

CHAPTER

1

My skin was melting. Not melting for real – that would be messy and just plain gross. But that’s what it *felt* like in the sweltering February heat as I slumped against the front gate, eyeballing Coolibah Creek School.

My new school.

My *fifth* new school in five years.

And this one was a concrete pimple that had popped up in the middle of a long, dusty road. All cracked paths and dead grass and faded signs warning *NO HAT NO PLAY*. It was a sorry sight, really, that most of the green I could see was from us kids wearing the school uniform.

It was the exact colour of snot.

Across the courtyard, two chatting teachers did their best to ignore the kids waiting in lines for the bell. I ignored the other kids too, the nosy glances over their shoulder at me were already a red flag that I stuck out here like a tap-dancing wombat. New school, same old problem.

Even my eyeballs were sweating. But worse than being hot, I was bored out of my brain. *What we need*, I thought to myself, *is to liven things up. Maybe a fire drill? Or a skydiver parachuting into the grounds?*

I imagined an eastern brown snake slithering down the line of kids, causing everyone to leap about like popcorn kernels in a hot saucepan. Naturally, I knew what to do if faced with a snake. My older cuz, Lennox, had taught me with a two-metre-long dried python skin out in Uncle's backyard when we first moved here. Use a long branch to hook the snake's middle and lift it like a floppy wet noodle on a fork. 'Just don't drop the branch,' Len had said as he waved the snakeskin in my face.

I slipped my hand into my pocket to feel for

the old peppermints tin. The surprise I'd trapped inside was sure to kick up a bit of dust. A shriek or two if I was lucky.

The thought made me smile, just a little. A smile that slid off my face when I saw a tall fella dressed in military uniform marching towards me. *That* created a bit of a stir, as more kids turned my way curiously. Being handcuffed and dragged to the army base would liven things up for real.

'Over here, Dad,' I called to him, kicking off the fence to stand while carefully zipping up my pocket.

'Look alive, Joey,' said Dad, then to the girl a few steps behind him, 'Peggy, please go join your brother.'

My sis looked like she would prefer to be bitten by an eastern brown snake.

'Righto, kids, I've just been to the school office,' said Dad. 'Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to locate your classroom, meet your teacher and have a great first day at your new school. Joey, you are to report to Year Five in D block. Peggy, your mission begins in Year Four next to the playground. I will return at fifteen

hundred hours. This is our meeting spot.'

Dad rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. I cringed at what I knew was coming.

'Psst ...' Dad stage whispered dramatically with his hand shielding his mouth. 'Don't trust that tree over there ... it looks *shady*.'

'Real funny, Dad,' I said, using all my willpower to stop my eyes from rolling. His jokes were cheesier than a pizza.

'Just trying to lighten the mood, kids,' said Dad. 'Your first day at school will be great.'

Peggy pretended to regurgitate her insides into her new school hat.

'Go on, tell us more jokes, Dad,' I said. 'That way we'll die of embarrassment and not have to go to class.'

Peggy snorted and slid out her palm for a high five. Dad cleared his throat. He peered at us, suddenly serious. *Here we go*, I braced myself, *the first-day pep talk*.

'I know starting somewhere new can feel nerve-racking. But how many schools have you had to settle into now? I know you kids will find your feet in no time.'

Peggy huffed and kicked her schoolbag against the fence.

‘Hey! Stop that, Peggy!’

It was true that we had found our way through many first days of school. We were always moving around. Dad worked for the Australian Air Force. Not an exciting military job flying planes on secret missions. I wasn’t sure exactly what Dad did, but I knew his job was dead boring – something about the town’s airstrip. And Mum never seemed fussed by the constant packing and unpacking. She would say, *It is the land we connect to, not the houses we live in.* I wished I knew what she meant.

Dad saluted us with his big, goofy grin. ‘All right, Joey-roo and Peggy-bear ... I mean, ahem, Joey and Peggy ... have a good day. Now get in line, porcupine! Toodle-loo, kangaroo! See you in a while, crocodile!’

Peggy and I stood shoulder to shoulder in our snot-green uniforms, all sweaty and red-faced. I watched Dad stride away, past the school fence imprisoning us and across the road. I caught sight of a bottlebrush bush spilling onto the footpath. Something wasn’t right about it. The bush rustled

in a way bushes shouldn't. Was there something hiding in it?

And as I stared at the bush, the bush stared right back.

Two eyes appeared, peering out among the leaves. Bright, unblinking eyes. Too big for a lizard. Too small for a stray dog. My breath stuck in my throat. A cold, prickly feeling crawled over me, from top to toes, like I'd stepped into a giant spiderweb.



The eyes glinted at me. They weren't from any animal or person I'd ever seen. I dunno what I was looking at. I just knew it wasn't good. And Dad was five steps away from it.