

## CHAPTER ONE

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Friday 18:45

Pollo di Nozi crouched behind a tombstone, watching the stranger swish through the grass. She reached out, twisted off a stalk of wild lupin and held it to the snout of the stout grey sheep clamped under her arm. She prayed it would keep him happy. Now wasn't the time for Shorn Connery to start bleating. Pollo — supersleuth and editor of the *Riddle Gully Gazette* — was onto something.

Around her, twilight was settling in, the shadows draped between the graves beginning to dissolve, the forest beyond the meadow already still. While Shorn Connery crunched, Pollo wound his rope lead round her waist to keep him close. She tied it with a tug, then fished out the small pad and pencil that hung from her neck. She scribbled a few notes.

Moving only her eyes, her pencil twitching expectantly, she tracked the man in the grey light. He walked in slow, wide circles, hands clasped against his chin, long fingers flexing and straightening like insect wings. Nearby, from a large silver case propped open against a headstone, a blue light blinked.

Pollo jiggled her shoulder. It was still tender where this same man had banged into her barely an hour before, bursting into the second-hand shop right on closing, just as she was leaving. So what was he up to now? Here in the Riddle Gully graveyard? When all the other adults in town were watering their rose-bushes or grilling their chops?

She had an excuse. Shorn Connery needed his daily walk and fresh lupins, and dusk was the only time they could come without Father Perry wringing his hands and tut-tutting. But what about him, this stranger?

He's no mourner, thought Pollo, eyes narrowing. He wasn't muttering deep-and-meaningfuls or dabbing his eyes or tenderly plucking out weeds. She tapped her pencil on her chin. No, he looked much more like ... like someone waiting for something.

But what? It was her job to find out. They didn't call her a supersleuth for nothing. The second he made a move she'd be right behind him. She owed it to the readers of the *Riddle Gully Gazette*.

*The readers ...* A thought snuck up and tapped her on the shoulder. The Youth Reporter cadetship — the

part-time post at the Coast news network! The deadline for applications was four days away. She'd only just hit high school so, as things stood, her chances weren't great. But what if she could dig up the story on this shady character and get out a scintillating special edition of the *Gazette* in time? That could change everything. She'd be irresistible! She could be a bona fide investigative reporter before she knew it!

The light in the silver case had begun blinking wildly. Pollo peered as the tall man strode across to it and studied it intently. Suddenly, he scooped up the case and, cradling it to his chest, began loping from the graveyard, towards the forest.

The supersleuth sprang. But the rope still tied around her middle snapped taut. Her feet flipped out from under her and she hit the dirt face first, centimetres from Shorn Connery's snuffling nose. Spitting soil, she squinted through the lupins. The man had nearly reached the trees! Her story was getting away!

She scrambled to her feet, plucking at the rope, cursing her bitten fingernails. Shorn Connery, meanwhile, threw everything he had into reaching a fresh patch of lupins.

'Keep still, boy!' she pleaded.

In the distance, the man cleared the falling-down fence between the meadow and the forest in one bound. A moment later he'd melted into the dark undergrowth.

Pollo had to get after him! She gave a last, useless yank at the knot and gave up. She set off, dragging Shorn

Connery behind her. She'd steer for Diamond Jack's Trail — the hiking track began close to where the stranger had vanished. It was haunted by the old bushranger but it wasn't night-time yet. And digging into her waist under the rope was her trusty pen-torch. She and Shorn Connery could sneak along the trail and cut the man off! He hadn't got rid of her that easily!

Pollo half-crouched at the head of the trail, her hands on her knees, gasping for air. The rope around her waist was now so tight that she could barely breathe, let alone chase anyone.

Shorn Connery glared up at her and curled back his top lip, flashing teeth the colour of old apple cores. *Baa-aa-aah!* He lunged towards the young autumn weeds on the edge of the limestone path and Pollo winced.

'Can you stop thinking about food for just one second?' she wheezed, shuffling after him, picking furiously at the knot. 'Aaarghhh!' She tossed her head back in frustration.

As she did, she noticed, not far above her, small dark shapes darting back and forth between the trees.

Just what she needed! Bats! With summer on the way out, the bats were on their way back to Riddle Gully. It was all the more reason not to be out after sunset. Her scalp prickled just thinking about their squashed, grumpy faces, their tiny pointed teeth, their curly see-through ears. They belonged in her vampire books, not in the real

world. And certainly not here with her now, alone on Diamond Jack's Trail with night closing in and a selfish, greedy sheep weighing her down.

All at once, the knot came loose. Pollo unwound herself in a flurry and inhaled long and deep. Shorn Connery galloped full speed back to the lupins in the cemetery, the rope lead bouncing behind.

Pollo slowed her breathing as much as she could. Very faintly, off in the distance, she could hear something two-legged pushing through the undergrowth. It had to be him — the stranger, her key to the cadetship — slipping away.

She peered down the track at the avenue of ghostly tree silhouettes. Somehow it wasn't twilight in there any longer. Not even a little bit.

She shuffled forward. She couldn't see ten paces ahead. She stopped and unclipped her pen-torch from her belt. Fingers trembling, she twisted it on. The thin beam shone shyly for a moment, faded, flickered

... and died.