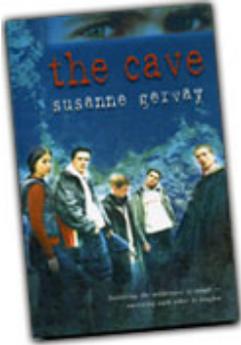


The Cave - Chapter 1



Bags, guys, parents, teachers are already outside the front gates. There's that moron Watts. He looks like a commando. He must have raided the Army Disposal Shop. I bet those leather boots have metal tips on them. Great for kicking guys when they're down. His brainless mates are with him. He'd be piss weak without them hanging around. Mum's driving me to the coach. What is she saying?

"Have you got everything, Sam? Did you remember your insect repellent? Sun block?"

"It's fine. I can pack you know." I rub my chin. I've started shaving. That makes me grin. Well, once a week anyway. Grandpa left me his shaving brush. He made the handle out of cedar. It's smooth with his initials engraved into it. The bristles are soft, not like the cheap commercial ones with plastic handles. Every Sunday, after my shower, I take out my razor blade, Grandpa's brush and shaving cream. I take my time, lather up, spreading foam over my face.

Mum parks near the bus stop. I know she wants to wait with me but she can't anymore. At least, not here. "See you later. You'd better go, Mum. You don't want to be late for work."

Mum has been the bookkeeper in Mr and Mrs Christos' Newsagency for as long as I can remember. It's meant we have been the most informed people around, except we're always a day late. You can always find yesterday's newspaper and last week's magazine on the coffee table.

This year I started working on Friday and Saturday nights at Pizza Palace. Mum didn't want me to because she said study is more important. I argued until Mum gave in. I promised I'd study seriously on the other nights. So I'm not broke anymore and I met Laura there. Laura. I'm going to miss her.

I tell Mum again, that she can't wait. She knows. "All right Sam. I'll pick you up at five o'clock. Next Thursday." I watch her drive away. She looks back once, waves, then she's gone.

Gone. Eight days. Last year's camp was only three days. I learnt to hate a few guys on that camp and I stank when I got home. No showers and the long drop. I'll probably get through the physical garbage, but living with guys like Watts, that is real garbage. Can you imagine Mum waiting here? Sure, if I want to die. No waiting, because we're men. I look over at Watts. Some are bloody stupid men.

There's Fat George. He'll never make it. The Principal lectured everyone including parents, teachers and us in the Assembly Hall. Parents were sucked right in when the Principal said that camp "will improve fitness, as well as socialization skills. The boys are going to be challenged." Right, like I can't wait to scale cliffs, burrow through mud holes, grovel into caves, dive into freezing underground rivers. And we can do this with maniacs and victims and guys you don't like or trust. The teachers separate friends. It's supposed to bond you to mankind. I don't want to bond to the mankind I've seen around here. In Watts' case, it's like bonding to a serial murderer.

"Knox, over this way." That's me. Sam Knox. I'm not Sam here. My Mum, friends, Laura call me Sam, but at school I'm Knox. It's a male school fixation to be hailed by your last name. Maybe it makes you an Emperor. Caesar Sam or is that Caesar Salad? I'm tough and I'm Knox. I wanted to go to a co-ed school where I'd be called Sam and where there are girls. The only school around home is single sex, so that's it. Poor Fat George isn't called by his last name. He's called Fat George.

"You're in B group, Knox. Put your bags in that pile and get onto that coach." Mr Seaten, alias Ape King, ticks off my name. Seaten is built like an orangutan and has as much sensitivity as one. Maybe I'm insulting orangutans. He hasn't liked me much since the parent-teacher night. Since that night, Mr Seaten slashes red train track lines through my Maths mistakes, with comments like, "You don't understand the work, Knox." He really means that I'm stupid, a loser and a failure. I really like Seaten. Sure.

At the last parent-teacher interview, I begged Mum not to say anything to Seaten. It was the first parent-teacher interview that Grandpa wasn't at. Grandpa always said "as long as you do your best, Sam". Mum was quiet in the car. I had a sick burning feeling in my stomach. Mum was quiet as we walked into the school hall. I didn't feel like talking either. The hall was crazy with people and the intercom blaring. I looked at the brown walls and wooden floors. Reminded me of mud. Parents and kids slid like slow slithering blobs towards teachers for the verdict. "Your son is a genius." "Your son is a moron." "Your son is." I didn't really care but Mum did. Grandpa used to take us out for a hamburger afterwards.

A few guys grunted hello. Some parents nodded at Mum. She pretended to smile. Seaten was waiting for us at the Maths table. We scrapped the plastic chairs across the wooden floor and sat. I nudged Mum not to say anything, but she didn't listen. Her hands were pressed together so hard that her knuckles were white.

Seaten fingered the names and marks on the class ledger and shook his head. Mum's voice had a crackly edge. "Sam likes Maths." Seaten shook his head. "Sam is good at Maths like me." She caught her breath, "like his grandfather." Her hands were nearly transparent as she spoke. "The past few months have been. Difficult. Grandpa." Seaten didn't hear. He just flicked over pages, droned on about curriculum and percentages of failure.

I think about those last weeks Grandpa was in hospital. I don't want to. I try to block it out, but the memories creep into my mind when I'm not looking.

Every day Mum and I visited. Every day we walked through those antiseptic corridors with that acid smell of bleach. There was always this feeling inside me as we reached his ward. Like a stone in my throat. Grandpa seemed small lying there alone in a ward of strangers. His black rimmed glasses were always on the dresser, but Grandpa couldn't see well without his glasses. There was a drip snaking into the back of Grandpa's hand. I hated that. His hands had always been big and capable. Fix-anything hands. Protect-us hands. They were motionless, blotched purple. But when we came up close, he'd raise his fingers. Just a little.

Seaten stopped talking. He leaned back on his chair with his head resting back on his wiry freckled hands. "No. He won't make it at advanced Maths," he said totally uninterested and rubbed his after five shadow. He always looked like he hadn't shaved.

Mum pressed her hands together even harder. She talked, waited, talked, stared until Seaten started flicking agitated looks between Mum and his watch. He had a football game he wanted to go to but Mum wouldn't stop talking. It was her bookkeeper's voice, repetitive, like reading out numbers. In the end, he shrugged his shoulders. "He can do Advanced Maths but he won't make the grade."

Mum cried in the car afterwards.

Bus stop. I quickly look at Seaten's B list. My friends, Andrew and Con are on the A list. Spano's name is right on the top of the B list. I groan. Watts' is there. The rest of the B list is mainly acquaintances. Guys you'd say hello to them when you race past or kick in the shins for a joke. You wouldn't ask them to your house but you'd go out with them on a Saturday night. Not that I go out much on Saturday nights anymore due to Laura and working at Pizza Palace getting rich. Then there are the Saturday night Rave Parties. That last Rave was bad.

"Stop shoving," I yell at the guys behind me. I get a window seat and dump my bag on the seat next to me. I want to bond with my bag while I have a choice. Andrew and Con climb onto the other coach. A and B groups only meet up after the Cave. That Cave. I don't know why we have to go there. Seaten's bloody stupid idea of "a challenge".

Andrew sticks his thumb up at me through the window. I do the same back. Con bends across him and sticks out his thumb too. Andrew punches him laughing. Andrew was my first friend at school. He has only got a Mum, like me. He has an older brother as well. Con is different. He is Greek with two parents and two brothers. His parents are really involved in everything he does. I bet his mother packed an extra jumper and made ten sandwiches for the trip. He hates that. I have two ordinary corn beef and mustard sandwiches, packed courtesy of Mum. Andrew yells out "don't break a leg" at the same time as their coach blurts out a fist of smoke. I watch the coach heading away.

My stomach takes a dive. Right. I'm on my own. I stare out of the window trying not to think about Camp. I start looking out for old cars. I want to buy a bomb of a car and fix it up when I get off my Learner's Driving License in a couple of months. I'll be seventeen and have wheels.

"Knox, wake up. Move your stuff." Seaten shoves Fat George at me.

Fat George. I throw my bag onto the floor. He sits down next to me. This is not a good start. I nod, then grunt 'Hi,' and that's it for conversation for the next five hours. The heating makes it warm in the coach and the seats are comfortable. The traffic thins as we get onto the freeway out of the city. The coach driver beeps at a lady driver who is in the fast lane moving at forty kilometres per hour.

"Women drivers are pathetic." Luke calls out. Then the jokes start.

"Women drivers travel faster in all gears, especially reverse."

"What's the same about a woman driver and biscuits?"

"They're both crackers."

"Why are women drivers dangerous?"

"They have in built booby traps."

I look at Fat George smiling. He must have a dick after all. The guys at the back are falling over themselves laughing calling out - "boobs, breasts, tits, fun bags". I swear Watts is salivating, like a dog. They go on about whose tits they have seen, mauled,

touched up. Then the morons talk about tonguing it down a girl's throat, getting it up them, doing girls. At the front of the bus, Seaten is thumping his hand against his chest in time with some sort of music coming out of the headphones. The backs of his hands are covered in this orange fuzz. He really is an ape. I turn around and see Watts and the others.

Tits. I think about tits a lot, especially Laura's. I have a trophy tacked onto my wall next to the "Oh! Shit!" poster. B cup, black, lacey and satin. Andrew has drooled over it quite a few times. There are a lot of great tits on SBS television. Foreign films with sub titles. People think that you are smart if you read sub titles. It is such a joke. It's about tits.

When Mum is asleep, I switch on the late night foreign films. They're sexy, especially the European ones. Women strip and so do men and they play around. Usually there is an argument, then making up, kissing, mauling, full frontals, sex and yes, close-up shots of tits.

Andrew is sex mad and he hacks into the porn sites on the school's Internet. I saw the most amazing things the last time he hacked into it in the library. The sites are very anatomical. Plenty of body parts and coloured condoms.

Something stinks. I look at Fat George. He grunts garlic salami breath at me. "Lunch," he splutters.

“Keep your face away from me.” I snarl as I shuffle through my pack for my sandwiches and drink. Everyone is eating except for Bennie who’s vomiting in a paper bag.

The orange juice tastes good. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, then stare out of the window. The city has disappeared into paddocks of grasslands. There’s been rain. I like the green of the flats and the brown of the craggy outcrops behind them. The wheels of the bus whir in quick rhythm as we drive past farms, new housing developments, cattle grazing. The landscape races by like streakers. I grin. Streakers. Everyone was falling over themselves laughing when Andrew threw Con’s clothes out of the gym window last year. Con really streaked.

“The Great Dividing Range,” Seaten screams out. I look up. Mountains rise like gigantic walls in the distance. That’s where we’re heading.

The toilet at the back of the bus is starting to smell. Missed pees. Suddenly the coach swerves off the freeway. There’s a long howl from inside the toilet. Everyone turns around to see Luke struggle out.

“Pissed your pants?” “Need to look where you aim.” “Want some help next time?”

“Shut up, you losers.” Luke tosses an empty drink bottle lying on the floor at a couple of guys. Hits one on the head.

I look at my watch. It's been hours already. How much longer? The bus winds past a sandstone village. The steeple looks like a hangout for the local finches. We're climbing higher and the bus is moving slower. My eyelids close, open. I see eucalyptus gums shadow the window, then I close my eyes again.

My eyes open with a start. There's a gale in my ear. "What? What?" I mutter, then I see him. It's Fat George breathing like a pig. I elbow him hard. He shuffles closer to the aisle and it's quiet again.

The coach veers off into a narrow winding back road bordered by government planted pine forests. There are huge tracks of them. I like the smell. Pines. Reminds me of Christmas. Last Christmas was the first one without Grandpa. Mum cooked the turkey like she always does. Grandpa and I used to put up the pine tree in the lounge room. I did it alone this time. It was harder, much harder. The house smelt like mountains. Grandpa used to tell us one of his famous fishing or camping stories. There were no stories this Christmas. We didn't laugh much and the turkey didn't taste as good. Mum put on taped carols.

The pine forests start to change as the road becomes steeper and more winding. It is wilder. Rugged territory. The bus is spluttering now. Someone calls out, "We're farting up the mountain," and there is laughing and a few farts explode from the back. Seaten takes out his earplugs and yells at everyone. "We're here."

There is a flat, dirt landing ahead. The bus grinds towards it. A woman is standing with her feet apart waving the bus forward. She's wearing baggy khaki shorts over long white thermals that reach down to her ankles. Her feet seem huge with massive army boots that have metal tips bigger than on Watts' boots. Ropes over her shoulder, a Swiss army knife combination, a hunting blade in a leather sheaf and a torch hang from her black belt. Her thermals go all the way up her arms, nearly to her neck. She definitely has tits.

There are wolf whistles and Seaten tells the whistlers to shut up. The bus stops. The doors open and the woman jumps onto the bus. She looks about twenty-five. She's only one hundred and fifty centimetres tall but she seems to take up all the space at the front. "Get your gear out. Take your bags from under the bus. There are the crates. Carry them. Follow me to the clearing." I want to laugh. It's a lot of noise from a small titty instructor. "By the way, I'm Sarah, your guide for the duration of the Camp."

As Fat George struggles out of his seat, Watts yells at him to move his fat butt. He doesn't yell back at him. George goes red and blubbery. Seaten is already ordering guys to carry the crates of gear. Someone shoves me in the back. I turn around snarling. "Watch it, you bloody idiot."

He has second thoughts.