

Chapter One

Wren took another slow step, the blazing sunlight raw on the back of his head and the heat of the rocks scorching the bottom of his feet. Tiny sticks prickled between his toes, but he ignored them. His eyes and thoughts honed in on the little creature as it nosed about in the leaf litter.

What was it doing out in the afternoon sun?

For that matter, what was he doing out in the afternoon sun?

Easy.

He was hoping to find something to eat, that's what he was doing out here, and there it was, right in front of him. Small and skinny and very probably just as hungry as him.

One more step.

By now his breath was burning in his chest and his heart was thumping, but he didn't dare breathe out, in case it noticed him.

Wren's foot wobbled and he forced himself to be still. Still as the hot, dry air. Still as the ancient rocks. Still as a hunter could make themselves.

And then, with a sort of sixth sense just as Wren was about to strike, the tiny rat-like animal swivelled, saw him, and darted for the undergrowth. Wren leapt forward, his hands closing together to catch it between them, missing by a just a whisker. It disappeared, burrowing through the leaves and dried moss, away under the spiky bush.

Wren tumbled after it, twisting in the air, and ended up lying across the rocks with his head and shoulders cradled amongst the lower branches.

He was scratched and itching and empty handed.

Nearby some startled birds squawked around before settling back into their daytime roost, hidden amongst the trees.

Kee was watching him, head to one side, and Wren couldn't decide if she was laughing at him or bewildered.

He stared up at the sky, his tummy rumbling in disappointment.

'Probably would've tasted pretty grim, anyway,' he said, not sure if he was talking to himself or to her. 'And not enough meat to feed a quoll, either.'

He pulled himself up and brushed dirt and leaves off his clothes.

It would've been something, though, and he was as hungry now as he had ever been.

He did have to admit that he was glad of Kee's company – and at least *she* was still with him.

Not like Old Man.

Wren hadn't expected Kee to leave the mountain when he'd started his journey down to the plains, but she was never far away. He could hear her high-pitched call and see her now as she swept from branch to branch, flashes of the yellow tips on her black feathers like beacons amongst the patchwork of trees as she circled the clearing.

It was always reassuring to hear her not too far away, especially at night as he settled down to rest. It meant he didn't feel so alone.

Old Man had told him that the black cockatoo represented strengthening of spirit and was a powerful guide.

He didn't know where he'd be without Kee.

Kee gave him strength.

She was a part of his life – ever since he'd rescued her as a chick and reared her. Even after Old Man said it was time to let her loose.

'Wild things need to be free,' he'd say.

Wren had taught her to fend for herself, and set her free, but Kee had never left him. She wasn't exactly a pet, and Wren didn't expect her to be there forever, but she wasn't exactly wild either. It was almost as if she was returning the favour, now that Old Man was gone.

Old Man.

Yeah, Old Man – *he* was the one who had got him into this.

'Now what, Old Man?' Wren yelled, his voice echoing around the rocky gully, and somewhere Old Man answered in the quiet voice he'd always used, 'Keep going, Son, you're nearly there.'

Nearly where? Wren had stuck to the directions Old Man had given him and by his reckoning, he should be *somewhere* by now.

Hannah had a hollow feeling in the very middle of her stomach, and every time she thought about leaving, it rose up into her chest and threatened to escape in a sob. She was going to miss the little, dark brown brick house at the bottom of the street. She was going to miss all the people who lived in all the other houses that lined the hillside garden, and she was especially going to miss all her friends at the school.

Would it really hurt if she just ran up to the school now for one final, last goodbye?

The farewell party had been bittersweet – they’d had lots of fun, but there’d been tears, too. School wrapped up early, everyone logging off and gathering outside under the trees where one of the parents had set up a picnic with finger-food nibbles — lemony biscuit slice, fruit sticks, potato bites, and peppery chicken strips, and, of course, a scrumptious marble cake with strawberry icing!

Everyone had brought something delicious to share. Libby, of course, had sent some of her famous marmalade to spread on thick slices of freshly-made bread.

Afterwards they played games – the name game was always a favourite, even though everyone knew each other really well. It was usually a heap of fun as they came up with all sorts of strategies to get each other out, like looking at a completely different person to the one whose name they called before they ran across the circle to take their place. Then there was capture the flag, darting in and out amongst the trees trying not to get caught, rescuing team mates, and stealing the flag away before dashing to safety in your own headquarters.

‘Hannah — you distract the guards; I’ll sneak in and grab the flag,’ Tom said, speaking through the side of his mouth as he ran past her so that the other team didn’t hear, and moving on before she could answer.

Never a quick runner or any good at dodging – and never, ever usually chosen for this task because she was one of the quiet ones who liked to sit around with a book or some art – Hannah ignored the sudden surging of her pulse rate, closed her eyes – yes, she had actually closed her eyes – and ran in and out through the trees, concentrating on the enemy base where the flag was being guarded by three members of the other team.

Somehow, she missed being tagged at least twice before Dita had her baled up around one of the huge eucalypts only a step or two away from the clear space where the flag was sitting in its hoop, and, for a minute or two, it looked as though the guards were going to come and help Dita, but at the last moment they noticed Tom coming up the other side and Dita was left to herself.

Of course, Tom was the bigger threat.

As Hannah feinted one way, Dita jumped the other, and they circled to and fro around the tree while Tom and his chasers whooped and teased each other on the edge of the clearing, just ten metres away.

Other members of the team were starting to come in to try and catch Tom, too, while some of Hannah’s team were also trying to sneak up.

And then it happened.

Tom got past the guards and the only person in a position to catch him was Dita.

Suddenly, Hannah, momentarily forgotten, was free to run through.

Heart in mouth, she rushed in, grabbed the flag, and started her dash home.

‘Go, Hannah! Run!’

The cheering rang in her ears and she got maybe a quarter of the way down the field before being tagged by at least three people at once, ending up in a tumble of arms and legs all over the ground, laughing.

It was the closest she had ever come to being the hero of the minute.

As they headed back to grab icy cool drinks, Hannah savoured the warm glow of belonging, which made the hugs and farewells as everyone had left even more heart-breaking.

It had been... special.

And now everything was changing.

The country was changing, and the lower down the mountain he got the harder it was for Wren to find food – or food that he recognised at any rate – or fresh water.

Yesterday, he’d found some bitter greens growing around a boggy pool and gobbled as much as he could, even though he had always pulled a face when they’d been served up back home by Old Man.

‘You’ll be glad of those when you get real hungry,’ Old Man used to say, staring off into the distance with a wry smile.

He’d be full on laughing now.

The best bit about *this* gully was the thin stream that had left a few warm but clear puddles pooling amongst the rocks. In fact, Wren had only spotted the little rat – the lunch that got away – because he’d come out from under the trees where he’d been resting for a drink.

The second-best bit about this gully was that the rocky slope meant it was clear of trees and he could see the sky properly for the first time in days. It was a relief to look up and see a big patch of blue sky instead of the towering trunks and looming branches and knotted vines.

Wren had never seen so many trees.

For all his life, his world had been filled with stark rocky plains dotted with alpine trees and shrubs – snow gums and plum-pines, common shaggy-pea bushes and southern grevillea. He was used to snow daisies and billy buttons and prickly poa grass. He knew all about march marigolds and wallaby grass.

But this? It was all new and strange.

Down here, there were no open mossy pathways. It was all bark- and twig-filled wombat-trails disappearing under scratchy thickets, and he *really* hoped that he would get wherever it was he was going soon.

The one good thing about these trees though was the shade, and with the afternoon sun burning against his skin, he figured right about now was a good time to get in underneath them and wait for the cool of evening before he tried to do anything else.

He knelt down to scoop up some water and splash it over his hot head then gulped down enough to keep him going.

Kee crooned her approval from the tree where she was watching.

Still there.

Wren waved at her and called back, '*Kee-ee*', then crawled through the undergrowth to the sheltered, hidden spot where he had left his handful of belongings. It was time to settle down for a siesta.

He really didn't know where he'd be without Kee. She led him to water when it started to get scarce and he'd found seeds that he could eat because he had followed her call, more than once. And another time, she tore strips of bark off a tree with her strong beak so he could winkle out the grubs with a sharp stick. He left some for her, then roasted the others for himself on a stone heated in a small fire.

What he'd give for a few of those grubs now or, yes, even some of those horrible greens. Anything, really.

Still aching with emptiness inside, he curled up on the leaf litter under the trees and listened to his tummy grumbling until he dozed off and dreamed about meeting the people that Old Man had sent him to find.

Hannah sighed. She was starting to get sleepy, just sitting, waiting. Even in the shade under the porch, the air was getting hot and stuffy, and she was bored with day-dreaming about all the new people she would meet at her new home.

It would only take a moment to run up to the school, but Libby had said to stay put.

‘I don’t want you running off and holding us up while everyone has to come looking for you.’

And Hannah always did what she was supposed to, especially for her great-grandma.

‘Yes, Libby.’

‘I don’t want to miss the tram.’

‘I’ll wait here and watch for Matilda.’

Mr Franklin would be here with his horse and cart soon, to carry the things they would be taking with them to their new life, down to the tram. Hannah loved the big, gentle Clydesdale. It would be hard to say goodbye to her forever.

Come to think of it, did she really want all the sad goodbyes to her friends again?

Perhaps not.

So, with another sigh, Hannah sat on the doorstep with her suitcase, watching out for Mr Franklin and Matilda, and listening to Emily from the house directly across from theirs. She was bustling around inside, finishing up the cleaning so the new owners could move right in, while Libby pottered here and there, reminding her to do this or that or the other, anxious as always, that everything would be all right for them.

New owners! Hannah stifled another sob.

Libby was excited to be leaving, but Hannah wasn't so sure.

This had been her home since forever. Everyone here was part of what she thought of as her family, and she'd only met her actual uncle once, maybe twice, if she stretched her memory back far enough, and she wasn't looking forward to living somewhere new and different.

At this time of day, what Hannah was *usually* looking forward to was helping in the garden after school finished, or meeting up with the other children from the other streets to do their homework together under the trees or just to play.

Or, when it was too hot or too wet, there was nothing better than listening to the stories old Missy Brown liked to tell about when the streets were paved with dark bitumen and cars drove down them, and people caught buses to go to work or school, far away from where they lived, and hardly anybody grew gardens.

Libby called them ghost stories, but Hannah noticed that she would listen, too, and chime in about her own childhood back then. Once, she talked about going all the way to the coast for weekends and swimming in the sea.

‘In the sea?’

Hannah couldn’t imagine swimming in the sea but Libby’s sea sounded so much brighter and fresher than the dark, foreboding, stormy seas that she had seen on video on her device.

‘It felt like every weekend in summer all the people in Canberra would jump in their cars and drive down to the coast,’ Libby remembered. ‘I must have been about your age when things started changing – maybe a tiny bit younger.’

Hannah couldn’t imagine her great grandmother ever being her age, but she supposed she must have been once.

‘First of all, there were the fires and then the floods – roads got washed away, and then came the huge storms and the rising seas. And, of course, it became too expensive to drive anywhere. No fuel.’

‘Fuel?’

‘Yes, back in those days we were still burning fossil fuels – people thought it was too hard to change. The fuel we had was needed for trucks and transporting food – until even that became too expensive.’

‘Didn’t they know?’

‘We did – or some of us did – but it was a way of life that we’d all got used to.’

‘It must have been exciting to go to the coast and see the sea...’ Hannah couldn’t imagine what it would have been like.

‘Ah, well,’ Libby said with a sigh. ‘All those beach houses and hotels are underwater now I expect.’

Many *had* been washed away in rising tides and big storms, and the broken shells of others still stood like sentinels with the sea sloshing around them, but lots were still there, Hannah knew, above the new high tide line, with people living in them.

Probably with their own street communities filled with gardens.

Everybody had gardens now –whole communities worked together to make sure there was food for everyone – but back then most people relied on their food being trucked in to big supermarkets down those long bitumen highways. Or they had, until crops started failing as the weather went crazy.

‘They were hungry days,’ Missy said, and Libby had nodded.

‘I remember the queues at the supermarkets, and how much it cost for even a soggy lettuce or some rubbery broccoli!’

‘And you couldn’t afford the travel to shop somewhere else!’

‘What happened?’ Hannah and the other children had been part horrified and part fascinated by the story.

‘Well, there was rationing and restrictions and food was redirected to priority people – who all seemed to be the wealthy business owners and government officials – and for a while it looked like there would even be fighting.’

‘Yes,’ Libby agreed. ‘There were protests and lockdowns — but, all of a sudden, people started looking to their own communities. There were already people growing food and seed saving, and it was like a quiet revolution. The Solar Revolution — although it was about much more than just solar energy. We all just started looking after ourselves.’

Missy nodded.

‘We brought food growing and sharing down to a local activity, and we all made sure everyone had enough to eat. And there was a flow-on effect. We started energy sharing and focused on working from home or in local centres. It took a lot of organising.’

‘It took time. It wasn’t easy.’

‘No, it wasn’t easy.’

Missy Brown was working up the hill a little way, right now, weeding or planting or doing something, the way she always was, with two of her grown-up daughters helping out, even though it was coming into the hot part of the day. And that was something else everyone had learned to do. As the temperature had climbed and climbed, they’d learned to do all the outside work early in the day or late in the afternoon. But there was no stopping someone like Missy Brown — or Libby for that matter.

Hannah squirmed. She really had to stop herself from running up to see them before Mr Franklin arrived to take them away; to take them down the tramway that ran right through the communities all the way from the city to the old highway.

But Libby had been very firm.

‘No going off and playing, Hannah. We can’t be late. There’ll be nowhere to stay if we miss this afternoon’s run and I can’t wait for you to meet your cousins.’

