

BETWEEN

ADELE BROADBENT



OneTree
HOUSE

Chapter 1

'I dare you,' said Loon.

'Yeah, Olly,' said Egg. 'We dare you.'

They both grinned, knowing I couldn't turn down a dare. It had been like that since we were six. They'd dared me to climb under a classroom one day to get a cricket ball. A teacher caught us and went ballistic, but we'd been best mates ever since. We'd dared each other to do all sorts of crazy stuff after that. Nothing dangerous or against the law or anything, but it was sort of an unwritten rule that we had to at least try it.

I looked down the long, narrow driveway. Scruffy trees along the left cast long shadows across the gravel and onto the old house. A towering, thick hedge to our right hid the house from the road. The blinds under the front verandah were pulled down tight but that didn't mean its owner wasn't at home. For all we knew, she could've been watching every move we made from a window upstairs.

Every town has one. A man who sits in the park bundled in

layers of mismatched clothing, talking to someone only he can see. Or maybe a lady who calls out to people she doesn't even know, asking them question after question until the person scurries off without giving any answers. Or it could be an old person sitting in the shopping mall staring into space for hours on end.

Everyone walks past, pretending not to see or hear them, acting like they don't exist. They get called all sorts of names. Nut job. Wacko. Weirdo. Especially by the kids, and especially when no adults are around. Our town was no different. And our nut-job-wacko-weirdo was Mad Martha Mischefski.

'I dare you to touch the shed doors,' said Loon. Egg nodded his agreement. We stared at the rusty tin shed at the end of the long drive. It seemed to lean towards us, as if it was joining in the dare.

I glanced up at the sign as it creaked in the wind above us.

Martha Mischefski
Spiritualist
By Appointment Only

The whole town knew Mad Martha was a whole lot more than her sign said. She claimed to be a psychic, mystic sort of person, reading palms and tea leaves from cups. Most people knew someone who'd tried out her mumbo jumbo. Most of those people denied it. But there were always plenty of rumours and stories about her that the kids in town feasted on.

'What do I get if I do it?' I asked. I didn't know anyone who'd done this dare. Not even Regan, I thought to myself. Regan was

what my teacher would call my nemesis. I called him lots of names but that wasn't one of them. But enemy pretty much summed it up. I'd be the first kid at school to pull off the dare and Regan couldn't do a thing about it.

Loon frowned for a second. His face lit up with an idea. 'I'll give you two pizzas with the works.'

'No thanks.' I pulled a face. 'The last freebie from your mum's work was way past expiry. It had its own fungus farm.'

'What about a go on Sam's new game?' blurted Egg.

'How?' I asked, remembering the last time we tried using Egg's big brother's new PlayStation. We had bruises for a week.

Egg grinned. 'He's got a job interview Saturday morning. He's so freaked out, he'll forget he even has a PS4.'

Loon and I returned his grin. I checked the house windows again, this time looking for any twitching curtains upstairs. There was no sign of Mad Martha. I focused on her shed doors and gave a nod. I was going to do it. If she was home, I'd be touching the shed and back again before she could blink.

'Time me,' I said, staring down the drive. I would've done it anyway, but a go on Sam's PS4 and beating the kid I hated most at school at something was a double bonus.

Loon found the stopwatch function on his phone. Egg peered over his shoulder. 'Ready?'

I leaned forward, my feet planted apart in the driveway gravel for maximum takeoff.

'Set.'

'Olly Layton! What do you think you're doing?'

I gasped, spun around and tripped over Egg's shoes. Scrambling to my feet, I looked up, already knowing who I'd see.

My aunt leaned out of her car window. 'Well?' she yelled. 'Get out of that driveway. You've been told before.'

'Yes, Auntie Claire,' I muttered, moving back onto the footpath.

'Hello, Gavin. Hello, Liam.' Loon and Egg squirmed like they always did whenever Auntie Claire spoke to them. 'Do you want a ride home, Olly? I'm heading that way now.'

'No, it's okay thanks. I'll walk.'

'Fine. I'll tell Kate you're on your way then.' She tooted as she drove off.

'Oooo, you're in trouble now, dude,' said Egg.

Loon groaned and shook his head. 'You'd think she'd know our proper names by now.'

He was right. Auntie Claire had known Loon and Egg for nearly as long as I had. She was even there when Mum got the email from my teacher about getting that cricket ball. You'd think I'd set fire to the classroom, not just climbed under it, the way Auntie Claire lectured me while Mum nodded.

I swung my bag up on my shoulder. 'Come on then. Better get home.'

Sure enough, Auntie Claire's dented, purple hatchback was up our drive. Loon nudged me with his elbow. 'Good luck.' I stood

by our letter box as they kept walking down the street. With a sigh, I decided to get it over with. Aunty Claire would've already told Mum everything and probably added stuff on, to make it sound even worse.

'Hi, love,' said Mum when I opened the back door. 'Had a good day?'

'It was okay. Just the usual.'

Mum sat opposite Aunty Claire at the kitchen table, with coffee mugs between them. I ignored my aunt's sudden frown.

'Aunty Claire said you were walking home with Loon and Egg,' Mum began.

'Yep. Same as usual,' I said, heading for the hallway. 'I'm just going to do some homework.'

'Olly, come back here please.'

I spun around. 'But, Mum. I didn't do anything!' I dropped my bag as she pointed to the space next to the table. I knew the drill. Aunty Claire shook her head when I stood facing them.

'How many times have we asked you to stay away from that house?' asked Mum.

'A thousand million,' I said.

'Don't be cheeky,' said Aunty Claire.

Mum glanced at her big sister. 'So what were you doing there, Olly?'

'I was just walking past,' I said. 'That's all,' I added in my aunt's direction.

'Are you sure?' asked Mum.

'Yes!'

'Fine,' she said with a sigh. 'Stay away from there please. Walk on the other side of the street if you have to.' Aunty Claire's reluctant nod meant I was dismissed and I escaped to my bedroom.

I really didn't get it. I was only exaggerating a bit with the thousand million times I'd been told to stay away from Mad Martha. It was just a bit of fun with my mates. No one else's parents seemed that worried. It wasn't like crazy was catching or she was going to turn me into a frog or something. Mum was just being paranoid. Or Aunty Claire was. I didn't have a dad but it was like I had two mums instead. I still got a double grilling.

I lay on my bed and stared up at my football posters, thankful that Aunty Claire caught me when she did and not when I was halfway down Mad Martha's drive. I knew if she had, I'd be toast.