

A Short Story

Behind the Limestone



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As our world changes in the blink of an eye, the words of this story are assisted by AI; the story itself was designed and constructed by the author.

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PROLOGUE

This might sound corny, but someone asked me as we were sitting around a campfire, "Does anyone know of any ghost stories? Well, we visited a tourist cave that day, and the events there inspired me to tell this story. I'll call it 'Behind the Limestone'.

SEABED



It was the kind of day that felt too good to waste. The ocean was still too cold for swimming, and the mountains too harsh for camping, so the only option left was the open road. A family of four packed into their car and headed out toward the quiet, remote township of Wee Jasper in New South Wales. The road wound through the limestone country—an ancient seabed long since drained of its waters. What remained stretched across the land for kilometres: pale rock formations rising through the earth like the bones of something enormous buried beneath the surface. The formations were strange. Jagged. Sharp-edged. They jutted upward in uneven rows, as if the ground had been ploughed by something far older than man. Out beyond the roadside, the fields of limestone shimmered under the afternoon sun.

The car rolled to a stop. “Let’s stretch our legs,” the mother said. Before the engine had even settled, her two boys burst from the back seat and ran toward the rocks.

“Watch yourselves!” she called after them.

“Yeah, Ma—no worries!” Joey shouted back without turning. Jeremy followed, smaller legs working twice as hard to keep up.

“Joey! Wait up!” Joey stopped just long enough to turn, grinning.

“Too slow! Keep up—or get left behind!” Jeremy frowned but pushed harder, scrambling after him.

They turned it into a game. The grass became molten lava. The rocks were the only safe ground. Each jump had to be perfect. Each landing is steady. The limestone was sharper than it looked, its edges biting through the soles of their shoes. More than once, Jeremy slipped and dropped into the grass, groaning as Joey

laughed and called out the score. Minutes passed. The sun hung high. The world felt big, open, and safe.

“Boys! Time’s up!” Their mother’s voice carried across the field.

Joey didn’t hesitate. He leapt from his rock and sprinted back toward the car. Jeremy groaned. “Hey! Wait up!” He turned, eyeing the gap between himself and the next rock. It was longer than the others. Too far. But Joey was already halfway back. Jeremy clenched his jaw. Then jumped.

His foot hit the edge. Slipped. For a split second, he thought he’d recover, then the ground disappeared. The grass gave way beneath him. His body dropped through a narrow opening, no bigger than a basketball.

“Joey!”

His fingers clawed at the earth, tearing through grass and dirt, but there was nothing to hold. The world tilted. Then he was falling. Sliding. Scraping through a tight, jagged tunnel that swallowed him whole.

He hit the bottom hard. The air left his lungs in a silent gasp. Darkness closed in instantly—complete and suffocating. Not dim. Not shadowed. Absolute. Jeremy tried to move. Pain shot through his legs, sharp and blinding. He cried out, his voice swallowed almost immediately by the heavy stillness around him. He reached out blindly. The walls were slick. Cold. Wet. His fingers slid across the surface as though the cave itself was breathing against him.

“Joey...?” he whispered.

Nothing answered. The silence pressed in. The cold crept through his clothes. And somewhere deep inside him, something shifted. A slow, creeping realisation. He wasn’t just lost. He was alone.

When Joey got back to the car, his mother asked him,
“Where Jeremy?”

He turned around to see no sign of him. They all went to search for Jeremy. They called JEREMY! JEREMY, but there was no answer. Little did they know what the next twenty-four hours would bring.

SENSE OF DREAD

The limestone region around Wee Jasper is famous for its caves. Tourists come from all over to walk through them and be guided safely along narrow paths, under low ceilings, past ancient rock formations shaped by time and water. But the locals know something else about the land. It shifts, subtly and quietly. And sometimes... without warning. Earthquakes are not uncommon. When they come, the surface might barely react, but underground, it's a different story. Passages collapse. New chambers open. Old ones seal themselves shut as though they had never existed. The caves are never truly still. They are changing. Always.

On this particular day, there was an earthquake. Julie, an experienced cave guide, didn't feel the quake during her final tour through the well-known cave. She had spent years guiding people through the dark. She knew every turn of the main cave. Every narrow passage. Every echo. Or at least... she thought she did. Her final tour for the day had just ended. The last of the visitors had filed out, their voices fading into the open air beyond the entrance. A few had laughed nervously, and others were relieved to be back in the light. None of them had noticed anything unusual. She lingered behind, as she always did, checking the pathways, making sure no one had been left behind. The cave lights hummed faintly overhead. A long stretch—about ten metres—separated the switch from the entrance gate. She reached for it. Paused. Listened.

At first, she thought it was nothing. Just the cave settling. Water dripping. The quiet shifting of stone. Then it came again. A sound. Faint. Thin. Almost too soft to notice. A cry.

Julie froze. Her hand hovered near the switch. She turned her head slightly, listening harder. Silence followed. Heavy. Absolute.

She flicked the lights off. Darkness swallowed the cave instantly. And the sound came back. Clearer this time. Not loud. But unmistakable. A child is crying.

Julie's breath caught. She fumbled for the switch and slammed it back on. The lights flickered—The cave returned. Empty. Still. Silent.

"Hello?" she called, her voice echoing along the stone. No answer.

Heart pounding now, she stepped deeper into the cave. Her boots scraped softly against the ground as she moved through the passages, scanning every corner, every recess where someone could be hiding... or hurt.

"Is anyone there?" Only her own voice came back to her.

She searched for over an hour. Every chamber. Every bend in the path. Nothing. No one.

Eventually, unease gave way to doubt. Maybe she had imagined it. Maybe it was just the cave. Julie returned to the entrance. She stood there for a long moment, staring at the switch. Then, slowly, she turned off the lights. Darkness. The crying started immediately. Closer. So close it felt like it was right beside her. Julie gasped and hit the switch again. Light flooded the cave. The sound vanished. This time, she didn't hesitate. She moved quickly toward the exit, her earlier confidence gone, replaced by something colder. Something instinctive. Fear.

As she stepped into the final stretch toward the gate, a chill crept over her skin. Not the natural cold of the cave. Something deeper. Heavier. It felt wrong. Like stepping into a place she wasn't meant to be. The closer she got to the entrance, the stronger the feeling became. A weight pressing down on her chest. A hollow ache in her stomach. And then a thought.

"Don't leave." Julie stopped dead.

Her breath caught in her throat. The cave behind her stretched into darkness. Silent. Watching. She turned sharply and looked back. Nothing. But the feeling didn't go away. It shifted into something else. Not fear. Not quite perhaps loss. A deep, aching sense of abandonment. So sudden and overwhelming it made her chest tighten. Her eyes burned. As if someone had been left behind.

Julie staggered the last few steps and pushed through the gate, stepping out into the open air. The feeling loosened instantly. The weight lifted. But it didn't disappear completely. It lingered. Like something that had followed her... right to the edge.

She reached for her phone with trembling hands and called her boss. When he answered, she barely got the words out.

"I heard something in the cave." There was a pause. Then, "... You too?" Julie's stomach dropped. He explained that the night before, while locking up, he had heard the same thing. A faint cry. He had searched. Found nothing. Neither of them said what they were both thinking. That something in the cave didn't want to be found. Julie ended the call and stood beside her car for a moment, staring back toward the entrance in the distance. The cave looked the same as it always had. Quiet and harmless.

As she drove home, the unease settled deeper into her body. A dull ache. A heaviness she couldn't shake. By the time she reached her house, she felt exhausted. Drained. As though something had taken more from her than just time.

That night, sleep didn't come easily. And when it did, it brought something with it.

A boy, sitting in a doctor's waiting room, afraid. He was waiting to see the doctor about his problem. His mother, sitting beside him, was also concerned. His school teacher had recommended that he see a specialist. The doctor had run some tests and was now waiting for the results. There was one result he dreaded: being sent to a specialised school and having to take medicine. All this meant that he wasn't a normal kid. The last thing the boy wanted to do was to go to a special school. The waiting room was quiet when the doctor came out. The doctor indicated that they should come through to his office. As the boy walked past the receptionist, he feared his fate. The boy sat down in a comfy seat next to his mother. The doctor had one of those swingy ball things on a tripod swinging on his desk. The boy couldn't stop looking at it. Memorised by it swinging back and forth, back and forth. The doctor looked concerned, he said "Well I think I know

what the problem is" He looked at the boy, he got out of his seat and walked around the desk continually staring at the boy, The boy looked up and the strangeness of the doctor's eyes had the boys on edge, the boy's fate was decided at that moment and the boy knew what the problem was all this time and the doctor confirmed it The doctor with a stone-cold look said "You left him behind boy, you left him to die, Joey!" Joey turned to her and repeated, "You left him behind, Julie."

Julie woke up drenched in sweat; the fever had broken, and she lay there contemplating the dream about the boy. Julie couldn't remember how she got there. It was a moonless night, and the darkness was so great that Julie couldn't see her hand in front of her face. She felt a little relieved as though a huge weight was lifted off her shoulders. She remembered the cave and the sound. She then heard a noise outside her bedroom.

She lived on a farm with an old dormitory-style shearer's hut. The hut sat alone at the edge of the property, just beyond the last fence line where the paddocks gave way to rough ground and scattered limestone. It looked older than it should have. The timber walls had warped over time, the boards slightly bowed, as if they had shifted and never quite settled back into place. The roof sagged gently in the middle. Not enough to collapse. Just enough to notice. A narrow veranda ran along the front, its wooden boards darkened with age. Some dipped slightly underfoot, others creaked even when there was no weight on them—soft, irregular sounds that came and went without warning.

She wasn't disturbed at first, although this noise was continuous and regular, "Thump! Thump! like a sack of potatoes beating across the floorboards. The noise came from outside her door. She turned on her bedside light, and the beating stopped. Perhaps whatever it was, it was startled by the light and froze. She paused. She was reminded by the noise in the cave, which would stop when the lights were out. She experimented by flicking off the light. The thumping sound started to move away from the door. The repetitive noise would grow fainter and then louder, as though

it were circling the cabin. Her heart would beat with every thump. As the sound came closer to her door, she called out

"Who's there?" The thumping stopped, and then she was overwhelmed by an aroma. The familiar smell of dampness, the scent she was so much adapted to, the aroma of the cave.

BILBYS

The hormone Melatonin, produced in the brain's pineal gland, is known as the "sleep or darkness hormone." Melatonin promotes sleep by signalling the brain that it is time to rest. This signal helps initiate the body's physiological preparations for sleep—muscles relax and a feeling of drowsiness sets in. Humans need sleep because it is the only way the body can slow down enough to cleanse itself from its own waste. Humans are conditioned to be conscious for 16 hours and sleep for eight hours based on a typical Earth day. The body needs sleep time to refresh itself and be ready for another day of consciousness. So, when you lie in darkness, the body thinks it's time to sleep, and when you see the light, it's time to be awake.

Jeremy had been asleep for some time, and when he awoke, he wasn't sure he was awake or still sleeping. He was sure he had his eyes open; the darkness in the cave was still there. Time didn't feel the same in the dark. He moved carefully, slowly. The pain in his legs had dulled, but every movement still cost something. He moved his hand around, and he could still feel the sliminess of the cave walls next to him. Tears welled up as he was reminded of the situation. He called out to Joey again, hoping he could be heard and that this was all a joke. Frustrated, he tried to move, hoping to climb back up to where he had fallen. It was too dark, and so there was no clue about which way to go. He felt wedged in, and it was hard for him to move around. He lay there for quite some time. The darkness reminded him of the night before, when he and his brother went to an amusement park.

Jeremy remembered the basketball stall with the sign above reading “3 SHOTS – WIN A PRIZE”

He recalled with disappointment that the hoop was mounted too high; perhaps too high for him to toss the ball. He took the basketball from the rack. It felt heavier than he had expected.

“Give it a go,” a strange-looking man behind the stall said. So he lined up the shot and threw.

The man wearing a cap with a possum symbol on the front said that if he made three baskets in a row, he would win a Nerf machine gun. Jeremy became excited about the thought of shooting his brother. Although the man added,

“I believe the glow sticks are the better prize for you.”

He missed his last shot, so he received the glow sticks. He was initially disappointed not to have won the major award, but he is glad now. He reached into his pocket, hoping to feel the glow stick bag. He became excited when he felt them. He took one out. He knew he had to break the compound, so he quickly bent the tube. The darkness remained, no light illuminating from the stick. Perhaps the compound was mixed while in his pocket. He reached in for another with the same result. Determined, he reached for another, noting that there were only two left, broke it, and instantly the cave came to light. The stick's luminescence was so minimal during the day, but it was very noticeable in total darkness. He blinked a few times, letting his eyes adjust. The cave slowly came into view. The walls were pale. Almost white in places. They caught the light strangely, reflecting it back in soft, uneven patches, as if the whole cave were glowing from within. It should have made him feel better. It didn't. The light was a faint yellow and not enough to see around the shadows.

Jeremy pushed himself up slowly. His hand pressed against the wall, feeling cold and wet. The surface looked smooth at first glance, but up close it was full of tiny ridges and shallow grooves, as if something had worn it away over time. He pulled his hand back and wiped it on his shirt.

The cave stretched out in front of him. Not one tunnel, but many. Passages opening in different directions, some narrow, some

wide, all glowing faintly in that same dull light. Jeremy turned in a slow circle. Everything looked the same. The light flattened everything, made distance hard to judge. Jeremy took a step forward, moving towards one of the passages. For a moment, he thought he saw something ahead. A shape, low to the ground. He blinked. It was gone. Perhaps just rock.

Looking up into the ceiling, he could see the narrow tube above. He seemed to be at the base of the chamber. The ceiling looked too high and difficult to reach, and it appeared to be a tight squeeze. Gravity would be a deterrent to getting through the small opening, but it was going up, and he felt that it was the way to go. He looked around and saw notches in the walls that led to an opening. He heaved his way up, crawled through the opening, and found that the chamber was large enough for him to stand. His legs were sore, but he could still climb. Remembering that the glow sticks had a limited time, he went around the chamber to see if there was another way up.

The upper chamber had another opening, so he went through to explore. After some time, the cave proved to be a maze of small and large chambers. He found moving through the cave painful and exhausting; it was hard to climb, and sometimes he had to crawl due to the limestone's smoothness and sliminess. When the glow stick started to dim, Jeremy reached into his pocket to pull out the last one. Nervous, he bent it, and fortunately, it came to light. He had more time. The brighter light made him notice an opening at the top of the cave, and he managed to climb up to it. The slippery rocks made it difficult, but he persisted. He was hopeful that if he went through the opening, he would be able to see the exit, but unfortunately, it never came. He had reached a dead end, and the only way out was back down to the larger chamber. He lay there exhausted, too tired to move, and he closed his eyes. While he was asleep, the glow stick dimmed and eventually went out.

Julie lay still on the bed, entranced by looking at the door; the smell was strong but not overbearing. She could hear a rumbling noise in the distance, and then it became louder; the bed started to shake. She was locked into a trance, and the earthquake had helped her snap out of it. She turned on the light. The picture frame of her parents fell off the dresser, and other items around the room had toppled as well. She recognised it as an occasional tremor and waited for it to stop. The noise outside her bedroom had moved from the veranda to the back lawn. She got up and cautiously opened the door.

The light from her bedroom was enough for her to see a small animal moving towards the back fence. The animal appeared to be carrying a bag in its mouth. She recognised the bag and the animal. She was relieved to identify the source of the unknown noise. The bag was a small feedbag that she had been using to feed the birds in the yard. This animal had other ideas. One of Julie's hobbies, which had brought her to this place, was studying the *Macrotis Lagotis* species, otherwise known as the Greater Bilby.

She had heard through her university course that there was a farmer, from the Wee Jasper region, who was breeding Bilbys on his land. Back in the '60s, the farmer had travelled around West Australia looking for the Bilbys. He found and captured a family of Bilbys and brought them back to New South Wales. The Bilby is a small nocturnal marsupial that was nearly extinct due to predation by wild cats, dogs, and foxes. The Bilbys were forced out into remote desert areas where their predator populations were limited. However, bringing the Bilbys into his environment would be a challenge. For the Bilbys to survive, he would have to control the local cat, dog, and fox populations. It had taken weekly spotlighting trips to ensure they were safe from their predators.

When she moved into the quarters, there was a condition that she wasn't allowed to bring either cats or dogs. She was sad when she left her Buster at her parents' home. She felt at times that canine would have been a perfect companion, especially when coping with strange noises in the night.

Julie stepped off the veranda and into the darkness to retrieve her feed bag. The Bilby slipped through the back fence and hopped down past the back paddock. Julie noticed the light in the eastern sky and knew that the sunrise was imminent. She was hopeful of tracking the marsupial critter to see where it borrowed. She followed the long-nosed, snouted creature for quite a while until it got to a large limestone rock formation. She could see it better now that the sun had risen. It was a nocturnal animal and, at any moment, it would find its burrow and lie for the day. She lost sight of the Bilby after it hopped over the rock formation. When she got to the boulders, she peeked over, just in time to see the Bilby drop down into its burrow. She was annoyed that it got away, but happy that she knew of the lair. Her concentration was interrupted by a commotion of noise to her right. She looked over and couldn't believe what she saw.

There was another rock formation, but this time it was shaped like a flock of quacking ducks. What made it so strange was that the eight or nine rocks were positioned in a perfect circle around this boulder. She went to investigate, and when she got to the boulder, she noticed a depression in the earth and at the base was a deep, dark void.

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

The boy felt himself hurtling through a dark tunnel, as if he were strapped into the front carriage of a roller coaster, dragged forward by an unseen force. The air rushed past him, cold and damp, carrying the scent of earth and stone. Ahead, a blinding light burned at the end of the tunnel—distant, yet pulling him closer with every second. Along the walls, shapes began to form. Figures. Carvings. They stretched upward like ancient totems, their hollow eyes fixed on him as he passed. Their forms twisted and shifted, as though alive, telling a story he almost understood—but not quite. They seemed to urge him forward... toward the light. He

forced himself to look ahead. A shape emerged beside the track. A fox.

It crouched low, unnaturally still, its body tense. Its eyes caught the light—two bright reflections, like twin spotlights piercing the darkness. The boy felt a chill crawl through him as the fox stared directly at him. Then, as the carriage roared past, the fox slowly turned its head... not toward him, but toward the light. Another figure appeared, smaller and stranger.

The figure looked like an enormous rat, but it was wrong. Its ears were too long, its snout too narrow, its body stretched like something caught between a rat and a kangaroo. In its mouth, it carried a small bag. As the boy passed, the creature paused... then gently dropped the bag onto the ground. And just like the fox, it turned its gaze toward the light. The brightness ahead grew stronger, almost unbearable. Then, suddenly, a wall of movement. Ducks.

A cluster of them stood across the track, packed tightly together, quacking loudly and aggressively. Their wings flapped, their bodies shifting as if they were blocking his path. The carriage began to slow, then came to a stop. The boy leaned forward, reaching out, desperate. "Go... go!" he tried to will it. But the carriage shuddered to a halt. The ducks didn't move.

The light was right there—so close now it burned his eyes. He turned his head away, raising his arm to shield his face as the brightness swallowed everything.

Jeremy opened his eyes with his arm covering his face. He was lying on his back with his head turned to the side. Jeremy lay there for a while thinking of the dream. He was admiring the sliminess of the cave walk. He could hear a drip. He suddenly realised that if he could see the wall, then there must be light. He took his arm away from his face and looked up towards the ceiling of the cave to see a bright light. The bright light hurt his eyes, and he closed them. With excitement, he opens them again only to close them. After a minute, he squinted his eyes enough to keep

them open. He could just see the blue sky through the hole. He got up to see if he could get to the hole, but it was too high. He kept looking at it. Suddenly, the light went dim, and so did the light in the cave. With his eye fixed on the hole, he could just make out a face. It was the face of a woman looking into the cave. He yelled out, "Help me!"

When Julie got to the rock formation. She saw in the middle of the depression a small sinkhole. She was familiar with this area, and she hadn't noticed it before. From her experience as a cave guide and the stories she told, caves can sometimes open and close again due to earthquakes. She wondered whether this hole had opened up this morning due to the earthquake. She knelt down to take a look. She knew that she had to be careful because looking down into any hole in Australia might bring surprises. The opening was the size of a basketball and appeared to be deep and dark. She slowly peeked into the hole, and when she did, she could hardly see anything because her head had blocked out the light. She was being careful, and with any movement, she would be ready to jump out of the way. Then she heard the sound of a boy's voice; it frightened her, and she instinctively jumped up out of the depression. With all the strangeness of this morning, it was getting stranger. Gathering her thoughts together, she realised that what she heard could be real and that someone might actually be down there. She slowly went back to the hole and called into the void, "Hello"

Jeremy's hopes were lost when the hole grew brighter, and the face disappeared. He stared at the opening, wishing for the face to appear again. He called out again and again, but nothing. After some time looking and hoping, she appeared. This time, the woman had called out "Hello!" Jeremy responded, telling her he was stuck down there. She said, "Can you make your way up somehow?" and Jeremy looked around and saw that the hole was too high above him. Her hand had appeared and was trying to reach down to help him up, and he tried to jump up and grab on, but it was too high. He made several attempts without success. She told him she had an idea and would be back shortly.

Julie got up from her position and looked around for a long piece of wood. It was an old trick for cave guides to carry a stick just in case somebody had fallen down somewhere in the caves. She searched around and found the perfect branch. She would stick the branch down the hole where he could hold on to it while she pulled him up. She was hoping the boy was light enough. The opening was small, but she worked out that a little boy could probably fit through it. She yelled out to the boy about her intentions. She poked the branch down far enough for him to grab on. She felt the resistance, and she yelled,

"Are you ready?", and she could just hear the positive reply.

The little boy was light, and she managed to pull the branch up, and all of a sudden, the weight went light again, like a fish that got away. She pushed the stick lower, thinking that the boy must have slipped off the limb. She felt the resistance and pulled the branch up again. She could brace her feet on either side of the hole to get leverage. She pulled up the branch about a foot, and the weight went light again. She pulled the branch out of the tunnel.

She peeked through and asked if he was alright. He said that his hands kept slipping. She looked at the straight limb and took off her shirt, wrapped it around the thinner part of the branch, and poked it down the hole. She felt the resistance again, hoping he was holding on at the other end. She started to pull up again. This time, she felt the weight and kept pulling. She could just see his hands coming through the hole, and she adjusted her grip to grab onto the wrists. With success, she grabbed onto both hands and slowly pulled him out of the hole. She lost her balance and fell backwards with the boy on top of her. She held him long enough and was satisfied that he was safe.

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Jeremy grew anxious when he saw the branch. He grabbed onto it and held on for his life, but his hands kept slipping. When the branch came down a second time, wrapped in a cloth, Jeremy grabbed it, which seemed to give him a better grip. He was worried

he wouldn't fit through the hole, but he did. He could feel her hands grabbing him and helping him through. When he was through the hole, he landed on her as she fell down and in her arms. He lay there for a while, crying. Then he went to get up and realised that she was half-naked and jumped up, not knowing what to do.

Julie felt the boy pull away and look at her bosom. She suddenly realised the situation, grabbed the branch, unwrapped her shirt, and put it on. The tense moment was compounded with awkwardness and a sense of relief. Then they both looked at each other and began to laugh hysterically.

She remembered her Uni lecturer once said, "Laughter is known to establish a positive emotional climate and a sense of connection between two people. Therefore, levity is known to defuse anxiety and stress and pave the way for intimacy."

Julie hadn't had a good laugh for a very long time, and with the morning she had, it was long overdue. She asked the boy how he got down there. When he replied, it was as if the floodgates had opened as he told his story, and she found it hard to keep up. He told her he was playing with his brother, Joey, when he fell into a hole. He mentioned that he had glow sticks he had won the night before and were still in his pocket. He said he used them to search around for a cave opening. When the last glow stick went out, he thought he was done. He said that he fell asleep and had a bizarre dream about a roller coaster ride, and that he saw a strange, small animal like a cross between a Kangaroo and a rat. When he woke up, he saw the opening.

Julie was flabbergasted. She also remembers the dream she had about the boy named Joey, as Jeremy described it, which seemed like a Greater Bilby in his dream. She wondered whether there was a connection. Julie told Jeremy that she would help him back to her quarters, and it was a short drive to Wee Jasper to look for his family.

REFLECTION

Wee Jasper is a small village with a general store, post office, a few houses and a park. When Julie turned into Wee Jasper T junction, she could see two police vehicles parked outside the general store. Julie knew that they must be searching for the boy. She parked, and they both went to the door.

When Julie pushed open the door to the general store, the soft chime above it rang out, an ordinary sound that somehow felt heavy with meaning. The room fell quiet for just a moment, as if the world itself had paused. Jeremy hesitated at her side.

Inside, a small group of people stood gathered near the counter. Two police officers lingered nearby, speaking in low voices. A woman stood with her arms wrapped tightly around herself, her face pale, her eyes red from crying. Beside her stood a boy, older and restless, scanning the room again and again as if he would not give up hope. And then the man turned.

For a split second, he didn't move. His eyes landed on Jeremy, but it was as though his mind couldn't catch up to what he was seeing. Hope and disbelief collided across his face.

"Jeremy...?" The word barely escaped him.

Jeremy froze, becoming emotional. "Dad...?"

The man crossed the room in an instant. He dropped to his knees and pulled Jeremy into his arms so tightly it was as if he was afraid the boy might disappear again. Jeremy let out a broken sob as he clung to him, his small hands gripping the back of his father's shirt.

"I thought—" his father's voice cracked, unable to finish. He buried his face into Jeremy's shoulder, holding him there, grounding himself in the reality that his son was alive.

The mother rushed forward next.

"Oh my God—Jeremy!" she cried, her voice trembling as she wrapped her arms around both of them.

She kept repeating his name over and over, as if saying it enough times would make it all real. The older boy, Joey, stood still just a few steps away. His face had drained of colour. For a moment, he couldn't move. Couldn't speak. Then Jeremy looked up, their eyes met.

Everything Joey had been holding back broke all at once. He stepped forward slowly at first, then faster, and pulled Jeremy into a tight embrace.

"I thought I lost you..." Joey whispered, his voice shaking.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..." Jeremy hugged him back without hesitation.

"It's okay," he said quietly, though his voice trembled too.

The family held onto each other, the weight of the last twenty-four hours pouring out in tears, in apologies, in relief. Around them, the room softened, voices hushed, and even the police stepped back, giving them space.

Julie stood near the doorway, watching. At first, she simply took in the moment, the kind of moment that didn't come often in life. Raw, unfiltered, and real. After an unusual morning, the Bilby had drawn her to the cave somehow, and she thought it might be an omen or a foreboding sign. In her studies about the Greater Bilby, she remembered her thesis on the Greater Bilby, and when she researched its totem, it said

"A light in the darkness, where the Bilby is the gentle shadow. It is a solitary creature, intimate with shadows and darkness. It negotiates its way through the heath, sand and earth and teaches us the safety and security that is found in darkness, and they guide those who are scared of the dark."

She remembers how she wrote about it, but was cynical about the idea of a totem. Now, she understood it and was familiar with the concept of how people would talk about fate and chance in the same sentence. It was certainly the case today. She smiled, then remembered the circle of rocks that looked like ducks, which drew her to the hole. The ducks in Jeremy's dream. She wondered whether there was a connection. She shook her head and said,

'Noooo' and began to laugh again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Over the last 20 years, I've started to write things down; my father published many books, so there must be some interest there. I've been writing fiction as a hobby and to improve my writing skills, keeping diaries of our travels. At first, it was handwriting, and now it's in electronic form. I once attended a writing forum, and the lecturer said that to be a good writer, you either need to be extremely talented or write one million words. It's daunting, I know, but I'm not there yet. Perhaps it will be two. I'll let you be the judge.

Andrew Cheffers