

SPEARO

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CHAPTER ONE

Sean slid into a vacant workstation on the mezzanine floor above the library where Mrs Robertson let students hang out on computers during their breaks. No one took much notice of him; small, quiet kids didn't stand out in the library and anyway, the students huddling up there were withdrawing from school, not embracing it.

He opened up Google Maps to hover above Zimbabwe before selecting satellite view to visit Bulawayo and walk the dusty streets. Then he moved up again to fly above his old farm, the grey roofs of the outbuildings, the brown, dusty earth surrounding their land and the tall trees that mostly hid his old house from aerial view.

He peered through the treetops trying to remember the way his white house became yellowed in the low, afternoon sun. The way the steel-mesh window screens glinted on hot afternoons and the way Yogi lay panting on the warm concrete steps, always waiting for Sean.

‘This is annoying. Why the hell won’t it work?’

The voice, from the boy one seat along, jolted Sean back to the library. He glanced over to see Mason Leadbetter hunched over his keyboard, long legs snaking around the chair legs, his head sunk into his hands in frustration. Sean braced for rejection, before saying, ‘Can I help?’

‘Do you know anything about editing?’ Mason didn’t wait for an answer. ‘I need to get this boat and a bit of coastline out of my clip but every time I cut the frame, I butcher the music.’ He gave a big sigh. ‘I’m useless at this stuff.’

Sean was in two of Mason Leadbetter’s classes. He already admired the way Mason was friends with everyone yet not friends with anyone special. At the beginning of the year Mason was voted class mediator, but to the teacher’s annoyance, he’d said, ‘Thanks for the votes, but maybe pick someone else. I’m not a class leader sort of guy.’ They eventually ran another ballot and the honour went to someone bossy.

Sean shuffled his seat closer. ‘I can probably sort it; I’ve done a bit of that stuff.’

‘Cheers.’ Mason stabbed at the section he wanted removed. ‘It needs an edit at 25 seconds and at two minutes, three.’

‘Why do you want them removed? Is the boat stolen?’

‘Ha ha. Nah, the boat’s my old man’s, but I’m uploading a spearfishing video and I want to disguise the location.’

‘Why?’ Sean leaned over to grab the mouse.

‘Otherwise, everyone wants to dive where the best fish are,’ Mason said as if that was obvious.

‘You have to take the soundtrack off to edit the clip.’ Sean knew it would be an easy job to tidy up the video: his mother had made safari documentaries on their ranch many times and she’d taught him to erase and add footage. ‘Do you want the water noise reduced, too? It’s drowning out the music.’

‘Yeah, ta.’ Mason tapped out the beat of the song as Sean made the changes. ‘Good music, huh?’

‘What is it?’

‘*Touch*. Hybrid Minds.’

Sean had never heard of them but mentally added the band to his list of things to check out. ‘What sort of camera were you using?’

‘Just a GoPro.’

‘It’s really clear.’ Sean finished the editing. ‘I wouldn’t mind seeing the whole thing.’

‘Sure,’ Mason said. He was peering into a grease-stained

paper bag he'd found after digging around in his backpack and he frowned at the slice of cold pizza he withdrew. 'The topping's come off.'

'Mine used to do that,' Sean said, 'but now I chuck the cheese on first so everything sticks.'

'What are you? A chef?'

'Desperate. If I don't cook, I don't eat.'

'How's that?'

'My mother works really long hours, so I make the meals.'

'There's just the two of you?'

Sean wished he could say three. It was a year and a half since his father's sudden death and saying 'two' still felt like a betrayal. He nodded, seeing the word wouldn't form.

'Want some pizza? You're Sean, aren't you?'

'Yeah.' They both knew Mason didn't have to introduce himself. Sean took a doughy triangle to fold into his mouth. It took a lot of chewing but gave him time to brush away the memory of his father which threatened to derail any conversation.

'I survive on a diet of stodge and seafood because my mother's gone off – just for a while, I hope.' Sean admired the way Mason casually slipped in his private information; he knew

he'd never be able to talk about his father like that. Mason wiped his greasy hands down his uniform and said, 'Shall we run this clip?'

Sean brushed his own hands clean and nodded. Mason hit start. The screen filled with the sight and sound of an aluminium boat racing across the sea. Thanks to Sean's editing, only the bow was visible. The camera moved to a wide view of the choppy sea before it focused on a close image of each wave. Then the picture sank seamlessly underwater. The bubbles cleared, the seabed came into view. 'Sick,' Sean said.

'I know, right?' The camera followed a black-gloved hand over rocks and through seaweed. The next frame showed a boulder covered in grey lumps. Then, the hand was back in the picture, this time holding a flat-topped knife, which the diver used to prise three of the lumps off the rock.

'Is that you?'

'Yeah.' There was pride in Mason's short reply.

'What are you getting?'

'Pāua.' Mason looked at Sean. 'Do you know about pāua?'

Sean squinted at the screen. 'They look like perlemoen so maybe. Do they have beautiful shells?'

'Yeah. Basically, they're posh snails with black flesh and

they're under pressure, mostly from poachers, so we're only allowed 10 per diver.'

'Bloody poachers,' Sean said more angrily than he meant to. 'There're greedy people everywhere in the world, huh?' He changed the subject by tapping the screen. 'Why's your knife flat-topped?'

'So I don't damage the pāua. I might take an undersized one and have to put it back. They're haemophiliacs.'

'Those people who can't stop bleeding? There was a guy at my old school who was one of those.'

'It's kind of rare and there're better outcomes now.'

'What are you? A doctor?'

Mason laughed. 'No, but my old man is.'

They watched as Mason measured the pāua before stashing them out of sight. 'One hundred and twenty-five millimetres to be legal,' Mason murmured as if Sean had asked.

'How come you only took three?'

'I went up for air.'

'You mean you're holding your breath all that time?'

'Well, I've cut and pasted a bit; cinematic licence,' Mason grinned. 'But I've done heaps of diving so I've increased my . . .' he waved his hand around searching for the word.

‘Capacity?’

‘Yeah, but we say dive fitness. I’ve trained my body to get used to higher levels of carbon dioxide so I don’t feel the urge to breathe as often. It’s called free diving.’

‘Why, though?’ Sean shook his head. ‘Surely diving with tanks is easier?’

‘Scuba diving’s a different sport,’ Mason said dismissively. ‘You’re not allowed to harvest pāua using scuba gear; you can’t even have the gear on your boat.’ Mason pointed at the video. ‘This is better.’

‘How?’

‘One breath, one spear and hopefully one fish.’ He pushed his chair back and started packing up his stuff. ‘You’re under the sea, in the fish’s environment, and you select your meal.’

‘How did you get into it? Spearfishing, I mean.’

‘Some mad-keen spearo gets you fired up.’

‘Spearo,’ Sean said, trying out the word.

‘It’s heaps of fun. We’re the pig-hunters of the sea – one on one with our prey.’

Sean thought it sounded noble and he liked the way Mason cared so much. ‘I’ve never caught a fish in the sea before.’

‘Never? How can that be?’

‘Zimbabwe’s landlocked.’

‘What’s that mean?’

Sean stood up, too. ‘There’s no coast; we’re surrounded by other countries.’

Mason was tying his jacket around his waist to go, but paused, ‘No coast? No sea at all?’

‘Four neighbours, nearly five because we almost touch Namibia in one corner.’

‘Namibia,’ Mason said, trying out the word the way Sean had tried out spearo. ‘I’m going to look that stuff up tonight.’

Sean wished he could show Mason the map of Africa. He wanted to see Mason’s reaction to the expanse and majesty of his country. He’d love to point out his old school and the family ranch with big game wandering free. But he couldn’t bring himself to suggest any of that, so he said, ‘Maybe you could tell me more about spearfishing sometime.’

‘Yeah. For sure.’ Mason slung his bag on his back. ‘I’ll be the mad keen spearo who gets you hooked.’

Sean didn’t think he wanted to jump off a boat, or shoot fish with just a lungful of air, but he was desperate to make a friend, so he said, ‘Cheers. I’d like that.’