

From Vanishing

Chapter Eleven

1965

By midday they found themselves at the creek in the shade of the trees. The winter had been a good one for rain: the river was still flowing well and the pool was full. It was so much cooler under the she-oaks and York gums, Jack almost went off the idea of a swim but Billy and Ruby were already stripping off to the bathers they'd put on under their clothes. He watched Ruby pulling her T-shirt over her head and tried not to stare at her chest. She slipped her Daks down over her hips and stepped out of them gracefully. From the back she reminded him of a wading bird with her thin brown legs and delicate shoulder blades like the buds of two wings. Billy was throwing a stick in the water for Buster, who was barking and splashing. A kookaburra started up, adding its mad, gargling cackle to the party.

Ruby dived. The kookaburra went quiet and Buster stopped barking. Jack waited for her to reappear. The surface of the water regained its smooth stillness and Jack held his breath to the silence. He held his breath until his chest began to tighten and then he let it out in a rush. She couldn't stay under for that long without getting into trouble. He was about to run and dive when she surfaced at the other end of the pool, bobbing up without warning and laughing, her white teeth like sunlight in the shadows. He felt foolish and annoyed.

Billy shrieked and did a little belly flop, then Jack stripped off and joined them. It was so cold he felt his balls tuck up into his groin. But it

was good. Buster leapt in after running up and down the bank barking, and did his frantic doggy paddle in an anxious circle, much more successfully than Billy, who was a useless swimmer. They were only out of their depth in the centre of the pool but the bottom was a soft, silty sludge spiked with rotting branches and tangled weed so they avoided putting their feet down if they could.

Once they'd cooled off they sat on the grass and ate their picnic. The horses were greedy for the narrow ribbon of green that edged the river and didn't need tethering.

'This is like *The Wind in the Willows*,' said Billy. 'We might see Ratty and Mole if we're lucky!'

'Never mind Ratty and Mole. Ya wanna be careful a gilgie dunt come and grab ya dick,' said Jack. 'Come on, let's catch some before they catch us.'

Billy held the net and Jack scoured the shallows, turning over stones to find the crayfish, which scuttled off into the shadows unless you were very quick. Jack held up the first one he caught so Ruby could have a closer look. It waved its dark pincers at them crossly.

'It doesn't look as if it belongs out here,' said Ruby. Jack thought his hunting skill deserved a bit more praise but he could see what she meant. The small dark creature was a thing of the watery shadow: out in the bright light it looked wrong.

'Be more comfortable in the dark,' said Jack, and thrust the thing down Billy's bathers. He screamed and wrenched off his Speedos, doing a little naked dance on the spot. Buster started up a manic barking once again.

'Come on, you're frightening the natives,' Jack laughed. 'Let's catch some more before they all bugger off to Bindi Bindi.'

'You shouldn't have done that,' said Billy, his chin wobbling. 'It's not fair.'

'Nothing's fair, mate,' said Jack. 'You should know that by now.'

'He's right. You shouldn't have done it,' Ruby said, her tone neutral. Jack felt himself colour. He tried not to look at her small, perfect tits. He could see the points of her nipples pushing against the thin fabric of her bathers.

After half an hour they had collected a dozen between them. 'Good tucker tonight. We'll keep 'em alive as long as possible,' he said, resting the

sack in the shallows. Then Jack and Ruby lazed on the grass. Billy paddled about at the edge of the pool. Jack pretended to close his eyes but he was watching Ruby as she lay on her front near him, her head on her arms. Trickle of water ran down her back and he could see the row of bumps down the line of her spine and her ribcage moving faintly as she breathed. He could see tiny hairs glistening on her arms and back. He wondered what her skin felt like. He could hear the horses tearing at the grass nearby. His back still ached from lifting bales. He felt soft and sleepy. There were maggots fighting over the remains of the food behind him and a fly buzzing near his ear.

Billy was splashing in the shallows and Buster was barking. He was bloody annoying, that dog. Billy spoiled him. The old man would give him short shrift. Jack's limbs were heavy; he might have dropped off to sleep if it weren't for Buster. The barking was worse, high-pitched and shrill. He wished it was just him and Ruby there, together without talking. He wanted to touch her. 'Shuddup!' he called to both Billy and the dog. It was quiet for a moment, then he felt Ruby move beside him. She was in the water in an instant.

Billy was gone.

Ruby dived, then surfaced and went under again. It seemed to take Jack an age to get to the water's edge. He felt slow and stupid. He stumbled at the bank and slid in off-balance, his foot snagging on a root. 'Billy! For God's sake, Billy!' he shouted, as if he might command his brother to rise up to the surface. The dog was going mad; the maggots were squawking in protest. Ruby seemed to be under water forever, her neat little duck-dives leaving barely a ripple on the surface. He took a breath and dived himself, swimming into the deeper water. It was another world. He could still hear Buster barking but it was muffled and distant; the water itself carried a blurred noise which sounded like his own heart. He opened his eyes but could see nothing. The silt had been disturbed and the water was dark and cloudy, shaded too by the trees. Mostly it was cool, but there were strange pockets of icy cold water, which frightened him. He imagined a river-dwelling Jack Frost, clawing his own legs with long, icy fingers until they went numb, pulling Billy under and holding him there until his skin went white like a corpse. Jack stretched out his arms as if groping in a dark room. He

felt nothing. This was vanishing. Then his arm smacked a limb and there was movement around and above him, a kick to his left shin.

Jack surfaced a fraction after Ruby, her arm wrapped tight across Billy's chest and his head lolling back on her shoulder. His face looked bleached and bony, his wet hair slicked back off his face so you could see the shape of his skull. He didn't look like Billy. Jack tried to help but it was awkward, three bodies out of their depth; even when they could touch the bottom, they were wary of putting their feet down. In the end he only managed to grab Billy's arm and hold it up, without actually taking any of his weight. He was useless.

Once they reached the shallows he was able to take Billy from her. He had to put his arms around her in a kind of embrace with Billy sandwiched in the middle. He felt the difference between them – Ruby's strong, lean arms and her bony shoulders, her skin cool but with the warmth of her blood coming through somehow, while Billy was cold and limp and lifeless. Jack was strong but Billy was a dead weight and surprisingly difficult to lift without the water to support them both. He carried him in a clumsy bear hug, Billy's arms swinging loose, his head flopping back and his legs knocking against his own. When he reached the bank he leaned forward to lay him down on his back and they fell together so he had to roll sideways to avoid crushing him.

They had done it. They had found him and hauled him out. Jack stood over his brother taking in deep, ragged breaths. His chest felt tight and he had a stitch in his side like a fish hook snagged on flesh. Buster had finally stopped barking and was licking Billy's face and whining, his tail low. Ruby knelt beside Billy. She started pumping his little skinny chest and put her mouth to his blue lips. Nothing happened. Jack just stood there and thought he was going to cry. It should have been him leaping into lifesaving mode, taking command, bringing Billy back to life. With Ruby watching. Instead the girl was probably doing it all wrong and Billy would stay dead and his father would hate him even more. He was furious with Billy. How dare he bloody do this and ruin everything? Ruby had a rhythm going now, so many pumps to the chest with the flat of her palms and then leaning over to breathe her own life into his mouth, one hand pinching his nose, her wet hair falling over both their faces like seaweed. She didn't break to shake

Billy, to smack the sense back into him the way Jack wanted to, she just kept going, steady as a wind pump.

Then a great gush of stinking grey water and bits of vomity stuff shot out of Billy's mouth and Ruby turned him over and he took long, choky breaths and coughed and cried and his whole body shook with life come back.

It seemed to Jack they waited ages for Billy to get over it. His colour was back and there was clearly nothing wrong with his lungs because he was still bawling. He was pointing at his foot.

'Look the other way,' Jack said to Ruby, and she half turned, while Jack reached into his bathers and pissed over Billy's foot, which was swelling as he watched.

'What are you doing?' asked Ruby. For once she sounded amazed.

'Cobbler sting. Hurts like hell. He needs to get his foot in some hot water quick. Help me get him up on Tunky.' Jack grabbed the horse and they lifted Billy under each arm. 'Now listen. Just stop ya bloody bawling for a minute and do what I say. Stand on ya good foot. That's right. Now up ya go.' Jack gave Billy a leg up, lifting him just below the knee so that he flopped over Tunky and somehow landed in the saddle. He started howling again immediately. Jack climbed up behind him. 'Strike a light,' he said. 'Ya wanted to go fishing.'

'I'll catch you up,' Ruby said. 'You get him back.' Jack set off at a canter, holding Billy firmly round the waist with one arm. The saddle pinched his bare legs. He glanced behind and saw Ruby getting smaller, tipping out the sack of gilgies into the river. Jack shook his head. 'Strike a bloody light.'

Just out of sight of the house, Jack reined Tunky to a halt and spoke into Billy's ear. 'Billy, shuddup and listen ... I said *shuddup* or I'll bloody thump you.' He tightened his grip around Billy's waist. Billy's sobs subsided into a hiccuppy cough. His face was smeary with tears and snot and mud. He stank. 'Now listen. What you did was stupid. Really stupid. Ya coulda got us all into big trouble. You can tell 'em about the cobbler sting but you stay quiet about the drowning.' Billy took another hiccuppy breath. Jack prayed Billy wasn't going to get one of his asthma attacks. 'Ya hear. You say nothing.'

'But it's lying ...' said Billy.

'It's not lying if no one asks. If you say anything, you'll get more of this. Only worse.' He twisted the skin on Billy's arm. At school Jack was the champion in giving Chinese burns.

'Orright!' said Billy and started up his bawling all over again.