

CHAPTER ONE

It's only half an hour since someone – Robyn I think – said we should write everything down, and it's only twenty-nine minutes since I got chosen, and for those twenty-nine minutes I've had everyone crowded around me gazing at the blank page and yelling ideas and advice. Rack off guys! I'll never get this done. I haven't got a clue where to start and I can't concentrate with all this noise.

OK, that's better. I've told them to give me some peace, and Homer backed me up, so at last they've gone and I can think straight.

I don't know if I'll be able to do this. I might as well say so now. I know why they chose me, because I'm meant to be the best writer, but there's a bit more to it than just being able to write. There's a few little things can get in the way. Little things like feelings, emotions.

Well, we'll come to that later. Maybe. We'll have to wait and see.

I'm down at the creek now, sitting on a fallen tree. Nice tree. Not an old rotten one that's been eaten by witchetty grubs but a young one with a smooth reddish trunk and the leaves still showing some green. It's hard to tell why it fell – it looks so healthy – but maybe it grew too close to the creek. It's good here. This pool's

only about ten metres by three but it's surprisingly deep – up to your waist in the middle. There's constant little concentric ripples from insects touching it as they skim across the surface. I wonder where they sleep, and when. I wonder if they close their eyes when they sleep. I wonder what their names are. Busy, anonymous, sleepless insects.

To be honest I'm only writing about the pool to avoid doing what I'm meant to be doing. That's like Chris, finding ways to avoid doing things he doesn't want to do. See: I'm not holding back. I warned them I wouldn't.

I hope Chris doesn't mind my being chosen to do this instead of him, because he is a really good writer. He did look a bit hurt, a bit jealous even. But he hasn't been in this from the start, so it wouldn't have worked.

Well, I'd better stop biting my tongue and start biting the bullet. There's only one way to do this and that's to tell it in order, chronological order. I know writing it down is important to us. That's why we all got so excited when Robyn suggested it. It's terribly, terribly important. Recording what we've done, in words, on paper, it's got to be our way of telling ourselves that we mean something, that we matter. That the things we've done have made a difference. I don't know how big a difference, but a difference. Writing it down means we might be remembered. And by God that matters to us. None of us wants to end up as a pile of dead white bones, unnoticed, unknown, and worst of all, with no one knowing or appreciating the risks we've run.

That makes me think that I should be writing this like a history book, in very serious language, all formal. But I can't do that. Everyone's got their own way and

this is mine. If they don't like my way they'll have to find someone else.

OK, better do it then.

It all began when . . . They're funny, those words. Everyone uses them, without thinking what they mean. When does anything begin? With everyone, it begins when you're born. Or before that, when your parents got married. Or before that, when your parents were born. Or when your ancestors colonised the place. Or when humans came squishing out of the mud and slime, dropped off their flippers and fins, and started to walk. But all the same, all that aside, for what's happened to us there was quite a definite beginning.

So: it all began when Corrie and I said we wanted to go bush, go feral for a few days over the Christmas holidays. It was just one of those stupid things: 'Oh wouldn't it be great if . . .' We'd camped out quite often, been doing it since we were kids, taking the motorbikes all loaded with gear and going down to the river, sleeping under the stars, or slinging a bit of canvas between two trees on cold nights. So we were used to that. Sometimes another friend would come along, Robyn or Fi usually. Never boys. At that age you think boys have as much personality as coat hangers and you don't notice their looks.

Then you grow up.

Well there we were, only weeks ago, though I can hardly believe it, lying in front of the television watching some junk and talking about the holidays. Corrie said, 'We haven't been down to the river for ages. Let's do that.'

'OK. Hey, let's ask Dad if we can have the Landrover.'

'OK. Hey, let's see if Kevin and Homer want to come.'

'God yeah, boys! But we'd never be allowed.'

‘I reckon we might. It’s worth a try.’

‘OK. Hey, if we get the Landrover, let’s go further. Wouldn’t it be great if we could go right up to Tailor’s and into Hell.’

‘Yeah OK, let’s ask.’

Tailor’s, Tailor’s Stitch, is a long line, an arete, that goes dead straight from Mt Martin to Wombegonoo. It’s rocky, and very narrow and steep in places, but you can walk along it, and there’s a bit of cover. The views are fantastic. You can drive almost up on to it at one point, near Mt Martin, on an old logging track that’s hard to find now, it’s so overgrown. Hell is what’s on the other side of Tailor’s, a cauldron of boulders and trees and blackberries and feral dogs and wombats and undergrowth. It’s a wild place, and I didn’t know anyone who’d been there, though I’d stood on the edge and looked down at it quite often. For one thing I couldn’t see how you’d get in there. The cliffs all around it are spectacular, hundreds of metres high in places. There’s a series of small cliffs called Satan’s Steps that drop into it, but believe me, if these are steps, the Great Wall of China is our back fence. If there was any access the cliffs had to be the way, and I’d always wanted to give it a go. The locals all told stories about the Hermit from Hell, an ex-murderer who was supposed to have lived up there for years. He was meant to have killed his own wife and child. I wanted to believe in his existence but I found it a bit difficult. My brain kept asking myself awkward questions like: ‘How come he didn’t get hung, like they did to murderers in those days?’ Still, it was a good story and I hoped it was true; not the murders part but the hermit part at least.

Anyway, the whole thing, the trip, grew from there. We made this casual decision to do it, and we immediately let ourselves in for a lot of hard work. The first job was to persuade our mums and dads to let us go. It's not that they don't trust us, but as Dad said, 'It's a pretty big ask'. They spent a lot of time not saying no, but trying to talk us into other things instead. That's the way most parents operate I think. They don't like to start a fight so they suggest alternatives that they think they can say yes to and they hope you might say yes to. 'Why don't you go down the river again?' 'Why don't you ask Robyn and Meriam instead of the boys?' 'Why don't you just take bikes? Or even horses? Make it a real old-fashioned campout. That'd be fun.'

Mum's idea of fun was making jam for the Preserves section of the Wirrawee Show, so she was hardly an authority on the subject. I feel a bit odd, writing things like that, considering what we've all been through, but I'm going to be honest, not mushy.

Finally we came to an agreement, and it wasn't too bad, considering. We could take the Landrover but I was the only one allowed to drive it, even though Kevin had his P's and I didn't. But Dad knows I'm a good driver. We could go to the top of Tailor's Stitch. We could invite the boys but we had to have more people: at least six and up to eight. That was because Mum and Dad thought there was less chance of an orgy if there were more people. Not that they'd admit that was the reason – they said it was to do with safety – but I know them too well.

And yes, I've written that 'o' in 'know' carefully – I wouldn't want it to be confused with an 'e'.

We had to promise not to take grog and smokes, and we had to promise that the boys wouldn't. It made me wonder about the way adults turn growing up into such a complicated process. They expect you to be always on the lookout for a chance to do something wild. Sometimes they even put ideas in your head. I don't think we would have bothered to take any grog or smokes anyway. Too expensive, for one thing – we were all pretty broke after Christmas. But the funny thing is that when our parents thought we were doing something wild we never were, and when they thought we were being innocent we were usually up to something. They never gave me a hard time about the school play rehearsals for instance, but I spent all my time there with Steve, undoing each other's buttons and buckles, then frantically doing them up again when Mr Kassar started bellowing, 'Steve! Ellie! Are they at it again? Someone get me a crowbar!'

Very humorous guy, Mr Kassar.

We ended up with a list of eight, counting us. We didn't ask Elliot, because he's so lazy, or Meriam, because she was doing work experience with Fi's parents. But five minutes after we made the list, one of the boys on it, Chris Lang, turned up at my place with his dad. So we immediately put the question to them. Mr Lang's a big guy who always wears a tie, no matter where he is or what he's doing. He seems kind of heavy and serious to me. Chris says his father was born on the corner of Straight and Narrow, and that sums it up. When his dad's around, Chris stays pretty quiet. But we asked them as they sat at our kitchen table, pigging out on Mum's date scones, and we got knocked back in one sentence. It turned out that Mr and Mrs Lang were going overseas, and even though

they had a worker, Chris had to stay home and keep an eye on the place. So that was a bad start to our plans.

Next day though, I took a bike and rode across the paddocks to Homer's. Normally I'd go by road, but Mum'd been getting a bit twitchy about the new cop in Wirrawee, who'd been booking people left, right and centre. His first week in town he booked the magistrate's wife for not wearing a seatbelt. Everyone was being careful till they'd broken this guy in.

I found Homer down at the creek testing a valve that he'd just cleaned out. As I arrived he was holding it high, watching optimistically to see if it was leaking. 'Look at that,' he said as I got off the Yamaha. 'Tight as a drum.'

'What was the problem?'

'I don't know. All I know is that three minutes ago it was losing water and now it isn't. That's good enough for me.' I picked up the pipe and held it for him as he started screwing the valve back on. 'I hate pumps,' he said. 'When Poppa pops off I'm going to put dams in every paddock.'

'Good. You can hire my earth-moving business to put them in.'

'Oh, is that your latest?' He squeezed the muscles on my right upper arm. 'You'll be able to dig dams by hand the way you're going.' I gave a sudden shove, to try to push him into the creek, but he was too strong. I watched him pump the pipe up and down, to force water into it, then helped him carry buckets up to the pump to finish the priming. On the way I told him our plans.

'Oh yeah, I'll have a go at that,' he said. 'I'd rather we went to a tropical resort and drank cocktails with umbrellas in them, but this'll do in the meantime.'