

# RACING *the* WILD

*A Journey of Freedom and Friendship*

Tellwell 

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Racing the Wild  
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## *Dedication*

I dedicate this book to my dearly departed mother, Gerda, who always encouraged her children's creativity and my sister, Christina, who was my childhood partner in storytelling. You are both with me in spirit every day.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

## *Table of Contents*

Chapter 1	A New School.....	1
Chapter 2	Friendships .....	14
Chapter 3	The fury .....	24
Chapter 4	First trip to the mountains .....	33
Chapter 5	Woylie Mountain Sport Camp and Retreat .....	42
Chapter 6	Horse Riding and Basketball .....	50
Chapter 7	Zara .....	59
Chapter 8	Work, horses and relationships.....	69
Chapter 9	Milo and Cocoa.....	78
Chapter 10	Family Secrets.....	87
Chapter 11	The Party.....	98
Chapter 12	Hot and Cold .....	107
Chapter 13	Broken .....	115
Chapter 14	Bombshell.....	121
Chapter 15	Taking Action.....	129
Chapter 16	Freedom.....	146
Chapter 17	Cowboy.....	156
Chapter 18	Snake!.....	165
Chapter 19	Facing the Truth.....	174
Chapter 20	Moving On.....	182
Chapter 21	Wild Horses, Wild Land.....	189
Chapter 22	Connections and Coincidences .....	201
Chapter 23	Life, Death and Fear .....	212
Chapter 24	Trail to Friendship .....	221
Chapter 25	A Turbulent Gathering .....	231
Chapter 26	Some Kind of Resolution .....	243
Chapter 27	Taking and Losing Control.....	253
Chapter 28	Friends, Families and Fathers.....	265
Chapter 29	Trust and Acceptance .....	272
Chapter 30	Friends and Brothers.....	282



## Chapter 1

### A New School



*Finally, alone!* Chris thought with relief. It was such a rare thing for him to be on his own that he revelled in it as he walked the long street to his school. He stretched and rotated his shoulder, trying to remove the ache from when his brother Cody had shoved him before he and Cam turned down the street towards their school. The shove had almost sent him into a lamp post and Cody's words still rang in his brain, "Have fun at your new school! Don't get expelled!" This had brought a guffaw of amusement from Cam.

Chris had responded with a loud, “Lay off, dickhead!” which only served to amuse his siblings more.

Slinging his backpack back over his shoulder, Chris wriggled to get it into a comfortable position. The school he was headed for did not have a good reputation, and his father had told him it served him right to have to leave Saint Fiacre Garden College but Chris was pleasantly optimistic. *No more being stalked in the corridors and bathrooms, punched by someone in the crowd, doors suddenly snapping closed on me, locker consistently vandalised...* He shook his head. *Don't go there...* He had long since given up wondering why they did what they did; some kids had siblings who protected them, but his brothers were his enemies, and they were skilled at inciting others to work with them in their bullying.

Chris enjoyed the long walk, alone and under the cooler winter sun, casually watching other students also on their way to school or waiting for buses. When he arrived at the new high school, he followed the stream of students through some rather imposing gates and found himself among some old two-storey brick buildings. As he looked around for any signs, he spotted a teacher on duty.

“Excuse me,” he asked quietly, “could you please tell me where to go for the front office?”

The teacher pointed to a set of doors, gave some instructions, then turned to stop some boys from kicking a ball near the classroom windows. Chris followed the directions into one of the buildings and approached a large counter, which divided the room. After introducing himself, he was left waiting for a year-level leader to come and meet him. Idly turning around to observe the kids outside, he was startled by his own reflection staring back at him from the reflective glass. He glanced at the new, foreign uniform hanging loosely from his thin frame. It was second hand from salvos and not nearly as grand as the fitted one from his previous school. His short, blond hair couldn't hide the faded bruise high

*Racing the Wild*

on his fine cheekbone, and with a cringe of recognition, he quickly turned away from the haunted look of the eyes staring back at him.

“Chris Franklin, I’m the year-level leader for Year 8, Mrs Hofer,” said a voice, startling him.

He turned to meet a rather short woman in a dull brown dress. She wore bright red lipstick and had her brown hair cut almost as short as his own.

She ushered him into a small meeting room, and with an accent that seemed foreign to him, she continued, “I have read your files and spoken with Mr Johns from Saint Fiacres. He assured me that you are a hard-working boy and not typically violent, but I can’t ignore the fact that you were expelled due to a brawl in the bathrooms, which resulted in some injury to students. Violence here at Melaleuca Creek College is not acceptable, and any sign of such behaviour will result in harsh and possibly permanent punishment.”

*Great, he thought grumpily, that bullshit is following me!*

There was a tap on the door, and a student entered the room.

“Thank you for coming, Greg. This is Chris Franklin. Could you please escort him to Mr Perez’s room and introduce him?” Mrs Hofer turned to Chris, handing him a sheet from her folder. “Chris, please keep in mind what we discussed. Here is your timetable. Since you are starting midyear, I suggest you try to catch up on any work you may have missed. Also, you need to see the school counsellor in the next two weeks. That is necessary for your type of situation. I will check to make sure you do it but you needn’t be concerned, it is completely confidential. Good luck, and I hope this is the right school for you to shine.”

After being hustled out of the room, he was walked across a courtyard—*like a prisoner*, he thought—then into another ugly brick building and along the corridor. Finally, he was shown into the classroom to be his homeroom for the next few years. Greg introduced Chris to the homeroom teacher, a Mr Perez and then left.

“Class, we have a new student, Chris Franklin. Please introduce yourselves to him and help him feel welcome here,” Perez announced in a deep gravelly voice. Chris noticed the accent as Perez accentuated his s’s and applied an unfamiliar rhythm to the words. He turned his bulk slowly and lowered his big head towards Chris as he addressed him from above.

“Chris, take a seat here, next to Ben.” He directed the boy to a central desk where a tall, lanky, dark-haired teen was lounging, deep in conversation with a red-haired girl seated at the desk behind him.

Feeling almost crushed by Perez’s huge presence near him, Chris quickly moved to the seat. As he lowered himself, he saw the big, loose black curls on Perez’s head bounce and wobble as he turned away towards his desk.

Ben made an effort to sit up straight before introducing himself. While Perez marked the roll and read messages to the class, several surrounding students did the same. Ben chatted openly to anyone who would listen about sports, girls and his holidays. He took a break from his monologue and turned to Chris.

“Let’s see your timetable,” he demanded, “see if we have any of the same classes.”

Chris opened his up and held it next to Ben’s.

“Ah, we’ve both got the same first class: history,” said Ben. “That’s in this room with Mr Perez. Then you have maths and English in Ethan and Malik’s class. I’ll introduce you to them after homeroom. We’re all in the same class for physical education. Then you go to art while I go to drama. I can show you where that is. It can be a little hard to find, but both rooms are near each other.”

“I’d really appreciate that, Ben, thank you,” said Chris softly. He felt the anxious knot in his stomach unfurl a little as he acknowledged the friendly attitude shown to him.

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*Racing the Wild*

During history, it became evident that Ben was extremely popular, more so with the girls than the boys. Chris was duly introduced to Malik, who sat at a seat in front next to a verbose young man named Ethan. Girls were drawn to Ben, and Chris felt a little uneasy as one in particular eyed him coldly after Ben refused to move next to her. Mr Perez wandered among the students and described the course content for semester two while pointing off and on to the whiteboard with a laser.

“Since you’ve missed terms one and two, I’d like you to take this textbook and read Chapters 5 and 6,” said Perez to Chris as he moved about the room. Chris was given a rather large textbook. “Malik, would you be happy to share your notes?”

Malik nodded his agreement. Ben, in the meantime, was less interested in the topic and more interested in the girls, who he flirted with and complimented at every opportunity. Chris saw him pass notes as well, but Perez was either ignoring the behaviour or oblivious to it.

The bell rang, and with a promise to meet in the canteen at recess, Chris went with Malik and Ethan to maths down the hall, while Ben went to his maths class in the next room.

Maths turned out to be relatively easy for Chris, as he had already covered most of the work at his previous school. Malik and Ethan were both able maths students, and between them, they seemed to finish the worksheets before any of the other students. With warnings of an impending maths test, they hustled off to recess.

The canteen had many tables, which were occupied by students of all descriptions, but as Chris and the other boys were sitting down, a group of older students started to push them aside to take their table. While Malik and Ethan looked ready to leave, Chris was not about to be bullied at his new school, so he stared directly into one of the boys’ eyes. Anger began to boil up inside him, but his voice was quiet and calm when he said, “This table is taken.”

Malik tried to whisper to Chris, but the older boy was already sneering in Chris's face saying, "Yeah, and we have taken it!"

Determination and confidence seemed to surround Chris. "Find your own table," he said in low tones, ignoring Malik's signals. The boys looked like they may retaliate, moving in towards Chris, but one friend suddenly whispered, "Sheers is coming. Let's go," and the group moved off.

The teacher wandered over to the table and asked if everything was alright. He then turned to Chris and said, "Ah, Chris Franklin, new student. I assure you that we do not tolerate the type of behaviour you exhibited at your last school. If you don't want to get expelled again, do not pick fights." With that, he turned on his heel and left.

Chris was astounded and embarrassed. His new friends looked at him questioningly, and he made as if to leave when Ben said, "Ha, that old Sheers is a shit talker! Don't worry about him, Chris. Stick with us!"

Malik and Ethan nodded in agreement.

Then Ethan enlightened the group with, "You're not alone. I was expelled from my last school too! It would seem that the faculty did not approve of my formidable IT skills when I mixed up all their names and subjects just before the school magazine was printed!" That statement had the group laughing and begging for more details and Chris felt the tension leaving him.

English class was somewhat boring, with a class discussion on their latest novel and test papers returned to the students but Chris's mind was preoccupied with thoughts about how to avoid fights and another expulsion. He absently sketched on the edges of his workbook page as he tried to think up a survival strategy. *Dad will kill me if I get expelled from here*, he thought nervously, hoping never to find out exactly what his father would do.

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*Racing the Wild*

“Ok, we’re going to test hand-eye coordination,” called the physical education teacher in the next lesson. Mr Drummond passed balls to the students and instructed them to go through a series of exercises as he divided them into teams. After some rigorous training, the students lined up to put their names down for sports of interest.

“I think you would do well in a basketball team,” announced Mr Drummond to Chris as he appeared uncertain where to go.

“I really like the game,” said Chris, “but I can’t play weekends or after school because I have to work. I would be glad to play during school hours, though.” Embarrassed at this admission, Chris dropped his head and thought he could feel the stares of the students around him. *Why can’t I be like other kids and do what they do?* he thought bitterly.

“Oh, that’s a shame,” replied the teacher. “We play a lot of games on Saturdays. Oh well, you can play on Ben’s team while at school. I see you are already getting to know him.”

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At lunchtime, the group sat outside, eating sandwiches and rolls and enjoying the mild sunny weather. Malik, Ethan, and Ben talked about their sporting preferences until a couple of girls came to join them and chat with Ben.

“Did you do anything interesting over the holidays, Chris?” asked Malik.

“Just worked with my dad’s horses,” Chris replied quietly, but anxiety began to grip him as he involuntarily remembered how his ribs had ached from his brother’s punches as he’d struggled to muck out the horses’ stalls and hold back the eager gallopers. He looked down, trying not to reflect his discomfort to Malik as the familiar tightness gripped his gut. He resisted the temptation to stand and walk away to avoid further discussion.

“Horses!” exclaimed Ethan. “My cousins have horses on a property at the edge of town. My brother and I ride with them on occasion.”

Ethan then described the horses and his latest ride in some detail until the bell rang, causing the boys to go to their classes and Ben to turn away from one of the girls and gather his belongings from the grass. Straightening, he said, “Chris, follow me. The art building is next to the drama room, and that’s where we’re headed.” They walked with the girl across the grass to a large factory-like building.

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Chris immediately enjoyed art. The teacher introduced the class and then had everyone do a series of contour drawings of random objects as a loosening-up exercise. He sat alone at the back of the room, deliberately avoiding the other students. Drawing for Chris was a private pleasure, and he didn’t want anyone to look over his shoulder and judge or talk about his work. They didn’t have to share their work, which suited Chris as he remembered occasional friction among friends due to his drawings at his previous school. Halfway through the lesson, the teacher handed out course and assessment information and showed some previous students’ examples.

It was with a heavy heart that Chris started the long walk home. He’d enjoyed making new friends but knew from experience that the demands of his home life would crush any real, close friendships due to his unavailability. His father made sure that working around the stables and exercising the racehorses consumed every minute of Chris’s home life.

Chris was so deep in contemplation that when something suddenly rammed into the side of him, tearing him from his thoughts and knocking him to the ground, he was completely taken by surprise. The palms of his hands scraped on the sidewalk

*Racing the Wild*

as he caught his falling body before he rolled and looked up to see a boy regain control of his bike and dismount. Finding his feet rapidly, Chris was confronted by three of the four boys he had challenged at recess.

“Hey, dickhead, that is our school!” sneered one of the boys as they circled him. “You and your wimpy friends will learn that the hard way if you cross us again!”

“Lay off,” said Chris, annoyed. “It’s as much ours as yours.”

He subtly assumed a loose fighting stance: legs apart, arms somewhat raised, knees slightly bent as he announced, “Come on...first come, first served!”

The boys crowded and shoved him, expecting him to cower from their taller figures, but they were taken aback when he sharply jabbed one in the jaw and kicked another in the knee.

“Ah...,” yelled the boy with the kicked knee as he dropped to the ground in pain. The other boy backed off, rubbing his jaw as Chris continued his defence.

Rolling with the punch thrown from the third boy, Chris grabbed the offending fist and twisted, putting the bigger teen in an arm lock. “Leave me and my friends alone, and I won’t break his arm!”

“You creep!” exclaimed *Sore Jaw* as he swooped in towards Chris. Chris swivelled on his heel to keep his captive between them while increasing pressure on the arm. The captive howled in pain, and *Sore Jaw* stopped, bewildered, unsure of his next move.

“I mean it,” growled Chris. His muscles tightened, and he felt the anger boiling through him like lava, ready to explode. *I will not be bullied at this school!* he thought through a red fog of rage. Images of the hell he had endured at his former school flashed through his brain, feeding his anger and he involuntarily tightened his grip, forcing a groan from his captive.

*Sore Jaw* looked at *Sore Knee*, who had reluctantly regained his feet and was backing towards his bike, clearly not intending to rejoin the fracas.

“Alright, let him go,” he finally said. “We will leave you and your friends alone.”

Chris released the boy, who quickly moved away from him and stood behind *Sore Jaw*, shaking and massaging his arm.

“You’re a fucking lunatic!” exclaimed *Sore Arm* before grabbing his bike by the handlebars. The group moved off together, and Chris ignored the parting jeers and threats as he turned to resume his walk.

\*\*\*

Although Chris had walked quickly, fuelled partly by the adrenaline still affecting him despite his win, he arrived home later than he was expected. Fortunately, his father was not in sight, and Chris assumed he would be watching one of the racehorses on the track, which was down a laneway behind the training facility. *He’s probably discussing technicalities with an owner*, thought Chris as he quickly slipped into his work clothes, washed his scraped hands, grabbed a glass of juice and an apple, then rushed to begin his stable work. He noticed his brothers were tag-teaming their work, as was their habit. Cody, spying Chris, sneered, shook his head and tapped his watch. Dread crept up the boy’s spine, because if Cody was making a show of it, his father had probably noticed Chris’s lateness.

Checking the outdoor clock, Chris realised he only had five minutes to get Storm out on the track for his workout. He struggled with the girth, finding the restless Storm difficult to saddle, and the twins laughed and jeered.

“Grow some muscles, weakling!” yelled Cam.

“Don’t fall off!” taunted Cody as Chris climbed the mounting block and hopped onto the horse’s back. He rode the prancing horse towards the gate. Storm was headstrong and fought the reins controlling him, lunging, sidestepping and pigrooting in excitement. Chris, however, had ridden this horse many times so

*Racing the Wild*

was able to keep him under some sort of control as he rode up the path towards the racetrack. When he neared the gate to the track, his father's stern eye settled on him, and he saw the tightness of his mouth, which indicated disapproval. That, more than the antics of the horse, made Chris's stomach do a flip.

"Calm that horse down, let him trot for a lap, then take another lap at a canter. Don't let him have his head, and don't let him race against any of the other horses out there. He needs to be ready to race on Friday."

Chris nodded and silently brought the horse onto the track. As he slowly allowed the horse to move forward, he heard Mr Jamison say to his father, "That boy of yours is doing well handling that big brute!"

The ride was bumpy as Storm fought for his head and Chris struggled to keep him at a trot. When one of the other racehorses in training passed by, he had to fight to prevent his horse from bolting away at a gallop. Chris felt the stickiness of fresh blood inside his riding gloves from the scrapes on his palms. Wincing, he pulled back on the reins in exasperation. *What an inconvenient time to have raw hands!* The dappled grey was race-ready and, if all went well, had a good chance of winning on Friday. By the time the horse was most of the way around the first lap, he had settled into a fast trot. Storm surged forward when allowed into a canter, and the distant voice of his father floated to Chris's ears, "...slow him down!"

It was difficult to keep the excited horse from galloping, and as Chris was nearing the gate, his father waved his arm for him to stop. When he finally pulled up, he had passed the gate and turned back. Chris was silently thankful for the presence of Mr Jamieson as it prevented his father from railing at him.

"Chris, put Storm in the sand yard and bring Ebony. Mr Jamieson is thinking of buying her and wants to see how she's coming along." He turned then to speak to one of the other riders coming in.

Nodding, Chris followed his father's instructions, knowing that when Leon informed Chris of the man's intentions, he was warning him to present the horse at its best.

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By nightfall, all the horses were bedded down and fed, and a tired Chris sat at the dining table with his family. His brothers and father discussed their day at school and the horses they worked with while Chris and his mother ate silently.

*Strange. No one ever asks me about my day at school or my opinion on the horses!*

Suddenly aware of the silence, he looked up, seeing an expectant expression on his father's face and smirks on Cody and Cam's. His mother was looking down. No, he wouldn't get any support there.

"There you go, daydreaming again. I asked you a question!" demanded his father.

"I'm s-sorry, I didn't hear you..."

"You were late home; that is not good enough. You come home immediately after school! I very nearly told Mr Jamieson he would have to come back tomorrow to see Ebony, and you know he's one of our best owners!"

"Sorry, I-I needed to talk to some people after school," Chris answered vaguely. "I, uh, have homework, so can I be excused?"

"Not so fast, young man," demanded Leon. "Don't think I didn't notice your hands!" He waited for an explanation.

"Oh, I-I tripped on the gutter..." Chris mumbled, trying to leave the table.

"Let me see!" Leon held his large, calloused hand out expectantly.

Chris felt a twinge of fear course through his veins as he turned his hands over for his father's observation of his palms.

*Racing the Wild*

Leon looked, then grasped his hand firmly, twisting it to examine Chris's knuckles. "If you have been fighting again..." he began.

Chris grimaced with unwelcome anticipation. "I just fell over..."

His father looked him in the eye, then growled, "You're excused. Get some antiseptic on that."

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## *Chapter 2*

# Friendships



*Everyone seems to stare at me*

Bright and early, after he had watched the sunrise while he finished mucking out, feeding, exercising and brushing his share of the horses in the stables, Chris left for school. He departed ten minutes earlier than yesterday to avoid his brothers, who were still showering and eating after their morning work. He was still angry after receiving a punch to the gut from fifteen-year-old Cody as he

*Racing the Wild*

exited the bathroom last night. His morning routine, particularly the mucking out, was quite uncomfortable as his gut muscles felt bruised.

On his long walk to school, Chris again contemplated his situation. Roughhousing near the horses was strictly forbidden and would come with a hefty punishment. With a chill, he imagined their father's rage if the brothers were caught nailing each other as they had this morning and did occasionally, using gravel fired from one of the slingshots meant for the rats and mice searching out free grain. *Should I retaliate and plan revenge, or would it be best for me to work harder to avoid the confrontations? But I do try to avoid them. I can't keep letting them push me around! I won't be someone's personal punching bag!* Chris could feel the bitter irony of that assertion even while thinking.

\*\*\*

At school, Chris made his way into the canteen to meet his new friends, immediately becoming aware of people looking at him and whispering.

*Dammit, I had enough of this at the last school.* He and his brothers had been notorious among the students for their savagery to each other and the brothers for their sneakiness.

Chris sat down somewhat carefully, pretending he didn't hear the group at the next table as they discussed the "new kid" and the fight they had heard about.

Ben gave him a look, and Malik frowned, openly disapproving. "It serves you right if they gave you a couple of bruises. You had no call to fight them over a canteen table!"

"What?" exclaimed Chris in surprise. "I didn't fight anyone over a table!"

With perfect timing, yesterday's trio walked in and steered to the back of the room. *Sore Jaw* had a light bruise on his face and a slight swelling at the edge of the mouth. *Sore Knee* walked

with a slight limp, and *Sore Arm* appeared to be cradling his injury somewhat. The fourth member of the group walked in and scowled as the group exchanged soft, excitable words.

“So, are you telling me you are not responsible for that?” asked Malik. “You were expelled for fighting from your last school, weren’t you? At least, that’s what Sheers said...”

“Take it easy, Malik. Let him tell...” inserted Ben.

Before anything else could be said, the teacher from yesterday, Mr Sheers, walked up.

“So, you’re a vicious little hooligan, are you? What threats or bribes did you use to stop them from reporting you?”

“Excuse me?” replied Chris in obvious confusion.

“Oh, come now. Four students have an altercation with the new student who was *expelled due to violence* from his previous school, and then three turn up to school looking bruised and uncomfortable? It doesn’t take a super sleuth to work out what happened. Just you watch yourself. You might be able to buy silence from a few pushy students, but your family money won’t bail you out of trouble when we have evidence of your penchant for violence.”

Chris couldn’t help it; he burst into a wide grin and repeated, “Family money? Hahaha, I could only wish!”

“Mr Franklin, I saw your file. I know who you are and where you come from. You may pretend to play the innocent, but I’m wise to your kind. I’ll be watching!”

With that, Mr Sheers walked away.

Malik, Ethan, and Ben were staring at Chris in surprise when two boys sidled up and slid onto seats next to them. “Hey, Ben, Malik, Ethan...who’s your new friend? We’ve been hearing colourful stories about the new kid!”

Chris looked down at his hands, slowly shaking his head. *I can’t believe it. How do I always end up in the limelight?*

“Aakesh, Stephen, our new celebrity is Chris Franklin,” replied Ben with a grin. “What have you heard?”

*Racing the Wild*

“We heard that Franklin, here, is bad news and we should steer clear of him!” replied Stephen with a grin.

“This is us steering clear!” exclaimed Aakesh with a cheeky smile.

The group looked across at Chris questioningly, and he felt like a deer in headlights. “I’m not going to explain myself,” he said softly and, with a deep feeling of frustration, stood and walked away. He could feel their eyes on his back and heard Ben say, “Loosen up, guys. It’s only his second day! He doesn’t even know us yet..”

\*\*\*

When Ben walked in, Chris was sitting sullenly in the back corner of the homeroom, feeling like a piece of rubbish. He placed himself beside Chris and put his hand on the newcomer’s shoulder in friendship. Chris, completely unfamiliar with friendly physical contact, jumped defensively but recognised the sound of friendship in Ben’s calming voice.

“Hey, you’re not on your own. We’re friends, right?”

“I can’t make small talk, Ben. I can’t chat about my actions or my life with people I barely know. People make up their own minds and they will believe what they want to believe about me! I’m not going to justify everything I say and do..”

“Chris, I want to be friends. You seem like a cool, genuine guy and we want you to be our friend! We’re not judging you. I’m sorry if that’s how it seemed this morning. Give us a chance, hey?”

Chris looked up at that exclamation and challenged, “You’re not just doing this because Mr Perez asked you to? Because if you are, I’ll let you off the hook. I can get by fine on my own.”

“No, Chris. I really do want to try to be friends. In any case, I don’t like to see anyone on their own!”

Looking at his face, Chris could see the truth in Ben’s eyes. His bad mood began to dissolve as his churning stomach settled

with the realisation that he may be able to remain friends with this group.

\*\*\*

Following the incident, Chris noticed the boys seemed to make an effort throughout the week to seek him out in class and be around him. It made him wonder about their motives. He had not had many friends before due to his unchangeable work routine and his threatening brothers. *How long before they decide I'm too much trouble and not worth being friends with?*

During history classes, the four boys sat together, except when Ben was trying to win over a female classmate. Chris was embarrassed and amused by the behaviour as Ben waxed lyrical over any girl he had an interest in. He had a poetic skill that made the girls blush, and the boys squirm and he was not at all shy about it. Strangely, Mr Perez went about the lesson as if nothing else was happening.

In maths and English, Chris continued to sit with the clever Malik and Ethan. The three advanced quickly through their studies and were given extra tasks to solve. All three of them were serious students who wanted to achieve their best and found each other to be challenging opponents and excellent partners for research tasks. Ethan had exceptional computer skills and could find information about anything. As they began their first group assessment task, Chris noticed Ethan spent a lot of time perfecting the presentation and refused to settle for mediocrity. Malik was confident and had solid analytical skills. Chris had good planning and strategy when tackling problems, though his computer skills and his self-confidence were lacking. It didn't take long before Ethan began to coach Chris with extra guidance on the computer during class time.

In science, Aakesh sat with Ethan and Chris while Malik and Ben were in a different class. He was a very talkative boy,

*Racing the Wild*

and Chris quickly learned the names of Aakesh's siblings and the background of his parents, who had migrated to Australia and become successful in their respective professions. His father, an architect, travelled interstate and overseas fairly regularly. Consequently, Aakesh was required to take responsibility for his younger brother and sister at times, including meeting them at their primary school and walking them home.

Art class was Chris's favourite. He had a personal sketchbook, which he used continuously, drawing the horses, stables, plants, landscape and people around him. His teacher was a capable artist and broadened Chris's skills with advice, modelling and examples. Soon, the class began to experiment with paint and ink, and Chris decided on a horse portrait as his first art assessment task. None of his friends were in the art class and he usually sat alone, immersed in his work. This was no bother to Chris, who valued time alone when he could get it. He felt free when he sketched but was reluctant to share his drawings, even with his teacher.

In religion class, the students were learning about different faiths worldwide. They compared some of the beliefs and practices and did an assignment on famous religious figures. After Chris had read an interesting quote he could relate to, he decided to research the Dalai Lama of Buddhism. He found sayings and practices that were powerful and meaningful, and during the evenings, he began to practice some brief mindful meditations.

Chris's home life consisted of the regular family routine of rising at four in the morning to feed horses and muck out stables, supervised mostly by Max, who was the head strapper. Chris and some of the other stable hands would then work a selection of horses, either walking them or riding them around the track, supervised by Leon, who usually lurked back and forth from the track to the stables. Chris would battle or avoid his brothers as they ducked in and out of stables and the tack room, visiting the round yard and manure pile. Around seven o'clock in the morning, the three brothers would finish, shower, eat breakfast and head off

to school while the stable hands continued to work. When Chris could manage it, he grabbed first shower so he could leave while his brothers were still having breakfast. As long as each boys' allotted horses were properly cared for each morning and night, Leon did not interfere.

Chris was constantly on his toes, trying to keep up with the tiring routine. His brothers, most often Cody, often got the drop on him, and he found himself retaliating against his better judgement. After school, he had to pick out the horses' waste again, then walk, brush, saddle and ride the racehorses before returning them to the sand yard for a roll. Afterwards, he would rub them down and rug them before preparing their feed. By the time he got to dinner, he was dead tired and ready for bed. The meditation technique he had learned helped him relax and let go of the day's stresses.

The work routine had been his since he turned eleven, big enough to handle the calmer horses, though, in those days, he only rode the most reliable and well-trained ones. His brothers had also been doing this since a young age and were both capable horse handlers and riders, Cameron more so than Cody.

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Weeks went by, and as the friendship among the boys grew, Chris found himself enjoying school and life more than he ever had. The group dynamics changed to include Ben, Malik, Ethan and Chris as core members, with a few students like Aakesh, Stephen and Francine—who came and went according to sporting activities and subject specialties. Often, there would be others in the group, in particular girls who were interested in Ben.

Chris found Ben, Malik and Ethan to be very generous and accepting. They joked around and did a range of sporting activities at lunchtimes and Chris always felt included. Any threat from

*Racing the Wild*

the group who had initially tried to bully them did not come to fruition.

At the end of the fifth week, Ethan asked the group to join him to watch the latest *Transformers* movie and have lunch on the Saturday at the local shopping centre and cinema. The boys had been discussing the trailers and decided it was going to be an exciting film. They all went home with plans to ask their parents and ring Ethan to arrange a meeting time.

When Chris saw his dad near the tack shed, he tried to square his shoulders and put on a brave front.

“Dad?” he tentatively tried.

“What is it?” was the curt reply.

“I was w-wondering if I could go to m-meet friends tomorrow?”

“Chris,” snapped Leon, “keep your mind on the job! Stop daydreaming and get on with feeding the horses!”

Disappointed, Chris scowled as he turned away and went on with his work, slamming the feed bins down a little more aggressively than usual. He did not see his father again until dinner time. Again, he broached the subject.

“Dad, if I can go, I’ll do all my work, I just..”

“Ah, for crying out loud, can’t I eat in peace?” yelled his father. “Whingeing and whining, always wanting something. Bloody hell, leave me be!”

Uncertain how to proceed and humiliated by the faces he received from Cam and Cody, Chris decided to give the socialising a miss this weekend.

And, as it turned out, the next, and the next...

Despite the closeness of the school group, Chris slowly began to feel isolated as they continued inviting him to socialise more. His inability to play sports or see friends outside of school hours became a major factor, and he had the feeling they didn’t believe him when he said he had to work afternoons and weekends. He was forced to reject birthday parties and film nights, making him feel like a hanger-on rather than a proper friend. They all had

phones and used social media copiously. He was the odd one out, and even his friends assumed his phone had been confiscated due to bad behaviour. *What a joke. I have never had a phone in my life!*

He was too embarrassed to admit it or the fact that he never had any access to money unless his mother slipped him a few dollars when no one was looking.

Even though he knew Leon Franklin did not like to be pestered, Chris decided to ask him, for the third time in three weeks, if he could meet with friends on the weekend. He knew his brothers were allowed to take the occasional afternoon off, albeit not many and they also had some free time on the weekends. They both had basic mobile phones on cheap plans, although they were not allowed to use social media or cameras at home.

Finding his father calmly watching a horse frolic in one of the small paddocks, he grit his teeth and approached. His stomach fluttered with nervous tension.

“Dad,” he said noncommittally, silently trying to gauge his father’s mood and gather up courage.

Leon turned to him, commenting on the horse he was watching. “Gypsy is lively today; I think she’s overcome the strained tendon. We can ease her back into work next week.”

Chris watched the horse and agreed, then began, “My friend Ben from school is having a birthday lunch tomorrow. I was invited. I was wondering...”

Leon’s face darkened. “Why,” he said stiffly, “are you asking me a question I answered weeks ago? Where is your respect?”

“I...I just thought that...well...Cody and C...Cam can go visit...,” started Chris nervously.

He was flat on his back before he knew what hit him, a familiar scorching ache pulsing across his cheek and jaw. Raging over the prone body of Chris as he lay in the dirt, Leon snarled and jerked, fists clenched. The image hovering above reminded Chris of a savage dog on the attack.

*Racing the Wild*

“How dare you question me! How dare you talk about Cameron and Cody! I make the decisions, and you abide by them, never mind anyone else. Get that into your thick skull!” roared Leon as he stomped away red-faced.

Chris struggled to his feet, anger warring with humiliation. His cheeks burned, and his stomach clenched.

*Why can't I visit friends? Am I a prisoner here? What did I do wrong?*

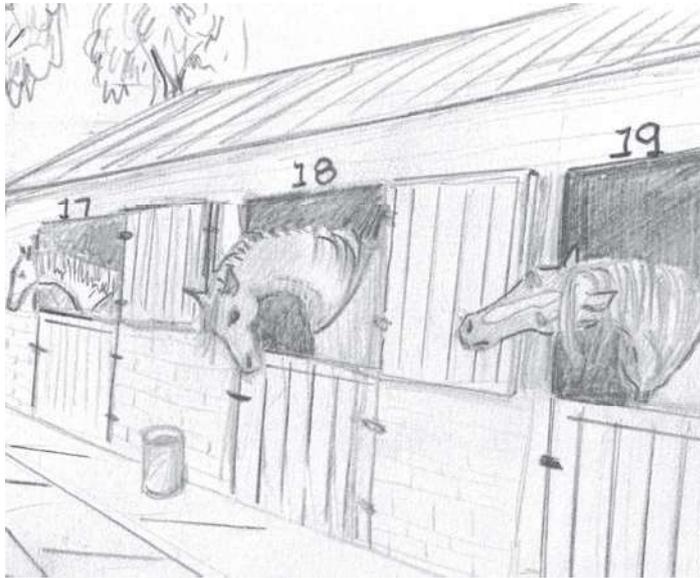
He decided against his better judgement to talk to his mum. Although she was quite timid, she generally didn't lie to him. He had, however, noticed how red her eyes were on occasion and from time to time, he glimpsed faded yellow marks on her skin. He couldn't help but blame his father. He had never seen the man raise his hand against her nor even touch her in any way. But he had certainly seen the man yell at her as he did the boys. That made Chris wary of including her in the conversation.

*Why is Dad such a surly bastard?* he wondered as he got to work in the stables.

He would need to be super careful when he approached his mum.

## Chapter 3

### The fury



*waiting for their dinner*

Rushing into his bedroom, Chris tossed his backpack on the floor and, with a tired sigh, slipped into his work clothes. It was Wednesday. His father should be out near the track with Ms Kramer and Mrs Black, two sisters who had purchased a promising young racehorse together. They had brought the horse to Leon for training, but for some reason, there seemed to be a rather strained relationship between the sisters and their trainer. This didn't surprise Chris at all since his father was a moody and judgemental man and the sisters were fun-loving jokesters.

*Racing the Wild*

As Chris went to the kitchen for his juice, he spied Ms Kramer's car pulling up.

*Good. A bit later than usual, but they'll keep Dad busy for half an hour at least.*

He found his mother preparing food for dinner. She absently passed him a cookie from a jar near her shoulder.

"Mum, I want to ask you something," said Chris quietly.

His mother nervously looked around but the two were alone. "What is it, Chris?"

"Why can't I go out on weekends or after school? Why can't I have a phone? Cody and Cam are allowed to."

Lucy looked at Chris. "I'm sorry, Chris, you are too young for a phone, and people waste such time on them. They are expensive to run, and you know we don't like to waste money."

"But Cody and Cam—"

"Are older than you, Chris. They also know that the phones are to be used sparingly. They have very limited data. And they know not to take photographs around the house or stables. You know we always have so much work needing to be done and we have such high costs..."

"But why? Why no photos? This isn't some secret organisation; it's a business..."

"Chris, those are the rules and you know it."

"Alright, then why can't I play sports after school or visit friends? Everybody else does it. Why are the rules for me different?"

As he looked up, his mother's face changed to fear and Chris felt his shoulder roughly grabbed from behind.

"Whingeing and whining again! I told you NO! You're just like your mother and probably HIM! Now get outside and DO YOUR WORK," yelled his father as he whirled Chris towards the door. He flung the boy with such force that one door hinge broke as Chris hit it. He was sent careening down the stairs of the verandah to land in a heap on the brick paving in the yard.

As he staggered to his feet, Chris heard his father bellow and his mother cry out. Dizzily looking around him, Chris realised that no stable hands were near. He wobbled forward a step to return to his mother but was disoriented and afraid. He was no barrier to his father, a big, strong man and Chris was wise to be wary of him. Suddenly, his father raged out of the house, looming up in front of Chris. Before he could react, the boy felt a savage blow to the face in an explosion of pain, which knocked him back down and caused his nose to bleed. A force like a kicking horse impacted his side and he yelled in shock and pain as an arm pulled him to his feet. The red face and wild brown eyes that roared at him to get to the horses was so frightening that Chris felt like the devil was screaming at him.

Like a tornado, the monster turned and headed out towards the track, swearing and cursing, flexing his muscles and shaking his head as he went.

Face throbbing with pain and the blood now trickling down his shirt, Chris shuffled to a stable door and scrabbled uselessly with the latch. His mind weirdly felt numb with shock, and he struggled to function. Touching his fingers to his nose, he gasped at the pain, then fumbled again with the stable door, leaving blood smears on the white paint. His hands were shaking and his right arm was numb where it had impacted the stairs. His back and ribs hurt badly, and taking a breath was very painful. Behind him, having heard the ruckus from the stable they were cleaning, brothers Cam and Cody emerged.

At first, they were greatly amused that their brother had been in trouble again, but Cam, spying the blood on the door, turned Chris by his shoulder to face him. The twins gasped at the extent of the damage done by their father.

“Oh man, what did you do?” asked Cam in dismay.

Chris, still disoriented and confused, gasped, “Mum...”

While Cam helped Chris with the stable door, Cody went to the house to see their mother.

*Racing the Wild*

A few minutes later, as Cam was saddling the horse for Chris, Cody called from the house.

“Oh, Mum. She’s not moving. I’m calling an ambulance!”

Cam had just legged Chris onto the horse’s saddle when he turned and looked at Chris, who was struggling to sit upright, one arm hanging almost uselessly as the other clutched at the reins.

“What did you do to Mum?” he asked menacingly.

Chris could barely speak from pain but the tears in his eyes and guilt on his face were enough for Cam to forget his momentary sympathy and assume the worst.

“You selfish shit,” he roared as he belted the horse’s rump with the lead rope.

The horse, already nervous from the smell of blood and the unusual activity, neighed in surprise and galloped away, losing Chris in an ungainly heap within a few seconds. Cam barely noticed as he rushed into the house to see his mum.

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Chris awoke slowly but could not comprehend his surroundings. Flashes of brief moments of awareness came to him and he realised that now was not his first time waking up. The annoying beep was the first thing he noticed as his eyes tried to focus. Then, the familiar smell of antiseptic hit his nose. Shapes became clearer around him, and Chris’s mind registered an ugly pocked ceiling and various bits of hospital equipment. He also discovered that his lower arm was in a cast.

*How had it been broken?* He tried to remember the events but struggled with a foggy memory.

It was not his first visit to a hospital and he looked around at the monitors surrounding him.

“Hello, darling,” said a friendly nurse who had apparently just come into the room. “Does your head still hurt?”

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Two days after the incident, Chris slowly awoke from dozing to a rather loudly whispered conversation.

“Man, look at those bruises.” That was Ben’s voice!

“Shit, his nose is huge,” came from Malik.

“That horse sure did mess him up,” replied Ben.

Momentarily confused, Chris opened his eyes and was embarrassed to see the two boys sitting by his bed, watching him.

“How did you know I was here?” he mumbled through his swollen mouth.

“There was something on the news about a riding accident at your dad’s training establishment, so I asked Mum to check. She said if it was you and if you agreed to see me, I could come,” finished Malik in a rather prerecited way.

“We brought a present for you,” said Ben, holding out a small box.

Chris was surprised and flustered. Had he talked to a nurse or doctor about Malik? He could not remember. He had also never received a present from a friend before.

“Uh, no need, but thank you,” he muttered, looking down with shame.

“Oh, we think there is a need,” said Ben, smiling. “You’re our friend, and we want to be able to talk to you.” With that, he pulled a phone out of the box and gave it to Chris.

“Oh, a-a phone! Ben, no, I can’t take that. It’s too expensive...”

“Yes, you can, Chris. We all chipped in. It’s under my name, but we’re all paying just a bit. That way, you won’t drown in gifts from all your friends, and you can use this to talk to us!”

“Th-thank you,” said Chris, fighting to hold on to his emotions. “I can’t believe you all did that! You’ll have to show me

how to use it. I have no idea!” With that, he had a giggle at his own ineptitude before gasping from the pain in his ribs.

Ben and Malik spent several minutes showing Chris how to use the phone and chatting about schoolwork. Joking around caused Chris pain, so they remained sensible and talked.

“You’ll never guess who I hooked up with at the pool on Saturday,” said Ben enthusiastically.

“Then you better tell me,” murmured Chris.

“You know Asunta from your art class? She was there, and we’re going to Funland next weekend together!” finished Ben proudly.

“Don’t know her,” said Chris, “and what’s Funland?”

“What’s Funland? Hell, Chris, how can you not know that! It’s an arcade over at the mall. I’m surprised you never noticed it! There are all sorts of games you can play, even ten-pin bowls!”

“I’ve never been to the mall,” admitted Chris quietly.

“You haven’t?” asked Malik, shocked. “Where do you get your clothes and food from? Where do you hang out with friends?”

“Malik, I told you I can’t hang out with friends,” replied Chris in a pained voice. “Mum does all the shopping. My brothers and I, we never go.”

“Well, that’s just weird,” said Ben, then, “We’d better go. It’s five o’clock already. Make sure you text us!”

Slipping the phone on silent, they hid the charger among Chris’s folded clothes and left him with a warped smile on his face.

While in hospital, Chris had plenty of opportunity to use the phone and soon became adept at sending and receiving messages, albeit slowly. The friends, including Ethan and Aakesh, sent many messages about anything and everything, so Chris began to feel more like one of the group again. He also learnt the joys of electronic games and found that there were some games he could play despite the hindrance of his cast.

Both boys visited Chris at hospital several times. He did not want to talk about the incident and stated that he had fallen

from a horse but remembered nothing. In truth, he had fleeting glimpses of a monster punching him when he was dreaming or about to fall asleep but it didn't make any sense to him. He also thought he remembered talking to his mother. It was with shock that he discovered she was also a patient there. At times, he became withdrawn, particularly with the medical staff, but since his friends texted him consistently, Chris became more relaxed and open when they visited.

Chris's family was conspicuously absent. The police were frequent visitors for a while, accompanied by a social worker. They asked many questions about his relationship with his mother and father but Chris could not reclaim any memory of the event. When he asked about his parents, the police were not forthcoming. Eventually, Chris's recovering mother denied he had anything to do with her injuries and the police presence dwindled.

A week after his admittance, Chris's father marched into his room and announced it was time to go home. It was the first time Chris had seen his father since the incident, and he felt uncomfortable and nervous, like there was something he should know. He discovered that his mother needed to stay a few more days as the doctors wanted to run some more tests. His dad gruffly helped Chris into the Jeep and buckled him in, avoiding the broken arm. Chris was anxious and tried to avoid any contact or discussion, which seemed to suit Leon just fine. At home, his father released the seat belt for him, then left the car wordlessly, leaving Chris to follow in his wake. When he entered the house, he could hear Cam and Cody discussing their homework in Cam's room. Chris went to his own room and, feeling like a stranger, sat on his bed, unsure what to do. A few minutes later, his door pushed open and as he stared up apprehensively, Cam deposited a drink and a sandwich on his desk, then left as quietly as he had come.

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*Racing the Wild*

It was the last week before the holidays for Cam and Cody, and the house quietened suddenly as they left for school. Chris sighed with relief. Home life had become stiff and formal, and Chris felt like a stray, unwanted dog that hung around looking for scraps. His brothers seemed different near him, Cameron making the odd kind gesture and Cody giving him the evil eye but not actually saying anything and not even touching him. That was a bonus, but Chris was afraid that he would be shoved about with a vengeance as soon as he was out of the sling. He found his practice of mindful meditations to be helpful in relieving the stress of the days, temporarily at least.

Leon was picking Lucy up from the hospital today, and Chris silently hoped things would become easier. He wasn't sure if he wanted them to return to normal, as normal for this family was pretty nasty, but this weird limbo they seemed to be in felt precarious and bound to shatter, hurting anyone in its path.

Lucy was subdued when she came home and Chris saw little of her. She spent a lot of time in her rooms, and that night, Chris was surprised to see his father and brothers preparing food despite her presence. The house remained relatively quiet, the family wandering through it as though they were strangers. Chris spent a lot of time sketching and texting friends in his bedroom to avoid the strained atmosphere.

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After dinner on Friday, Cam tapped on his bedroom door and walked in with a few books in a bag.

"These were dropped off at the house this afternoon. It's the work you need to do for school. Your friend Malik said he left instructions in the bag." He hesitated. "Chris...I...I shouldn't have...I mean...I didn't know..."

"Save it, Cam. I don't remember a thing," said Chris dismissively.

*Rosanna Andrea Feeken*

“No, really. I was an asshole. I’m sorry...”

Chris looked into Cam’s face in surprise.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

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Cody, however, remained antagonistic and nasty, apparently choosing to believe that Chris had attacked their mother even though Lucy had denied it. “You’re a dirty rat bastard,” he whispered to Chris as they passed in the hallway, “and you’ll get yours.”

Lucy’s demeanour had changed to almost silent, and her fear of Leon seemed obvious to Chris. She kept her head down as she silently ate and left the table hurriedly. Usually a quiet presence, she seemed to walk on tiptoes as if any noise she made might bring on trouble. Chris wondered what had happened that day. The only thing he knew for certain was that he would never, ever raise a hand toward his mother in anger.

*I wonder why Cody can’t see it?*

The school holidays loomed large, and Chris despaired at how he would survive the time, unable to work with the horses, unable to see friends and with nothing but his sketches and text messages for sane company for the next two weeks.

## *Chapter 4*

### First trip to the mountains



*Stares on the bus*

Despite his fears, the holidays passed relatively uneventfully, with Chris focusing on his schoolwork, reading and sketching. He was enlisted to do tasks around the house and yard, but they were not particularly challenging. While he could not work with the horses, he was too afraid of his father's reaction to ask again to leave the home. Even though he had not remembered the events from that day, he did remember asking his mother about why he wasn't allowed out. It gave him an uncomfortable guilty feeling that, perhaps indirectly, he was the cause of the injuries.

His dreams had intensified to the point that he slept badly most nights, with foggy images of a red devil's face, a lurking monster and a frequent feeling of falling. From the odd overheard comment between the stable staff, he learned of an argument between his father and the sisters on the day of his accident. The sisters broke their contract and removed the horse from the stables, enraging the unpredictable Leon. Chris wondered how that particular event affected the eventual outcomes for himself and his mother.

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Returning to school after the prolonged absence, Chris had little work to catch up on, as the extra help from Malik had served him well. For a day, he felt like the focus of attention, but this passed quickly as students relayed their holiday experiences to each other. He covertly made an appointment to see the school counsellor and began to research issues in mental health relating to family violence. With alarm, he discovered that children from violent homes may exhibit similar behaviour as adults. He decided to take whatever action he could to avoid that outcome for himself.

He still had some weeks before he would be back to full strength, but Chris found himself pushed into resuming work at home quickly. By the time his rib and arm were completely mended, his father had already put Chris back to work. The first time he had to ride track again, he was anxious and unfortunately relayed this to the horse, who responded in-kind. Chris's riding skills were strong, though, so he persevered and overcame his nerves and his weakened arm. However, after working two horses, he had to hand over the rest to Max and the other strappers as the soreness was making his arm feel weak. His father scoffed but, surprisingly, refrained from comment or interference.

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*Racing the Wild*

“I got this email from your school basketball coach, Chris,” said Leon one evening. “He has asked for you to join the team on Thursday afternoons for training and Saturday mornings for school competitions. I’ve decided it’s time to let you go, as long as the Saturdays don’t interfere too much with your stable work. I’ll get the new casual stable hand to do your mucking out on those days, so all you will need to do is exercise the horses.”

Chris was caught completely by surprise and, in excitement, stammered out his thanks.

The first couple of times he played out of school hours, it felt unreal, and he couldn’t help the nagging feeling that he would be in trouble for not being at home. With nervousness, Chris took the horses onto the track, somehow expecting his father to be angry, but Leon acted like any other day and didn’t acknowledge Chris’s absence nor ask about the basketball. For a whole month, the surly man kept his temper, and Chris couldn’t help but wonder why.

One weekend, on his way to the tack room, Chris overheard a furious confrontation between Cody and their father. The boy recklessly yelled at Leon, which he had obviously paid for, judging by the flaming pink cheek he was sporting at dinner. The twins had been less active in their torment of Chris recently and he couldn’t help but sympathise with Cody and wonder at the cause.

*Wouldn’t this family ever be able to just get along with each other?*

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It came as another surprise when, for whatever reason, Chris couldn’t understand, his overbearing father decided to allow him to attend a weeklong basketball camp to be held in the mountains on the last week of school. He knew of the letters sent home to parents asking for permission and payment but hadn’t even hoped for it—he just never imagined being allowed to attend. The trip coincided with his birthday, but his family rarely celebrated the event much.

“I have two young horses due to arrive shortly, so to compensate for the trip, you can break them and train them,” said his father sternly. “I bought the horses, and both Max and Reggie think you can do it, though Reggie will supervise and advise you.”

Later, sitting at the canteen table at school with his friends, Chris discussed the conditions of his trip. Though he tried not to show it outwardly, he was ecstatic to have a chance to train the horses and join his first-ever school camp.

“I’ve always wanted to try training one,” he exclaimed. “Dad usually hires a horse breaker, Reggie, for the job. He taught me a lot and let me help a few times, so I have a fair idea how to do it. I’ve been reading and watching YouTube clips when I get a chance. I want to try a gentler method than Reggie used, if Dad will give me time. The racehorses only need to be trained to go, stand, turn and stop. They’re already well handled, so it isn’t like starting with a wild horse.”

“I’ve never had much to do with horses but isn’t that a big job to expect of a kid?” asked Ben in surprise.

“Well, yeah. I’m not sure why he trusts me to do it but I know I can succeed,” said Chris with some puzzlement, “though if I mess it up...” He trailed off, suddenly fearful.

“I’m sure he has confidence in you,” said Malik. “You need to have confidence in yourself.”

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The day for the trip to the mountains finally came. His mother surprised Chris with a carry bag containing a new set of both casual clothes and training clothes. She had also bought him new training shoes and a warm coat. For the first time since her hospital stay, Lucy left the horse complex with Chris to drive him to the school drop-off zone. She was more openly talkative and appeared happier than he had seen her in a long time. His mother gave him a sleeping bag that she had used some years ago and a

*Racing the Wild*

disposable phone with instructions to call using a code sound so that he would not have to face speaking to his father. The boy couldn't help but feel slightly uncomfortable plotting with his mother to avoid his father.

Chris was happy and amazed that his mother had bought him new outfits for his birthday. Usually, he had hand-downs from the twins, another reason for their bullying behaviour. The warm coat was also a surprise; it was not a cheap one but a faux fur-lined puffer jacket that was sure to keep him warm in the mountains. He grinned with amusement about the phone. Now he had two phones! When the bus set off on its journey full of excited and happy students, Chris felt like he had stepped into someone else's life.

After travelling for over two hours, the bus stopped and the students were allowed a bathroom break. They then changed into their sporting clothes and had the first of three prearranged basketball games with two other schools. The handball team who accompanied them also played a couple of matches. The games were tough, the skill level of the opposing teams high, and the travellers not quite limber. The last game was a shuffle of teams so each school played the other two with all their basketballers forming mixed-gender teams. Happily exercised, the schools shared picnic lunches before the students climbed aboard their buses to continue the journeys.

On the remainder of the bus trip, Chris sketched in his ever-present sketchbook, capturing elements of the countryside and the bus passengers. A very private person, he avoided attention and tried to hide the sketchbook as he drew. Ben was happily chatting with a pair of twin girls who were on one of the teams and Malik was examining a book on sporting injuries and how to prevent them. Both Aakesh and Ethan had joined the trip with several other students to do a small handball comp which was being run consecutively this week. Stephen played basketball and sat close to the established friendship group.

“Chris, can I see?” Stephen asked when he became aware of the sketching.

“It’s nothing,” said Chris evasively as he tucked the book away.

“Why are you hiding it? Is it rude?”

“No, of course not,” exclaimed Chris irritably. “It’s just scribbles.”

“Then let me see,” demanded an obnoxious Stephen.

His rising tone attracted the attention of surrounding students, who all tried to listen and see.

Malik, whose brain registered a change in the tones around him, looked up from his book.

Chris watched angrily as Stephen tried to reach over Malik and grab the sketchbook from where it was tucked at the side of his seat. He felt his fury rise up at the invasion of his privacy. His muscles tightened and he suddenly grabbed the offending hand and twisted it until Stephen yelped. “Lay off, Stephen. Don’t touch what doesn’t belong to you,” he snarled.

Stephen’s hand was pinned until Malik quietly and calmly said, “Ok, Chris, I think he has the message.” With that, he gently prised Chris’s fingers off Stephen’s hand.

“You’re psycho!” spat Stephen as he reclaimed and rubbed his sore wrist.

A stirring of the teachers at the front of the bus alerted the students to potential trouble and they returned to their quiet murmuring. The teachers, having heard or seen nothing serious, lost interest.

“Chris, I know that you are angry,” said Malik in soft tones, “and the drawings are innocent sketches, but reacting so strongly against Stephen will only make him more curious!”

“It’s my property, and it comes from my pencil and my imagination. If I choose to share it, it will be on my terms, no one else’s,” grumbled Chris. He then turned to stare out of the window, indicating that the discussion was over.

*Racing the Wild*

Unfortunately for Chris, it was not over for Stephen, who, as they dismounted the bus at the campsite thirty minutes later, loudly called, "Hey, Da Vinci, don't leave your easel on the bus!"

There were accompanying giggles as well as curious expressions from fellow students. Chris turned and growled, "Fuck off, Stephen!"

Immediately, a teacher, Ms Carman, swung towards him and snapped, "Christopher Franklin, how dare you use such gutter language. One more outburst from you and I've a good mind to call your father to come take you home!"

Chris felt mortified. He apologised to the teacher, retrieved his bag from the unloading bus and slunk away, quickly fading into the trees in the dimming light.

The campsite had an outdoor kitchen, a large undercover area with benches and seats and something of a playground central to a group of eight cabins. The cabins could sleep up to eight students in bunk beds spread through two rooms and each had a sitting room with a couch and some armchairs. There was a building like a cabin with signs on the sides reading *Male* and *Female* and a large *Bathroom* sign on the roof. Farther away was a barn, corral and large arena with some horses currently loose, picking at the grasses there. To the side was a large cabin surrounded by vegetable and herb gardens, fenced and protected from wildlife with mesh and electric wires. This was the home of the property owner and caretaker, who was currently discussing plans with the teachers.

In his anger at the situation, Chris walked obliviously past it all and off into the surrounding bush. He then sat atop a small cliff, looking at his sketchbook. He had been at the brunt of antagonism before due to his sketchbook, but never had it bothered him as much as this. The thought of his father being called to collect him made his blood run cold. That would be the end of his freedom and he could imagine the rage of his father far too realistically.

*Happy Birthday, Chris!* he thought unhappily. In his frustration, he threw his sketchbook off the precipice and watched as it opened

and fluttered on its way down. *Like a dying bird...*, he thought abstractly. He was breathing rapidly, almost in sobs as he felt his private creativity ripped from him. And surrounded in creation in all its glory! Towering mountains, huge rocks, abundant trees, a creek, shrubs, and tall native grasses... As he slowly swung his head around, he took in the magnificent shapes and forms, the shadows, lines, textures and colours. It was spectacular, unspoilt even by the distant noises of the students, and Chris had never been surrounded by such beauty. With a resounding “Fuck!” Chris angrily swiped at the tear in his eye and took off, trying to negotiate his way down the steep slope, hoping he could see the book’s black cover in the fading light amid the heavy undergrowth.

As he pushed through the bramble, Chris realised the lack of light would be a problem. He had no fear in the bush—*nothing could be as scary as his father*—but he had decided he really did not want to lose the sketchbook.

He was so busy trying to work out the shapes on the ground that when a young voice interrupted his thoughts, his heart jumped into his mouth.

“Hi there!” said the voice. “I’m Evan. Did you change your mind?”

“Huh!” exclaimed Chris. “Where did you come from?”

“Oh, I live here,” said Evan. “When I saw you toss that off the edge, I thought you didn’t want it. I didn’t realise you were playing *fetch* with yourself!”

“Playing... I’m not playing. I just changed my mind...”

“When I found it, it was open on this page, and I thought, I’ve never seen no one who could draw a horse as pretty as that! And them people...wow, you are really good!”

“It’s private,” mumbled Chris in embarrassment.

“Can’t be too private if you’re throwing it all over the hillside!” exclaimed Evan.

*Racing the Wild*

“Yeah, I shouldn’t have thrown it. I was angry, but then I thought...it doesn’t make sense to throw it away. Why let someone wind me up and spoil one of my favourite pastimes?”

“Why would anyone tease you about these?” asked Evan as he leafed through the pages.

“Because I wouldn’t let him see them. I hate showing people my work. Like I said, it’s private!”

“Are you ashamed of it? Embarrassed?”

“No! I just like to keep it to myself! It’s kind of special for me, helps me relax.”

“Oh yeah, I’m a bit like that with poetry. I love writing poems!” said Evan as they began making their way back up the steep slope.

“Wow, really! I like poetry. What do you write about? I’d love to read one, one day if you’d care to share...”

“Come meet Grandpa!” said Evan suddenly, changing the subject and leading the way to the caretaker’s cabin.

## *Chapter 5*

# Woylie Mountain Sport Camp and Retreat



*Cabins*

“Grandpa” turned out to be the main caretaker and part owner of the property. An imposing-looking man, “Grandpa” had a stern face and proud posture but this quickly became kind as he spoke to the boys.

“Hi Grandpa, this is Chris! If you ask him real nice, he might show you his drawings!”

Chris, embarrassed and astounded over this greeting, ducked his head shyly.

“Hello, Chris. You can call me Rick or Mr Wyman if you prefer, and that lovely lady setting the dining table is May or Mrs