

BUSH BOYS ON THE MOVE

CHAPTER 1 - KEVIN MAKES NEW FRIENDS

Part 1: The Wild Bush Mountains

KEVIN KEYS was climbing the tallest Norfolk pine in the big backyard of his new home. It was easy climbing. The branches were like rungs on a ladder. In fact, there were too many branches. They stuck out all round and got in the way. And there were little jagged sticks -- some jabbed him, some scratched him... The Keys family had arrived mid-morning yesterday, the first Monday of November. Long before breakfast Kev -- only his mother called him Kevin -- had been knocking on the timber-lined walls, hoping to hear the hollow sound of secret passages. Had they not impressed upon him that Blue Gum Inn was 'a house with a long history'? After breakfast they were glad to be rid of him and get on with unpacking.

He could climb no higher. He opened his telescope and rested it on a branch, telling himself, "I'll get my bearings before exploring on foot." However, what with swaying branches and shiny green foliage he could see better without it. Almost below him was the railway line. Beyond it, south-southwest, was a small dam. Good! A lake for swimming, he told himself. There was an orchard. He needed his telescope to see tiny green apples. Were they Granny Smiths, ripe when green? Or would he have to wait till they reddened and ripened? He did not like waiting. Hmmm! There was a farmhouse. Would its owner object if he 'borrowed' some apples?

Beyond the dam, orchard and farmhouse, peeping through trees, was another house. Then nothing but wild waves of ridges and valleys, an endless sea of grey-green bush, going on for ever.

"The Wild Bush Mountains!" He breathed the words softly. Then, as though it were a spell, added, "Never before visited by man..." He day-dreamed into the distance. He would be the first. But he must find a friend to go with him. Real explorers never went on their own. With this his parents agreed. It was on these terms that they had already given him a general permission to roam the bush. Oh how he wished he had a brother and not just four big sisters! They were kind, but no good for adventures. He swung round more to the south.

His curiosity was held by the distant view of a man doing something on the ground. He brought the telescope to bear. Sure enough, a man in black leathers seemed to be raking up leaves and sticks with his hands. Whatever for? He poured out some stuff from a bag. He pulled a white gadget from his pocket. There was a brief pale flash -- perhaps a reflection off shiny metal? He put the gadget down, picked up a black box and covered everything. He disappeared into the trees. There were no more flashes and nothing more happened. It all hardly seemed to matter so Kev thought no more about it.

He changed his position. Eastwards he could see a vast chasm down whose sheer cliffs plunged the waterfalls that gave the place its name -- Coachwood Falls. Faintly he heard the muted booming of falling water. Yes, he must find a friend or two to guard the rope while he climbed down. He worked himself round the trunk to face north. Slightly below him and just across the paling fence was something he had missed. In his neighbour's yard, up an even bigger pine tree, was a tree house.

Aha! A tree house -- those boys next door must be okay. Their house was only twenty metres away. Yesterday, amidst his family's hustle and bustle of moving in, he had caught a glimpse of two boys and heard a woman's voice calling, "Pete! John!" Today there was no sign of them. He would explore their tree house in their absence. He put his telescope in his pocket and began climbing down his own tree. He had an idea. He would cross from tree to tree by the long overlapping branches near the ground. It was more fun than getting over the fence. Agile as a monkey, he swung himself out on a branch, hanging by one arm while he got a new grip with the other. All okay. The sagging of his branch had not put the other branch out of reach. Once into his neighbour's tree, climbing was much easier. Those boys must have sawn off the little branches and smashed the spiky bits. Their tree house was a platform of planks nailed across several branches at the same height. There was a trapdoor near the trunk which he had

only to push up. It saved climbing out over the edge. It even had railings to stop you falling off.

In one corner was a jumble of rope and sticks which did not look very interesting. In another was a twenty litre barrel raised on blocks of wood so that a mug would fit under the tap. He cupped his left hand and turned the tap on with his right. He sipped it. Yes, it was water. There was a big box, too, with a hinged lid. He swung it up and gaped at the food supplies: jars of home-made Anzac biscuits, tea, sugar and powdered milk -- and an apple with a bite out of one side. There was equipment, too: a billy can with a lid, a stove with a bottle of metho, a box of matches, two mugs and a spoon. "Pretty good," he said to himself. Then SOMETHING grabbed his ankle and sank in its claws... He dropped the lid of the box. He twisted round. His telescope jumped out of his pocket. Before he could squeak, let alone speak, the SOMETHING chortled, "Got you, sticky beak! Spying on our quarter deck..." The SOMETHING was a boy, a bit bigger than Kev, and he now withdrew his finger nails and let go. A smaller boy by- passed the trapdoor, poked his head over the edge and hissed, "I'm a goanna! Will I rip him?"

"No!" declared the bigger boy, "We'll hang him from the yardarm till he's dead and then he can walk the plank."

"Yeah!" chortled the smaller one, "then keel haul him and finish him off with a dozen lashes." Kev grinned. "You can't scare me. You live there in Black Wattle Lodge" -- he pointed to the other house -- "and you've got all those sisters."

"And we know you, Kev Keys," said the ankle grabber, "and you've got four sisters, same as us. I'm Pete and he's John. We're the Cumberlands."

Pete came right up through the hole and John worked his way over the edge. They shook hands solemnly. "Welcome on board," said Pete.

John added, "We're on our way to the Crow's Nest."

Kev got the message: he was on a ship.

Pete was polite. "Like to come?"

Kev grinned. He stuffed his telescope back in his pocket and followed Pete. John followed Kev. There was a knotted rope stretching upwards but it was quicker to use the branches clustered ring-a-rosy around the trunk. They climbed in silence. The Crow's Nest was so far up that the big tree was now a gently swaying pole. Pete and John looked eagerly to the north. Kev looked, too, and saw the scattered houses in the village of Coachwood Falls. There were lots of paddocks and cleared land, but his eyes focused on a hectare of scrubby bushland where dirty smoke billowed up from an old slab hut and a woodheap, and little red flames struggled in green grass.

Pete said, "We saw wisps of smoke when we were up here an hour ago. We phoned bushfire headquarters at Guntawang." Then, very seriously, he added, "It must've been deliberately lit to burn like that after all the rain. It's the firebug again." Kev was puzzled. "Firebug?"

What shocking ignorance, thought Pete. Then, impatiently, "You know, someone who sets the bush on fire `just for kicks'. He's a murderer and a thief."

Eagerly John told Kev, "Mum doesn't know one of us sneaks out every hour to watch for bushfires -- we're expecting a lot this summer."

"It's a wonder you didn't hear the siren," mused Pete. Then, pointing to hazy figures dressed in orange, "See? Fire-fighters. And look! The smoke's thinning out. They've got it under control."

Pete went, "A week ago we and our cousins went to cadet training at the Guntawang bushfire brigade. They said a parent's gotta come with you every time, so we had to drop out. But it gave us the idea to make our own fire-fighting cart to fight bushfires."

Kev trained his telescope. "Three men in orange boiler suits," he announced excitedly. "They're squirting hoses on the fire -- they've got a red truck -- oh! I say! I can see where they're getting the water -- they're pumping from..." He pointed hope- fully to a distant gleam. "Is that the council swimming pool?" How soon would he be swimming in it?

Part 2: "Can I come, too?"

PETE LOOKED PITIYINGLY at Kev. "Council swimming pool! Come off it! That's the Coachwood Falls Lagoon. It was once the water storage for the old steam engines on the railway. The only chlorinated pools round here are in rich people's back yards -- like the Gladstone's, down the road. Of course, village boys swim in the lagoon, though it's all reedy and muddy and polluted -- but they don't go exploring like us."

John added contemptuously, "And if there were council swimming pools we wouldn't swim in 'em."

Kev was curious. "Where do you go swimming?"

Pete grinned. "Mostly in pools in the creeks in the bush." Clearly, swimming in bush pools required superior daring and skill. Was Kev game?

"Our closest bush pool's in Koala Creek," explained John. "Ducky! and it's beaut," he added proudly.

Kev was none the wiser so Pete pointed southwest and said, "See the Twin Peaks? They're the hills that give our cousins' place its name, The Hills of Home. But you can't see their house from here. Well, Ducky Pool is in the gorge beyond those two hills."

Sure enough, Kev could pick out the pimple-like hilltops and a deep valley cutting through the tangle of ridges beyond them.

"We took a flying visit down to Ducky two days ago," said Pete, "the first sunny day after non-stop rain for a week."

"A sunny Sunday," chortled John.

Pete ignored the pun. "The bush was still sopping wet but steaming in the sun. Uncle Matt -- that's our cousins' Dad -- came with us and he said that sometimes a flood turns a bush pool into a sand bank, and sometimes it leaves it scoured out, bigger and better than ever."

John broke in, "At The Hills of Home they heard the ROAR of the flood in Koala Creek, all day and all night for the whole week."

"We knew what they meant," said Pete feelingly. "We could hear the thundering of Coachwood Falls even above the battering of the rain on the windows and the roof, and the shrieking of the wind."

"When we got to Ducky," John went on, "Koala Creek was a wild raging river, roaring like an express train that doesn't stop at the station and just keeps tearing past for ever... The water was so dirty we couldn't tell if the pool was sanded up or not."

"Didn't you wade in a bit?" asked Kev.

John glanced at Pete and their eyes signalled, "City-slicker!" and "Greenhorn!"

"No!" said Pete decisively. "At knee depth it would have ripped you off your feet and drowned you in seconds... It came down in great surging waves and lots of whirlpools, with ripped up trees and great chunks of earth in their roots and even large rocks, all going past like battering rams."

John quoted solemnly, "It was the most rain in a week for over a hundred and fifty years -- ever since records have been kept."

Pete and Kev had perched themselves on the only available branches in the Crows Nest. A bit below them, John was still standing on one foot. So his suggestion was, "How about we go back to the quarter deck? It's too hot up here." Pete grinned his agreement. John seized the rope, stepped off the branch, and climbed down the knots, hand over hand. Pete motioned Kev to go next. Kev knew he was on trial. But he had practised this sort of thing on a backyard tree in the suburbs. With a casual grip Pete came last, looking down to see how Kev was getting on.

The tree house was shaded and the view was not as good. The three boys sat down -- Kev saw there was room enough for at least half a dozen. He made polite conversation. "When did you make the tree house?"

Pete and John looked at each other and laughed. "We didn't," confessed Pete. "It was here already. We only had to clear away the dead branches on Sunday."

John chimed in. "And we made the rope ladder yesterday, and the knotted rope to the Crow's Nest. All the ropes are brand new. Couldn't you tell?"

However, there were more urgent things Kev wanted to know. "What school do you go to? Why aren't you at school today?" His own Mum and Dad were still undecided about his

schooling, though they favoured the Wild Bush Mountains Grammar School at Galway Craggs. Kev could be a day boy or even a boarder. However, he was not keen on either. Now, having met Pete and John, he knew their school must be best.

John told him chirpily, "We have school at home." Kev looked puzzled.

Pete explained, "It happened like this. John an' I spent the October holidays with our cousins -- he waved his hand to the south -- "down there a bit. We managed to stay two extra weeks when our two oldest sisters at home got sick. Our aunt homeschools our cousins so she did us as well. Then just over a week ago our Mum moved up from the city to make this our new home. She took over our homeschooling -- she calls it home-tutoring. She's spent the whole of last week proving to herself that we can work on our own -- after she's got us started, of course. Later in the day we report back and show her our work and she talks about it. This Friday she's getting us registered with the government as official homeschoolers."

"Yeah," lamented John, "and working our fingers to the bone! Our only day-off was Sunday -- but after this week we'll get most afternoons off and have plenty of time to be bush boys again with our cousins."

"Our next day-off is on Saturday," Pete told him. "We're going with them to King's Cave."

Kev grinned eagerly. "Can I come?"

Pete looked cunning. "We'll have to check with cousin Greg before inviting you -- and you'll have to learn his ABC of Camping and pass the bush boy tests."

"What tests?" asked Kev. "And what's this ABC?"

"You'll see," grinned Pete, lapsing into Greg's expression. "The tests are secret, of course, but I'll give you the ABC this arvo -- seven sheets of pictures."

Pete opened the tucker box and got out the apple. "You have first bite, Kev," he said.

Kev grinned and said, "You mean, second bite." Pete and John laughed. They passed it round, bite for bite, Kev, John, Pete...

Pete went on, "Just over a week ago we found the bushranger's gold and..." He took his second bite and passed the apple on to Kev.

"And we moved here the same night," John chimed in. "Mum an' the big girls had secretly moved up from the city the night before -- as a big surprise for us."

Kev bit the last morsel off the core and threw it at a magpie. He asked, "What does your gang do?"

Pete rattled off some of their doings. "Oh, bush- walking, an' bushy swimming, an' cooking our own beaut meals on open fires, an' sleeping in tents with the rain pouring down, an' exploring where no white man's even been before, an' catchin' crooks and outwitting our rivals..." He ran out of breath. John took up the litany. "Climbing trees, climbing cliffs, scrub bashing, running full tilt downhill, rock hopping in creeks, an' surviving the bull ants, leeches and deadly poison snakes."

"Wow!" said Kev enviously, more determined than ever to join the gang. "Have you done all that?"

"Lots of times," John assured him. "We get sick of home an' grown ups an' we escape from our sisters."

Kev wanted to escape from his sisters, too. "Do you ever get lost? How do you find your way?"

Pete had got his breath back. "Navigation by map an' compass, and the lie of the land -- ridge walking and all that -- an' we're going to fight bushfires..."

Just then came a mother's call. "Peter and John! Come back to your schoolwork at once."

"Coming, Mum," they chanted. Then, in a low voice, Pete added, "Oh blow! I was just going to light the stove for a cuppa." Then, brightening up, "Have a bicky, Kev?"

But almost like an echo came another call. "Kevin! you scamp! Where are you? Come here! At once! KEVIN!"

Kev said abruptly, "Sorry, but I've gotta go when she calls like that. He yelled over the edge of the tree house, "Okay, Mum! coming ready or not!" Pete shoved a biscuit into Kev's hand and all three stuffed their mouths.

Kev swung himself down the tree from limb to limb, hoping that Pete and John would be impressed by his expertise. But they had one more surprise for him. Pete kicked the bundle of rope and sticks through the trapdoor. It turned into a rope ladder, whistled passed Kev and nearly skittled him. Nor was he pleased that Pete and John just beat him to the ground via the ladder. However, he admitted to himself that it was pretty clever how branches had been sawed off to let the rope fall freely. He mustered up his usual cheerful grin. "Pretty good!"

Then he told them, "I've gotta go to Mrs Gladstone's for lunch -- most of us are going -- she an' Mum went to school together, and Mrs Gladstone's nephew and his two sisters arrived on Sunday -- so he'll need me for support. He's called Sam and he's as black as the ace of spades."

Pete chortled, "Don't forget the Gladstones have a jolly good pool."

"Cool!" shouted Kev. "As he vaulted the fence, he added, "See you later," and hurried off, trying to think of ways to impress his newly acquired bushy friends and win membership in their Bush Boys' gang.

CHAPTER 2 - SAMSON FROM DUSTBOWL

Part 1: Tales from Dustbowl

KEVIN, HIS MUM AND DAD, and two of his sisters, Grace and Georgette, set out for the Gladstone's. Mr and Mrs Gladstone were childless. However, they often invited their various nephews and nieces and their friends' children to swim in their big in-ground pool and welcomed them to scrumptious morning or afternoon teas afterwards.

Mrs Gladstone introduced Maria, Samson and Joanna. She explained, "Fourteen years ago their father immigrated here from Nigeria. Their mother is my sister. She met her husband when they worked together in the Australian embassy in Nigeria. He was the ambassador's driver and she an office assistant."

Mr Gladstone added, "The Kalumbos have been living in rural Australia ever since. But now, Mr and Mrs Kalumbo are visiting Nigeria until early next year."

Kev was glad Mum had warned him in advance that young Sam Kalumbo was jet black, though Sam's older and younger sisters, Maria and Joanna (who was usually called Jo), had brown skin like strong milk coffee. The adults settled down in the lounge room. The women talked of many things: the children, the two Cumberland families, other neighbours, the Blue Gum Inn, the Gladstone property. The men discussed the coming bushfire season and the rumours of a firebug. The four girls talked and giggled in the spare room which Maria and Jo shared as their bedroom.

Kev and Sam went outside. They eyed each other warily -- like fighting roosters before a set to. Sam was younger than Kev, but much bigger. By way of showing-off to each other they climbed up an easy turpentine near the front gate. Kev pointed north and said, "See those pine trees. That's where I live."

Sam pointed the other way. "Greg Cumberland lives over there," he said offhandedly, just as though he had known him for years. "At The Hills of Home."

"Yeah, I know that," said Kev. "His cousins live next door to me. They're called Pete and John." Sam's face lit up. "Greg was here this morning. Just to see me! No one's ever done that before. Really friendly." Later, Kev got an inkling of what this must have meant to Sam. Sam continued, "We had a beaut wrestling match when Uncle Tom and Aunty Flo weren't watching, and he's invited me on a wild expedition in the bush on Saturday -- down some creek near his place."

"Cool!" chortled Kev. Then, with a big grin, "Pete and John're going with Greg and they've more or less invited me, too."

Kev and Sam found they had much in common. Both of them were the only boys in their families, with six sisters between them. They both liked biking, hiking, swimming, climbing trees and wrestling -- and getting away from their families `to have adventures'.

Although Sam was `country' and Kev `city', both were now in a strange and unknown land of the Wild Bush Mountains -- big trees and dense scrub, rugged ridges and deep gorges, a land neither flat nor civilized and mostly standing on its end. Both had curly hair, though Sam's was black and Kev's fair -- matching his freckles. And their mothers had been at school together, with Sam's Aunty Flo.

There were differences, too. Though both fathers worked at home, Sam's father ran a petrol station and general store in a farming village called Dustbowl. Kev's father was a free-lance computer programmer. Sam did school lessons by correspondence with the government's distance education programme but until now Kev had been at a big suburban boys' school. Sam had been allowed to run wild up the country while Kev had been hemmed in by civilization and convention.

At this point Sam's Uncle Tom called them in to lunch. They raced each other down the tree and, as a consequence, were duly criticized for the dirt and damage to their exposed skin and clothing. After a scrub, they were invited to tuck in to sandwiches, fruit and cups of tea -- and listen to the grown-ups.

Mr and Mrs Gladstone spoke admiringly of the two Cumberland families. They described at length the adventures of Pete and John and Greg, and all their sisters and Greg's brothers, with lots of juicy details... things like recovering stolen exam papers, treating snakebite, rescuing a kidnapped cousin, smashing up a crook's groovy car by furious driving in a truck, finding bushrangers' gold... Kev and Sam begged for details.

After the meal, everyone kept on talking. It filled up most of the time for a one-hour fast for swimming. The boys asked, "May we be excused, please?"

Sam suggested a wrestle. "We'll go round the far side of the pool where the grass is springy." And with a grin, "Where it won't worry them."

Kev saw it was an ideal spot for a friendly fight. They rushed at each other. Kev ducked at the last moment and tossed Sam over his shoulder. Then he dived on him. But Sam was heavier and stronger. He grappled with Kev, gave a quick twist and sat on Kev's tummy, pinning his arms to the grass. Kev slid his feet up to his bottom, gave a sudden heave, and threw Sam off. This caught Sam by surprise. Kev was onto him in a flash and spread-eagled him for the second time. They grinned at each other in delight. Sam began `a sit up', lifting his chest by pushing against the ground with his powerful arms. Kev held on desperately but his grip was slipping. Their faces touched and they made snarling noises at each other. Kev found himself heaved up in the air trying to keep his seat on a bucking four legged animal. He waved his arms to keep his balance. Suddenly Sam collapsed himself and wriggled over. His gorilla arms wrapped round Kev's chest, imprisoning Kev's arms. Then he squeezed. For all his wrestling skill Kev could not get out of this one. His face began to flush.

"Surrender!" cried Sam.

Kev grinned. "Okay," he gasped. They got up and brushed off the grass, leaves and twigs, and shook hands solemnly. "How about a swim?" said Kev.

"You beaut!" said Sam. "Oh, Uncle Tom told me the Cumberlands always get changed in the garage -- to save messing up the house -- but he said you may use my room."

Kev chortled, "If the garage is good enough for the mighty Cumberlands then it's good enough for me."

"Me too," agreed Sam. "They'll do me."

They changed into their swimmers. Sam's bright yellow board shorts contrasted with his black skin. "Got new ones, eh?" asked Kev.

Sam grinned. As they strolled across to the pool, he told Kev proudly, "Uncle Tom and Auntie Flo gave us cossies as an `arrival present'. And I'm helping Auntie Flo teach Maria and Jo how to swim."

Kev couldn't work it out. Evidently Sam could swim and his sisters could not. "Why didn't you teach them in Dustbowl?" he asked.

"There was nowhere for them to learn," replied Sam in a matter-of-fact tone. "The farm girls reckoned my sisters didn't wash... and wouldn't let them come swimming. Even a lot of the boys didn't want me."

Kev was puzzled. "Wasn't there a town swimming pool? Or some creek where anyone could swim?"

"Dustbowl's only a tiny village," Sam explained patiently. "There's no public swimming pool and the creek was usually dried up. It hardly ever rains but when it does the creek's in flood and hopeless for swimming -- but at least the rain fills the tanks for us to swim in."

Kev had never heard of swimming in tanks. Sam explained, "You'd call 'em dams -- but out West the farmers always call 'em `tanks'. They're the same thing."

Kev's experience was limited to municipal swimming pools and, less often, backyard pools. He asked curiously, "What were the dams like to swim in?"

Sam chuckled. "Pretty awful, most of them," he said. "The water was often so murky you couldn't see how deep it was, or where it shelved down into deep holes."

"Sounds pretty dangerous," commented Kev.

Sam piled on more horrors. "Lot's of 'em were only half a metre deep for a long way in from the edges, and most of that gluey clay. The sheep'd get stuck in it like it was quicksand and drown or starve unless rescued."

"Ugh!" exclaimed Kev.

Sam continued relentlessly. "One time, just in from the edge, but in deep water, I felt something grab my leg... An octopus? No, it was water lilies."

"Ah! only lilies," said Kev complacently.

"Only lilies nothing!" corrected Sam. "They had long rubbery stalks and seemed to drag you down when you kicked to get free... And there were lots of yabbies, oh, and leeches, too, which were worse."

All this was an eye-opener for Kev. "Gosh!" he thought, as his mind began to grasp the picture. "Fancy swimming like that! And Pete and John swim in creeks." He alone was so dreadfully civilized...

Part 2: Temptation!

KEVIN AND SAMSON had arrived at the edge of Gladstone's pool. They were talking so much that they had no recollection of jumping in. In the water, Sam went on. "Last year two boys were killed -- in dams where farmers had forbidden kids to swim. But boys still swam in them. One got trapped in underwater lilies. The other split his head open on a rock, diving head-first from a swinging rope they'd put over a high branch." Kev's eyes goggled.

Again Sam went on. "Farm kids were always sloping off for a swim -- to escape correspondence lessons or their farm jobs. They used to invite some of the village kids for a swim in their dams -- but hardly any one invited me." Sam flushed at this memory of rejection.

Kev nodded sympathetically. Previously, he had only heard of prejudice against skin colour, but Sam's account made it suddenly real. How horribly cruel! He got Sam talking again by asking, "Then how did you learn to swim?"

Sam went on more cheerfully. "I hunted around, exploring a lot on my own. I'd hide my bike in the long grass along the road and sneak in through the barbed wire fences and across the paddocks. And so I found a shallow tank, er, dam, with a harder, rocky bottom -- not much clay or lilies. It was out of sight from the road because of the bank, and the wings which run the water into it. Unless the farmer came close up, he'd never see me lying on the edge or in the water."

Kev looked reprovingly at his new friend. "You could've got drowned."

Sam grinned, "Yeah, the water was dirty from leaves so I was mighty careful. At first I used a stick to prod the bottom in front of me to check the depth. I had a rope tied round me with the other end on a tree so I could pull myself out. The water was only up to my tummy. I'd come out and lie down on the grass and study the pictures in my how-to-swim book, then I'd run in and try it."

Sam's account prompted them to swim lazily along towards the deep end -- breaststroke so they could continue to talk. Kev's mind was caught up in Sam's far away, drought ravaged land, with few trees and no water except in dams -- and in Sam's social scene so hostile to children with an African father.

Sam continued his epic. "The Hayter family lived next door to our shop and they had a beaut backyard pool, chlorinated, just like this one -- though they had trouble getting enough water cos of evaporation. But they were very nasty to me and my sisters and called us dirty niggers."

He was reaching a triumphant climax. "Oh, I did have three friends sometimes at 'my dam' -- they were escaping from their sisters -- and we had lots of fun, much more than on my own..."

He grinned from ear to ear. "But the most fun of all was when the Hayters went away for a two month holiday last Christmas and village boys came sneaking in to use their pool--it saved them biking out to the farms. Of course, we couldn't've done it without Hayter's high hedge hiding the pool from the road, and a high paling fence hiding it from my Mum. Then the village bully told the others to kick me out and I punched him in the nose and there was blood everywhere and he ran home to tell his Mum. So the whole village knew. So our district policeman came and kicked everyone out. But he didn't know that all the time the Hayters were away I used to sneak out of our house at first light like I was going to the loo and I'd get through the fence and go swimming -- and again at night after I'd gone to bed... I had two

swims every day for two months! But I couldn't tell Maria and Jo without Mum finding out, though I'm sure Dad knew and pretended not to -- my Dad's like that."

"Cool!" said Kev, deeply impressed. He had never done anything like it. What could he do to catch up?

Suddenly the girls burst upon them. Sam's sisters `bombed in' at the shallow end as decoys while Kev's sisters dived and swam underwater. Kev felt his lower legs seized and, despite his struggles, he was ducked and held under. He came up spluttering. Sam likewise had been humiliated by a girl -- for the first time in his life -- and his own sisters were giggling at him!

Meanwhile Grace and Georgette fled to the deep end, pursued by Kev and Sam. Maria shouted after them in her `big sister' voice: "Sam! Uncle Tom says you and Kevin've got to get changed at once for afternoon tea."

Sam whispered something to Kev and the boys climbed out. Grace could not resist a parting shot. She pointed at the white-bodied Kev in red swimming briefs, then at the black-bodied Sam in yellow board shorts, and chanted, "Red and yellow, black and white!" The other girls laughed. Where had Kev heard that before?

The boys took their sisters' towels from the rail. "Catch!" cried Kev cheekily. Then, "Oh, bad luck! You missed..."

Back at the garage, they kicked off their togs, towelled themselves a bit and put on their undies. Kev had been waiting for this moment. "Can you flick- fight?" he challenged -- and, as an excuse, "It'll help us dry."

Sam grinned and flicked Kev in the chest with his towel. So they went at it with gusto... Kev was quicker on his feet and had an expert aim, and Sam was a big target. This time it was Sam who surrendered.

They finished dressing and raced inside to afternoon tea. The grown-ups chatted as they ate. But Kev was no longer listening. He was thinking. Sam had taught himself to swim and triumphed over the hostility of the boys in Dustbowl. Those Cumberland cousins had adventures all over the place. And Sam was definitely invited to their expedition on Saturday - - but Kev's invitation was still not certain.

He felt little twinges of jealousy. Resentment roused his mischief -- mischief much practised against his long-suffering sisters. He would do something so wild that Sam and all those Cumberlands would take notice...

However, he must have a companion to witness his daring... "May we be excused, please?" he asked the Gladstones politely. "Sam and I'd like to climb the tree again." And to Sam, "I want to show you something."

When they were as high as they could get, Kev revealed his plan. "Boys like us rob orchards, Sam. How about we raid that apple orchard tomorrow arvo?" He pointed northwards. "I found out it's O'Reilly's."

Sam could see fruit trees and a red-roofed farm house. He protested, "Old O'Reilly'll throw a fit -- farmers don't like trespassers -- and stealing's wrong."

Kev had his answers pat. "We won't take more than we can eat in a week, so it's not really bad stealing. And they taught us in Sunday School how the Israelites helped themselves to the grapes in the Promised Land. If it was all right for them, this must be all right for us." Kev made it sound noble and desirable. And yes, Sam felt it was dangerous enough to make it worthwhile.

Kev continued persuasively. "Actually, we'll be doing old O'Reilly a good turn: we'll spy out any firebugs who might burn his orchard. And we'll do it cheap -- our price'll be nicking a bit of his fruit..."

Sam's conscience was weakening fast. But he still had a very practical objection. "What if we get caught?"

Kev was cocky. "Impossible! We'll sneak in and we'll sneak out. No one'll ever know. What they don't know won't worry them. We can't get caught. Okay?" But Sam still wavered.

Would he give in to a dare? Kev decided to try it. "I dare you! If you won't, you're a cowardly cowardly custard -- and a sissy!" Then, with his winning smile, "I double dare you!"

Sam grinned. "Okay, but I'm only doing it once." They shook hands on it. "I'll be at Blue Gum Inn straight after lunch tomorrow."

Kev's account of Sam for his parents' ears was somewhat lacking in vital detail. "Sam's just the right sort for me to be wrecked on a desert island with," he told them, "so we're going to explore the Wild Bush Mountains together." His bed-lamp was on late that night -- Greg's ABC of Camping was very interesting.

CHAPTER 3 - ROBBING THE ORCHARD

Part 1: "No one'll ever know!"

KEVIN found Wednesday morning pretty dull. His schooling was still in doubt. And his mother kept finding jobs for him. He grizzled -- and was threatened with his father. Dad was busy on his computer upstairs and would be very touchy about interruptions... So Kev bargained, "If I'm good this morning, can I go exploring this arvo with Sam?" Mum, too, was caught up in her own work and murmured mechanically, "Be back by five."

So early afternoon Kev set off with Sam. Just ten minutes later, Pete and John arrived. Pete whispered hoarsely, "Don't forget we're calling it `a picnic' -- his mother looks the nervy type." John did not whisper. "Bags me knocking but you do the talking." He knocked long and loud... Mr and Mrs Keys answered the door together. "Good afternoon, Mr and Mrs Keys," chorused Pete and John.

"Welcome to Coachwood Falls and the Wild Bush Mountains," continued Pete. "We're the Cumberlands an' this is my young brother John an' I'm Pete an' I'm about Kev's age an' we've come to invite Kev on a picnic..." He paused for breath.

Both boys grinned and John lost his shyness and seized his chance. "An' we'd've come before but Mum said to give you three days to settle in."

Mr and Mrs Keys were touched by their manners and warmed to them at once. "Please come on in," said Mrs Keys. "Kevin has only just gone -- he's gone exploring with Samson, the boy staying at Gladstone's."

John beamed. "Good practice for our picnic!"

"Our cousin Greg invited Sam yesterday," explained Pete, "so we've come to invite Kev to King's Cave on Saturday an' we leave here at nine o'clock."

"That's very kind of you," said Mr Keys gravely, impressed with Pete's presentation. "Thank you. But a picnic at King's Cave -- I've never heard of it."

John helped him out. "Kev can bike down the road with us past O'Reilly's to Gladstone's, an' pick up Sam, an' then on to the last house, that's The Hills of Home. We walk over the ridge and down to Koala Creek and a bit further up to King's Cave."

For Mrs Keys, `picnics' were genteel outdoor activities only a little lower socially than garden parties. She asked, "Should Kevin wear his good clothes?"

Mr Keys gave a little smile of embarrassment. He spoke carefully. "I doubt if they'd be his good clothes after these two have finished with him on their bushwalk." Pete and John looked at him gratefully.

This aroused Mrs Keys anxiety. "If it's that wild, what about getting lost?"

Pete replied soothingly, "We've been there before, Mrs Keys." He saw no need to tell her that they had been there only once, and by another route.

Somewhat re-assured, Mrs Keys wanted to know, "Will anyone else be going?"

"Oh yes," said Pete. "Our cousins from The Hills of Home -- Greg and Bernie Cumberland, and their little brother Tim. They're homeschoolers, same as us."

Mr and Mrs Keys wanted Kevin to make good friendships in his new world, so different from schoolboy life in suburbia. And Mrs Keys was thinking to herself, "Homeschoolers? How unusual. But such good manners and cheery confidence." Aloud, she said, "What about food?"

"We'll bring the food this time," said Pete, encouraged by the twinkle in Mr Keys' eyes. "Then Kev and Sam'll see how we do things. All Kev needs is old clothes, a mug for tea and be sure to wear a hat."

Mr Keys grinned. "Seasoned campaigners travel light. But you'll understand we must have a word with your father and the other Mr Cumberland."

Pete looked serious. "I'm sorry, Mr Keys, but our Dad is dead. Perhaps you could talk to our mother?"

Mrs Keys frowned. She was thinking, "Men! How could you, George? I told you she was a widow after she called yesterday afternoon to offer help."

Not far away and only a little earlier, Kev was telling Sam, "We'll keep off the road and out of sight. We can cross the train line east of the bridge where there's a lot of bush on our side."

"Good," said Sam. Kev knew Sam meant 'a good plan' for doing wrong and felt a slight pang of conscience.

Sam looked askance at the high cyclone-mesh fence alongside the railway. "What about this? Isn't it meant to keep people out?" Sam liked to avoid trouble.

"Oh yeah?" replied Kev cheekily. "More like they put it here for us to climb over."

"But are we allowed to?" persisted Sam.

"Of course not," said Kev with a grin. "But we will. Dad hasn't told me not to but he'll wallop me if he finds out. He'd say I should've known."

"OOooh!" said Sam thoughtfully. "My Dad told Uncle Tom to wallop me if he thought I needed it."

"Forget it," said Kev. "They'll never know."

Like commandos on a raid, the taller Sam gave the shorter Kev a leg-up the fence. Then Kev reached down to help Sam up. They jumped off the top and streaked across the two sets of shining rails. The other side was easy with a splintery post-and-rail fence. The northernmost part of O'Reilly's was swampy. Kev led the way. He pointed at a grass covered bank. "Let's have a look at that." They swung off to their right. "Wow! Here's the lake I saw through my telescope!" Then he pointed to a rough affair of corrugated iron. "I wonder what's in that shed?"

Sam knew all about it. "It's the pump shed for the dam. Dam or tank, not lake," he explained. Come and I'll show you." The low-roofed shed was not locked. Sam showed Kev how the electric motor drove the pump. Then, looking longingly at the dam, he unbuckled the belt of his jeans and started pulling off his brightly coloured shirt. "We ought to have a swim." Kev looked doubtful. Sam grinned. "No one'll see us from the road. At Dustbowl we..."

He was cut short by a sudden whirr as the motor and pump started up. Kev nearly jumped out of his skin. He thought they'd been sprung, trespassing. Sam laughed. "The pump starts up when you turn on a tap up at the farm."

"It wouldn't be fair to swim in his drinking water," said Kev virtuously. He wanted to rob the orchard.

"Not drinking water, silly!" retorted Sam. "He'll have galvanized tanks for rain water off his roof. The dam's only for fruit trees an' pigs an' toilets an' things."

But Kev was determined. "We can come back tomorrow for a swim. Let's get at the fruit before someone turns up. Come on!" Sam followed reluctantly.

It was slightly uphill out of the swamp to the first of O'Reilly's apple trees. These were a less popular variety ripening in December, and awfully green in early November. Kev bit into an apple or two and threw them down in disgust. "Ugh! They're tiny and bitter and hard. Fancy him not having them ripe enough for us to eat."

It was Sam who discovered the strawberry patch -- and that they were ripe and irresistible... They tried one -- and felt the urge to pop in another... and another. They spent half an hour gorging.

Then Kev found a mulberry tree... with overripe fruit. All around their mouths and on their hands and shirts and jeans were mulberry mush and the purple stains of indelible juice. But the taste was great. Next, they discovered some old and very rotten apples from last season lying under the trees. Kev threw one at the next tree and knocked off some unripe apples. He could not resist throwing one at Sam. It splattered beautifully all over his shirt, and inside it. The quiet Sam was aroused to pick up two more and hurl them at him. He splattered Kev on the forehead and belly. Sam was deadly accurate. After ten minutes of battle royal Kev called a truce. A mush of old brown apple and dangling fragments of skin adorned them both from

hair to boots -- and many trees had newly fallen apples underneath. They gathered more strawberries in a plastic bag for eating at home -- the bag Kev had brought for apples. Back at the dam, Sam again demanded a swim. Kev agreed: "Okay, with undies as cossies." They climbed the grassy bank, stripped to their briefs, ran round to the shallow side, waded through gooey mud and plunged in, still chortling about their successful raid as they swam through the cool, muddy waters. They flung themselves about and paddled round in circles. As always, swimming was fun.

Part 2: Sequel to Sin

THEN EVERYTHING WENT WRONG. They looked round to see a big blue cattle dog, hackles rippling, standing next their clothes. His jaws gaped open, drooling saliva. He made a great show of his ferocious teeth -- in between deep throated savage barks. Kev and Sam were neck deep in the middle of the dam. How to get their clothes? How to get past the dog? At their slightest movement the beast growled threateningly... a terrible noise suggestive of tearing brown paper to bits. The snarls and growls were even worse than the bark.

Mr Piggy O'Reilly (only his best friends called him Piggy to his face) swung his battered ute with a cage full of pigs out the gate and onto the road to Coachwood Falls. Pigs grunted, the engine bellowed, bodywork rattled and creaked... above this bedlam he heard the tell-tale barking of his faithful watch dog.

From the cab window, through the trees, he could see the dam. He saw his dog. He slowed to a halt and scrambled out just before the railway bridge.

The dog spared him a fleeting glance, whoofed a perfunctory welcome, then put all his energies into a final burst of fearsome barks and snarls.

Farmer O'Reilly's bulky figure strode towards the boys, cutting off their escape on the shallow side. Even at his best Piggy O'Reilly looked like a broken down bushranger, with a couple of days stubble always on his chin. How did he keep it just that length? However, his hail was friendly enough. "Jest 'aving a dip, are yers?" he called. But they were too frightened to answer. He lumbered on round the side of the dam to where his dog still guarded their clothes. His eyes bulged when he saw the bag of strawberries. His glance took in the mulberry stains and squelched apple on their clothes. He swung round to his orchard -- and saw newly fallen apples. He turned back to glower at them -- and saw their mouths were all stained with mulberry; and their hair still choked with pulped apple. He screamed, "Yer blaggard robbers!" His bloodcurdling shriek of rage far outdid any of the earlier performances of his dog.

What might not this terrifying personage do to them? Another bellow summoned them to come out at once...

Refuge there was none. They waded towards the wall and, plunging out of their depth, swam the last bit. At the steep bank of the dam, Kev stumbled -- and crawled out as black with mud as Sam's skin was naturally.

It was minor relief that O'Reilly's glance silenced the dog and, at his grunt of "Nero!" the animal loped off home, presumably to track down other trespassers.

They cringed before him. "Names?" he bellowed.

In trembling little voices they answered, "Kevin Keys" and "Samson Kalumbo."

"A man orta feed yer to 'is pigs," he roared, with a jerk of his thumb in the direction of the utility. Then, "Where d'yer live?"

"At the Gladstone's, sir," said Sam shakily.

"Are yer an Abo?" he barked, his curiosity at the black boy outweighing his rage.

"No, sir," answered Sam, "but like them, I'm Australian and my father is an Australian from Nigeria."

Mr O'Reilly gave another of his famous piggy grunts. He glared at Kev, who mumbled, "I've just moved in to Blue Gum Inn, sir."

Mr O'Reilly grunted again. "COME ON!" Then, with a snarl, "Blue Gum Inn's on me way -- I'll take yer to yer pa an' see what he's got to say to yers--yer blaggards! yer thieves! yers might even be the fier-bug..." Slowly, and quite without zest, the boys bundled up their clothes and sneakers. Kev dropped the bag of strawberries which rolled everywhere in the dirt. "Bring 'em with yer, every single one," growled Mr O'Reilly grimly. Then, muttering to himself, "Evidence."