

One



Hannah

“All right, class. Settle down,” Mr Lawrence shouts.

I cringe at the teacher's vain attempt to control a class taller than he is. We are standing in the car park of Litchfield National Park. Ten of the class of twenty students have brought their dogs on this camping trip. They are on leads, ready to go. The dogs, not the students. It seems like everyone has a four-legged trusted companion who gives unconditional love, except me.

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There is a motley collection of big, little, long and short canines. According to some surveys, the kind of a dog a person bonds with tells a lot about their inner person. Some of the choices are rather surprising. My Border Collie would beat the pants off these in both intelligence and looks. If I still had him.

“As you know, the object of this excursion is to test your dog's loyalty and tracking ability. And to get out of the classroom during the mid-year school holidays program. There is a range of abandoned houses and mines here in the mapped area, so there are plenty of places to hide. However, no going beyond the marked area. We don't want a real life search and rescue operation,” he says, laughing wickedly.

Or maybe it is just in my mind that it is wicked. I don't like this teacher. His dark eyes are small and shifty. I always feel he is trying to look down the cleavage of the girls' tops or checking the boys' zippers are done up. Other than being shorter than many of his students, he dyes his hair black to look younger and wears a

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moustache. Just the kind of guy who could be a paedophile. He's just plain creepy.

Karly is standing next to me. She has long blonde hair, slim figure, is naturally feminine in anything she puts on and could easily be the most popular girl in the school if she let her looks control her personality. Thankfully, she doesn't.

She has brought her black and white Corgi pup, Skip. They are a perfect match in so many ways, including girly cuteness.

“If Skip gets lost, you can help find her so she can find me,” Karly whispers. “I hope she remembers me long enough to start in the right direction.”

I struggle to keep from laughing out loud at the thought of the number of kids who will be doing just that, looking for their dogs after this exercise. Mr Lawrence glares over at us as he continues to bark out instructions. He must have seen my smirk.

“To keep you from just hiding in one group, I have given you each a treasure map. At the point marked on your individual charts, you will find something you can use, but you must follow the trail to get there. It will allow your dog to follow your scent.”

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Whoever came up with this insane holiday exercise needs their head read. There is no way these dogs are going to find an individual scent mixed up like this. A trained sniffer dog might be able to but these?

I sigh sadly. This exercise is stupid. This camp is stupid. My life is even more stupid. I would much rather be at my parents' cattle station, riding horses and doing something constructive like checking fences or water troughs. Even finishing my final biology thesis would be more interesting.

Sadness overwhelms me as I try to pull my mind back from the direction it is heading. That is all gone now, ever since the plane went down over the Indian Ocean, taking my parents with it. The station, the cattle, all the horses and even my dog Puffin are all gone too. The new owners wanted everything, so that is what the lawyers gave them. What would a teenager do with any of that, anyway? I walked off; they walked on.

“Don't cry, Hannah. You are lucky not to have a dog here. You'd have to go through this path exercise, too,” Karly whispers

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as she squeezes my hand. "I'll be the laughing stock of the class if Skip gets lost, so don't let me down. You can track us both."

She is my only friend in this school, the only one who knows my deepest secrets. Although she is a city girl, we got along from the moment we met. She doesn't judge me for my naive country ways and complete ignorance of city life. I have my thick black hair cut short and never put on any makeup. My regular uniform consists of baggy t-shirt and jeans. In fact, I take it as a compliment when people mistake me for a boy.

"Instead, you are my partner. We are going to win this exercise. I wonder what Mr Lawrence thinks I need? Probably a push-up bra. He is such a pervert."

I wipe the tears from my eyes as I give her a hug farewell. Why am I getting all teary? It must be due to being back in the bush again. All the old memories are flooding back.

The only camping trips we did as a family revolved around mustering cattle. Camping with a bunch of school kids is not the same at all. I plaster a smile on my face and give her a cold bottle of water.

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“Go and get that treasure so we can go for a swim before it gets too hot. It is already 11 o'clock. Come out of hiding if we don't find you within an hour. We can make up some excuse.”

As soon as the treasure hunters take to the trail, it is evident which dogs are more interested in playing rather than looking for their owners. Skip is one of those.

“Where is Karly?” I ask the cute bundle of fluff, tugging on her lead.

She cocks her head and looks down the trail where Karly disappeared. That is a good start. At least she seems to recognise her owner's name.

“All right now, the rest of you, take your partner's dogs and go looking. Remember, it is about learning to work with the dogs. Observe them. Encourage them. Only try not to guide them unless they are seriously distracted.”

It takes a few minutes to convince the dogs to hit the road. It takes even less time to break Rule Number One with the handlers leading the dogs.

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What a disaster! I laugh sarcastically inside my head, but I don't dare show it on my face. I get in trouble for not showing respect to the teachers all the time. So now all I want to do is be invisible, finish school and then disappear back to the Bush where I belong.

Quickly, I head down the trail Skip indicates she wants to go down. It is the same one Karly went down, at least. Looking promising!

Mr Griffin, the cute blonde gym teacher, is nearby and following the group heading down the same trail. Why do I have to be here, going through this? He always seems to make an effort to talk with me. Sometimes, I feel he knows what I am hiding, and he doesn't want to let me be in peace.

"Hannah, I don't think Skip is going to last the distance," he laughs as he walks next to me. "Look at her. Her legs are too short. You might need to carry her."

"True but I think she has the idea."

So far, Skip is ignoring the others who have stopped to pee on all the bushes along the track. Her little ears are flapping

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wildly, as she trots along. Mr Griffin is probably right. Her tongue is already hanging out to one side. It is too hot and humid to be doing this, but it is better than sitting in a classroom watching movies on school holidays. My heart strings are tugging just by watching her. Puffin was just as cute at this age. I just wish Mr Griffin would go somewhere else so Skip and I could enjoy this alone.

The Australian Outback has a life of its own. The smell of the gum trees, the warm breeze and the hot sun, makes me come alive. The ice block where I keep my emotions securely frozen starts to melt out here. This is where I belong, not in the city. Maybe that is why my half-sister Monica sent me on this trip. She said I need to get out of the house more and to have an 'attitude adjustment'. I have to accept my life has changed, and stop sulking in my room.

Pessimism is my new best friend.

"I know about your collie. Puffin was its name, wasn't it?" he whispers, as I continue to ignore him.

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“How do you know?” I snap angrily, stopping to glare at him.

Has he been prying into my life? He has no right to do that. I don't want sympathy nor persecution. I just want to be invisible, survive the public school system and eventually retreat to somewhere no one can find me. Those thoughts have become my mantra. Invisible, survive, then disappear.

“I make it my business to know my students. You two would have had this game over before it started.”

He smiles as he goes to put his arm around me.

“Don't touch me!” I step away and put my hands up. No-one touches me for any reason. I have become a 'no-hugs' and 'no-kisses' person ever since my parents.....

“I was only going to turn you around. Skip is wearing out.”

Sure enough, she has flopped under a bush with all four legs spread out to allow her belly to touch the cool, shady ground.

“If I pick her up, she won't be able to track Karly.”

“Yes, of course.”

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He looks at me strangely then turns to head further up the track. Quickly, I scoop Skip into my arms. Either he can see this is a waste of time or there is something else going on here. All the other students and dogs have disappeared up the various tracks, so it is just us.

“What is going on here, Mr Griffin? This game doesn't make any sense.”

“What do you mean, Hannah?” he asks, as he strides along the path.

“Why are we here? Why are we doing this stupid exercise? Since you pried into my life, you must realise an aboriginal tracker trained me. These dogs don't know how to follow anything, and it is impossible to find an individual scent with all these people. There are footprints and broken twigs everywhere. It is worse than a needle in a haystack.”

“Yes. I know that.”

“Then why are we here?”

“I don't know.” He stops walking for a moment, frowning in thought.

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Squeals of laughter erupt nearby as we reach the small open area around the ruins. Bags of lollies and doggie treats appear to be the most common treasure as dogs and owners reunite.

The pioneers of old would roll over in their graves if they knew their hard life spent building and opening up this big country has become the site for such a pathetic game.

“I don't know,” he repeats, whispering. “I just know something is not right. Something big is about to happen, and I can't work out what it is yet. Hopefully, we all make it out of here alive. Just keep your eyes open, Hannah. I might need to call on your skills before this is through.”

Two



After a couple of hours, it is too hot to be wandering through the bush. The treasure hunters are back with no thanks to their dogs. Eventually, it is time to have a barbecue lunch by the waterfall with everyone laughing and talking about their adventures. Boring! Who cares if they saw a goanna?

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I am looking forward to having a swim in the fresh water. There is one major problem, though. We haven't been able to find Karly, and we have looked everywhere. She is still hiding well past the hour limit I gave her.

Skip is not happy, either. She is supposed to be a Corgi, but I think a miniature Border Collie may have slipped through the fence as well. She is very smart.

"I'm going back out to look for Karly," I tell Mr Griffin as I head away from the group.

He nods knowingly, but Mr Lawrence calls out as I leave.

"You are not going back out there, young lady. It is getting dark soon. Karly Simons must realise she has to come in by now."

I glance at Mr Griffin, and he nods for me to go anyway. Something big is about to happen? What is it? Am I feeling it too? Or is it only due to his words emblazoned on my mind? It is many hours before dark, and

he knows I have to find my friend. I can't leave her out there. Although she has a water bottle with her, it won't last too long in this tropical heat.

Skip runs along as fast as her little legs can carry her, heading to the abandoned buildings. It is the most logical place, but I thoroughly searched it earlier. An eerie silence settles over the town now.

Why would Karly still be hiding? Has something happened to her? Is this what Mr Griffin was worried would happen?

“Cooooee!” I call as loudly as I can. “Karly, stop hiding. It is time to come in.”

Silence hangs heavy as the sun beats down with a renewed intensity. The old wooden planks are discoloured and warped with the passage of time. Although no one has lived here for nearly a century, it still feels like someone is watching me.

“Karly!” I cry out again.

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Skip rushes up to what was once the old jail. Typical! I laugh to myself. She probably got herself locked in a cell after the first group left.

The building is one of the few still standing with any integrity, most likely due to the support of the iron bars. It feels as if I am walking back in time, back to the days of the bushrangers and gunfights. I wish I lived back in those days. Life was much less complicated then. Schools taught subjects that actually helped people survive in a harsh world.

I'm becoming more convinced that Skip is a miniature Border Collie with an identity crisis as she stops at a cell, growling. Is there such a thing called 'breed dysphoria'?

On the old floor boards is a stone encircled by one of Karly's hair ties. My first instinct is to pick it up, but as I move it, I jerk my hand back. The word HELP is scratched underneath. What on earth has happened to her?

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“What did you find?” A voice from behind startles me, causing me to jump in fright.

Quickly, I turn to find Taylor and his friend Mitch watching me. They are the two most popular and handsome boys in the whole school. Both are blonde and muscular. Why did they follow me? Can't people just leave me alone?

“She was here earlier,” I whisper. “That is her hair tie. Someone must have taken her.”

I don't know why I am whispering except maybe saying it out loud will make it more real. Taylor goes into the cell to have a closer look.

“Don't touch it! There might be fingerprints on it,” I cry out as he picks it up.

“Yeah, hers. If someone took Karly, they wouldn't have left it here as a clue,” Taylor replies. “That only happens in the movies.”

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Duh! Why did I say that? Of course, he is right. Why do I act so dumb in front of boys? He looks at the scratching then replaces the tie where it was.

“Mr Griffin said for us to come help, in case you found something. We need to get him.”

“I haven't had a chance to look around yet. Maybe she left another clue somewhere. How could they take her away without anyone seeing anything? The class was spread all over the grounds. Maybe she is just fallen asleep somewhere here.” I leave the room, heading deeper into the cell block.

“I'll go back to the camp and let Mr Griffin know what is going on,” Mitch offers. “We need to get the police out here if she has been abducted.”

Taylor and I look around the building while Mitch runs back to the camp. There is something about Taylor I have never taken the time to notice before. Although I have hardly even spoken to him, I feel extremely comfortable

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with him, like a brother. Is he a kindred spirit? Another fish out of water?

“Cooooeee! Karly! Where are you?” I call out loud enough to wake the dead. That is probably not a good example to use in such a place. The hairs on the back of my neck are starting to rise. There is still no reply.

“I know it is stupid but it feels like someone is watching us.” Taylor whispers.

“Yeah, I feel it too. I wish we could find Karly and get out of here. This place is starting to freak me out. I tell you something else I find strange. This building doesn't feel as old as the others. On the outside it is, but here inside, it's been fixed up. Do you think someone is using it for something? Druggies wouldn't come out here since we are a long way from Darwin. I wonder if there is something else?”

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“Maybe. Surely the teachers checked the place out before sending us out. They left ‘treasures’ at the hiding spots, remember?”

"Mr Griffin told me to keep my eyes open since he felt something terrible was going to happen. Maybe he knows more than he is letting on."

We are standing at the entrance of what may have been a gathering room for the police officers back in the day. It is a large open area with cobwebs and dust piled over the few pieces of broken furniture. The only spot that has been disturbed for years is the one closest to the door. That could be from other students but who knows? It doesn't look like anyone was assigned to hide here.

Suddenly my heart stops, drops to my stomach, pounds, thumps out of my chest all at the same time as blood rushes to my head in fear.

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Stuck to a floor board next to a closed trapdoor is a piece of Karly's long blonde hair. It must have been a solid knock as there is blood on it.

“That will have DNA. No touching that!” Taylor says as he grabs my hand and pulls me out of the room.

I pull away quickly. I don't need the kind of reputation holding hands with him would give me. I can just imagine the stupid trendy girls saying *'Oooh, look at Hannah. Hooking up with Taylor when she is supposed to be looking for her friend.'* Nah, I don't need that.

The other students, Mr Griffin, and Ms Stewart come hurrying along the path, carrying all the torches they could find. I glance at the position of the sun. It must be getting close to five o'clock. It has taken a lot longer than I realised.

“Mr Lawrence is waiting for the police to arrive. They should be here soon,” Mr Griffin says as he joins us.
“Can I have a look at what you found?”

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Skip is still in my arms, so I give her a hug, as Mr Griffin looks closer at the trapdoor.

“We need to get the police here to check that out. Karly must have hit her head pretty hard. I just hope she isn't dead. This is what I was afraid of, Hannah.”

My heart makes another trip to my stomach. Surely my friend has just gone exploring and will be okay. She is pretty uncoordinated, so maybe she just fell over. I know it is selfish of me, but she is all I have.

I have lived with my half-sister Monica and her husband Steve since my parents' death, but Karly is more family than they are. I haven't cried for years, but tears finally make their way to my eyes and flood over the brims.

“It's okay, Skip. We will find her,” I whisper to the innocent pup who is snuggling in my arms. “I'll find her.”

“Hannah, can I speak to you privately?” Taylor murmurs.

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“What is it?” I ask, wiping the tears from my eyes. I follow him into the cell where we found Karly's hair tie.

“I just got a text from a friend in Darwin. The reception here is awful, but it still came through. You need to see this.”

He hands me his mobile phone. On it is a picture of a drawing showing Karly sitting on the cell floor. She is carving the word HELP with a stone in her right hand. Someone one hundred kilometres away has drawn a picture of my friend here in this cell? How can that happen?

“Charlie doesn't know who this person is nor how the drawing came to be in his house. It was on his desk when he came home from work about an hour ago.”

“An hour ago?”

“Yeah, it just appeared. No one could have left it there.”

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“Someone had to leave it there. I am not sure if you should tell the police about that. Your friend might get into trouble.”

It is too much for my brain to cope with so I find myself walking outside to join the class.

“My uncle is a police officer. I'll show him when I get home. Maybe he can make sense of it. It doesn't tell us anything other than what we already know.”

“I wish Mum and Dad were here. They would know what to do,” I whisper to myself.

“I wish mine were too,” Taylor answers sadly. I hadn't noticed him follow me outside and stand next to me. “They died in a car accident ten years ago.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. Mine died in a plane crash three years ago.”

“I had no idea. Maybe we should hang out together a bit more.”

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“You and Mitch are the most popular boys in school. I am a country outsider, with no social skills to speak of, and this is our last year of school. As soon as this is over and we find Karly, you will realise we have nothing in common to talk about,” I laugh softly.

“You might be surprised. I can tell we have more in common than you realise,” Taylor says, walking over to where Mitch is talking to Ms Stewart. He looks hurt, but I know it is the truth. We just have to find Karly and everything will be normal again. Taylor must feel the same strange bond I do but it will pass.

It has been the longest couple of hours in my life when the police arrive. Constables Sarah and Felix get straight to work.

“Who found the evidence?” Sarah asks as she puts on a tactical vest and plastic gloves.

“Hannah,” Mr Griffin replies, indicating for me to come forward. I feel guilty, as if I've done something that

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is going to waste a lot of people's time. Why couldn't I just open the trapdoor and call out to her? She has probably thought it would be cooler underground, and fallen asleep. As soon as we open the door, she will come out laughing, and all this will be a bad dream.

“Good. Tell us what happened.”

She raises her eyebrows as I describe the ridiculous exercise, using treasure maps and dogs. I can imagine what she is thinking - A perfect way to separate a student and put them in a dangerous situation. Felix takes fingerprints from the trapdoor, bags the hair and blood into forensic bags, then carefully opens the door. I wish they would hurry up. Sarah takes her gun out of its holster, as she shines her torch down the stairs leading to the underground room.

“Hannah, come with us.”

Me? Why me?

I'm glad she has said I can come with them, though. I can't just stand around doing nothing. She heads down the

stairs first, followed by Felix and me. The torchlight doesn't want to penetrate the dense darkness of the small square space at the bottom.

“There is a tunnel,” Sarah whispers. “Lots of tracks.”

Cool! I wonder if it is an escape tunnel dug by a bushranger? The tunnel is narrow but tall enough, so we can stand upright and walk single file. It is several degrees cooler down here. Why aren't we living underground more? Ah, the monsoon rains would drown us all like a bunch of rats. The tropical north gets a metre of rain each year. We would all have swimming pools under our houses if we dug basements. At least the crocodiles wouldn't be able to infest them. Claustrophobia is starting to creep into my brain. I hope we don't get trapped down here.

“How could they have dragged Karly along this?” I ask, pulling my brain back from the direction it is heading.

“With a lot of difficulties,” Felix answers. “There are no drag marks on the ground so she walked under her own

strength. At least we can assume she is not dead or unconscious. She may have just slipped and hit her head as she was going down the ladder.”

That makes sense. The tendency to be uncoordinated and trip over our own feet is one thing Karly and I have in common. It seems like ages by the time we come to a door. Sarah looks back at us and puts her hand up. Slowly she opens it and shines the torch through the opening before moving forward.

“It’s clear,” she says confidently, as we exit and look around.

We are back at the main car park. How could someone arrive and leave without any of us noticing? The area seems too exposed with the bus sitting silently off to one side.