

Opening extract from

Deadly!

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Part One

NUDE

The story begins . . .

It's Amy's birthday, but none of her surprises is what she expected. Her mum's missing, her dad's left, and Amy's stuck holding a bawling baby she's never seen before. And now a little blond kid is shoving her into the back of a speeding military vehicle . . .

Meanwhile, Sprocket has no idea how he ended up all alone in the bush, naked and with no food. He's lost his way, he's lost his clothes and he's lost his memory. One thing's for sure – being chased around the rainforest by fiendish little brats isn't going to help him remember anything . . .

DEADLY!
Once you start you won't stop . . .

SPROCKET

ONE

There were three things for sure.

I was naked.

I didn't know who I was.

And I needed to go to the loo.

Stones cut into my cold, bare feet as I hobbled across the narrow hillside track. I made my way to a rocky clearing and squatted down behind a tree. It would have to do. There was no toilet. And no paper. But when you have to go, you have to go.

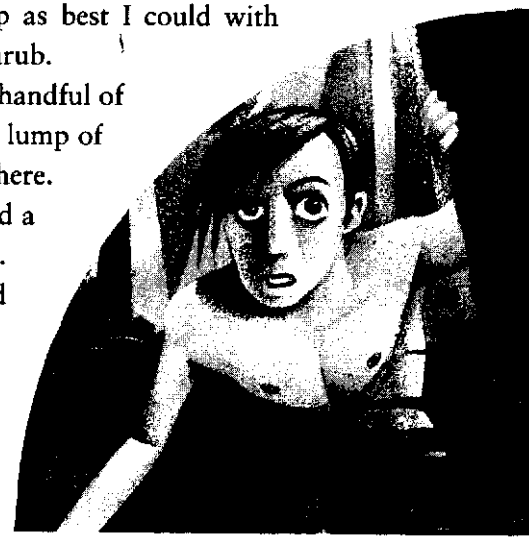
'Ah,' I said. 'That's better.'

I cleaned myself up as best I could with some leaves from a shrub.

Then I picked up a handful of dirt to cover the large lump of poo I had deposited there.

'Drop that,' snapped a voice from behind me.

I turned around and saw a boy about six years old with a



pretty face and curly blond hair. He wore an outfit like a jungle fighter. Not dress-ups – the real thing. Only pint-sized.

The dirt fell from my hand as I stared at him with astonishment. 'Hey,' I said. 'Where did you come from? Where's your mummy?'

Maybe I could help him and he could help me. I had woken with the dawn. Naked on the grass. That's all I knew about myself.

He didn't answer. He was an odd little kid. In one hand he held a small spoon. And in the other a mobile phone. He flicked the phone open, pressed a couple of buttons and spoke quickly into it.

'He's here,' he said into the phone. 'About half a kilometre along the track.' He glanced at my half-covered poop. 'And he's done a nice big one.'

A look of annoyance crossed his face and he began jabbing away at the buttons with his fingers. 'You're breaking up,' he yelled into the phone. He began pacing around trying to find a spot with better reception. Suddenly he threw the phone down on the ground and jumped on it. 'Pathetic,' he shouted. 'Cheap rubbish.'

'It's all right, Titch,' I told him. 'Your mummy can't be far away. Don't get upset. We'll find her.'

Maybe his mother could also help me. At least she might have some clothes I could borrow.

I tried to sound relaxed but I was worried. What was his mum going to say when she saw me in the nude?

The angelic little boy had a devilish smile. He didn't appear surprised that I was naked. And he seemed to know

who I was. 'Just you stay there, son,' he said. 'You're not going to get away this time.'

Talk about weird. He should have been at kindergarten doing a finger painting or having milk and fruit. Not standing here in the rainforest ordering me around like a bossy bank manager. Maybe he was a relation. Maybe he was my little brother. He had hard eyes. But perhaps I had hard eyes too. I didn't even know what I looked like. It was a terrible feeling.

'Do you know me?' I asked.

'Just you take it easy,' he answered. 'There's no one around here to help you. Think about it. Consider your options. All alone in the bush, naked with no food. Better to give yourself up. This is rough country. You need clothes.'

He was right. The morning sun was just beginning to rise and I was shivering in the cool morning air.

And embarrassed.

He talked funny for a little kid. The words seemed too big for his mouth. I started to feel uneasy. But surely this little boy couldn't hurt me? He was only half my size.

The angel-faced brat reached into his pocket and took out a large white handkerchief. 'I think you have something that belongs to me,' he said.

He was crazy. I was stark naked. I had no pockets. What could I possibly have that belonged to someone else?

Dimples appeared on his rosy cheeks. He grinned with delight, dropped to his knees and spread the handkerchief out on the ground. 'Good,' he said, motioning at my fresh piece of poop. He gently scooped it up with the spoon and

placed it on the handkerchief. He looked at the big brown lump of poo with sparkling eyes. As if it was made of gold.

Oh yuck. He was pinching my poop. Shovelling up my . . . Disgusting. Gross. Surely this was a dream? It must be a nightmare.

The kid was too confident for his age. His eyes were old. They seemed to know things that they shouldn't. They weren't the eyes of a child. It just didn't make sense.

This couldn't be happening. At any moment I would wake up to find a smiling mother telling me that everything was all right.

I made one last effort to be friendly. 'What's your name?' I asked.

'Shut up,' he said. He was peering down the rough hilly track.

I put on a false grin. 'OK,' I said. 'If you won't tell me your name I'll call you Pooper Scooper.'

He didn't reply. He was listening to the sound of an engine. An engine with a loud, unfriendly growl.

Someone else was coming.

Pooper Scooper jumped to his feet as a truck rumbled around the bend. It was a four-wheel drive, a khaki-coloured Hummer. A low, mean military vehicle with huge off-road tyres. It left the track and crawled right over a large rock in the clearing. I half expected to see soldiers staring through the narrow slit of its windscreen. But I couldn't see anyone. The glass was tinted black.

The driver jumped out onto the long grass. A girl. She was a little kid too. About the same age as Pooper Scooper – five

or six at the most. What was she doing driving a truck? She must have been sitting on a pillow just to see over the steering wheel. She wore red and blue racing-car gloves, a baseball cap and a driving jacket fit for a Formula One champion. It was covered in advertisements and bright sewn-on patches. One of them read, REPTILE. The name suited her. She licked her lips with a flicking tongue. Just like a lizard about to catch a fly.

Someone inside lifted a canvas flap on the back of the Hummer. Two more infants jumped out. They were dressed in expensive walking gear. They had Nike boots and designer jeans. One wore a woollen beanie on his head. The other had spiky red hair and scowled a lot.

They carried backpacks with aluminium frames. Ropes, knives and whistles hung from their belts. The knives had big blades and burnt bone handles. Everything they owned was new and shiny – state of the art. Each of them had a mobile phone strapped on at the waist. They all sported military watches and compasses. The red-haired guerrilla held a large net.

Each one had the same creepy, knowing eyes.

I just stood there gaping at the crazy sight. And as I did a feeling of coming danger crawled over my naked skin. An alarm bell rang inside my brain. I was naked but they didn't seem to care. I felt like . . . prey.

'Time to go,' I said to myself.

Too late. The little scowler's net fell over my head and wrapped itself around my naked body. I felt a rope being tied around my ankles.

The tiny hunters had me trapped.

The kid in the beanie shouted excitedly at Pooper Scooper. 'Where is it?'

Pooper Scooper pointed to his handkerchief on the ground near by. For a moment they lost interest in me. They all gathered excitedly around my piece of poop. Beanie was so worked up that he began jabbing at it with his bare fingers. Reptile pulled off bits of poo with her gloved hand. Scowler sliced it into sections with his Bowie knife. His wild cuts just missed Beanie's fingers. The whole four of them scuffled and pushed like a bunch of infants at a party trying to grab the biggest piece of cake.

'Get back,' snarled Pooper Scooper. 'I'm in charge here.' He shoved the others aside and recommenced investigating my poop with his spoon. He had a cute face but a nasty voice. Underneath those dimples Pooper Scooper was an ugly person.

'Sorry, Orson,' said Beanie.

'Careful,' said Scowler in a low voice. 'Don't damage it. This could be our last chance.'

I began to struggle inside the net. I had to get away from these insane children. But the more I struggled the more tangled I became.

'It's not there,' shrieked Pooper Scooper.

Now they were interested in *me*. Very interested. Scowler wiped his knife on the grass and joined the others as they formed a circle around me. Each one of them had a murderous expression. I looked for some sign of mercy. Only Beanie had a face with any suggestion of doubt. Behind his angry looks his eyes were not as hard as the others.

These little kids outnumbered me four to one. But I was twice as big as they were. If I could only get out of the net I might have a chance.

I was terrified but my brain was racing. I grunted and shrieked as if my senses had completely left me. I bucked up and down and squirmed and wriggled like a wild boar.

'He's panicking,' yelled Beanie. 'He might hurt himself.'

'We wouldn't want that,' said Scowler, sneering. He jumped up into the air and gave me a swift kick in the neck with the sole of his boot.

I gasped at the pain and held my hands to my throat. Then I collapsed with my eyes closed.

'He's choking,' said Reptile. 'We need him alive.'

'For now,' said Pooper Scooper.

'Don't damage him,' yelled Reptile. 'He's our last chance.'

'He's dead,' said Beanie in a worried voice.

Pooper Scooper picked up my wrist and felt for a pulse. 'No he's not,' he said. 'He's just fainted. What a weakling.'

I felt them undo the ropes, lift off the net and carry me to a patch of soft grass. Reptile forced a flask between my lips and poured in some cold water. I coughed and spluttered and sat up.

Scowler fixed me with an angry glare. His red spikes of hair whipped around like snakes as he angrily shook his head. 'Where is it?' he said. 'Hand it over and nothing more will happen to you.'

'Where's what?'

'Don't try that,' said Scowler. 'You know exactly what we want.' He looked ready to spring into the air.

'I don't,' I yelled. 'I don't even know who I am.'

'Very good. Very good indeed,' said Pooper Scooper sarcastically. I could see that he was their leader. 'We'll take him back with us,' he told the others. 'Where we can make him talk.'

I went cold all over. They were going to torture me.

'Aaargh,' I shrieked.

The child commandos fell back. Just for a second. Enough time for me to jump to my feet and dash between Scowler and Pooper Scooper. They both leapt at me but I was too fast. I bolted down the track like a rat out of a trap. The pain of the gravel under my bare feet was terrible but I couldn't stop. There was no way I was going to let these fiendish little terrorists take me prisoner. I jumped into the undergrowth and pushed my way through the ferns and hanging vines.

And behind me, yelling and shrieking and crashing through the forest, came the Brats from Hell.