

**T**HERE HAD BEEN DARKNESS and nothingness. A place without time or space; without life or death. She had laid in that emptiness, alone and unaware. It could have been hours, days. Or longer? Time was meaningless. Then, from the void, a presence had slowly come into being. Gradually, she was brought back into knowingness.

# The Book of Gabrielle

Gabby readjusted her position. One of her legs had gone to sleep. She brought it out from under her, rubbing it gently as she thought back to the time of her awakening. Yes, *that's the right word*, Gabby thought, jotting it down in the small notebook in her hands.

Awakening.

She closed her eyes, letting the words of the Voice she had heard at her Awakening flood over her. It had been a friendly, yet distant voice.

Gabby gripped the pen tightly.

Listen to me, Gabrielle. You have been given a chance. A chance for redemption. An opportunity for you to change your ways; to help others and not just yourself. You have been chosen; and so few are chosen.

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This is no dream. You are not like anyone else. You must understand this. Your path is determined. The answers will come to you. Delve into your past, Gabrielle, at your own peril. Nothing is more likely to destroy you than discovering who you are. You are saving yourself, Gabrielle. That is all you need to know.

There will be times when you will be reminded of your past – these things will all trigger long lost memories. Do not let them creep into your mind. Do not give them your attention.

Be strong, Gabrielle. A new beginning awaits; dawn approaches.

Gabby could recall trying to respond. At least she thought it had been her trying to engage the Voice; either way, the Voice hadn't listened.

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When it is time, you will know. You are going to help people, Gabrielle. More than that, you are going to save people. People just like you. Don't seek them. When the time is right, they will find you. If everything proceeds as it should, order will be restored. Redemption will be yours. But if you stray from the path you will be forced to make a choice – a terrible choice. A choice you will have to live with until the end of time.

Gabby glanced at the final words on the page.

Be strong, Gabrielle.

For a while Gabby wondered whether she had imagined or dreamt it all. But the events of the last few weeks had completely destroyed that idea. She was just going to have

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to wait. Like the Voice had said, she was not to go looking; her destiny would come to her. It was her fate.

And it sucked.

Gabby was not a patient person. But she sensed that whatever she was waiting for was big. Really big.

Gabby closed the journal, wondering for a moment if she had done the right thing by recording her memories of the Voice and her Awakening. But she reasoned that if it was in her head, then it made no difference if it was on paper as well.

It would mean nothing to anyone else.

# CHAPTER 1

Michael swore under his breath. He'd taken each corner as smoothly as ever; braking hard as he skidded into the turn before accelerating out again. His lines were perfect and yet his brother was already a good 40 metres ahead of him and pulling further away. Still, they'd planned a three-lap race; anything could happen in three laps.

Michael swore again. 'I'm bigger,' he panted, lifting himself off his bicycle seat to pump the pedals harder. 'I'm stronger.' He felt his back tyre skid slightly with the force of his

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downward thrusts. The rear of the bike swung left and he had to fight to regain his balance. 'And I've got a way better bike,' he added, stealing a glance at his younger brother now sailing around the back of the Art block at the rear end of the school. 'And yet the little pest always wins.'

Michael lifted his face to the sky and this time cursed out loud.

From up ahead Jack heard his brother's cry and eased up off the pedals. He must still have been travelling over 30km per hour along a downhill section when the accident happened.

As if in slow motion, the back end of Jack's bike lifted into the air, sending him flying off the seat. The handlebar twisted suddenly and his hands were jerked free of the grips. Jack felt himself soaring through the air, completely separated from his bike that was now cartwheeling down a grassy slope. A moment later Jack crashed to earth, hitting his head hard before tumbling down the embankment.

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He came to rest against a wire fence that marked the boundary of the school.

Jack lay perfectly still, his heart thumping. What had just happened? A moment ago he'd been sailing along what he and his brother Michael called the Goat Track: a narrow, barely defined trail that snaked along the ridge of the hill behind the Art block and sheds at the end of Brinkley East Secondary School.

It was his favourite section of the course. It was the stretch where he could lower his head so that his nose was almost touching the handlebars and fly like an angel over the crest of the hill. But not today.

Jack lay on the ground, dazed. There was a throbbing in his foot and a sharper pain near his left elbow. He glanced up, wincing as he tried to move himself away from the fence. He'd barely been aware of the wire barrier but in that moment realised that it might have just saved his life. He caught sight of a wide hole only a few metres away from where he'd ended up.

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What if he'd crashed a split second earlier? Would he have ended up tumbling through the hole? Beyond the fence the hill dropped sharply, almost vertically in some sections, to the river 50 metres below. Apart from the odd twisted root of a stunted bush, there was nothing that would have stopped him from plummeting to the bottom.

Jack closed his eyes again. He was enjoying the sun's rays beaming down on his face. In spite of the pain, he smiled. Michael was about to win. Jack knew he would never hear the end of it. Best to delay the moment as long as possible. Anyway, his head was throbbing and there was a strange clicking sound coming from somewhere. Was it from inside his head? Jack opened his eyes suddenly. A red shoe lay centimetres from his face. *How did my shoe get there*, he wondered. Then he saw another one. *This is stupid*, Jack thought, and closed his eyes again.



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Unaware of his brother sprawled against the fence, Michael pedalled on, smoothly negotiating the Goat Track before swinging onto the dirt road that took him behind the soccer ovals. It was only after he'd navigated a tricky 'S' bend through a clump of trees that he was able to look up. To his surprise there was no sign of Jack. Surely he wasn't so far ahead that he'd already rounded the main oval and started his second lap? Michael knew he was never going to catch him, even if he did have the superior stamina.

Michael raced on, circling the oval on a pebbly track that he knew sometimes caused problems for his brother with his thinner tyres. Michael flew down a short flight of steps, twisting his bike in the air before landing his two wheels on the ground again. He was pumping, he knew it, and yet there was still no sign of his brother. At the end of the Goat Track, Michael stole a glance to his left. Surely he would see Jack now, somewhere in the open spaces of the car park or oval. He swung

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his head around, almost losing his balance as his front tyre caught the point of a tree root jutting out of the track. It was only then that the thought occurred to Michael that his brother might have fallen. With no sign of Jack at their agreed finishing line, he swung his bike around and headed back onto the course.

It was Jack's bike that Michael saw first, a glint of metal catching his eye.

Michael tipped his helmet back to see better. 'You okay?' he called, his arms folded. Jack was standing next to his bike, frowning. One of his shoes appeared to be missing. 'What happened?'

'I fell.' Jack didn't look up.

'Yeah, I figured that. How?'

Jack shrugged. Michael watched him bend down to pick up his helmet. He obviously wasn't in a mood for talking. 'You want a re-run?' Perhaps his brother was injured? This was a hollow victory for Michael. He wanted to beat his brother fair and square.

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‘No.’ Jack lifted his bike easily and started walking it up the steep hill towards Michael.

‘Are you hurt?’ Michael noticed that his brother appeared to be limping slightly. Jack shook his head. ‘What about your shoe?’ Again his brother shrugged. Jack paused at the top of the hill, a few metres behind his brother.

‘You look spooked, Jack. You’ve lost your mojo. Next time we race I’m gonna kick your butt.’ Michael sniggered, then got on his bike and started riding. ‘You coming?’ he called.

‘Yes,’ Jack replied, walking his bike carefully along the narrow path.

Michael got to the end of the Goat Track and slowed, swivelling in his seat. Jack was still walking, a look of quiet determination etched on his face.

‘Why don’t you ride? Best thing to do after you’ve stacked. Stay off your bike and you let the fear take over.’

Jack stood still, his eyes down.

‘I’m okay,’ he muttered, beginning to walk forward again.

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‘Jack, you sook, ride your bike! It’s not broken. What’s wrong with you?’ Jack glared at Michael then slowly mounted his bike. Immediately, the handlebars started to shake as Jack fought to keep both the bike and himself steady. Michael didn’t know whether to be surprised or angry, but angry was easier.

‘I’ll see you at home — if you make it.’

Small stones sprayed into the air as Michael powered away.

Jack did not reply.



‘I beat him!’ Michael called to his father as he pedalled up the driveway.

‘Yeah?’ Stephen Wallace stood up from the garden bed where he’d been digging. ‘I guess it was bound to happen eventually. How’d he take it?’

‘He sooked, like I knew he would.’

‘Michael!’ His father’s eyes narrowed. ‘I hope you were a good winner. You know, being a good winner is sometimes harder than being a good loser.’

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'Yeah, whatever.' Michael thought about mentioning the fall but decided against it.

'Where is Jack, anyway?'

'Still coming. He's walking home.'

'Is he okay?'

'Yeah, he's fine. Bruised ego, that's all.'

Stephen Wallace smiled. For years he'd tried to eliminate the competitive urges in his older son, but without any success. Now, it was a matter of managing them as best he could. He didn't mind Michael doing what it took to win a game. It was his behaviour after the game that mattered.

Stephen waited another ten minutes for his younger son to appear before heading inside to wash his hands.

'You sure your brother's all right?' he called out to Michael. It wasn't like the normally reliable Jack to be out this long on his own. Maybe he was hurting a little after the race. After all, he hadn't lost to Michael in a bike race before. Plenty of other games over the years, but not a bike race.

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'Like I said, Dad. He's sulking. He'll be home in his own good time.'

'Well if he's not back in ten minutes, you're going out to find him, do you hear me?'

'Yeah, yeah,' Michael muttered.

Jack was walking slowly up the driveway when Michael appeared at the front door fifteen minutes later.

'Where the hell have you been?' Michael snapped. 'Everyone's been worried about you.'

'Just walked home,' Jack mumbled, leaning his bike up against the side of the house.

'Via Wagga Wagga?'

'That's right.' Jack grinned, his soft voice barely audible.

'You're totally loopy.' Michael glared at his brother. 'Dad, Jack's home,' he called, heading back inside.

Jack stared at the front door a moment, smiling again. Slowly, he mounted the steps.

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He spent the evening in his room, refusing to come out to eat dinner or to play on the Wii.

‘Go and bring him down, Michael,’ Grace Wallace said, looking up suddenly from the book she was reading.

‘Leave it, Grace,’ her husband said. ‘I’ll talk to him tomorrow. It’s just what he wants us to do. Go up and feel sorry for him. He’s got to work this one out for himself.’

Grace sighed. ‘Well at least go and find his shoe, Michael. It’s just not like Jack to return home minus one shoe.’

‘Well maybe that’s why he was so late. Maybe he was looking for it.’

‘Michael!’ his father snapped. Michael shrugged.

‘Okay, I’ll go look for it,’ he muttered, standing up.

‘Take Jack with you,’ his mother pleaded.

‘I’ll be right.’ Michael was tiring of Jack’s moping and quietness. Not for the first time

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he wondered whether the fall from his bike had shaken his brother more than he cared to let on.

It was dark by the time Michael reached the school again. He had almost given up his search when he caught sight of the missing shoe, hooked against a broken part of the fence. As he leaned over to retrieve it, something else, half-buried on the left side of a rabbit hole, caught his attention. It was a small section from an ID tag.

Michael turned it over in his hand. The words *Jan...* — *SMED* were inscribed neatly on one side. Even though it was broken, the fragment still looked relatively new. He couldn't make out the rest of the name.

'*Jan,*' he muttered, shaking his head. Had Jack been carrying it with him? Or did it just happen to be here?