

# KIRSTY STUART

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## THE SPECIAL PLACE

MY BIG BROTHER was the best, but he's gone now. I don't know where he went but Mummy said he wouldn't be coming home again. This makes me sad. I remember that he used to eat my vegetables when Daddy would yell at me for not finishing them. I don't like vegetables, they're yucky. Hunter didn't like vegetables either but he would still steal them off my plate when Daddy wasn't looking so I wouldn't get into any more trouble. He used to always do stuff like that for me.

When the Anderson kids from next door would throw old apples at us on the way home from school, Hunter would throw them back as hard as he could. He would take me by the hand and say, 'Don't listen to them. You are the best sister in the world and if they hit you, I'll just hit them back.' His face would light up and he'd run off laughing, racing me back to the house. The loser would have to eat the worms Daddy caught the fish with, so we'd both run as fast as we could. Hunter would always win because he was quick—but he never made me eat those icky worms.

Everything changed that Sunday in the blackberry fields. Mummy used to make the best blackberry jam in the whole wide world. When I woke up she was sitting on my bed with a feather in her hand, tickling my nose as she always did to wake me up. I could smell her special pancakes cooking in the kitchen. Hunter was standing in the doorway in his bright yellow rain jacket. He wore that silly thing everywhere—even if it wasn't raining. He said that when he wore it he felt like he was invisible, that no one could see him as he explored the rocks in the hills behind our house, or sneak up on the cows in the paddocks behind Daddy's milking shed. Mummy told me that she had a surprise for us, but I had to get dressed and eat my breakfast before we could go.

Outside the sun was shining bright and it made my eyes hurt. All the cows were hiding under the trees in the paddocks and stared at us as we walked past them towards the forest. Mummy told me that we were going to the ‘special place’. Only my family knew about it; it was our little secret. It took a while to get there but it was always worth it in the end. It was dark and spooky in the forest, but up ahead I could see a bright light shining through the trees and I knew we were getting close. As the trees parted we saw the ‘special place’ open up, and in the middle of some grass was the giant blackberry bush. It was huge and covered in thorns. This was where Mummy picked her magic berries for her jam. She said that late at night fairies that lived in the forest would come and sprinkle magic dust on them to make the jam taste extra sweet. Daddy said that I wasn’t allowed to touch them and that I should supervise. Hunter was older than me so he already knew that the thorns were dangerous so he was allowed to walk around on his own. Mummy still kept an eye on him, but he was allowed to play as long as he didn’t run off.

Mummy and Daddy collected the blackberries that we had planted last year. Daddy would come and cut the plant every now and again because he said otherwise it would get out of control and take over the world. I knew he was just being silly, but sometimes I wondered if late at night all the vines would slither up from the forest and take me away in my sleep. I didn’t like this strange plant.

After a while we stopped for a break and Mummy gave me a sandwich to eat. Daddy looked for Hunter but we couldn’t find him; we yelled and yelled. Daddy started to get angry, but that was when Hunter popped up from behind the other side of the blackberry bush, covered in dust. Mummy said that he shouldn’t run off again because otherwise he could get hurt. We ate our lunch and stared at the clouds through the tops of the trees. Hunter said he saw a snake, and I said I thought I saw a kitten. The sky was so blue and I asked Hunter how the clouds stayed up that high in the air. Hunter said there were people that held the clouds up by strings. I knew he was lying.

Hunter said he felt funny. Mummy thought it might have been the sandwiches. Daddy said that we had been out in the sun so long that maybe he had got sun stroke—whatever that was. So they decided to take us home; it was getting close to dinner anyway, so we packed up our berries and started to walk back to the house. Hunter looked pale and I wondered what was wrong with him. Mummy said not to worry and that after a good night’s sleep he would be all better. He said that he felt cold. I didn’t feel cold.

The next day I heard a lot of people in the kitchen. A man was sitting at the table when I walked in and Mummy was crying in the corner. Daddy's face was red and his eyes were pink. I asked Mummy why she was crying but Daddy said that I shouldn't disturb her. The man was dressed in funny clothes and had a lot of papers. I could see a large van in the driveway with pretty colours all over it and bright lights on the roof. I left the room looking for Hunter because he should have been up by now. When I opened the door I could see his bed was empty, but the sheets were lying all over the floor. I wondered why Mummy hadn't picked them up.

When I went back into the kitchen and asked Daddy where Hunter was, Mummy started to cry again and the man said that he was very sorry. I didn't understand what he had to be sorry about; I just wanted to know where Hunter was. I could hear the TV playing in the lounge room and it sounded like The Wiggles. I thought Hunter would be in there dancing as he did whenever they would sing 'Wake up Jeff', but he was not.

Daddy took the man to the door and said goodbye. Mummy continued to cry in the corner. Her eyes were puffy and her hands shook as she held them to her face. Daddy watched as the van drove back to the road towards town. I asked Mummy where Hunter was again, but Daddy turned around and yelled at me to stop. I didn't understand why he was so mad at me.

Hunter has been gone for two years now. I don't have anyone to eat my vegetables for me and the boys from next door still throw their apples. I don't know where Hunter went, but now we don't go to the 'special place' anymore and Mummy has stopped making her blackberry jam. Daddy says that one day I will see Hunter again, but until then I have to wear my gumboots whenever I'm playing outside because if I don't the snakes will come and take me away, just like my big brother.