



SPARROW

SCOT GARDNER

From city streets to
a cave in the wilderness

OVERBOARD

The boy's guts grew tight. The week of boot camp had been tense enough, especially after Ratcliffe, hyper at the best of times, stopped taking his meds. Now, on their way back to Derby, the boat had broken down and it felt like a flash-point. The guards were on edge and the survival instructor, Maddox, was mutinous.

'We have a responsibility to the kids,' Maddox insisted. 'Crack the thing,' he said, turning to the biggest guard.

The guard peeled the emergency beacon from its carry pouch.

'Don't!' the captain barked.

Maddox nodded to the guard. 'It'll be dark in thirty minutes.'

'We've got lights,' the captain said. 'Did you reset the sat phone? Try the radio again.'

Maddox tore off his cap, scruffed his hair. 'We've done all that. We're out of options.'

The boy and the other detainees – Ratcliffe, four other guys and three girls – stared through their tiredness as though the drama in front of them was unfolding on a TV screen.

‘You crack that EPIRB,’ said the captain, breathing hard, ‘and this . . . *inconvenience* becomes an emergency. The authorities are notified and it costs you ten or twelve grand to get your crew to Derby. That’s what you’ll be up for if you fire that beacon.’

The guard swore under his breath. Maddox looked uncertain.

‘Give it to me!’ Ratcliffe chirped, manic. ‘Let me do it.’

‘Sit down, Bradley,’ Maddox said curtly, and for once Ratcliffe did as he was told.

The tightness in the boy’s guts shifted to his chest. He wanted out. He knew he could make it to the rocky coastline, a k or more away – he’d swum twice that distance in the pool at juvie – but there were monsters in the gulf. They’d seen the long shadows of sharks in the water below them on their outward trip. They’d seen the floating tree trunks – with eyes – all along the coast. Estuarine crocodiles. They’d found the translucent body of a box jellyfish on the beach; dead, but still deadly according to Maddox.

Maddox would be the only one likely to dive after him. He was fit and a reasonable swimmer and, unlike the guards, he actually seemed to give a shit. He had hauled Ratcliffe out of the waterhole by his shirt the previous day after he’d dog-paddled out of his depth.

In the end, the decision was made for him. Ratcliffe discovered a thin black tube under his seat. With practised stealth, he sliced the tube with the shiv he'd sharpened on rocks at the waterhole the day before. The stench of petrol jolted the boy to his feet. He scissor-kicked over the side rail and hit the water shoulder-first. He was deaf for a second before his life jacket buoyed him to the surface. His skin prickled with relief and he started swimming for the coast.

Someone roared at him, but he paddled on. Others joined the chorus and he heard a body slice into the water. The bass-drum *WHUMPH* of ignition turned the chorus to screams. The boy stole a glance over his shoulder. Flames were leaping to the roof of the cabin and Maddox had stopped swimming to watch bodies plunging from the gunnels. The boy swam on. When the fuel tank blew, he felt the thunder in his whole body. For a moment, the water around him glowed orange, like a second sunset, but by the time he'd turned his head again the flames had become thick black smoke that surged skyward in a rolling mushroom cloud. Parts of the boat rained down around him. The evening air sparked with screams of pain.

'Over here,' Maddox yelled. 'Swim to me. Come on! You can do it.'

The boy turned his back on the mess – the mess of the boat and the mess of his prison life – then lowered his face into the water and swam, stroke after stroke, for the distant silhouette of coastline.

After a dozen strokes, the boy felt his life jacket dragging at his throat, holding him back.

‘Spaz!’ a voice shouted from behind. Ratcliffe’s voice. ‘Spaz! Wait up!’

In a moment of calculated rashness, the boy unclipped and unzipped his jacket and set it floating on the tide. He tore the velcro on his runners, and kicked them and his wet socks off with his toes.

‘Spaz!’ Ratcliffe screamed. His voice broke and he squealed, ‘Wait for me!’

But the boy didn’t wait. He stretched out in the water, set his feet kicking and counted his strokes.

One two three breath one two three.

HARBOUR

One two three breath one two three.

The boy hadn't learned to swim until his twelfth year.

One two three breath one two three.

'That's it, Sparrow,' the old man growled. 'You've got it, mate. Keep going. All the way.'

The boy could take you to the exact spot where it all came together, down on the lagoon – City Beach – in Darwin Harbour.

One two three breath one two three.

'Stretch, stretch, stretch. Keep your legs going. That's it.'

At twelve, he'd felt it click inside him. As if his arms and legs were clockwork and they'd finally meshed.

One two three breath one two three.

'Keep your face down,' the old bloke bellowed. 'Breathe into your armpit. Yes!'

It wasn't just the ability to float unaided and move himself through the water that he'd discovered. There were so many

layers. He knew now that even if his feet couldn't touch the bottom, he could stay afloat or swim to a place where they did.

One two three breath one two three.

'Go, mate, go,' the old bloke said. 'You're a champion.'

He knew that if a stinger somehow made it through the net – and they sometimes did – he'd be able to swim away from it to safety. In any direction.

One two three breath one two three.

The old man hooked him under the armpits and lifted him out of the water mid-stroke. The boy sucked air as the old guy swung him around and tossed him back into the deep.

'Go again,' the man said, so the boy counted and breathed into his armpit and stretched his strokes and swam. One moment he'd been frightened to leave the sandy shallows, the next he'd become the master of a new world. He'd changed from non-swimmer to swimmer, just as old Sharky had said he would. And then, not quite fifteen minutes after he first found his rhythm, he set his sights on the opposite shore of the lagoon – sixty metres away – and swam.

One two three breath one two three.

When his toe-knuckles dragged on the sand on the opposite shore, he stood, puffing, to see Sharky already there, clapping his wet hands.

'Told you,' the old man said.

The boy smiled.

SHORELINE

One two three breath one two three.

The waves were slight and they urged the boy on. His shoulders burned, his heavy arms slapped the water and his salt breath grazed his throat raw, but he knew this pain.

One two three breath one two three.

Keeping up with old man Sharky had been a serious challenge for a twelve-year-old. Four years (and a complete lifetime, it seemed) had passed since then. Cutting laps in the pool at juvie, the breathing into his armpits and counting, had kept him sane while the likes of Ratcliffe were plotting (and failing) to escape. His shoulders grew and his boy stomach developed muscles and hair.

One two three breath one two three.

His body would make it, sure, but it was as though each stroke chipped at his mind's defences. He could always see the bottom of the pool in prison; out there in the gulf, the darkness just kept getting deeper and more dangerous.

One two three breath one two three four.

After the dusk burned out and the stars began winking in his salt-stung eyes it became impossible to judge the distance to shore. The stars finished some way above the waterline, but was that the Kimberley coast he could see, or clouds hanging low over an endless ocean?

One two breath one two breath.

Grabs of angry and frightened voices came from the wreckage – so there were survivors – and the boy kept their panic at his back. His own panic rolled in his belly. He tried to clamp a lid on it, but his foot bumped something rough.

One two . . .

In a split second, the panic had him by the throat and he flailed, breathed water, began to drown. He thrashed at invisible jaws in the dark and bumped something rough again, then gathered purchase and thrust himself to the surface. Coughing and spluttering, he heard the unmistakable murmur of water lapping at edges. Not a monster, but the root of a mangrove tree. His wrinkled fingers pawed the rough trunk and discovered a branch. He hauled his body clear of the water and up into the canopy.

For an hour, he dripped and shivered, listening to the voices carried to him on the warm breeze. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but they rose and fell in volume and pitch, some challenging, some reassuring. Nobody laughed.

ABANDON

A night in a tree wasn't a new experience, and the midges that whined at his ears and bit every square centimetre of exposed skin couldn't keep him awake forever.

Back in that other life, back when he was eleven, almost twelve, the tree had been a monstrous fig in Bicentennial Park. Its dense canopy felt like a weathered tent and provided shelter for a troop of flying foxes during the day. In the evening, the bats flapped and rattled through the foliage and flew, screeching, along the foreshore in search of food. The branches of the old tree were spattered with their musty guano, but the boy felt invisible propped in a high fork. Scrubfowl scratched between its roots and clucked and chirred duets in the dead of night. He sometimes heard people shouting and fighting in the park below. Then there were the ghost boys – slow-moving teenagers in hoodies who lived their days and many of their nights in the park. Bottles smashed. While those noises would

make his heart race, they posed little threat to him in his high loft.

Back before he found his tree, before his brother had left and become a ghost boy himself, the two of them camped on the floor of Aunty Jude's Kurringal flat. She lived on the fourth floor and the stairwells stank of piss and hummed with flies. She wasn't their aunty – she was everybody's aunty – but her door had been open to them when their mother was sick. The drawback was that her door was open to everybody else too, and some nights the partying, the drinking, the shouting, the fighting and the smashing glass happened in the room while they tried to sleep.

His first night in the fig happened by accident. Aunty Jude's daughter, Mindy, told the boy she'd seen his brother hanging out with her brother in the city, so the boy walked the seven kilometres into town but couldn't find them. A family of Italian tourists in the park offered to share their fish and chips with him. Day turned to night as he ate and listened to their stories about Jesus. They bade him farewell and the boy understood, with the conviction of a slammed campervan door, that he was alone. He could walk back to Aunty Jude's place in the dark, but his brother wouldn't be there. That last thread of real family had snapped. It hadn't been torn apart with the calamity of a cyclone but unravelled in increments, over years. While he wished he knew where his brother was, he'd had enough practice sleeping rough to make decisions on his own. The fig tree seemed like a good choice at the time. It took a while to find a roost and even longer to

get to sleep. Cars passed and shadows danced in the canopy. Just before dawn, the boy woke with the claws of a moving shadow scritchng at his knee. He sucked a breath and swiped the beast off his leg – the warm, furred body of a rat.