

[before]

We're a few suburbs away from McKinley Street. It's after school, it's the beginning of summer, and there's nothing to do but cruise as the sky slides away from the day. We've both done this shit before on our own, but it's more nerve-wracking doing it with someone else, somehow. You have no idea if the other person is gunna freak out halfway through, at a critical moment.

Craggs is the one who notices it, as we swing past on our bikes. The garage door rolled up, the tools hanging in their special spots, power drills and an angle grinder, and on the workbench there's a router, a couple of circular saws, the complete Sidchrome set. That's what I want. The rest doesn't interest me much. This you open up and it has everything in there, ring spanners for every possible job, all lined up in increasing size, and the sockets nestled into purpose-cut spots.

We dump the bikes and head back. There's no one

around. We watch for ten, fifteen minutes before making our move.

Of course, it all weighs a fucking ton, but we are in and out of that guy's shed in less than a couple of minutes, and the blood is pumping, man, is it ever. I sweat fear in those minutes.

Craggs wants to do a second run to get the rest, but it's too risky. We run down the back lane behind the guy's house loaded up to the max as it is — anyone seeing us would realise what we were up to. We have to stash the heaviest stuff at a construction site a couple of streets down. (We go back later on and shift it over to Craggs's place.) But no one does see us. And at the end of it, I have the Sidchrome set.

I kept it afterwards, under some junk in Dad's shed. I never used it, in case Dad saw me, just opened it and looked at it sometimes. One day I'll change a whole engine using that thing. Craggs sold the rest of the stuff to some guy he knew, and threw me a hundred bucks. I didn't really wanna get rid of it because I thought we'd be more likely to get busted that way, but Craggs wanted the cash, so that's what we did.

That was about eighteen months ago.

It seems more like a decade.

1

It was Dad who finally snapped over what had been going on. Said he couldn't watch me screwing up my life anymore, and for any good to come out of it he'd have to personally avert the course of legal justice. He said family justice was worse, much worse. So he went down to the cop shop and did a deal with that fat fucker who runs the juvenile crime squad. McPhee. Detective Sergeant McPhee. The guy hates me, so I don't know how Dad did it. McPhee slapped me across the face once, one of the first times I was in there. Fucking pimp slapped me, like I was his to have a go at, like it was personal. That was the most humiliating thing, being in the cop shop with other dudes watching. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to do violence. I reckon that was a real turning point for me. That's when I knew I'd do it again, I knew I was on a roll. I knew what I *was*. That backhander kind of made

it easier; it made me want to do fucked-up things, it made me hate things, hate certain kinds of people. The lowest feeling was that I knew I deserved to be cracked — I deserved worse, for sure — and it was probably his way of trying to scare me into stopping, into turning back from the bad shit, but it didn't. It fuelled me.

Somehow, Dad did this deal with McPhee. They hooked me up with a juvenile justice team and I had to agree to follow an *action plan*. I had to accept *responsibility* and agree to steer clear of *negative influences* for three months. It was a month in the slammer, otherwise. The old man swapped the month inside for three months out here — solitary, he said, tougher than anything the kiddies jail could dish out.

We had a big meeting about it before Dad got what he wanted. Me and Dad; McPhee; my case manager, Sandy; a hairy dude from the juvenile injustice department; and the head copper down at Nallerup. Senior Sergeant Wardle. All these people, sitting around a big table, writing notes and shit, about me.

‘From the department’s point of view,’ Hairy Dude said, ‘it’s highly risky to entrust the offender with his own punishment.’

‘Yes. I know this is a very unusual approach,’ Dad said, taking a sideways glance at me. ‘I know ... we are

asking a lot. But perhaps that's where Sergeant Wardle could step in? If he would be willing to oversee things?

Wardle squirmed in his chair and slid a document into the centre of the table. 'I'll agree to it — but I have some conditions.' He looked up at the people around the table. 'And I want to make it clear that this is a test case. I'm only approving it because my advice is that the offender is open to turning things around.'

Apart from Dad, no one looked at me during all this. There they were, discussing in detail what I'd be doing, with me sitting right there among them. It was more than weird.

McPhee looked the pages over and snorted. 'Dodgy idea if you ask me.'

'It's a *test case*,' Wardle said. 'A trial. And he'll have to report in each week.'

Sandy scanned Wardle's notes and said, 'I think these are fair. And I would like to add one thing: that Joel be required to return to school immediately once the three months are up. The school principal has expressed concern about his taking such a long break from study, but is willing to work with Joel's teachers to create a personal study program for him on his return.' She looked over at me. 'If you don't catch up, Joel, you'll have to repeat the year from scratch.'

Oh, happy days.

‘I think we all agree,’ she went on, ‘— and this is the reason we’re here — that Joel has a much better chance of a positive outcome if we can make this work. We’ve all seen the data showing that young offenders rarely rehabilitate once they’ve been incarcerated, and if we can avoid that, then for God’s sake ... This is so much more positive than anything we can offer him in a detention centre.’

There were a few grunts from the coppers. Dad looked like he was holding his breath. Sandy waited for a moment but when no one spoke, she said, ‘So, are we all in agreement that we should give this a go?’

‘If Sergeant Wardle is happy with it, then I would like to see this go ahead,’ Hairy Dude said. ‘It could become a precedent for other kids, if it works.’

‘Yeah. If it works,’ said McPhee.

And so here I am, in this shack in the middle of the forest somewhere down south, totally on my own for the next few months. Apparently, in order to contemplate life and what a balls-up you’ve made of it, it’s best to be out in the sticks. And, yeah, they reckon it helps with staying outta trouble.

Craggs has always been into the edgy shit. The kind of guy who smokes Winnie Reds in between cones and passes out at parties but you know he'll be okay in the morning. A total scruff but the teachers love him because he's smart, even though he never does any homework. He hardly ever rolls up for class, and he turns in huge test marks. We've been mates since our folks both bought houses in McKinley Street, about four years ago. He's a funny bastard, even if he can go way overboard, as recent events have proved. The first thing that Craggs did when he moved into McKinley Street was punch out Mario Ripelli. We'd been wanting to do that all year. Craggs just went and did it like you turn on the telly, slugged Mario a couple of times, then picked up his bike and we rode home like normal, me thinking that this guy was his own boss in every sense of the meaning. No one even questioned it; it was like, Mario's gonna get scrapped by this dude, just stand clear and let it happen.

Craggs is now in the slammer. His dad didn't have a shack in the bush to send him to. His dad didn't do anything much to help him at all, actually. I went and saw Craggs before I left and he was cheery as always but looked like he'd been to Weight Watchers, not the Young Offenders' Rehabilitation Program.

The detention centre didn't look too bad, what I saw of it. (It's not like you get taken on a guided tour or anything.) Craggs said there was an open area with a TV and a yard with gym equipment, and a library. He was sharing a room with an older dude who looked pretty scary but Craggs reckoned everything was okay. He had a tiny calendar shoved in his back pocket, though, and when he pulled it out, I could see the days crossed out, scratched out, like mistakes on a school project.

2

‘So ... what’s this place got, exactly, in terms of *facilities?*’

I pushed my empty plate into the middle of the table. (Lasagne. With roasted eggplant. Damn fine.) We were going in a couple of days. I wanted Dad to tell me what the hell was out there, at this shack, cos I was struggling to picture any of it. For a weekend, maybe, but for three months? I mean, what if something happened, like I got bitten by a dugite or plummeted off a cliff?

‘Not much. A fridge.’

‘A fridge?’

‘A fridge.’

‘And?’

‘Umm ... Oh yes — a shower.’

‘A *shower?*’ That’s worth a mention? I mean, how could there *not* be a shower? I sucked in a breath.

‘And?’ I said hopefully.

‘That’s it,’ said Dad.

Above us, the kitchen fluoro faltered.

Dad had been fairly short on the chat since everything happened, which was unusual for him. We’d had a couple of pretty dark talks, but once he’d got the go-ahead to excommunicate me to the bush he went pretty quiet on me. I got the feeling that an avalanche might come out if he opened his mouth, just saying *pass me the Weetbix* or something one morning.

‘It sounds a bit feral,’ I said.

His mouth pulled up at the corners for half a millisecond. ‘Feral, yep,’ he said, almost to himself. He got up to tackle the carnage heaped up in the sink, then realised it wasn’t his to do and jerked his thumb at it and gave me a sort of *sorry, mate* look. ‘Feral: that’s the point.’

Yeah yeah yeah.

‘The cabin’s got what you need. Not a hell of a lot more, but that’s part of what makes it ideal down there. For this.’ He stared at the water running into the sink. ‘The place didn’t even have power until a few years back. The Pelhams got their farm hooked up and they offered us a line from their place. It was gas lamps and candles until then. Like living in another century.’ He

slopped water around. 'Living without power is a real eye-opener,' he smiled wryly. 'I almost regret getting the place connected.'

Jesus, I hadn't even thought about power, just presumed there'd be *power* to the place. *Like living in another century?* Oh, wicked. This is gunna be a trip.

'Well ... so, when was it you were last there?'

'Oh, years ago now. I went on my own for a few days ... maybe ten years back? Your mum and I stopped going there once you were born; the hike in was just too far with a child.'

Christ. I looked up: alert and trying not to be alarmed.

He was grinning at me. 'Reckon you're up to it?'

I look around me now, wondering. There's no phone here, no vehicle, no one around. It's a 17 kilometre bush trek to the nearest town along some poxy hiking track that hippies and backpackers come down here for. Imagine that, spending your holidays hauling a sackful of shit along some scrubby track, getting blisters during the day and freezing to death at night. It's some old Aboriginal trail, apparently, starts in the Perth hills and goes right down to Albany. Anyway, this ... *cabin*, as Dad likes to call it, is in the deadzone, way out. No one

else is coming to stay, not my mates or the old man or anyone. I couldn't bring anything apart from clothes and stuff to read. Dad rifled through my bag before we left to make sure I hadn't snuck any contraband in. Grog, money, dope. Phone numbers of certain people, or my mobile, of course. Banned. No reception, anyway. No point taking the laptop either. The wireless would only pick up birds tweeting. Made sure I brought Bella's number though. Wrote it on the inside of my leg, way up — figured even Dad wouldn't go there. When we arrived, totally hammered from the hike in, I realised before I even got inside that the place wouldn't have a phone. It's got a cassette/radio (who the hell has cassettes any more?) but no CD player, and one massive stack of mouldy A4 paper.

It's May and it's already dark at five.

I met Bella at a party in Hammy Hill. The usual gig — the guy told his parents that he might have a few friends round while they went away for the weekend, and, err, it got a little out of hand. It could have been worse, I guess; I mean, losing a few pot plants over the back fence and having your letterbox yanked out and replanted in a rosebed a few houses away isn't going to end life as we know it, or, at least, not as your parents

know it. You never even fully realise what's gone down until the next day anyway, when you see the joint in daylight and can do a full damage survey. That's when you calculate the ETA of the olds and start making some harsh decisions about what you can fix and what you haven't got a hope in hell of fixing — this week, let alone this afternoon. Anyway, you would never have known from inside the house that some dudes were rioting outside that night. There were a fair few spliffs being passed around, the old bucket bong perched at the edge of the pool, and a shitload of cartons. The odd alcopop was up for grabs too.

Bella was sitting on the kitchen counter talking to some other chicks. She grinned at me as I went into the kitchen to skol water following a few beers too many. She had long strands of bright red hair — and I mean chilli red — on either side of her face. There were a few strands caught up in her earrings. Sort of a gypsy look. It felt like she was grinning right into me as I walked past and I knew then that I was gunna have to talk to her.

I took ages at the tap, thinking of what the hell I could say that wouldn't sound completely lame and stuff up the whole thing.

Eventually I had to turn around, mainly to avoid

looking like a complete freak who'd had too many beers and was, as a result, zoning out over the sink and skolling an embarrassing amount of water. The other chicks were talking among themselves and I knew it was good timing. It was perfect timing, it was go-Joel timing, and I just wanted to say, *So, hi, I'm Joel, who are you?* But before I could get my mouth into gear she half blurted out, 'It's Bella.'

'What is?' I said.

'Bella's my *name*,' she laughed, going red. 'In case you wanted to know.'

'Oh, right, yeah,' I laughed. 'I did want to know. I mean — *I do* want to know ...' *Aargh, oh Joel, you'd better save this, this is pathetic, mate, this isn't what you want to —*

'Joel,' I finally got out. 'I'm Joel.'

She laughed, looking at me in the nicest way. 'Glad we sorted that out.'

And I had an overwhelming sense then that I wanted to keep talking to her. That I needed to. There was something different about her, something lively and cool and natural. And while I was busy realising that, there was this big random pause where I couldn't come up with a fucking *thing* to say, and she was looking at me, kinda waiting with this expression on

her face that made me lose it all over again.

‘So ... so ... how d-do you know Matt?’ I threw out.

‘Matt?’

‘Yeah, Matt – the guy who’s having the p-p-party.’

I laughed, trying hard to sound normal, thinking, *Okay, Joel, that’s enough of the speech impediment for one night, thanks, just take it easy ... have another beer or something, why don’t ya.*

‘Oh, no, actually, I don’t know him,’ she said, looking embarrassed. ‘I came along with a couple of friends ...’

‘Oh, well, yeah, nah, I don’t really know him either,’ I lied, hoping he wasn’t nearby hearing me say that. I reached out for another EB and tried to keep it together. ‘That’s how good parties happen, I reckon. Otherwise you just get the same old crew every time. Same old same old.’

She laughed again then. She was wearing these wicked beaded silver earrings that *chink chinked* at me in the most distracting way. One had that red hair twisting around it.

‘You okay for a drink?’ I asked, realising I hadn’t even offered her one.

‘Yeah, I’m fine, thanks. But if you wanted to ... just hang out and chat for a while, I’d like that.’

Man. And that's Bella for you. She catches you off-guard, it's insane. That was me gone — it was the *directness* of her that really got me hooked, not to mention her smile. She's got this amazing smile — oh, shit, it did me in.

Skolling water didn't make any difference that night — I still ended up hurling in the park around the corner from home. I had to lie on a bench for a while and look up at the sky to wait for the headspins to pass. It was a perfect, clear night and everything around me, and inside me, seemed perfect and clear back then too.

3

The old man pulled the car over where the road meets the track. It was Sunday, a good day for new beginnings, he said.

Right on, Dad. I think he was more nervous than me.

We hauled on our packs. Well, I hauled on mine. Dad could have picked his up with his little finger. He'd brought a day pack, with a couple of litres of water and food and sunscreen. I had the mother of all packs; it ended somewhere near my knees. The zips bared their teeth over my gear like they might vomit if I put any more in.

We stayed on the main track until we reached an old fenceline, which Dad reckoned should take us right to the shack if we followed it.

'Yeah, and how long has it been since you were last here, Dad?'

‘Not as long as it’s been for you, I’ll just point out, you little —’

‘Now, now, be nice; new beginnings, remember?’

We tried to keep it like that on the walk in. Cheery. The months ahead, and the weeks before, were heavy enough for both of us. I think we were just sick of all the *weight*, you know? We just crapped on like nothing unusual was happening. I was really grateful to Dad for that. No last-minute sermons.

The day before, of course, had been a different story. He’d come out with this new thing that I had to *write* to him once a week.

‘*What?* What is this, army camp?’

‘Well, it sure as hell isn’t a bloody holiday for high achievers!’

We stared at each other.

He shook his head. ‘Look, Joel, you’re going to have to go into town once a week anyway to report in and stock up on food; you won’t be able to carry very much each time you go — it’s pretty far, believe me. You may as well drop me a line at the same time.’

Oh, jeez-uss. Fun.

‘It’s just so I know you’re okay, and sticking to the deal. I’m not kidding: if you don’t write I’ll presume

you've gone AWOL and I'll have to tell Sergeant McPhee. He'll contact Wardle and send him over — and we both know what that means.'

That was true. I wasn't gunna argue. I'd been shitting my pants about the whole detention centre thing, to be honest, which the lawyer said was definitely a goer this time. This shack idea of the old man's seemed pretty crazy at first, but anything's gotta be better than the alternative.

We'd had these talks, Dad and I, after it all came out, after school threatened to expel me and everything. It was like Dad had been pretending it wasn't happening until then, until the second or third call from the cops. And then it was real all of a sudden. Like the lights went on. He'd open a couple of stubbies and pass me one and you could see him trying to stay calm. I knew it was serious when I got a beer out of it just so he could talk. We've always been able to talk, you know, but there's never been much time. And this whole thing wasn't anything to do with him. I've never had any big issues with the old man. So when he flipped his lid it was actually terrible. He asked me why I'd done it and I never really had much of an answer. *Cos I could. Cos everything was boring. Cos I couldn't talk properly and people took the piss out of me. Cos I*

wanted to show them I was cool. Cos I couldn't say no. Cos Craggs is my mate and we do everything together. Cos I dunno. And that's all pathetic, I know that; they're not reasons, but they're the best I can come up with, cos I don't really know why else. I don't really know who I am, or who that person is — the one who rips off gear and flouts the law. Are they even the same person? Are they both Joel — whoever that is? I've been thinking something random. I've been thinking, yep, yep, they are.

I'd chosen my skankiest boots for the mission. The track was pure sludge in parts, so that was one good decision. But my *pack!* What the hell did I have in there, man? Thank god I didn't have to carry in cooking equipment as well. The shack had all that stuff, even if it was covered in dried-up mouse turds and the dust of fifty years. It was like a nuclear bomb had gone off and everyone had just dropped what they were doing and evacuated. I brought some clothes, a couple of books that the old man forced me to pack (*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* — what kind of hippie dope-smoker would call a book that?), and eight zillion packets of instant noodles — my idea. I might have brought a few too many, in retrospect.

During a drink stop on our walk in Dad said, 'I've set up an account for you at the general store in town, so you can buy food and things you need, okay?'

I nodded uncertainly, wondering what that meant, exactly.

'There's a limit on it,' he said, reading my mind. 'It's \$650 all up. That's fifty bucks for each week. To buy food with *only*, Joel.'

'Right,' I said, thinking of all the things I could do with that amount of cash.

'I won't be shelling out any more if you spend it on other stuff.'

'Yeah, got that, Dad.'

He looked at me hard and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a card-hand of twenties. 'And that's \$100, in case of *total emergency*. Okay?'

I took it and shoved it into a bunch of clothes right in the middle of my pack. That money wasn't going anywhere, not today, anyway.

But he couldn't quite wipe the doubt off his face. 'Joel?'

'I said, *G-o-t i-t*, Dad. Got it?'

I knew Dad wouldn't want to hang around when we finally rocked up. He had to get all the way back to

the car before dark. The concept of anyone doing the return walk straight away seemed fucking insane, quite frankly. He reached over and kind of shook my arm. ‘Good luck, all right?’

And that was it.

I tried not to watch him walking away. It was too weird. Maybe, until then, I’d thought it was all a trick, and he wasn’t *really* going to leave me out here alone.

He didn’t turn around, either.