



## ALL UNPACKED

Harry had just finished packing his bag when Deepika's mum unzipped it and took everything out again. She started a pile of his things, right there, on the floor of his new apartment.

'You won't be needing this on the track,' she told him. 'Or these. Or this.' His best spinner. His trading cards. His remote-controlled car. They all went on the pile. Then, after she'd taken everything fun out of his bag, she stood there, holding out her hand.

'What?' he said, pretending not to know.

'Come on,' she said. 'Your phone.'

Now he pretended not to hear. 'What?'

'You won't need a phone. We'll be embracing the great outdoors. It'll be our time to get to know each other.'

She beamed at him. Harry's eyes grew wide. They'd only just met, but he already knew all he wanted to know about Deepika's mum. Ana was bossy. She dressed like a farmer. And she was obviously deranged. 'No way, I need it.' He held his phone close and looked for his mum. She knew about phones. She'd save him.

But Mum was in the other room, on her phone.

He thought Deepika would surely understand. She was a kid. But when he looked to her for help she just smiled at him. She didn't even seem to realise her mum was being a fruit loop. Or perhaps she was used to this behaviour.

'There won't be much reception out there anyway,' said Ana, still holding out her hand.

Harry wanted to back away. Or run. Or hide.

'It'll just be extra weight to carry,' Ana pushed on. 'You really won't need a phone.'

Now Harry did take a step back. 'But I really will,' he insisted.

But Ana didn't seem to hear. 'Just leave it on the pile,' she said, and started folding a T-shirt. 'Do you have a rain jacket? What about an extra jumper?'

This was brutality. 'I'm entitled to my freedom.' Harry puffed out his chest. 'And my basic human rights.' Without a phone there'd be Nothing To Do. And he was pretty sure Not Dying Of Boredom was a human right.

'Exactly,' said Ana, still sorting his belongings. 'Deepika, can you get Harry a spare spare-jumper? There's a pile on the couch.'

'Okay,' chimed Deepika. She turned to Harry with another enormous smile. 'I'll lend you my favourite,' she said, and skipped away.

Just then Mum returned from her phone call. Harry could've kissed her.

'Mum, I can bring my phone on the hike, can't I? I'll take care of it and I won't stay up late, plus you know how annoying I can be when I'm bored ...'

He tried to flutter his eyelashes, but Mum



was looking to Ana instead. Unbelievable. Mum hadn't seen Ana in twenty years, but now, just because they were back in the same city, they were acting like long-lost sisters. Worse, even though Harry and Deepika had only just laid eyes on each other, suddenly, just because their mums were old friends, they were supposed to be all buddy-buddy best friends forever, too. Ugh.

And way worse than all that put together, the absolute worst, in fact, was that this was only the beginning. Mum had dragged Harry all the way from Sydney. And they were here to stay. He'd had to say goodbye to all his friends. His school. Their old apartment. The only life he'd ever known — and it had been a good life, too.

And now this.

'Here,' said Deepika, holding out a brandless blue jacket he wouldn't wear even if he was alone and freezing in Antarctica and it was snowing. 'It's so soft, feel it.'

‘Don’t forget repellent,’ Ana said to Mum. ‘The horseflies can really bite.’

‘And it’s so warm,’ said Deepika. She pushed the jacket at him. ‘Feel it. That’s why I love it so much.’

This had to be some sort of demented dream. Harry looked pleadingly at Mum. Surely she could see? This whole move had been a horrible mistake. And spending an entire weekend tramping around stinking-hot, snake-filled scrub with only lunatics for company was another horrible mistake. If she was really so desperate for a long-lost Ana-reunion, why couldn’t they re-une at a resort? Somewhere with a pool, and a flat-screen and a DVD collection.

Harry appealed with his eyes. ‘Mum, I seriously need my phone.’

Mum looked at Ana again and Ana just shrugged. ‘It’s your choice Charl, but there won’t be much need for phones. As long as we have one for emergencies.’ She returned to matching socks.

Mum nodded with relief. ‘Right, okay.’ She slipped her own phone into her jacket pocket and shrugged apologetically at Harry. ‘Sorry mate. We only need one.’

Unbelievable. ‘But Mum!’

‘Surely you can leave it at home, just for a weekend,’ she said, but she couldn’t meet his eye. That’s because she knew full well what she was asking. Mum would have a nervous breakdown if she ever had to leave her phone for just five minutes, let alone an entire weekend.

‘Here,’ said Deepika. ‘You can borrow these socks. They’re like walking on pillows.’

‘Does everyone have sunscreen?’ Ana asked.

‘Mum ...’ appealed Harry.

But she was gone, into the other room to make one last call.

And so just like that, the decision was made. No phone. One whole wasted weekend. Unbelievable.

Later, piled into the back seat of Ana’s car with

Deepika, Harry slouched as low as his seatbelt would go, and scowled.

In the front passenger seat, Mum was using her phone to check the maps app. Which was totally unfair, and she knew it. 'Look Harry,' she said, all forced cheer and fake smile. She reached round to show him her screen. 'Not long now.'

She was obviously feeling guilty. Well, good. He was glad, and he scowled some more.

'Bye-bye civilisation,' cheered Ana. 'Bring on the bush!'

'Yay!' cheered Deepika.

Ugh, thought Harry.

## ON THE TRACK

An hour later and they hadn't walked a single step. Harry was exhausted. He was stuck, still, with Deepika in the back of Ana's car. Their mothers were chatting non-stop about jobs and schools and old friends and other jobs. And whenever they paused so Mum could check messages on her phone, Deepika would jump in and never stop.

'Camping is awesome and hiking is even better and I can't wait to eat hot noodles and toast marshmallows and jump over logs and this one time we climbed a tree, and I could see across the whole forest, and when the wind blew you could feel the whole tree move, but I wasn't scared even though it was really, really high.' She paused for

breath, then leaned closer. ‘Well, a bit scared.’ She grinned a huge grin at him. She seemed to do that a lot. ‘Have you ever climbed a really, really high tree?’

Harry just shrugged. His old apartment was really, really high, if that counted. But he hadn’t had much call for tree climbing.

‘Well, have you been hiking?’ Deepika persisted.

Harry shrugged.

‘Well, what about camping?’

He shrugged again. He didn’t want to make friends with Deepika. He was more into proper-fun things, like gaming and Netflix. Not camping and pillow socks.

Hours later, right when vital parts of Harry were turning numb, Ana pulled into what she referred to as the car park. It was actually an abandoned sand patch, ringed by miles of deserted scrub.

Mum lasted approximately twelve seconds

before she confirmed that her phone had no reception. Then she started having some sort of semi-cyborg meltdown.

‘But I didn’t realise ...’ she spluttered. ‘What about my messages ...? What about work?’ She stared desperately around her, into the sand, into the bush, as if willing a phone tower to somehow rise from the undergrowth.

Ha! thought Harry. Serves you right.

And then Mum shrieked. ‘What’s that?’

Harry spotted a dusty red sedan, hidden further down the dirt road and a few metres into the bush. He knew what it was immediately. A stolen car. And the driver was probably on the run from the police. With a fistful of diamonds. Also stolen. Probably from a celebrity. Offering an enormous cash reward for their return. He saw it on his newsfeed all the time.

‘Should we call the police?’ Mum asked.

But Ana had obviously never lived in Sydney.