

## **Prologue**

Scroll ... click. Scroll ... click. Scroll ... click.

If Jacko hadn't startled you with a loud bark at some distant cat cry, you would have kept scrolling. You would have missed it.

It's a school night but your homework is mostly done. So you're sprawled on the couch with Jacko at your feet, mindlessly scrolling through your feed.

'Settle, Jacko. It's just a cat.' You return to the screen and you see it:

## THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN < VIRTUAL > RACE

Too young for reality TV but want a shot at fame and glory?

Great at challenges but stuck at home?
Are you an expert on anthems, flags and symbols?
Enter now for your chance to compete in the first
ever Great Australian <Virtual> Race.

You click on the link and the page bursts to life on your phone. This looks amazing! You read it – fast the first time and then once your heart rate settles, you read it again properly. The Great Australian <Virtual> Race is a virtual race around Australia with team challenges and great prizes. You keep scrolling and scanning - searching for the vital piece of information that has kept you out of every other competition - the age requirements: Participants must be over 12 years of age to enter.

'Yes!' You startle Jacko, who had only just settled again.

-----

By the time you arrive at school the next day, you

Beau hadn't replied straight away because he was working on a playlist for his sister's birthday next weekend. He is obsessed with music. His headphones are permanently connected and some body part is always tapping – a foot, a hand, a knee. Recently he's been experimenting with mixing instruments traditionally used by Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders into other music. It is pretty amazing. But once he saw the message, he was in too.

Amari took longer to convince. He is a year below you and the others but he is tall. Everyone thinks he'd be great at basketball but the truth is, he hates sports. His passion is art. His sketches are incredible. But he's quiet and prefers to keep to himself, so you had to work a lot harder to get him to agree. You got there in the end –

after way too many messages and a whole lot of charm. Now you just hope he doesn't change his mind. Ruby, Beau, Amari and you as captain. The Dream Team!

'So, there are three main categories and they are all about Australian symbols,' you explain to the team as you eat lunch outside the art room. 'Anthems, flags and other symbols.'

Your phone vibrates in your pocket. Absent-mindedly, you pull it out and continue talking. 'We start next Friday. Beau, you're on anthems. Amari, you're flags and ...' You look at your phone.

A message from an unknown number: Quit now, losers!

You look up and see the rest of your team looking at their phones too.

'Losers? That's not very creative,' Beau laughs.

You laugh too but you can't ignore the worry that rises in your chest.

## Chapter 1

When Beau walks into your kitchen, you can hear the tinny drumbeats blaring out from his headphones.

'Hey,' he says a little too loudly as he sits down beside you at the table. He slips the headphones down around his neck and the music stops.

'Hey,' you reply. 'Ready?'

Beau nods his head. It's not as enthusiastic as you had hoped. He looks like he's about to say something but then quickly closes his mouth and stares down at his lap.

'Everything okay?' you ask.

'Yeah. It's just ... I got another message this morning.'

'Same number?' you question, remembering again the text you all received last week. Your worry starts bubbling up again.

Beau has his phone in his hand now. He nods. 'Same number. It says: You will not succeed. I will make sure of it.'

With more confidence than you feel you say, 'How much damage can they do? It's online. They can't hurt us. It's just someone trying to put us off.'

'Maybe. But how did they get my number?'

'I don't know,' you admit. 'Maybe someone from school found out we entered and they're just trying to put us off. Take it as a compliment – they think we're a threat!'

Beau shrugs and swivels in his seat to focus properly on your laptop screen. You've already logged into the game. 'Let's do this,' he says. 'How does it work?' You read the instructions aloud:

The competition consists of three challenge rounds. Only two team members are permitted to participate at a time. Each round must be completed successfully to gain entry into the final stage of the Great Australian <Virtual> Race.

You move the mouse to the start button and click.

Beau reads: Round 1 is all about the Australian National Anthem. Read the information and then answer the questions.

Suddenly the screen goes black and a message flashes: YOU HAVE BEEN HACKED.

But then it disappears and the screen returns to normal. It all happens so fast, you actually wonder if you imagined it.

You and Beau stare at the screen. 'Did you see ...?' you both say at the same time.

Your heart is racing but everything looks normal now. You let go of the breath you've been holding. Then you notice something odd. Some of the words have been removed. There are blank spaces all over the screen.

'Yep,' Beau says. 'We've been hacked.'

'Well I don't know about you, but I'm not guitting. We'll just have to fix the mistakes as we go. Are you with me?'

'I'm in. Let's do this!' Beau says.

You finish the challenge and close the laptop. Beau is looking up – his eyes darting around with his swirling thoughts.

Finally he speaks. 'When I put the playlist together for my sister's party, I had to make sure I had songs in there that everyone would like. Imagine trying to pick just one song for the whole of Australia!'







'That's true. I hadn't thought about it like that before,' you agree.

'I really like the line: For we are one and free,' he says. 'It reminds me that although we are individuals, we are all part of one country. We might have some differences but we also have heaps of things in common.'

'Yeah. I like it too,' you say. 'But maybe don't use it for your sister's party!'