used to the silence.

The heavy rain emptied itself through the open windscreen and onto both of the boys. The other boy started screaming. Water made it worse. Brad remembered that from when he hurt his own hand. Water made it worse.

The boy sat straight, upright in the seat and screamed. He tensed the muscles in his forearms, and pushed himself back with his legs, trying to get away from the water.

Brad put his foot on the brake. The wagon slid and skidded to a stop.

The poor stung lad was whimpering in pain, crying again. Tears burst out of his eyes just the way they burst out of Brad's eyes when he was hurt.

'Sit down on the ground behind the seat.'

The boy nodded and climbed into the back, wet-faced with tears and rain.

Brad started the car again. The motor caught and then stalled.

Oh no, Brad thought. Maybe the petrol was gone. They were on another hill. The front of the car pointed down. Brad moved the gearstick into neutral. He released the handbrake and rolled the car down the hill.

At the bottom of the hill, he stopped on the flat and tried again. The Landcruiser started easily, and they took off at once, gaining speed

rapidly up another long, muddy and forested, closed-in road.

Thank God, Brad thought to himself. But how long would the petrol last? Maybe, just maybe, they'd make it to Brentwood. And from there they could get help.

They crested the hill and set out on a long, straight stretch of road. Muddy water swished under the tires; fronds and creepers whipped and flapped against the car. And the rain poured in through the windscreen. Brad was soaking wet, and the floor of the car had started to fill with water.

They were sinking, Brad thought to himself. They were going to sink. He laughed at his own joke.◆

They came down the hill to a creek. It flowed over the top of the road, muddy and shallow. Brad slowed the car and moved into the creek cautiously. The stream flowed swiftly but the tires held, sluicing their way through water, rocks and mud. The powerful engine pulled the car up the bank and stalled.

Dead.

The petrol was gone.

16

Brad shifted the gearstick into park. He turned the key and tried to start the motor. The starter whirred and the engine hiccupped before stalling again.

They weren't going any further.

He tried again and another time. But the petrol was gone. Brad could see that by the needle on the tank. It was below empty.

The rain stopped suddenly and the hot, tropical sun flashed out again.

Brad put his head forward and rested it on the steering wheel. What was he going to do now? It would be just as far to walk back home from here as it be to walk to Brentwood. Everything had gone wrong. He was stuck. They were stranded.

Brad looked over at the boy, his double. His eyes were open and he smiled weakly at Brad.

'It's not so bad now,' the boy said. 'Just like a ringing in my head. I can't feel anything.'

'We've run out of petrol,' Brad said. 'We're stuck in the middle of nowhere.'

The boy nodded. His head lolled forward. He was asleep again.

Brad opened the door and got out. He almost had to jump because the car was so high off the ground. The rain had stopped. And suddenly, it was hot. Very hot. The car clicked and pinged in the sudden sunshine. Clouds of steam hung over the muddy track, filling the air with water. It was hard to breathe. And Brad could feel sweat at the roots of his hair, trickling down onto his neck.

He stumbled down to the creek and stood in it, on the edge. He wished now that he'd run back home and called the ambulance from there. It was a mistake. Home had been so much closer than Brentwood. Now, they were equally remote.

He leant forward and scooped water up in his hands, tossing it onto his face and wiping it back through his long, sodden hair.

On one side of the creek there was a clearing, a small, grassy area in the shade. He'd have to get the boy out of the car. It was too hot. He could die in there.

Brad drank some water out of the stream. He slid and stumbled his way through the cloying mud, back to the car. He opened the passenger door. The boy fell on top of him. His head fell on Brad's shoulders, and Brad had to lift him and push him back into the car. The boy woke up. He groaned and tried to pull away from Brad.

Brad turned around. 'Get on my back,' he said, looking over his shoulder. 'I'll piggy-back you.'

The boy understood. He nodded and put his arms over Brad's shoulders. He lifted his knees up so Brad could get his hands underneath them. Brad stumbled away from the car, with the boy on his back. He took three or four steps and then slipped sideways. He fell heavily on the ground and the boy landed behind him.

He didn't even groan.

'I can walk. I can walk,' he said, getting up.

Brad helped him, putting his hand out and around the boy's shoulders. They stumbled toward the clearing in the shade.

17

They sat down, side by side, on the wet grass. The boy stared around him at the forest and the creek. He didn't seem to know what was happening. Brad watched him lay back on the grass and wondered if he was going to fall asleep again.

'Bet it hurts?' he said, wanting to keep the boy awakes.

The boy shrugged his shoulders. 'It did at first. Now, I can't feel anything.'

'Really?' Brad opened his eyes. He knew what it felt like to be stung.

'It was bad at first. But now — where are we?'

Brad shrugged his shoulders. 'Halfway to Brentwood,' he said. 'The car..' What could he tell him? 'The car ran out of petrol.'

They sat in silence for a moment.

'I've been stung before,' the boy said.

'Me too.'

'On the hand..' they both said at once, holding up an identical left hand. Brad smiled at the boy. It was funny to see what his own face looked like when the boy smiled back at him.

'I leant..' they both started again.

'You go,' Brad said.

'I leant against the trunk of a tree, to steady myself. I didn't even look at it.'

'I did the same..' Brad stopped. '...at Rashcombe Falls.'

The boy nodded and stared at him. They waited.

'Who are you?' Brad said, staring at the boy. He was exactly like him — but it was more than that. When he frowned, the boy frowned too. It was like — they were the same person.

'I thought I was you,' the boy said.

'What do you mean?'

'I used to be you. This morning I was you.'

'This morning? How could you be me?'

'My name's Brad — like yours is, right?'

Brad nodded.

'You live on Windermere?'

Brad nodded again.

'And yesterday,' the identical boy talked slowly, as though he was drugged. 'You walked to down to Hooper's Creek, and saw a boy there who looked just like you.'

'But that was you,' Brad said.

'No. It wasn't. It wasn't me at all, because yesterday, I was you. How else would I know what you'd seen?'

'Because you were the person I saw,' Brad said.

'No. I wasn't.'

18

'I really wasn't. There's another boy — a third boy. I saw him — with the man.'

Brad shook his head. He didn't know what to believe.

'Here, I'll prove it to you,' the boy said. 'Look at our clothes. We're wearing the same clothes.'

Brad looked. They were both wearing an identical red T-shirt with a black question mark on the front, black shorts, ankle socks and Nikes.

'You see? The other boy — he's wearing the clothes I had on yesterday.'

'What clothes? What clothes did you wear yesterday?'

'The green smiley T-shirt, black shorts, Nikes.'

Brad remembered. 'Which black shorts?' he said. He was wearing the same ones today.

'These ones. Look. We've both got them on.'

Brad stared at the shorts and shook his head.

He looked around him at the forest. It was getting late. The afternoon sun was golden on the tops of the trees. And everything below them had started to look dark and wet. It would be night soon. Most likely, it would rain. They had nothing to eat, and Brad could only wish he was at home. In the strange, golden half-light, everything took on an uncanny atmosphere, as though the boys had entered some dream world of mist and hidden creatures, where anything was possible.

Brad started to feel like he was talking to himself.

'Maybe,' the boy said, starting again. 'Just maybe, I know when it happened — at the creek.'

'When what happened?' Brad said.

'I walked away from you.'

Brad waited.◆

'You see, today,' the boy started again, 'when I got to the creek, I wanted to go straight across and look for the boy. But I knew it was a bad decision. Something inside said, 'No, wait for him here.'

'Yeah! That's it!' Brad said suddenly, excited by the memory. 'I wanted to go and look for the boy, but I thought I should wait.'

'Yeah, *you* waited. But *I* didn't listen. I just went straight into the water and plunged ahead. I walked away from you. And I got the feeling, right as I did it, that I'd done something dreadfully wrong. But I went anyway. I walked all the way up to the house.'

'Really?'

The boy nodded. 'There was a man there. A man with a car. I watched him for a while, and then I saw the boy. He was hiding on the veranda of the house. The man had a gun. And then I noticed the boy. He looked dirty and tired, as though he had spent all night on the veranda, and he was wearing the same clothes — green smiley T-shirt, black shorts — that I had been wearing yesterday.'

'When I realised, I started to get a sick feeling, as though something was wrong. The boy looked very white. He didn't look real. And then I realised what was making me so worried. I didn't *feel* real.'

'I'd done something dreadfully wrong.'

'I should never have crossed the creek so rashly. I was impelled. I turned around and went back to the creek.'

'You saw the boy?'

'Yes. But he frightened me. You see, I already had this feeling that something was horribly wrong. I wasn't a proper person anymore.'

Brad frowned.❖

'I stumbled back to the creek. I was thirsty. I climbed down the bank to fill the water bottle. I thought I was alone.' The boy shook his head and started to cry. 'And then I looked over to the old tree. The same tree that I'd planned to hide in. I could see something inside it. And then I realised. It was you. But I looked closer. I saw the water bottle at your feet — the same one I had; the T-shirt you were wearing — the same.'

Brad looked at the boy, at his T-shirt, his shorts. They were the same. What the boy was saying had to be right. They were wearing the same clothes. Black shorts, Nikes, red question mark T-shirt. They were identical.

'I think,' the boy went on, 'When I crossed the creek, I made a bad decision. I should have waited. But I didn't. I went straight ahead.'

'But how?'

The boy shrugged. 'I don't know,' he said. 'But I felt it. I felt that I'd done something really bad. It made me sick. I didn't feel real. I was lighter somehow.'

19

'How come I didn't see you?' Brad asked him. 'If you walked away from me, how come I didn't see you?'

The boy shrugged. Brad started again. ❖

'It doesn't make sense. If we are the same person, why did you run away from me at the creek?'

'I was scared,' the boy said. 'Suddenly, I wasn't real anymore. And I got the idea into my head that I couldn't let you catch me. If I let you catch me, I said to myself, I would certainly die. And now you have caught me, and I am going to die.'

'You're not going to die,' Brad said. He put his hand on the boy's arm. 'It's only the shock that kills you.'

'No. That's where you're wrong. It's got nothing to do with the stings. I can't even feel them now — I'm not real. I'm supposed to be you. I *used* to be you.'

Brad turned away from him and looked at the water.

It was difficult to accept what the boy was telling him. One person couldn't become two people? Could they?

Brad shrugged and looked down at the ground. There was a worm there, struggling under the surface. He looked at the boy and noticed the hole in his black shorts, where they had got caught on the gate, weeks ago. He looked at the shorts he was wearing, and then back at the boy's shorts again. Both of them had the same hole in the same place. And the same rusty stain.

20

'Did you talk to that man?'

'What?' the boy asked him.

'The man with the car — did you talk to him?'

'No. He looked like a weirdo.'

'Yeah, he did look like a weirdo.'

'Do you remember?' the boy asked, suddenly confused.

'No. We passed him on the road,' Brad said. 'You pointed to him. I hit him with the car.'

'You hit him!' The boy held his head still and then nodded. 'Oh yeah,' he said. 'I forgot.'

'What do you think he was doing?' Brad said. He felt bad about the man. He really had hit him with the car. But it didn't seem to matter anymore. Nothing seemed to matter.

The forest grew darker and quieter.

'Maybe he was pig shooting,' the boy said.◆

Brad nodded. There were pig tracks everywhere — and droppings.

21

Brad lay down on the grass next to his other half. 'Do you remember Con Wilkes?' he said.

'Yeah.'

'He goes pigging.'

'With dogs. Yeah, I know.'

'What about what I said to him?'

'When?'

'At Christian's.'

'You pig-mauling bastard, I said.'

'Oh yeah, I said—'

'I said.'

'Whatever.'

'And he hit me.'

'He lets his dogs maul the pigs, eh?' ❖

'Yeah, I know.'

Brad smiled and then they both started to laugh. It was like they had suddenly found a best friend. But then again, something about it didn't feel...quite right.

It got dark. Eventually, they fell asleep. And when Brad woke up, the boy was white and cold.

22

Brad reached over and held his wrist. It was cold and light, frail like the bones of a bird. It wasn't Brad's arm.

'Hey! Wake up!' he said, trying to rouse the boy. Brad felt for a pulse on his neck, and the boy's eyes opened.

'I'm dying,' he said.

It really did look like it. Brad could almost...see through him. Surely, he could see the grass through the boy. And then, as the stream of morning sunlight broke through the trees, it lit the boy's skin white and dissolved it, peeling away the child before Brad's eyes.

Within a moment, nothing was left. The child was gone. And Brad was alone. He sat down on the grass and put his head in his hands. He started to cry.

'Don't move a muscle,' someone said.

Brad turned and saw the man. He jumped in sudden fright. The man was standing on the grassy patch, backlit by sunlight, Brad couldn't see his face, only his wiry hair, lit golden in the sunshine. There was a dark patch where the man's face should have been. His shadow stretched toward Brad across the grassy slope.

Brad stood up. He felt sick.

'What's the matter with you?' the man asked him. He walked forward. 'What happened to your face? Oh, Jesus! Look at your arms and legs.'

Brad looked down at his arms and legs. There were white blisters, red marks, a million tiny needles. Pain.◆

Bright, white pain.

Stings?◆

But these were the boy's stings, weren't they?

Brad felt dizzy.

He looked at the man's face. A kind face? It was hard to tell.

And then everything, suddenly, turned black.