

**BEWARE  
OF DOGS**

# BEWARE OF DOGS

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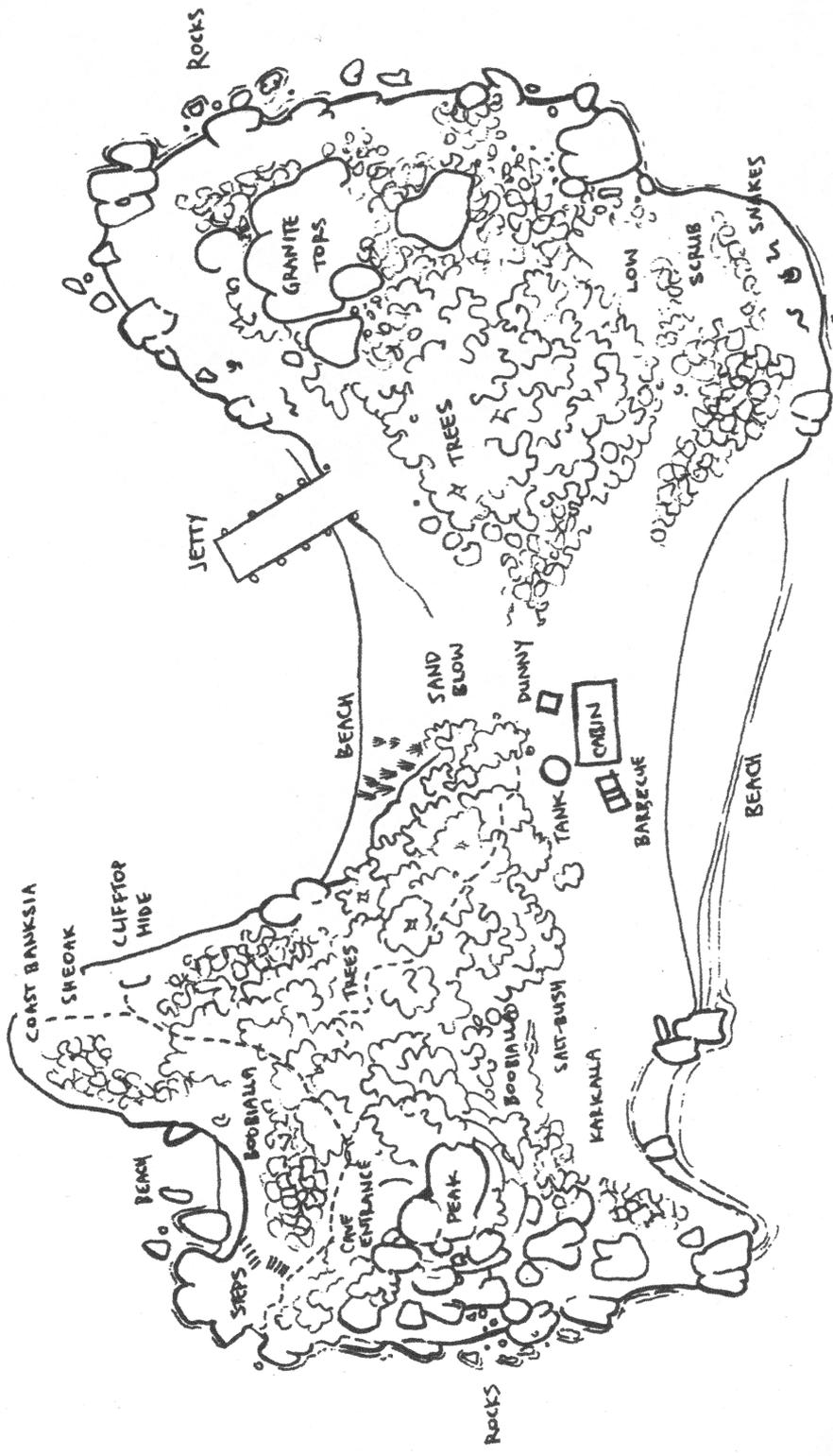
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*In Memoriam*

I would like to dedicate this book to Judith Rodriguez who gave me unstinting help and encouragement throughout its early development, but sadly did not live to see the final result.



# CHAPTER ONE

## **Karkalla** (*Carpobrotus rossii*)

Also known as Pigface, these plants are found in dry, rocky and sandy locations. The flowers are pink or purple and the horned, fleshy fruits are purplish-red. Every part of them is edible or can be used for medicinal purposes. The fleshy leaves can be eaten raw or cooked, and the fruits have been described as tasting like salty strawberries, fresh figs or kiwifruit. With the fruits I find it best to peel off the outer skin and suck out the soft pulpy seed mass. Karkalla leaves are also salty enough to use for seasoning cooked meats if no salt is available.

**Professor Atkinson's Guide to  
Bushcraft for Geology Students**

FIELD DIARY - Friday 13 April

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Not much daylight left now. So why waste it on writing a diary no-one is going to read? But as my heart stops pounding and my pulse begins to slow I find myself falling into old habits: organise shelter for the night; write up field diary. Perhaps in some

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future time surveyors with theodolites will come to turn this island into desirable real estate. 'Sought-after location, split-level design, ocean views'. They will stumble across my mouldering remains and read my diary to find out what happened. What will it tell them? How can I find the words? I can't even begin to make sense of how I got to this place, so perhaps I should start by describing my surroundings.

My refuge is not a true cavern. It could best be described as a shallow rock shelter gouged progressively by pounding waves in primeval days when the sea level was much higher. It has a narrow slanted entrance, clean dry air quality, and a half-circle of small ceiling holes letting in a surprising amount of daylight. Although not large, it has a number of advantages. I noticed some of these when I first explored it, but in my new and different circumstances I was afraid that it might turn out to be dank and fetid or, worse, too small for occupation. It's fortunate that I'm not claustrophobic because, particularly with the tree masking the entrance, it's a pretty close fit. Still, there's not much chance I'll be putting on any weight.

Taking stock, I have between me and starvation a 100 gram bag of sultanas, a 100 gram bag of peanuts, six stems of fruiting karkalla (about nine fruits), and two honey menthol lozenges (found in the pocket of my anorak). In the morning I will use

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the tiny specimen bags I always keep stuffed into the pockets of my pack to divide the nuts and sultanas into daily rations. This will be a nice quiet activity. Since I cannot risk going out in daylight, I'll need to find things to do. I hear my father's voice, like a phantom echo: *The Devil finds work for idle hands*. I wish I had some music, though as I think this I know that even with earphones it would be dangerous. They could be right outside and I'd be too busy jamming along to hear.

Suddenly, as if I've conjured it, a sound, a sharp crack, shatters the silence. It's coming from the seaward side and, pen in hand, I freeze. There's no way they could have gone up there without my hearing them. Although I know it must be a natural occurrence – a falling branch perhaps or a fruit stone dropped from a bird's beak – the desire to look is almost overwhelming. I take some time to hug my arms around my legs and rock myself calm, until I gradually manage to muffle my rasping breaths. What if I'm wrong? What if they are out there, taking up position, ready? I have my weapons out, my knife unsheathed, but in my heart I know there's no-one there. Now that my breathing is back to normal I will get back to describing the cave.

Just to the right and out of sight of the entrance is an area a little above my height but without much room for movement. Beyond this is a wider area with

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a sandy floor, too low for me to stand. Sitting cross-legged, I can quite comfortably unpack and arrange my supplies, but I can't find any way of lying down, and getting up from this position is quite difficult. How am I going to sleep? I'll take my newly emptied pack and see if I can use it as a cushion to form some kind of sleeping space.

Keeping very quiet, *just in case*, I next sort out the contents of my pack. The water bottle, still full, I place in the far corner where there's no danger of knocking it over, covering it with my hat to keep out dust. The small plastic specimen bags go next to it, with their tangle of rubber bands, topped with the pack of much larger kitchen tidy bags I managed to scrounge this morning. They are weighted with the jagged rock I collected on the beach in case the time came to bash someone's head in, ensuring that it will be within easy reach when darkness comes. At first I don't know what to do with the food. What if something comes in, scavenging? (I don't want to think about this, but I must.) Are there goannas here? In the end I decide to wrap all the edible supplies in my anorak, twist it into a kind of sling and hang it by the sleeves from a tree root that snakes through the cave's roof.

But exhaustion makes me clumsy and the entire parcel crashes to the floor. Too tired and demoralised to care and drained by the effects of the tension of the past twenty-four hours, for some time all I can do

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is sit, cross-legged, head bowed, the cave so silent I can hear the seconds ticking by on my heavy-duty waterproof sports watch. When I finally open my eyes, it's appreciably darker, but the relief at finding the food bags unbroken gives me new energy and the second throw allows me to knot the sleeves into a functional swinging larder. Not much time left, but not much more to do.

My rock hammer and torch I line up on a small rock platform near the back of the cave, making sure the hammer, too, is within easy reach. I empty my pockets of compass, waterproof matches, pencils and pens and line them up on the floor. (Now, finally, I am reaping my reward for being prepared for most eventualities.) The only thing I keep with me is the scout knife that was a gift from my brother.

Then clothes. From inner pockets I extract socks, spare underwear and handkerchiefs. In the backpack are a long Amnesty International T-shirt, a tiny red pouch containing a bright-red emergency rain slicker (a gift from Kathryn) and a spare hat. I am still wearing the two T-shirts I had on when I left the cabin. The cave is not cold and I suspect I am overdressed, but I have no energy left to go through the contortions that would be required for taking my clothes off.

With the light fading fast, I fold all the unneeded clothes as flat as possible into the backpack and

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then squash it to form some semblance of a cushion. I take my water bottle, drink one mouthful of water and carefully pour another mouthful into the cup that functions as an extra lid, placing the cup close to where I plan to sleep. The bottle I reseal and put back in its spot at the rear of the cave, so I can't risk trying to drink in the dark and spilling the rest of my supply.

Then, sitting cross-legged again, with the pack between me and the wall as a very inadequate kind of pillow, in the last of the light I set the alarm on my watch for five a.m. Even at that hour, I can't risk sound, and set it to vibration mode. I don't think I'll have any trouble waking. *If* I manage to sleep. With the water beside me, handkerchief up my sleeve and knife in my hand, I wait for darkness. The time is 5.57 p.m. on Friday the 13th of April.

\* \* \*

Now the cave is in total darkness. I can't see to write but my mind is spinning like a crazy wheel. All I can do is close my eyes and listen to my thoughts ...

I had forgotten the thick dead blackness of the inside of a cave, even a shallow cave like this one. As soon as the light goes I begin hearing things – rustlings, patterings, *slitherings*. This could be any kind of creature's lair. I rack my brain for likely contenders. Bats? I don't mind bats, but

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I don't think so. Anyway, they're nocturnal. I would have seen them asleep, hanging like velvety black corrugations from the roof. Not bats. Spiders? There's been no sign of spiders or webs, and most cave spiders are harmless, as far as I know. This is not much comfort as my skin rehearses the experience of fat hairy bodies using me as a ladder, or a sleeping platform. I shudder, feeling tiny feet creeping across my face. I brush my face frantically, to no avail, there's nothing there, and try to force my thoughts away from creeping, slimy, slithering creatures. Especially slithering ...

*Dreams. Of someone (Dave?) locking me in a dungeon, where I fall down a chute into black, black water. I'm choking, drowning, losing consciousness ...*

... and wake into a state of instant paralysing terror. The darkness feels soft and thick, like the wings of a moth. I pull back my sleeve and the luminous dial of my watch glows eerily, its hands showing 2.16 a.m. I've slept. I do a quick calculation. An amazing eight hours. My back is cricked and aching and without thinking I go to stand up. *Crack.* My skull hits rock and there's an acrid taste of blood. The pain is excruciating, but I'm afraid to move. I can't remember the configuration of the cave, where I am, what's around me. I can't see a thing, and have to force myself not to panic.

The longing for light becomes obsessive. I know my torch is nearby, but I also know I can't risk using it in case the beam shows through the roof holes. Torchlight looks like nothing

in nature. Can I risk lighting a match? Slowly, with every muscle screaming, I lean in what I think is the direction of my supplies, hand closing on something metallic. Pen. Reach to the right. Pencils. Which side are the matches on? I struggle to remember. Other side of the pen. Finally I find them and with much fumbling succeed in striking a light. Overwhelmed by the utterness of the darkness, it flickers feebly and goes out, after illuminating nothing beyond my hand, corpse-white in the surrounding blackness. I hear whimpering, and go cold until I realise it is coming from me. *Kop op!* I tell myself, just as I used to do as a child. *Get a grip on yourself, Alix. Deep, deep breaths. Calm down.* It can only be two and a half hours at most until daylight.

I sit back, and my parched throat lets me know I'm thirsty. Slowly, carefully, I feel along the rock floor for the water cup, trying to make my movements as gentle as a butterfly's wing, terrified of knocking it over. My finger touches plastic and I manage to close my hand around the cup without spilling anything. When I sip the water tastes dusty, but comforting. I eke it out, taking an extraordinary pleasure in each sip, wetting my lips with my tongue. I realise also that I'm hungry, haven't eaten since lunchtime yesterday. I decide to apportion my food into two meals a day, one at eight a.m. and a lighter one at noon. Just making a decision makes me feel irrationally better.

What can you do to fill up hours when you can't move and can't see? My neck is killing me, my head still throbs and my knees tell me I'm getting too old for this kind of

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game. I try counting the minutes, but thoughts get in the way. I begin to wonder when someone will notice I'm missing, and a terrible realisation hits me. *Will* anyone notice? So independent, so in control of my life, I might just as well not exist. Work thinks I'm on holiday. Kathryn thinks I've floated off into the sunset with a potential Mr Right. For at least another week, possibly two, there's only the remotest possibility that anyone will wonder where I am.

I'm very aware that I have flouted Professor Atkinson's Golden Rule for Survival, which he hammered into our heads at the beginning of every class, shouting in his eagerness to be heard: 'I cannot stress too strongly that, whatever else you may disregard, do not neglect the first and most important rule: Always leave information about where you are going with a responsible person.'

I can picture the professor wagging a remonstrative finger if he could see me now. I wish I had the little pocket book the university printed out to go with his lectures, but here I find my photographic memory, which has served me so well in fast-tracking my academic career, is proving its value again. I can remember quite a lot of it pretty much word-for-word, especially the descriptions of bush food, which had particularly interested me. But some of the even more crucial things that hadn't seemed so important at the time I cannot remember at all, like many of the bush methods for obtaining water.

For someone who is normally absolutely meticulous in letting the right people know, in packing for all exigencies,

in being prepared, I've been shockingly careless. The problem is that although I'm so steeped in the lore of bushcraft, this time, this one time, I had no idea I would be going into the bush. Mainly because Dave made sure that I had no idea.

It's no excuse. No excuse at all.

And if anyone does miss me, no one knew where I was going. Except Dave. Who's not going to tell. Did I leave any clues? How could I have when *I* didn't know where I was going? I try to recall the last time I saw Kathryn. *If it wasn't for Kathryn I wouldn't be here.* I hear this thought in the back of my mind but I know it is not the whole truth. This is not her fault or mine. No sane person could have foreseen the situation I am now in.

Kathryn knew I was going away for the Easter weekend with Dave. But did she know his other name? I don't think so. Did I tell her where he lives, still in the same old place? I might have. *He isn't there, though, is he? He's here.* I still don't know Matt's other name or anything about him really, except that he's a psychopath. Even if Kathryn did track him down he'd easily manage to hide that little fact from her. She likes to think well of men.

Lana might be another matter, but since I hadn't met Lana before we got on the boat, I could hardly have mentioned her.

I was pleased with myself, I remember that. 'I might be going away after all,' I told Kathryn. 'With a blast from the past.'

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‘I didn’t think you had that kind of a past. You’ve always said Jonathan was your one and only.’

‘Dave’s not “that kind”,’ I remember telling her, already slightly annoyed. ‘He lived next door to Jonathan and me. That’s all.’

That probably didn’t register with Kathryn. She had just met her latest Mr Right and could barely spare any time to spend with me, so she was probably feeling a bit guilty about not being available when I finally needed her. I think she was trying to ease her conscience by making sure I had somewhere to go.

‘At least you might meet someone there. No-one has parties any more, but they’re a great way to mingle.’

Although I’m younger than Kathryn, she constantly points out that my chances of meeting ‘the right man’ are equally slim. I used to find this amusing. Having failed so horrendously in my first relationship, I wasn’t at all sure I wanted to try again. But now that almost everyone I know from work, university, and recently even rock-climbing, has married and dropped out of normal life, Kathryn is pretty much my only social contact. It has become an issue, with her requests for me to join her on what she calls ‘double dates’ becoming more and more intrusive. And even though Kathryn’s brief conquests usually seem more unexciting than dangerous, I guess I’m a bit warier of strangers than she is.

My boss had been blunt when I resisted the idea of taking leave. ‘Use it or lose it, Alix. I see here you haven’t

had any leave at all since you started.’ I continued to argue, about projects that needed me, about wanting more time to make travel plans, but he was adamant. ‘Use it or lose it.’ I didn’t want to lose it so I gave in.

‘You could enjoy yourself, Alix. People do that on holidays. Go to Noosa, go horseback riding, see some movies.’

I didn’t want to go to Noosa. I didn’t want to go horseback riding. And all the Easter films seemed to be aimed at children under five. There wasn’t even any climbing to be had. Everyone I knew was spending Easter with their family – or Mr or Ms Right.

I managed to fill up the first few days by getting my teeth checked, my eyes checked, even making an appointment with my local clinic for a general physical checkup. They were able to tell me what I already knew, that I was in very good condition. This would have been welcome news if I’d been planning some extreme rock-climbing, but at least I had enough sense not to try that on my own.

By the time the fourth day came around I was thoroughly bored. On my kitchen wall was an invitation to a photographic exhibition in my old stamping ground, St Kilda, a few doors from where I used to live with Jonathan. The cover was a stunning picture of sun rays reflecting off a rocky cliff. I looked at it and thought, well, I am on holiday, I’d better do something at least slightly festive.

And I found, to my profound relief, that St Kilda held no ghosts any more. When I emerged, energised by the

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extraordinary scenes of mountains and rocks, I decided to extend the experience by treating myself to a drink at a familiar and lively bar next to the local backpackers.

As I struggled through the throng in search of a vacant bar stool, I suddenly found myself face to face with David Grogan, very much, as I told Kathryn, a blast from the past. And yet someone I found myself not particularly pleased to see, for reasons I couldn't put my finger on at the time. Dave was certainly pleased to see me. 'Alix!' he said. 'Alix Verhoeven! Long time!' And he grinned, a strangely familiar I'm-just-the-boy-next-door grin and I can remember thinking, *Oh well. He may be irritating, but at least he's not dangerous.*

And soon I had a drink in my hand and found myself being introduced to 'my boss and co-conspirator. This is Matt.' Something about Matt made me uneasy. Perhaps it was the slight flash of pain when he shook my hand just a little too hard. More likely it was the way he launched straight into very personal questions.

'Do I detect a slight accent there? Where in the world do you come from, Alix?' Although he was good-looking in a clean-cut, Bondi lifesaver sort of way, there was something about the unblinking stare from those piercingly blue eyes that was just a little bit creepy.

Compared with this, Dave looked even more ordinary than usual. Nondescript hair, mid-brown eyes, shorter and stockier in build, he looked like the lesser version, the sidekick to the Golden Boy. For no obvious reason, I felt

uncomfortable in their presence and found myself backing away, trying to find a gap in the conversation so that I could leave, but somehow, somewhere along the line, with all their relentless questioning they found out that I was on three weeks' holiday, and didn't have anywhere to go for Easter.

Dave was delighted, bouncing like an excited puppy. 'This is perfect, Alix. Matt's having a house party for Easter. You've got to come. Can't have you all on your little lonesome, can we?' He turned to Matt and they exchanged a look that I couldn't interpret. 'How about that? Poor Alix doesn't have any family or anything. She's absolutely on her own.'

Matt took his time. I had the impression he was the kind of person who pauses before speaking to ensure that everyone is giving him their full attention. 'I think you're right. Alix could be perfect.' I didn't register at the time what an odd response that was.

'I don't think so. I've got things to do.' That's me. Ms Cautious. But not, in the end, cautious enough. 'But thanks for the invitation.'

'Oh, come on, Alix. You'd love the place. Very outdoorsy. Cliffs and beaches. Just your kind of thing.'

And Matt said, turning those unblinking ice-blue eyes on me, 'And we're a bit low on females, aren't we, Dave?' You'd think that would have alerted me, but no.

When I told Kathryn about this, what did I tell her? What did I know? I didn't accept it at the time. In fact

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I didn't think any more about it. But Dave called me up the next day to make arrangements. He found my phone number and *tracked me down*. Why didn't I realise how sinister that was? I'm very careful about online security, and I'm not on social media. 'How did you find me?' I asked him, and he laughed.

'You can find anyone if you know where to look. How many Verhoevens do you think there are in Melbourne?' (Twelve. I checked. And I don't know any of them.) He tracked me down and sweet-talked me. And here I am.

'Matt has a house party every year ... Cliffs and beaches.' He didn't mention the boat. Or the island. So the most Kathryn could possibly remember was that I was going to the beach with someone called Dave. That should narrow it down.

I run the afternoon's events over and over in my mind, but can't come up with anything new. And I'm so tired ...

*Dreams. Of Dave saying 'I always knew I'd get you in the end.' Of running, falling into a hole, and black creatures hovering over me, pressing closer and closer.*

*They press on my face and I begin to scream ...*

I wake with a cry to find light creeping in through the holes in the cave roof. For a moment relief floods me as my surroundings begin to take shape and form. Then new fears set in. What if my cry has been heard? I don't think there's much likelihood of their coming in the dark, but it means I cannot risk sleeping at all during the day. How am I going to fill twelve hours of daylight in a space where

I can barely turn around? My bladder reminds me that sometime soon I am going to have to leave my shelter. The very thought terrifies me, but the alternative is too horrible to consider.

It would take them at least half an hour to get to this place from the cabin, so I estimate that I can allow twenty minutes to find a suitable toilet spot and stretch my stiff and aching legs. Torn between the longing to move and the knowledge that when I do the pain will be terrible, I remain in my cramped position. If it wasn't for the urgent message from my bladder, I don't think I'd be able to move at all, but somehow I force myself to crawl slowly to the entrance of the cave, where I try to stand up. My body is so knotted that for a moment I don't think I'll be able to do it, and then when I do the pain is so intense I almost pass out. Slowly, every muscle screaming at me to stop, I inch my way to the entrance. Shaking, heart pounding, I move aside the tree I set to block the entrance, and am temporarily blinded by the full force of the sunlight.