

Chapter 1

We set up camp at the first clearing we found. Native trees surrounding the perimeter, thick brown soil and loose weeds filled our view of the bush. White trunks littered with droopy bark, green leaves too thin to use as toilet paper. Someone had been there recently, there was a fair amount of rubbish so Mr Edwards made us clean it up. I didn't think it was fair because it wasn't ours but he said he didn't want the bush animals to get sick from eating the plastic. I looked around, half expecting a group of roos watching us with devil eyes, peering from behind the trees, the scene becoming dark and dangerous as the sun began to fall.

There were heap of beer cans too. I wanted to crush them up and put them into my backpack in case I could cash them in later. Actually, I don't think you were allowed to crush them up anymore because people used to put rocks in them to make them heavier. I guess you'd get more money that way. I shook each can, hoping for spare dribbles of beer.

I looked up into the orange sky and felt a moment of peace. I was so far away from home, it wasn't just a camp, this was a new beginning. I was determined to never go back home again. At least not for a few years. I really wanted to sort my life out, I didn't want to become like my parents.

A cool breeze whipped through the bush, I couldn't hear any traffic anymore. It was a different world and I loved it. Sure I missed the Playstation but I had my Iphone with me, so that would have to do. Mr Edwards told us we weren't allowed to bring any electronics with us. Well, I didn't bring my PSP, so he's going to have to settle for that!

"Pearson, are you going to help set up the tents?" Mr Edwards asked me.

I shrugged, disappointed my daydreams had been rudely interrupted and went to walk over to him. Mr Edwards was tall with a slight shaved head resembling a GI from the army movies. His chest firm with an eight pack. I

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envied Mr Edwards. Tall, muscular, perfect in every way. That was the look I wanted to emulate to magnetise my way into every girl's heart. Truth was far from it. I carried a keg and everytime I looked into the mirror, I felt like a white blob of jelly. I could run but I would die after 10 metres.

Jamie was already setting up the main tent where we would keep our food supplies. Mr Edwards said the possums would steal our food if we weren't too careful. Jamie was a year older than me but a miniature version of Mr Edwards with crooked little teeth and a nose that had been broken too many times. I liked to think he had a dad like mine but I'm guessing it was broken from too many rough games of footy.

I looked at Stacy as I grabbed a hammer. She was bending down and she looked so pretty. Her brown hair had fallen loosely in front of her eyes but I saw her take a look at me. She smiled. I smiled back and stood up, the mallet still in my hand. Her full red lips seemed dark against her European coloured tan, a beach babe from California with a New Zealand accent. I wasn't really sure where she was from but she was beautiful. I dropped the mallet, losing my state of consciousness. I heard a twig snap behind me.

I turned around to see Brodie glaring at me. He reminded me of Kevin's older brother in Home Alone. The type of bully that cracks his knuckles and you can feel the equivalent running down your broken spine in addition to the deadly look in his eyes. Snake eyes. Riveting yellow beads of poison filled to the eyeballs ready to explode in droplets of toxic waste.

"You looking at my chick?" he asked, his solid shoulders hunched up with his arms folded. I imagined him at his position on a rugby field, ready to take aim to knock me out. What chance did I have? I tried to think.

"No"

"I think you were!" he said, his breath smelling like lunchtime's pepperoni pizza. He shoved me to the ground, I landed on the mallet.

"Ow!" I yelled. I was angry. I jumped up and faced him off.

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“Boys! Stop that right now” Mr Edwards said, striding over to us quickly to separate us. “We’re here to camp, there’s no time for this!”

Brodie kept his glare at me, which turned into a sneer. His yellow nicotine teeth bulged out buckled. I grimaced, wondering how I could have ended up with such a collection of weird looking boys who took great joy in making my life a misery. I smiled at him, cautiously. I would have loved to punch him right square in the face but he was a hot shot rugby player, so I’d have spent the night in a hospital bed instead of my rock hard canvas bed. Although, I wasn’t really sure how I’d get to the hospital or how far it was from here.

I turned back around to look at Stacy but she’d gone and was now gossiping to the girls about some boys back at school, behind the tent. I couldn’t see them very well from where I was. I wanted to walk over and see how close I get to them before being caught or flogged. Just to hear her cool voice whispering over perfect teeth, fresh peppermint breath filling the air. I decided against it and I looked back down at the peg I’d been attempting to hammer in. I was so tired, so weak, I really didn’t feel like hammering it in.

“It’s like this Pearson!” Mr Edwards snapped, grabbing my mallet. I didn’t realise he was behind me the whole time. He twisted the peg around so that it was on an outside angle and bashed it down. He had strength, such force. I walked off to get a drink from my backpack. “PEARSON!”

I looked around. Mr Pearson got up. “Come here please, you need to set up this tent. I’m showing you how to use a mallet”

Brodie snorted and laughed. “Doesn’t he know how to use a hammer?” he asked. Jamie, tall and lanky, stood next to him. He was also laughing but for once, I really didn’t care.

I wondered what would happen if I grabbed my backpack and set off in the middle of the night. I turned around to look at the direction we’d just

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come out of. I didn't think anyone would care if I'd gone. I could set off and have my own adventure, my lungs felt like they would burst, it all seemed too exciting, certainly so far away from my past life in front of the Playstation.

"PEARSON!" Mr Edwards yelled again. He was right next to me, I didn't see why he had to burn off so many calories to call my name. I looked up to see some white cockatoos fly off from the tree they were sitting on. Mr Edwards must have scared them off. He had a tendency to do that, he WAS pretty scary.

"What did I just say?"

"Um" I paused. "Bash the hammer with the mallet and get the tents set up before the sun goes down because we're all hungry for our dinner?" I asked.

Mr Edwards glared at me. I began to count the wrinkles on his super tanned face. One, two, three . . .

He slapped the mallet in my hand, just as I opened it. Ouch! I swear I had bruise now. I put the mallet in the other hand and examined my right hand. I had so many lines in my hand, I think they were starting to go red from the hammer. Maybe I'd got a splinter or something. I ran my hand down the handle of the mallet. Ouch! I'd definitely got a splinter now.

I dropped the mallet to the ground and squeezed the two fresh splinters now embedded in my finger. They began stinging. I wondered if we'd thought to bring some Dettol.

"Come on slacker!" Brodie said, walking towards me. I tried to step forward out of his reach but I was too late again, I hit the ground.

"Will you leave me alone?" I asked, pissed off.

"Listen shrimp, we want our dinner. Hurry up and get the food tent set up!" he said, chewing stale gum like a cop from the western movies. I imagined him with a sling and gun or whatever it was that made them look

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cool in the movies. The star on his chest and the cowboy hat flipped down with a crease on the top. It was a perfect audition start.

“Why don’t you?”

“Take a look around! We’ve put four other tents up, including yours. So hurry up and pull some weight around here or I’ll throw you off a cliff” he said angrily, shaking his head as if I was a loser.

I laid back down on the cool sand, probably littered with cigarette butts and dried up urine from the last camp. The stars began to shine as the sun started to fall towards the horizontal line. I wondered who’d be looking at the sun right now. Maybe those famous celebrities in Hollywood? I wondered what it would be like to walk down that big road. The one with all the palm trees near the huge Hollywood sign. I think I’d seen it in the Beverley Hills Cop movies. How I wished I was Eddie. I bet he didn’t have to cop so much crap, he was cool and socially adept and this lacking of skill made me a target I didn’t appreciate or value.

I’d only agreed to go on the two week science expedition to leave home. I didn’t really care about getting an A grade for going. The idea of a camp in the outback seemed interesting, looking for plant and animal samples wasn’t. I didn’t realise they’d be so many losers coming along too, I thought there would be other people like me but I guess I was wrong.

I sighed and sat up, resting my elbows on my knees. I thought again about leaving in the middle of the night but I wasn’t sure who had my torch. I’d used it to go to the toilet on the bus last night. There were lights on the Greyhound but I decided to use the torch because it was so dark. I like to have full light. Who knew if Brodie or Jamie would trip me over. Legs and bags had littered most of the walkway for the trip. One of the bus drivers had fallen over and banged his knee. He’d been so angry, he was off to bed because he’d been driving all day and now it was his turn to sleep. Brodie had laughed and the bus driver looked like he was going to punch him out. I would have done too but . . . I wouldn’t have liked to hurt Brodie. If I gave him a black eye or bloody nose, the whole camp would be up in arms at me

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and start picking on me again and all through the expedition. It was bad enough as it was. But then again, I guess it would make me a rebel. Perhaps if I toughened up before we returned to Sydney, I'd be king!

I laughed out loud. "PEARSON! Go boil the water please. You're absolutely useless with a mallet" Mr Edwards said, screwing up his face. Perhaps if I'd been good at football or rugby, I'd be in his good books. I made a pact to get up before anyone else in the morning and start running and doing push ups everyday. Perhaps if I ate meat and eggs for every meal too, I could really bulk up like Brodie. Then I'd score all the girls. I wouldn't leave him any. I'd be like the sports version of Elvis. I wondered if Elvis had ever been good at sports.

I stood up. "Useless sack of shit!" Brodie muttered under his breath.

"You wait, I'm going to try out for next year's rugby team so I can knock you out" I mumbled.

Brodie spun around. "WHAT!"

"What's going on?" Mr Edwards asked.

"WHAT THE . . . ?" Brodie suddenly dropped to the ground laughing so hard. "HA HA HA HA" he clutched his stomach, slapping the ground. "Oh my God, I can't believe you just said that . . . HA HA HA HA"

Mr Edwards walked over to Brodie. "Am I missing something?" he asked.

"HA HA HA HA" Brodie was still laughing and I suddenly hated myself for having such a big mouth. 'Why oh why couldn't I keep it closed?' I wondered. I made a mental note to punish myself for my stupidity later. What had I just done? Dug myself a grave?

"Oh my God Mr Edwards, ha ha . . . Pearson said he's going to try for the rugby team so he can knock me out" Brodie said, with a big grin on his face.

The next few minutes were a blur as my face flushed red hot. As if I'd eaten a whole bowl of Grandma's chilli sauce. I could hear everyone laughing, it was a blur, no one's laugh was distinctive. Like a hot pot of sound all melted. I felt like passing out or throwing up.

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Even Mr Edwards was laughing at me. "No chance of you being on my squad Pearson. You're so fat and lazy, you couldn't run 100 metres towards the nearest burger restaurant!"

More laughter. I walked over to the small campfire that was waving around in the slight breeze. I stared at the flames, wondering if it was true that I could walk on the coals and not get burnt if I thought positively. Would I get respect from the others or just have to suffer first degree burns for a few days?

I saw a lizard nearby. I thought about hanging it over the fire. Not sure why, I just hated myself so much right now, I wanted to inflict so much pain on anything and everything. I really hated this world.

I think I was the only one who had to fundraise the money for the cost of this expedition. Everyone else was rich and could afford it. I think they even had a few hundred in spending money. I only had \$20 which was stupid. I couldn't even afford a beer, not that we were allowed to drink. I was just so desperate to get out of Sydney and as far away as I could from my family. If you call them family. I was on my own now. I wanted an adventure and I was going to toughen up. By the end of this trip, I was determined that everyone would like me. I'd learn anything and everything about camping and be so smart, I'd be a hero to everyone. They would be able to rely on me to do all the work, I'd have so much respect, I'd be a real man.

I grabbed some wood that was lying nearby and put it on the fire. I thought a nice big fire would be a great start, proof I had common sense. "Oi you dickhead!" Brodie yelled at me. "That wood needs to last us the whole night, we've got to ration it!"

I stepped back as the wind caught the flames that were suddenly as tall as me. It was like a shower of fire. "PEARSON! Go boil the water now!" Mr Edwards said.

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I walked around the fire to the small portable barbecue we'd bought. I didn't think it was really something you brought camping with you but I didn't tell them that. Perhaps I really was smarter than them! I knew how to cook damper, I bet they didn't. Not that I was really sure HOW they made the bread.

"So what's the plan for tomorrow?" Stacy asked Mr Edwards, as she sat down on an upturned crate near the fire. The other students walked over to her.

"Well, I was thinking that it would be a good idea to go for a nice bushwalk to the creek near the ridge over there" Mr Edwards said, pointing in some direction, I couldn't see.

I took the lid off a water bottle nearby and poured it into the saucepan. I figured this is what they meant.

"You really are useless, aren't you!" Brodie said, walking up to me. He grabbed the saucepan and tipped it into the sand at my feet. Brodie walked off to the entrance of the food tent where there was a 10 Litre container of water and began to fill it up. "THIS is the water for drinking and using it to cook our food" he said. "THAT . . ." he said pointing to the bottle I'd poured it from, "is MR EDWARD'S COFFEE for the next few days. He's going to kill you when I tell him how stupid you are".

Mr Edwards came over. "Getting sorted are we?" he asked me.

Brodie plonked the saucepan onto the barbecue grill. "He took the coffee from your flask thinking it was water to boil" he told Mr Edwards with a smirk.

I didn't have to look at Mr Edwards. My head began to feel so hot from Mr Edward's eyes, I began to have a headache and was worried it was going to explode. I decided that I'd have dinner and then go straight to bed. I think I had some Panadol in my personal first aid kit I bought. I figured

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sleeping as much as I can on this camp would be a great way to survive. At least I'd have time to think. I sure couldn't do that at home.

"Okay Pearson, we're going to have a serious talk after dinner" Mr Edwards said dangerously. "We need to discuss why you're really on this trip . . . because right now, you're pretty useless and I'd be tempted to stick you on the first bus out of here."

I didn't say anything as I stirred the water with a nearby wooden spoon. I licked my lips as the heat from my face began to burn.

"I wouldn't have let you come if your dear counsellor didn't beg for me to give you a chance. Not sure why I really listened to her" he said quietly.

'Because you're banging her?' I wanted to ask.

"So we're going to have to work out what skills you have . . . if any . . . that we can use to make this expedition a success. I can't have the others doing all the work and you sitting on your bum all day doing nothing. Do I make myself clear?" he asked dangerously. I nodded cautiously.

Dinner was simple with onions, sausages and tomato sauce. We'd forgotten to buy the salad and bread when we were in Midland. We'd just jumped into the minibus that was parked at the train station. Mr Edwards was worried we wouldn't be able to find the camp before dark, so now we were suffering. My stomach rumbled. I let the water boil and went to walk over to the fire.

I wanted to make friends with all the girls before we left. I figured girls were a gentle creature who weren't as nasty and cruel as the boys.

"Hey Stacy" I said, abandoning the stove to sit down next to her. She'd been talking to Jodie who was sitting on the otherside of her but I didn't care, I figured she'd have all night to gossip to Jodie later. She could talk to me right now.

She looked at me. "What do YOU want, fuck face?"

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That kinda knocked me back for a six. "What?" I asked.

"What the hell do you want? Aren't you supposed to be on cooking duties?"

"Um, yeah but the water's not even boiled yet"

"PEARSON! Come here please!!!" Mr Edwards said.

"I'll be back in a sec" I said politely to Stacy but she'd already turned around to face Jodie to continue her boring gossip talk.

I walked over to Mr Edwards who had by now, lit a lantern near the barbecue. Bugs and insects began flying around, attracting themselves to it. I was worried they would go into the food. "You know, maybe we should move that lantern" I said to Mr Edwards. "If the moths and bugs fall into the food, we might catch Ross River Virus" I told him.

Mr Edwards was silent for a few seconds. "Are you serious?"

I nodded my head. "Oh yeah. I'm just saying this because I haven't had my Hep shots yet so I'm thinking that I'd be kinda useless if I was bitten or ate one of them and copped it. Why? Have you had your needles to protect yourself?" I smiled.

"Okay . . . for one thing, Ross River Virus is caught through mosquitoes. Secondly, Hep shots are for Hepatitis. Do you know what Hepatitis is?" he asked me in a deep voice. I wondered how deep it could get, then I realised his eyes were growing small, I could see a frown, maybe it was a glare.

"Um . . . oh yeah, you get it when you have sex. It's protection for the baby so it doesn't catch any diseases"

"Okay, you're close but I think we'll leave it at that" Mr Edwards said. He grabbed the lantern and moved it onto a nearby fold up table that had the butter and tomato paste. "The matches are in the tent. Go grab them because you're going to be here all night if you think the water's going to boil itself all night"

I bent down and noticed I'd forgotten to light the flame. "Oh yeah" I laughed. "Sorry about that, that's a bit careless of me"

I began walking towards the tent. Brodie was standing near the entrance. "Talk to my chick again and I'm going to pour that hot water down the front

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of your shirt and burn your dick off" he said quietly. He grabbed the front of my shirt in his fist. "Don't fuck with me bitch!" he said. "The only reason why you came is because your mum's mental and your dad's fucked off. I heard Mr Edwards talking about it to your counsellor"

He let go of me and shoved me back but I was smart this time. I knew it was going to happen and stopped myself flying back. But I felt like he'd slapped me across the face and that was worse. Maybe I could tell him to punch me. Then I would have a good reason to leave. Maybe it was a bad idea to go onto this expedition. It would have been easier to run away from home.

I entered the tent, concentrating on a Black Eyed Peas song running through my head. I couldn't remember the name of it but I was intensely focused on the words so I wouldn't cry. I wondered if I'd reach 40 years of age and still be a loser. A mess. I had to work things out fast, I was almost 15. I didn't have much time. I wanted the rest of high school to go sweet, not keep making mistakes all the time.

I grabbed the matches that were sitting on top of the provisions box and walked over to Mr Edwards who was fine tuning the gas bottle. I lit the match and huge flames poured out from under the saucepan.

I didn't know Mr Edwards was leaning on the barbecue. "AAARGGH!" he said, his jumper catching on fire. He began dancing around, unsure what to do. The flames ran up the arm of his jumper. Mr Edwards dropped himself to the ground and began to roll around. He hit the table with the barbecue and the saucepan fell and landed on Mr Edwards, soaking the legs of his jeans.

I looked to my left and saw Brodie walking towards me. I didn't have time to move. I saw the punch and then everything just went black.