

A person in a green shirt and blue jeans stands in a field, looking out over a landscape with a fence in the foreground. The background shows a vast, open field with some trees and a clear sky.

CIRCLE OF FLIGHT

THE ELLIE CHRONICLES

JOHN MARSDEN

John Marsden's life recently took a new turn when he established a small alternative school just outside Melbourne.

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JOHN MARSDEN



John Marsden's website can be visited at:

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John Marsden

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CHAPTER 1

YOU COME UP the driveway. You're late, but you knew you were going to be. That's why you took the ute to school this morning. And told Gavin to catch the bus. He'll have been back for two hours now. On his own. But you're not stupid. And he's not stupid. You both know what to do. He's been good about it. He takes the precautions. When he gets off the bus he doesn't just jump on the new fourwheeler and herb straight on up to the homestead.

He knows. And so do you. You detour into the bush, find a spot where you've got a good view of the house. You take a look. You watch for hostile visitors, enemy soldiers, an ambush. Even if the house looks OK, you still take care. You approach from a different direction each time. You use your eyes. If it's Gavin, you can't use your ears. But you use something else, better still. Your instincts. Your sixth sense.

Gavin knows. He knows that if there's any sign of trouble, there's a bolthole the two of you have organised, down near the lagoon.

He knows that if you're there on your own you go out to feed the chooks and dogs, and check the stock, but you're careful about it. Change your pattern all the time. Never leave by the same door twice running. Lock the house behind you. Take the rifle.

And you do the same things yourself. Today for example, you don't go in the main gate. You use the bush gate into the Parklands paddock. You stop behind a couple of trees, get out and take a good look at the house from across the creek. You notice that everything looks fine. Washing on the line. Polaris in the machinery shed, axe stuck in the chopping block where you were splitting wood last night.

Marmie's still in her run. That's a bit unusual. Normally Gavin'd let her out. He loves that little dog.

Then you see it. One little thing is wrong. The front door's wide open. Your heart starts hammering. You get back in the ute. You take off with a clumsy foot dance involving the clutch and the accelerator. You come at the bridge at a bad angle. The bridge is just a couple of logs with planks laid across them, and no railing. You think for a moment that you're going to roll off it, onto the rocks, into the water. Now your stomach is lurching. But you make it across the bridge.

You forget about security. That bloody Gavin. If he's just been careless . . . but what are you thinking? You want him to have been careless. Careless leaves the other option a trillion k's behind. Oh Gavin, please be careless. You can have both the Kit-Kats after tea tonight if you've been careless.

You jam on the brakes and stop the ute right in front of the house. You throw open the car door and jump out. Not for the first time you run into a building that could be full of guns, with death waiting for you. You don't even think of that until you're crossing the threshold. It seems like an abstract thought, interesting to a scientist perhaps.

A few metres down the corridor you tread on something. In fact you nearly wrench your ankle. You

look down. It's a spare magazine for a rifle. It looks to be full, loaded with bullets.

Now it's too late to do anything else, so you go on.

You already know what you're going to find. Underneath the fear and horror and panic there's a cold realisation, that Gavin's body will be somewhere in the house. You can picture what those bullets will have done to his little body. You've seen their effect on adult bodies, the men in the barracks, your mother in the kitchen. You go first to his bedroom. His school uniform is there. God, for once he actually changed out of his uniform when he got home. It's still on the floor, and the shirt's actually crunched up, but for Gavin that's what you expect. The rule is that he changes every afternoon, as soon as he gets home. He actually does it about once a week. His Redbacks aren't there, but he could have left them on the veranda, like he's meant to do but never does. There's no sign of a struggle, but most importantly, there's no sign of the horror that you know awaits you somewhere. The open front door and the magazine full of bullets have told you everything. You run back to the kitchen. Nothing there either, except memories, terrible vivid images.

You go to the TV room. And you see everything, as though you were there when it happened. The chair on its back. Gavin's favourite chair. The cushions scattered. The television with a hole smashed through it. Sharp glass fragments, milky white, everywhere. It'll take hours to vacuum every last piece. No Redbacks, but one of his ug boots, the short ones that come up just past the ankle, lying on the floor, between the sofa and the door.

He always wears those after he's done his jobs.

You run back out through the house. You're crying, but not much, and there are no tears. You're saying his name over and over in a kind of weeping way, but there's no point to that, because he couldn't hear you anyway.

You stand in the middle of the front drive. You'd make a good target for anyone with a high-powered rifle, for anyone with no conscience, for anyone who takes life because they like it, for anyone who has a particular reason to hate you for what you did during the war.

You see something that you missed before, when you were racing up the driveway in the ute. The other ug boot, about thirty metres away. Your brain clicks a few times as it processes this information. And something deep inside your mind tells you that there's still hope. Not much, but just a chance that he might be out there somewhere, and alive. But you're not a blacktracker. Sure, you've picked up a few things over the years. Sometimes you've been able to follow a cow who's about to calve, and you've found the hidey-hole she's made. You've followed the trail of the motorbike, to find your dad when he was working somewhere in a paddock and you had a message for him from your mum. Sometimes that was ridiculously easy, especially when he was riding through long grass, or a crop.

Not long ago you did follow some of Gavin's tracks when he nicked off on a motorbike to follow his heroes, Homer and Lee. But with the rain there are so many tracks around the homestead at the moment that maybe even one of the legendary blacktrackers, the Aborigines who can follow a lost child across rocks and sand, would be struggling here.

And now you have a lost child, and he could be one kilometre away, or a hundred, and he could be heading to the north or the south or the east or the west. And he could be going further away with every minute. This is a big country. You don't know where to even start your search.

And chances are you're just searching for a body anyway.

CHAPTER 2

WE KNEW WE were a target. We found out in a way that caused me a lot of internal chaos. First, Lee and Homer and Jeremy and Jess had crossed the border on a mission that ended up creating some chaos over there. The idea was that they would stop a group who were going to attack a target on our side of the border. Get them before they get you, the best defence is attack, strike while the iron's hot, all that kind of stuff. I had no problems with that in principle, especially after what had happened to my parents and Mrs Mackenzie, and to Shannon Young and her family. Not to mention hundreds of other people who'd been wounded, or worse, by visits from an enemy who we weren't supposed to be fighting any more.

This particular mission had gone wrong, although we got out of it OK in the end. I hadn't intended to go but I got sucked into it by Gavin, and found myself with the others in a very intense situation. For a while it looked like we'd be getting out of it in body bags.

It was quite a few weeks before we were off on another mission. It was meant to be sooner but they kept putting it off. But this time I volunteered to go, for two opposite reasons: partly because it was meant to be just a little mission without a lot of danger, but partly because I wanted to feel danger again. One of the effects war had on me was that I got bored really easily these days. It was hard to settle down to routine. Brushing your teeth, feeding the dog, studying for a test, these things did not have the gut-grabbing excitement of towing a steel dumpbin through a rain of bullets while you hoped your friends, who were hiding in the dumpbin at the time, didn't get killed. I didn't want to be addicted to this kind of stuff, I knew it was unhealthy, but like all addictions it had its hands around my throat before I knew it was there.

Liberation, the organisation that I didn't even belong to, the organisation that was so secret I knew only a couple of its members, had offered me a new quad bike to replace the one I'd lost when we had our deadly rendezvous over the border, but the bike came with a string attached. They made it clear that I was expected to use the bike on a new trip. Pretty long string. But this time I gave up without a fight, for the reasons I said. I tied Gavin to Mrs Yannos with some of the leftover string, not quite literally but almost, and went with Lee and Homer, just the three of us, out into the sweet night air.

'Your mission, should you choose to accept it . . . ' The boys told me the night before where we were going and what we'd be doing. It was what you call a sensitive mission. I swore oaths of secrecy and even now can't say much about it, but it involved meeting someone deep in enemy territory and giving them a parcel. It was a very well-wrapped parcel – seemed like a strong cardboard box with about a hundred metres of tape around it – and none of us had a clue what was in it, but when we met the man he said, 'Thanks, this will keep quite a few people happy,' I wondered if it might be drugs. Had Liberation turned me into a drug runner? Maybe I should have thought this through a bit more and not trusted so much in people I didn't know. Then the guy smiled at us and said, 'You seem very

young. Do you know how much is in here?’

He seemed so relaxed and his English was almost perfect. I shook my head. He shrugged and said, ‘Well, enough for a luxury car. They must trust you a lot.’

I realised then that it was money, and felt guilty for not trusting the Liberation people. I admit I also thought, ‘Gee, I could have paid off a lot of the farm debts if I’d known that earlier.’

The man gave Homer a packet of papers, a big envelope stuffed with bits and pieces in a pretty messy way, like they’d just been shoved in there. Back we went, as dawn greyed the sky. It was such an easy trip that I wondered if security was getting a bit slacker now. It was difficult at times to remember that if we were caught we would face death. It wasn’t until we were back on our side of the border, the safe side, that I realised we’d been turned, not into drug runners, but into spies. The papers might have looked like a big mess, but I’d say they were pretty hot. The guy we’d met was probably being paid for spying and now we were in the same category as him, even if we were amateurs. Everyone knows the penalty for spying, in pretty much any country. The Americans electrocuted the Jewish couple, the Rosenbergs I think their name was, in the 1950s, because they claimed they were spies for Russia. When it comes to spying, people don’t muck around.

Back home I fed the boys omelettes for breakfast. Homer went off with the envelope full of papers. Lee went to bed, and I went to school. Partly I went because I’d promised Gavin I’d be on the bus, but partly because it amused me to go. I wanted to be able to sit through each class, have recess and lunch like normal, hang out with the usual people, knowing all the time that while they’d spent the night doing homework and watching TV and then going to bed, I’d spent it spearing through the night on the quaddie, in enemy territory, carrying a huge amount of money, meeting a spy, collecting secret documents, risking death. How weird life was. How amazing that an average human like me could be so adaptable. I did fall asleep a couple of times in lessons but the rest of the time I spent wondering how I had ended up in this strange existence.

In the next few days, though, I found myself feeling bugged about the trip. I had the feeling Homer knew something that I didn’t, and apart from Poland China pigs and taking diesel engines apart, that doesn’t happen a lot. If you could see Homer’s school grades you’d have to agree. I like feeling superior to Homer whenever I can, I don’t mind admitting that, because he’s so good at making other people feel inferior, so it was doubly or even triply annoying to think that he was sitting smugly on some secret knowledge. It was my fault because I’d refused to join Liberation, the group which organised these parties. I didn’t even know who was in charge of our local branch, only that it was someone Homer and the others nicknamed the Scarlet Pimple. It could have been Homer himself, Jeremy, or anyone else for that matter. Could have been any one of half-a-dozen macho young guys in the district. Could have been a girl. Could have been Gavin or Mrs Yannos or Mr Rodd. Chances were that it wasn’t though.

But when I saw the big Greek wombat a couple of times the next day, and the day after that, I had the feeling that more than usual was being kept from me. Like there was a big rock in the middle of our conversations and he kept sailing around it.

I wanted to know about that big rock.

Well, I found out about it, and was sorry I had. No, that’s not true. Knowledge has got to be better than ignorance any day of the week, that’s what I believe anyway. I just wish I could have made better use of the knowledge.

On Thursday afternoon Homer wanted to get off the bus at our place and come home with Gavin and me. His idea was that I’d feed him and then take him home. He’d probably have another meal at home, but that’s Homer for you. Never stand between him and a steak. But it was fine by me and v

got off together and opened up the twin-cab, which was parked by a young sugar gum and nice and warm in the spring sun. Apart from anything else, it was good to have Homer to myself for a bit. Well as much as Gavin would share him. We hadn't had a decent conversation for ages, just a few words as we rushed past each other in school, or grunts as we fed cattle or serviced machinery together.

'Place is looking all right,' he said as we cruised up the driveway.

'I don't think Dad would have agreed with you.'

'Nah, but it's not bad. Mr Young's cattle are getting some condition. I had a look at your lot the other day too, and some of them are coming on well.'

'And some of them aren't.'

'Yeah well Miss Queen of Positivity, I'm trying to look on the bright side. If you buy a bunch of skeletons, at the end of the day you might have skeletons with meat but they'll still be skeletons.'

'The walking dead.'

'Yeah exactly.'

'They weren't that bad.'

'Nah, those Poll Herefords aren't too bad.'

'They'd want to be for the price I paid for them. Eleven hundred and forty bucks a head.'

'The way prices are going you could get a grand a head for steers that died of starvation.'

'That died three weeks ago.'

'Only three weeks? Sheez, you'd get fifteen hundred if they'd only been dead three weeks. How about you turn right up there and go across the ford?'

'Hey, this thing doesn't have four-wheel-drive.'

'It's got four wheels hasn't it? And they all go round at the same time? I'd call that four-wheel-drive.'

'Why do you want me to go across the ford?' But I could tell he was serious so I went right and eased the ute down into the gully, trying not to tear the sump out on the rocks. From the back seat Gavin started squawking in protest. When we didn't pay him any attention he tried to climb through into the front, to find out what was going on. We shooed him back.

We bumped up the other side. I could almost feel the relief of the suspension as the track flattened out and we accelerated to a dazzling fifteen k's an hour. We drove along the side of the gully, the nastiest bit of erosion left on the property.

'You wanna stop here somewhere?' Homer asked.

Obediently, I stopped. Obedience is not my usual attitude with Homer, but sometimes you have to play along to work out what he's getting at. We sat looking at the view. We could see the house from here, quiet and comfortable in the afternoon sun. A magpie made a clumsy landing on the front lawn and taxied to a halt near a hydrangea bush. Gavin stirred restlessly in the back seat and poked his head between us.

'What are you doing?' he asked. 'Why are we here?'

I turned a bit so he could see my mouth. 'Ask Homer,' I said.

He asked Homer but he didn't get much joy there. He got more restless and then gave up, opened the back door and got out, announcing, 'I'm walking home.'

'Watch out for snakes,' I said.

Off he went, sliding into the gully, eroding a few more clods along the way. His head disappeared. Homer and I sat there a bit longer. Eventually Gavin reappeared on the far side, climbing busily.

'There's a lot of different ways to get to your house,' Homer said at last.

'Yeah.'

‘Like, if you go along here a k there’s another ford.’

‘That’s the truth.’

‘It’d be good to take the scenic route more often.’

‘Homer, what the hell is this about?’

‘If you took different routes all the time, it’d be harder for anyone to ambush you.’

He said it so casually that it took me a while to realise how sinister his message was.

‘What the hell are you talking about?’

When he didn’t answer I slowly understood that life was not the way I’d thought, that my life had a different shape to the one I’d imagined. It wasn’t the first time this had happened but it was the first time I’d seen it so clearly. It’s hard for my brain at moments like that. The only way I can describe it is that I had a picture of my life as, say, a farmhouse with a veranda and a large chimney, and then suddenly it metamorphosed into, I don’t know, a stainless steel triangular prism sitting on top of a mountain.

Neither of us spoke for a few minutes. Then, so quietly that I surprised myself, I said, ‘Why?’

He glanced at me, then looked away again, through the windscreen. ‘That raid we went on. To the –’ I’m not allowed to say the name of the place in case anyone finds this.

‘Yeah?’

‘That envelope of papers he gave me.’

‘Yeah, I remember.’

‘I tipped them out on the floor to sort them out a bit, just, you know, to pack them better, neater.’

‘Cos you’re such a neatness freak.’

‘Well I wanted them in a bigger envelope where they wouldn’t be –’

‘Yeah yeah I know, I’m just kidding, go on.’

‘OK, well, first thing I see, well not the first thing, but in the middle of them is a map of your place.’

‘My place?’

‘A map of the district, with your place outlined, and the house marked, and a line drawn along the route we take over the border, more or less.’

‘What?’

‘They didn’t have the boundaries of the property even halfway right, but you could see they were picking out your place, the map was to show someone where you live.’

My body prickled like a thousand funnel webs were walking all over me. I felt as though I was rising in my seat even though I was still sitting behind the wheel.

Homer didn’t say anything else, just waited for me to do the figuring-out by myself. It didn’t take me long. My place was being singled out, I was being singled out. I felt a spasm in my stomach, like a violent sickness, but I didn’t do anything as dramatic as vomit, like in novels, where everyone seems to vomit or faint when they hear bad news or cut their little finger.

So they hadn’t finished with us yet. Before I thought to ask Homer the most important question, he gave me the answer anyway. He said quietly, ‘It was dated two weeks ago.’

‘You could read the date?’

I didn’t know what they did about dates in their language, those aliens, those monsters, those horrible people who I suddenly hated with so much passion it scrunched me up inside.

‘It was a computer thing, you know, downloaded from one of those websites where you can get maps of your back yard.’

I sat there, continuing to figure. It was like a sudoku. Mrs Barlow, my English teacher, had been

saying the other day how when you write a story you should think sudoku. Give the reader a few bits and they'll figure the rest out, no problem. She used me as an example. 'If I say "Ellie got on the tractor" then you can figure Ellie's on a farm, you don't need to tell the reader that, they can work it out for themselves.'

'She could be at a field day,' Sam Young called out.

I put him and Mrs Barlow out of my mind and tried to concentrate on my own sudoku. 'So you think they're coming back here,' I said. 'They've got unfinished business. How come you didn't tell me this straightaway? They could have come last night. Or the night before. Gavin and I could have been murdered by now.'

'We thought we'd wait till the right moment. And Dad and George and I have been hanging round here for a few nights.'

'What?'

'You know . . . with rifles. These raiding parties are always small. We thought we could take care of them. Dad was right into it. Never knew he was so bloodthirsty. Guess that civil war got into his blood.'

I was dumbstruck. My first instinct was to say, 'I don't need looking after! How dare you do this without telling me? I don't like people making decisions on my behalf.'

But I had to recognise the generosity of my neighbours who would put themselves in danger and go without sleep to protect me. I had to recognise the kindness of it. 'The highest wisdom is kindness. Where had I read that?'

'Thanks,' I said, trying not to choke on the word. 'Civil war?'

'Greek Civil War.'

'Oh. Was there a Greek Civil War?'

'Ask him, he'll tell you. For weeks. Anyway, the Scarlet Pimple did a bit of checking around with the experts from the Army and so forth, and they didn't have any reports of anyone about to launch an attack. So we thought that you'd probably be OK in the short-term. And face it, if you can't trust an expert, who can you trust?'

'Exactly.'

My mind was churning now, fit to match my stomach. I was just one big churn. You could have made butter in me, easy.

'Great,' I said. 'The short-term. That's all there is now, isn't there? The bloody short-term. In the medium-term they'll come in here and kill Gavin and me and burn the place down. And in the long term we'll be rotting in our graves. Well bury me with my parents, that's all I ask. And Gavin too, thanks.'

Homer didn't say anything. We sat there looking through the windscreen of the ute at the eroded gully, the ugly evidence of a landscape wrecked by humans.

CHAPTER 3

BEFORE THE RAID and the conversation with Homer things had actually been going rather well. Maybe the problem is that I don't touch wood enough. Maybe the problem is that God likes to play with us. Teasing us the way a kid does with a spider, when he harasses it for a while then lets it crawl away into a hidey-hole, and after a few minutes the spider thinks he's safe and comes out again and there's the kid, waiting, ready for the next round. And so on and so on until the kid decides that he's had enough fun now, he's bored, and he squishes the spider.

We'd been through a terrible experience in Stratton, Gavin and I, which was about as terrible as experiences get. Gavin's my adopted brother more or less, and when we went looking for his little sister, we found her, but unfortunately the man who had been their stepfather found us first. No-one but Gavin knew the truth about him, that he had murdered Gavin's mother. And when you're the only person in the world who knows about a murder, you're not in a very comfortable position. We found ourselves in a very uncomfortable position, getting wet and bloody, in a fountain in a park, trying to defend ourselves against a knife attack, and not making a very good job of it for a while. We both have the scars to prove that.

What it did lead to was a new experience for both of us, going to court for a criminal trial. It was one of those things where you feel kind of excited, but guilty for feeling excited. Nervous as well of course, definitely nervous. OK, I'll be honest, scared, but you can't help having the other feelings as well. The trial was in Stratton. One thing that was good these days was that the legal system had been streamlined under the new constitution so things got dealt with faster. A law student I was talking to at the court said that in the old days it might have been a year before this case got heard.

We stayed with Lee and his siblings again. I wasn't one hundred percent convinced this was a good idea, given that Lee's catering depended on how many pies were in the freezer, and his housework depended on whether the path through the lounge room to the front door was still open to traffic. When it was completely blocked he'd schedule a ten minute clean-up.

The filter in the dryer had like three kilos of lint in it. OK I'm exaggerating again, but I don't think anyone had cleaned it since they bought it. I explained to Lee about the fire hazard but I had the feeling it wasn't going to make a substantial difference in his life, and I didn't feel really confident until I'd found Pang, his little sister, and explained it to her. Honestly, without Pang that family would have to call in Meals on Wheels. Lee's in his own world half the time. Phillip, the nine year old, is a bit obsessive. His three main interests are computer games, footy stats and reading Deltora Quest books. This does not necessarily make for good conversation. I mean, the kid collects light globe covers. Used ones. He has about twenty of them in a cupboard. Pang showed me.

Paul, who's seven, is the quiet one, with his nose in a book, quite like Lee in some ways but not as determined. Then every once in a while he just gets the devil in him and goes through the house looking for ways to create havoc. Intira, the smallest, is a four year old with anger-management

problems. As all four year olds have anger-management problems I wasn't too concerned about this but in a small apartment it's not so good.

When we got to Stratton for the trial I suddenly thought that I should get them presents, but there wasn't much time, so I grabbed a box of chocolates at a shop near the station. Stupid really, everything's so expensive nowadays, and you only get about twenty choccies for thirty bucks. I'd have been better off going for quantity instead of a nice box with lots of packaging inside. Anyway, before anyone else realised, Intira had raided the box and wiped out half the chocs, and if that wasn't bad enough she then had a monstrous tantrum when Lee took the box away and told her she was a greedy little guinea pig, or words to that effect.

The one thing that didn't happen while I was staying with Lee was a sudden romantic windstorm that blew us both away. Maybe I'm looking for excuses but I gotta say there's not a lot of room for romance when five kids are bouncing off the walls of a flat that doesn't have bounceable walls. This sounds so middle-aged, like a suburban mother in the *Women's Weekly* explaining why the romance has gone out of her marriage, but for the first time in my life I had a bit of sympathy for suburban mothers living unromantic lives. Not that I wanted a relationship with Lee any more, now that I had Jeremy, but bloody Lee, something about him, we couldn't be in the same building without my getting funny feelings inside. They weren't even necessarily nice feelings – I got sort of squirmy in the stomach, plus my breathing changed – but there was still definitely something smoky about him.

The last thing I wanted him to do was fall on his knees in front of me, red roses in hand, but I thought, without really thinking about it, that life would be more interesting if he did keep after me. I mean, face it, the more guys who are after you the more interesting life is, even if you aren't totally enraptured in some of them, and even if you're making it hard for other girls by causing a bottleneck in the supply line. I was hardly in that league, but I knew I'd prefer Lee to have me for his first priority than some other girl who wasn't good enough for him. No other girl would ever be good enough for Lee, in my opinion.

Anyway nothing happened. Well, a lot happened of course. As well as attending the trial Gavin and I witnessed or were involved in Pang slapping Paul when he spilt Pepsi on her homework, Lee trying to make Phillip clean the griller when he left melted cheese all over it after cremating his sandwich, Phillip huddling in the broom cupboard for two hours when Pang said he couldn't have his move back in a game of chess, kids refusing to go to bed, refusing to get out of bed, refusing to go to school, refusing to leave school in the afternoon, refusing to eat meals, refusing to stop eating junk, refusing to go to the park, refusing to come home from the park . . . refusing to put new fuses in when the lights went out . . . in other words refusing to refuse . . . that was a joke by the way . . .

It wasn't all bad though. I mean, Lee would kill me if he read this. They really loved each other and they had a heap of nice moments together. When Paul discovered Phillip having his tantrum in the broom cupboard, he was really sweet, huddling in there with him for ages trying to talk him into coming out. Succeeding too, eventually. Intira and Paul spent many a happy hour at the kitchen table with crayons and coloured pencils and stuff. They had this game where they made up little cartoon creatures with special powers. One had the ability to grow wings and another could change into a worm and another could make himself invisible. I wouldn't say I found it too exciting but the kids loved it. They were based on stuff they'd seen on TV, I think, and I hadn't had much time to watch TV lately.

So, action 24/7, but romance, no. If ever there was a moment when something seemed possible it would be interrupted by a scream from one of the bedrooms or a crying kid demanding justice or a crash from the kitchen. After a few nights of this I realised that my relationship with Lee was still in the

deep freeze. As long as I had Jeremy I shouldn't have worried about that, because I didn't want to twine time him, but I just wanted to keep a connection open between Lee and me. We stayed at Lee's three nights and on the last I wrote a letter to Jeremy.

Hi, just wanted to tell you how much I'm missing you. It's a bit of a madhouse here and the trial has been totally nasty so I can't wait to get home and see you again. We've been going to court every day waiting to be called as witnesses and today it finally happened. It was a pretty weird experience but I guess it went all right. Gavin wants to stay and see whether his stepfather gets convicted. I think he hopes the jury will come in with a guilty verdict and then the horrible Mr Manning'll be taken straight outside and hung from the nearest tree. Come to think of it I wouldn't be too sorry myself if they did that. I'm crapping myself a bit over the chance that the guy might get off. I know there's no way in the world he should, but God knows how things happen in courts and everyone keeps telling me stories about criminals who got away with murder, which isn't very comforting.

We've seen quite a bit of Rosie, Gavin's little sister. I don't know whether you remember but she lives with people called Russell who are really nice, even if Mrs Russell is the main one who tells me about court cases gone wrong. But we took Rosie to the park yesterday and had a game of daylight Capture the Flag, which I made up on the spot. They're still kind of awkward with each other, Gavin and Rosie I mean, but it's sweet to see them together and it gets better every time. Rosie's even bossier than Gavin, if you can believe that, but he's starting to give her as good as he gets, which I think's probably a good sign.

I'm lonely, Jeremy, and I want to be home and back at Wirrawee High and sitting next to you and listening to your soft voice. You do things to me that I can't describe, but all I know is that with your arms around me I feel safer than I've ever been and I just hope you're not cheating on me while I'm away, with Jess or anyone else. Just kidding. But think of me all the time, OK. We should be home by the time you get this, so ring me, or I'll ring you,

Lots of love, Ellie.

I posted that on the way to court, but I didn't know then that we'd be able to go home the same day. Turning up for the last day of the trial was Gavin's idea. I wouldn't have come back for any money now we were no longer needed. When we'd been waiting to be called as witnesses we weren't allowed to watch any of the case. I think that's because they don't want you to hear what the other witnesses are saying in case you change your story. Bit like Mrs Gilchrist when she's interrogating students to find out who really did assassinate the lollipop lady or rock the roof or get a preview of the question for the science test.

It was better as a spectator though. The pressure was off us. I soon realised that things were moving faster than I'd expected and the jury was going to be sent on their way pretty soon to decide the result. Mr Manning hadn't been charged with murder, the murder of Gavin's mum, because the police said there wasn't enough evidence. Well, the police said there was enough but the prosecutor apparently disagreed and told the cops they couldn't run that one, so it was only knifing us that put him in the dock.

I thought that was outrageous, but of course the only evidence about the murder was from Gavin. They'd found a couple of old neighbours who said Mr Manning was violent and a liar, and no-one had seen Gavin's mum once the war started, but there was nothing else that could pin the actual murder on him. They never found her body. And I could see that Gavin in a witness box wouldn't necessarily be

enough to persuade a court to lock up an adult and throw away the key.

Anyway, ~~this being the last day of the case there were no more witnesses.~~ It was just the lawyer trying to convince the jury. We got there late and it turned out that the prosecutor, whose name was Mr Lucas, had already had his turn and Mr Manning's lawyer was on the job. He looked like a real nice man, like anyone's grandfather, kind face, glasses, friendly voice, but I didn't trust him after the questions he'd asked us. The stuff he told the jury was outrageous, about how Gavin and I had pestered and harassed 'the defendant', how we'd exaggerated the whole thing; but as he went on, something told me that his heart wasn't really in it, and I started to see him differently. Gradually the mask slipped and I saw him as an old guy who had this nasty client who he probably knew was guilty, but he'd been given the job of going through the motions and making sure he seemed to be getting a fair trial. At the end of the day it was pretty hard to argue with the fact that Gavin and I had both been taken to hospital in an ambulance, and it was because we'd been knifed by Mr Manning.

The judge made a speech to the jury, mostly about how in murder you can be convicted if you set out to give someone a severe bashing and they die of it even if you didn't want that to happen. But that doesn't necessarily mean you can be convicted of attempted murder if you set out to give someone a severe bashing and they don't die of it. Or in our case a severe knifing. She said the jury had to be sure that Mr Manning meant to inflict grievous bodily harm on us, and she added, 'You may well be of the opinion on the evidence you have heard that he did,' which seemed to me like she was telling them what to think. But even if they agreed with her on that one, by itself it still wasn't enough. They also had to be sure that he was reckless. 'You can make up your own minds as to that,' she said, but it seemed pretty obvious that she'd come to her own conclusion on that as well.

Then she went into a bit of a spiel about 'present facts' and 'future facts'. 'If someone in a country town batters another person with an axe handle and a bystander calls the town's only ambulance and the ambulance is involved in an accident on the way to the scene and never arrives, and the victim subsequently dies, then the attacker is guilty of murder. But if the same circumstances occur, and the victim does not die, the attacker is not guilty of attempted murder. He is not expected to know future facts, only present ones. If a person points a gun at the head of another, knowing the gun probably has rounds in one or two of its chambers, and he pulls the trigger and the gun goes off, wounding the victim but not killing him, then the person is guilty of attempted murder, because he had present knowledge and failed to act appropriately in relation to it.'

So apparently if Mr Manning knew that plunging a knife into us was very dangerous, the jury could convict him of attempted murder. I thought the judge was making the whole thing a lot more complicated than it needed to be. But what would I know? And maybe I didn't understand it properly anyway. I actually thought it was quite interesting and I did listen more attentively than I do at school.

The jury shuffled out, looking a bit embarrassed at all the attention, and I talked to the police prosecutor for a while, who was a really nice guy, and then Gavin and I went for a hot drink. Chocolate in his case, flat white in mine. Mr Lucas said to hang around as he didn't think the jury would talk long, although then he added, 'I'm usually wrong.'

After an hour nothing had happened so he put us in an office where Gavin could play on a computer and I could read my book, which was called *Sing, and Don't Cry*, and which I liked because it took me far away from Stratton and Wirrawee into the exotic world of Mexico, where guys sit in the back of a cafe and serenade their women at midnight, playing guitars and singing achingly and lovingly and warmly and mournfully . . . it made Jeremy look pretty boring.

Then suddenly Mr Lucas put his head in the door and said, 'They're coming back', and Gavin and I joined the little rush of people heading into courtroom number 4.

After that it was pretty much like on TV. The jury came in, and none of them looked at Manning, except one woman who gave him a quick nervous glance, and I knew then that they'd go for guilty.

They handed a bit of paper to the judge and she read it and said, 'Is this the verdict of you all?' and they all nodded, and she then announced that they'd found him guilty of attempted murder and that she agreed with them. She leant forwards and said to him, 'Mr Manning, you are basically a complete asshole,' perhaps not quite in those words, but she did let him have a pretty good blast. She said he was a coward and a person of no conscience and no integrity, who was quite prepared to kill children if they got in the way, and who showed absolutely no remorse. She then hit him with ten years on the hard rock pile and they took him away, Gavin and I waiting till he was out of sight before we highfived each other. I hoped they put him in a cell with Sideshow Bob, or with a couple of six foot four, two hundred kilo bikies who found him irresistibly attractive. I hoped they left him there to rot.

For us, it was back to the farm, back to school, and back, I thought, to life as normal.

CHAPTER 4

THERE ARE NO prizes for guessing what I did when I realised Gavin was missing. Went a little crazy, ran around in circles for a few moments with my hands to my head like I was trying to keep my brain from exploding with all the different thoughts rioting in there, then headed for the phone. I called Homer's place first and when Homer answered I screeched, 'Someone's taken Gavin,' then hung up. Rang Lee and got Pang, so I asked her to find Lee and have him call me straightaway. I didn't want to upset Pang. I wasn't very rational, because I then rang Fi's boarding house at her school and went through that whole annoying thing of having the phone ring for ages and then a girl answers but she's kind of lazy and she says, 'I don't know where she is,' and when you say, 'Oh will you please find her please, please, it's really important,' she says, 'Oh all right, she might be in the TV Room, I'll go and have a look there.' And you wait and wait and you can hear people laughing and talking as they pass the phone and you think you've been forgotten until the girl comes back and says, 'Sorry, can't find her,' and you say, 'Well can you please tell her Ellie rang, and it's totally important and urgent,' and you hang up wondering if the message will ever get through.

God, I had an anger-management problem at that point.

I realised I'd rung the old gang first, all except Kevin, and he was still in New Zealand as far as I knew. Old friends are the best friends. But I rang Bronte then. There was something about her calmness and strength that I needed right then. And at least she was home.

'Have you called the police?' she asked.

Duh, it hadn't even crossed my mind. Shows how far I'd come since the war. In other words, nowhere. I still hadn't adjusted to this world where, if I killed someone, like I'd done at the Youngs when enemy raiders attacked them, the police had a major investigation. I was now living in a world where a man who tried to stab Gavin and I to death actually got arrested and put on trial. Where if the hostiles grabbed the kid you were meant to be looking after, you could call the cops and they might do something.

So I took a deep breath and called the cops.

The deep breath was because I had a feeling I'd be in for a lot of complicated explaining, namely about my illegal trips across the border, plus something I wasn't used to: having a problem taken out of my hands and being told to go and sit in the waiting room and 'We'll let you know as soon as we hear anything.'

Bronte was right, of course I had to ring them, but I didn't have a lot of confidence in what they might do.

'Constable Brickwater.'

Funny name. 'This is about a kidnapping. The little kid I look after, who lives with me, I think he's been -'

'Whoa, whoa. What's your name?'

‘Ellie. Ellie Linton.’

‘OK. And where are you from?’

I told him. I realised later how clever he was. He’d taken control of the conversation, and that calmed me down and put everything into some kind of order. Otherwise it would have been a huge mess, with me yelping and stammering and sounding like a whole mob of cockatoos in the last light of day trying to settle in a gum tree.

‘Now who’s been kidnapped?’

‘This little boy, Gavin, he lives with me, he’s lived with me since the war and he’s deaf and the afternoon when I got home from school he’d gone and the TV’s been smashed and there’s a magazine full of bullets in the hallway.’

The bit about the bullets got his attention. ‘They’re not your bullets? They don’t fit any of your weapons?’

‘No way. He’s been abducted or something. We did a lot of stuff during the war, and seems like we’ve been targeted since then. My parents got killed here earlier in the year . . .’

‘Ah, OK, yes, now I know who you are.’

From then on things went into serious mode. I found myself talking to a detective sergeant and when I got impatient and said, ‘But you should be doing something, they could be a hundred k’s away by now,’ he said, ‘There are three cars on their way out to you,’ and not much more than five minutes later they arrived, pretty much one after another.

In the meantime I made a quick call to Jeremy, and he was home, thank God, and he said he’d be right out here too. That was good. Sometimes I needed a guy with me. And Jeremy was quite a guy. I had big-time feelings for him. I spent most of my spare time at school with him now, and we’d been to two parties and a barbeque. I loved being with him and lit up inside when I saw him at school every day. I scanned the crowd for his face every morning, and felt restless and empty till I found it.

I hung up when I saw the police cars. Coming out of winter there was enough dust for them to raise a bit of a cloud as they came down the driveway. I don’t know if they took any precautions against being ambushed but I didn’t notice any. Homer, Lee and I, coming into a situation like that in cold blood, I think we would have.

There is something stirring and terrible and exciting about having three police cars parked in your front driveway. There were probably more than three when my parents and Mrs Mackenzie were killed, but I was in the kitchen most of that day and don’t remember too many details. Now, seeing them all lined up, with their headlights on and their blue lights slowly turning, the police labels and logos all over them . . . Gavin would have loved it.

I answered their questions but in a kind of blank state. What could they do? If he was dead, find his body. If he was over the border, they might take a year to get him back. It would all have to be done through official government channels. Investigations, denials, negotiations, I knew that script. I’d read about it in newspapers, with other cases of kidnappings. The man we’d gone over the border to find Nick Greene, was a typical example. My only chance was for us to do what we had done all through the war, and since the war for that matter. Take charge. Act for ourselves. When the tsunami hit south east Asia I saw a guy on TV who’d lost his brother. He said to the camera, ‘Where’s the government? The government should be over here looking for him.’ I felt sorry for the guy – and for his brother – but I did think that he was asking too much of the government. If Gavin was dead it didn’t matter who found him, and when and where. If he was alive the person who had the best chance of finding him was standing in the kitchen wasting her time helping the cops to fill in forms. This realisation dawned on me gradually as I answered their endless questions, but after a while I felt an impatience for the

to be gone.

Some of the cops had been searching the sheds and the paddocks but as darkness dropped over the house they drifted back in, shaking their heads and shrugging their shoulders. The cop in charge was a guy called Henry, who seemed pretty important. He was quiet but efficient. I think he was an inspector at least. He talked to a circle of other police for a few minutes then came back and sat me down at the kitchen table. In front of him was a little pile of plastic bags. Evidence. The magazine full of bullets, Gavin's ug boot, a grubby red cap that they thought might have belonged to the terrorists but I knew was an old one of my father's that Gavin wore occasionally. Henry gave that back to me and dropped the bag in the kitchen waste bin. Then he came back to the table and sat down again.

He went through the options. He thought Gavin was probably alive. 'If they'd wanted to kill him they'd have done it here.' I'd already thought that, but it gave me more hope to hear an adult in uniform say it. It was the only encouraging thing he did say though.

'These acts are nearly always carried out by groups of renegades who, as you know, have no support from their own government. No official support anyway. They have different agendas. Some are just out-and-out bad, men who come here to rape or plunder. Some are politically motivated and they carry out assassinations and terrorist attacks to try to soften us up. Some have personal motivations. I'm guessing that the people who came here might fit into the last group. The only reason I say that is because the attack on your parents didn't seem to have any obvious motive, and the abduction of a child is unusual too. I believe you published a book about your guerrilla activities during the war?'

I nodded. 'Three books.'

'And you described various attacks you and your friends carried out?'

'Yeah, only a few. But there was a lot of publicity for a while . . . Some of the other stuff we did got written about in newspapers and magazines. There was some stuff on TV too.'

'I wonder if someone who read your books or saw you on TV formed the belief that you were responsible for something they felt strongly about. The death of someone they were connected with for example.'

I nodded again. 'Probably. I got a tip-off not long ago that we might be a target.'

'How did you get that tip-off?'

I went red, wondering how much I should say. 'It's a bit awkward. It came from over the border. Someone saw a map that had our house marked on it, like they had a special interest in us.'

He frowned. 'I hope you haven't been involved in anything you shouldn't. I hope your guerrilla activities ended when the war did.'

I sat there in silence, wishing I hadn't started down this path. Guerrillas. All I could think of was an old joke of my father's. One day when Mum was away we were working in the machinery shed, close to the house, and it was getting quite late. Eventually Dad said he'd go into the house and turn on the grill, to heat it up so we could chuck a couple of steaks on it when we knocked off work. He came back a minute later, looking shaken.

'That was a close shave,' he said.

'What happened?'

'I nearly turned on the gorilla instead.'

He thought he was so funny. When I groaned he said, 'It's no laughing matter. Have you ever been trapped in a kitchen with a turned-on gorilla? It could have been very ugly.'

I wonder if people like Jim Carrey and Glenn Robbins have kids, and whether their kids groan and say, 'Oh Dad,' when their fathers make jokes.

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