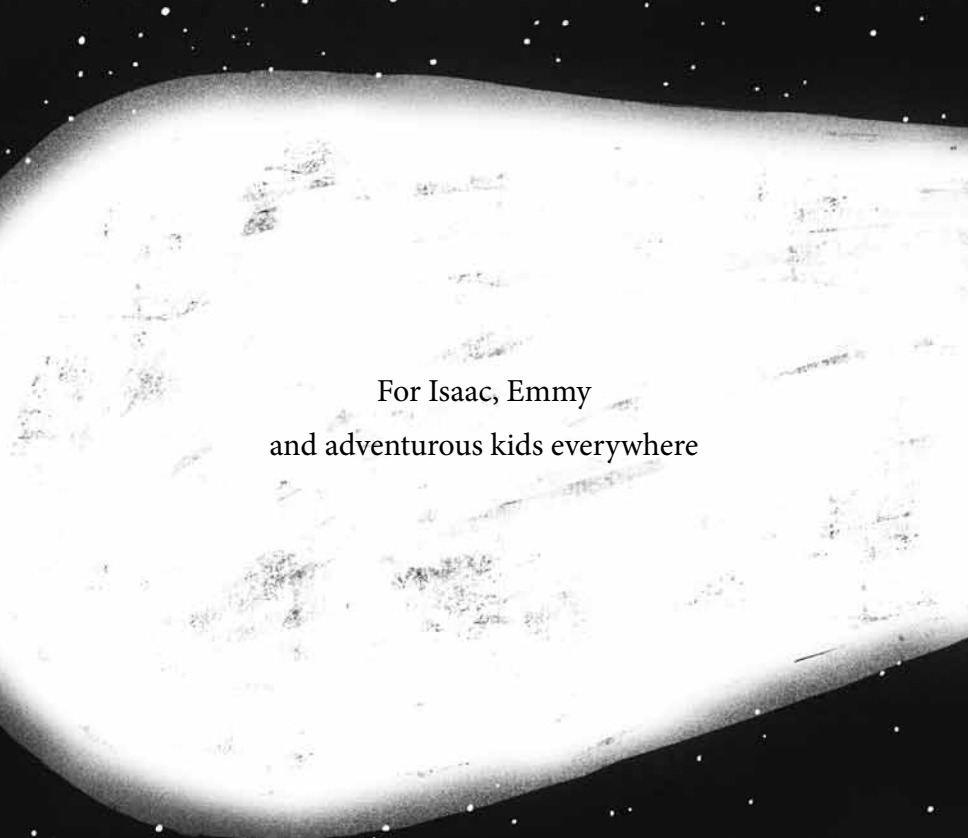


To THE
LiGHTHOUSE



For Isaac, Emmy
and adventurous kids everywhere

The creators of this book recognise the cultural significance and sad history that Wadjemup (Rottnest Island) holds for Aboriginal people and acknowledge the Whadjuk Noongar people as Wadjemup's traditional custodians.



FREMANTLE PRESS

Decorative foliage and plant silhouettes at the bottom of the page, including a large leaf on the left and various smaller plants and branches.

TO THE
LIGHTHOUSE

CRISTY BURNE

ILLUSTRATED BY AMANDA BURNETT





LANDiNG

Isaac stepped off the boat. The island was waiting for him, he could feel it. At the other end of the long jetty, there was white sand to sprint across, sandpaper cliffs to explore, massive fig trees just waiting to be climbed.

‘Stay close,’ warned Mum. ‘You don’t want to fall in.’

Isaac looked around. The jetty was wide enough to race monster trucks. One side was bounded by a tumbling wall of giant boulders. The other was roped off at least three metres from the edge. The only way he could possibly fall in was if he took a running leap.

Yeah right, Mum, he thought.

‘Okay Mum,’ he said out loud.



Seagulls soared and waves lapped and people laughed as they whizzed by on their bicycles. He couldn't wait to start adventuring, but first he had to manage Mum. Convincing her to even come to the island had taken him ages.

School holidays usually meant Isaac was shipped off to vacation care while Mum went to work. These holidays, he'd planted the idea of a winter getaway. She'd studied the website for ages.

'Peace, quiet, fresh air and a good book. It does sound perfect,' she'd said. Then she'd looked at Isaac and frowned.

'I'll be fine,' Isaac had promised. 'Seriously, Mum, you can relax all you like.'

Mum had wrung her hands. She wrung her hands a lot.

'We can play cards, and ride our bikes, and bake cakes ...' Isaac hesitated.

Mum hated baking.

'I just worry that something might happen,' she'd said.

Isaac had nodded. Something *might* happen.
An awesome holiday might happen.

‘I’ll be fine,’ he promised.

‘You’ll make sensible decisions?’ Mum asked.

‘Super-sensible,’ Isaac had assured her.

So here he was, sensibly standing in the middle of a jetty the size of a small nation, trying not to fall off or jump in. He scanned for kids his age, but only saw littlies, running and screaming and drooling. There was no one interesting. No one to hang out with and explore with.

And then he saw the girl.

She was climbing on the wall of boulders. Racing across them. If Mum saw, she’d have a heart attack. The girl had long, bronzed hair, and although it was winter, she was wearing just a T-shirt with shorts, the khaki sort, with lots of pockets. Isaac checked his own clothes. He was trussed up in so many layers he could hardly bend his arms to scratch his nose. Mum had smiled

and called that a sensible decision. It didn't feel so sensible now.

The girl saw Isaac staring and made a horrible face at him. Isaac made his own face back. She grinned right at him.

'Isaac,' said Mum. 'Keep an eye out for our bikes.'

High above them loads of bicycles were lined across the ferry's deck in a twist of colourful metal. There weren't many cars on the island, so almost everyone rode bikes. Up on deck, a man with sticking-up hair was rolling bikes down a narrow ramp and onto the jetty. Isaac's bike was up there. Somewhere. It was a blue mountain bike with an all-black helmet and chunky pedals. He'd never done actual mountain biking, because Mum thought actual mountain biking was dangerous, but since there were no actual mountains on the island he might be okay. There were loads of hills and trails. He couldn't wait.

The next bike down the ramp wasn't a mountain bike. It was a white BMX, with pegs out the sides for doing tricks.

The bronze-haired girl in the khaki shorts jumped down from the boulders. She thanked the crewman, grabbed the BMX in her strong, brown hands and rode away down the jetty. Alone. With her helmet dangling on her handlebars.

'There's your bike,' Mum said, pointing to the sticking-up hair guy, high above them on the deck.

Isaac watched the girl. Was she really alone? Where were her parents?

Then he spotted a tall man in jeans and a red jacket. He seemed to be calling out to the girl, but Isaac couldn't hear what he was saying. Neither could the girl, because she didn't stop and she didn't turn around. The man's words were swept into the salty wind, where only seagulls would hear them. Isaac watched as the man swung a bag

onto his back, then heaved a wriggling toddler into the seat on the front of his bike. A kindy kid streaked past him on a balance bike.

‘Come on, Dad!’ the kindy kid yelled, racing ahead. *Balance bikes have no brakes*, Isaac thought. Mum would’ve been wailing about the edge and the cracks and be careful of seagull poop. But the man was busy juggling his bike and backpack and small child. He had no time for anything else. And the bronze-haired girl was way ahead.

‘And there’s mine!’ Mum sounded relieved to spot her slightly larger but equally unused bike.

Isaac got his bike and waited while Mum collected hers, and waited while she double-checked that the luggage truck wouldn’t forget their bags and that the weather wasn’t going to be stormy. Then he waited while she triple-checked that the island wouldn’t sink or flood or otherwise be struck by catastrophe. Then, about an hour

later, she and Isaac finally wheeled their bikes away, very carefully, down the centre of the jetty. Isaac stared into the lapping water and wanted to jump. Sometimes Mum could be too much.

At last, they stepped off the jetty and onto the island. Isaac breathed deep, just as the bronze-haired girl whizzed past on her BMX. She made an even worse face at Isaac, grinned, then pulled an awesome wheelie, her front wheel spinning in the breeze. She disappeared up the hill and around the corner.

Isaac's stomach tangled into itself. He'd tried wheelies a few times, but they'd never really worked. Perhaps this was the place to learn how. Perhaps this island was the place for





loads of new things, like making friends with the bronze-haired girl, for a start. Only, he wasn't sure Mum would agree.

What he needed was a plan.

Later that afternoon, Mum and Isaac settled quietly in their little yellow house. Mum

unpacked her case, read up about their gas heater, tucked all the extra blankets onto their beds, and photographed the evacuation instructions, in case the real instructions were stolen/burnt/swept away in a freak tsunami. Then she stood on one foot, and then the other. Isaac sat at the kitchen table, trying to focus on drawing the view. Mum liked it when he drew. She thought it was safe.

She shifted back to her other foot.

‘Why don’t you read your book?’ he suggested helpfully.

‘Really?’ Mum looked lost.

‘Really.’ He smiled his most calming smile.

She fetched her book and incredibly, finally, actually relaxed, even putting her feet up on the couch. Isaac returned to his drawing, but mostly he was staring out the window at the rippling bay beyond. The sky was blue, the water was bluer. It was time to put his plan into action. He cleared his throat.

‘Can I get you a cup of tea?’ he asked.

Mum looked up. Her face softened into such a loving smile that Isaac felt almost guilty. ‘That’d be great,’ she said. ‘Thank you.’ But then she added ‘Will you be alright with the kettle?’

No, Mum. The kettle has a black belt. I won’t stand a chance, Isaac thought.

‘I’ll be careful,’ he said.

He filled the kettle, switched it on. He made a big show of finding a mug, and then unearthing a tea bag, then opening the fridge.

‘Oh no! Mum, there’s no milk.’ He pulled his best responsible face. He’d practised it about a million times. ‘No worries, I’ll just jump on my bike. Ride down to the shops.’

He waited. Mum hesitated. Isaac’s heart thumped. He knew she preferred milky tea.

‘I’ll grab some fresh bread, too,’ he added, to sweeten the deal. Tea and toast. How could she resist?

Mum didn't look convinced. 'Are you sure? To the shops? By yourself?'

Isaac nodded. Smiling. Three times.

'You'll be sensible?' Mum asked.

'Super-sensible.' He nodded again for good measure. Then tilted his head like a waiting puppy, in case he'd already done too much nodding. Mum could worry about anything, even nodding. It wasn't really her fault. It was just that Isaac was all Mum had left.

'Well, if you're sure you'll be okay,' she said.

Isaac felt like awarding her a Certificate of Achievement. She was really progressing.

I will be totally excellent, he thought.

Mum checked her watch. 'Make sure you're back in half an hour,' she said.

'Can we make it forty-five minutes?' he asked, still doing his waiting puppy face.

She wrung her hands.

'It might take a while to find the wholegrain

bread,' he added.

She nodded, then agreed. There was so much white bread around these days. Sometimes sensible decisions could take a little longer.

'Back soon, Mum,' he said, and he dashed out the door before she remembered they hadn't synchronised their watches.

AT THE SHOPS

Isaac rode fast, with the sun on his back and the wind in his face. He felt wild and free, like a galloping eagle or soaring tiger, or something. He dodged pedestrians, weaved between cyclists, kept left when the occasional luggage truck crawled by. It wasn't that Isaac was a reckless criminal when Mum wasn't around. It was just that when Mum wasn't around, he wasn't so worried about Mum's worrying.

Quokka!

He pulled over for a closer look. Mum had warned him about the island's resident marsupials, about their claws and their teeth and their probably rampant disease. This one stared at him, its black eyes serious as it nibbled a ripe fig

held in two furry paws. It looked like a teddy bear crossed with a miniature kangaroo.

‘See how she keeps her baby safe,’ came a girl’s voice.

Isaac twisted to see the bronze-haired girl right behind him. She stood with one leg on either side of her BMX, pointing at the quokka. Isaac looked back. From inside its tiny, furry pouch poked a tinier, furry head. Mini-quokka!

The girl dumped her bike on the side of the footpath, then crouched to offer the quokkas more fig.

‘Here, Mama Quokka,’ she crooned. ‘You’re doing a great job. Here’s a fig for you, and one for your baby. Aren’t you a clever girl?’

She wasn’t afraid of their claws or teeth or probable rampant disease. She wasn’t afraid of wheelies or boulder-hopping or solo cycling. She was the friend Isaac needed for this holiday. And this was his chance.

He started the way he always started when he was at vacation care. ‘Would you rather have a face like a monkey, or a butt like a baboon?’

The girl didn’t laugh. She didn’t even look up. And the quokka ignored the extra figs. It just sat there, nibbling the one it already had. For a second, Isaac thought the girl wasn’t going to answer.



Then she looked right at him.

‘Face like a monkey,’ she said. She wiped at her nose, and he noticed her eyes were red. ‘You?’

‘Butt like a baboon,’ he said.

Her lips twitched, but she didn’t smile. ‘You like donuts?’ she asked. She sniffed, wiping at her eyes this time. ‘I feel like donuts.’

Isaac grinned. ‘I love donuts.’

They jumped on their bikes and rode the rest of the way to the shops. Together.

Isaac felt a kind of fireworks and lemonade happiness bubbling in his chest. When the girl pulled up outside the bakery, Isaac did too.

She pulled a twenty dollar note from a pocket of her shorts. ‘How many?’

‘What?’

‘Donuts. How many do you want?’



Isaac did some maths in his head. Mum had counted out ten dollars for milk and bread, but surely there'd be something left over. Would it be enough for a donut? Only one way to find out.

'I gotta get some stuff,' he said. 'But I do want donuts. Can I meet you back here?' His heart was thumping again. Would she wait?

She shrugged. 'Get your stuff later.'

He stared at his toes. 'It's for my mum,' he said. 'She's ...'

'So whatever,' the girl said. 'You go do whatever. I'll be here.'

Isaac tried to catch her eye, but she wouldn't look at him. 'Okay, thanks. See you in a bit?'

She just shrugged.

Isaac cursed all the way to the shop, but he knew Mum would think he was doing the right thing. And he had to keep Mum relaxed and happy. A relaxed and happy Mum was the key to his holiday success.

The island shop was bigger than he'd expected, and it took a while to trawl through the towers of chips and lollies and sunscreen, plus stuffed quokka toys, quokka oven mitts and even quokka fly swats, but eventually Isaac found the milk and bread.

Back outside, he scanned for the girl. Pie-eating families. Map-reading tourists. But no girl. His guts turned, like he'd swallowed a quokka fly swat, laden with wriggling, undead, disease-ridden flies. She'd gone.

'Hey!'

She was still there! And she was staring right at him, while he had his wriggling, undead flies expression still written across his face. He plastered over the flies with a smile he hoped covered his nerves, and walked up.

She was sitting on a wooden table with her feet on the seat, chewing on a donut ball. Two seagulls eyed her, their beaks as red as the sugary jam. A

quokka nibbled crumbs on the floor.

‘Here.’ She held out a paper bag to Isaac. ‘You want one?’

‘Thanks.’ Isaac felt the glow of relief and anticipation. He sat next to her on the table, munching crunchy donut mouthfuls.

‘So I’m Emmy,’ she said, mouth full.

‘I’m Isaac,’ said Isaac.

‘How long you here for?’

‘A week,’ he said. ‘You?’

‘Same.’ She offered him another donut.

He took it and thanked her, watching people trail in and out with their pies and choc milks and sausage rolls. He couldn’t help grinning. This island was the best. Crows hopped and cawed. Little kids scooted up and down while their parents sipped takeaway coffees. And he was sitting with the coolest girl he’d ever met. He tried to think of what to say.

Nothing came.

Emmy turned to him. He gulped nervously.

‘Would you rather eat twenty donuts in a minute, or have no donuts for a week?’ she asked.

Isaac didn’t need to think. ‘Twenty in a minute.’

She nodded, seeming satisfied. ‘Me too.’ She pointed to the web of ropes and steel that towered in a bed of sand, next to the bakery. ‘Dare us to go right to the top.’

Isaac checked his watch. It wouldn’t do to be late, not on his first day. But there was still time. ‘Sure,’ he said. ‘Race ya.’

He shovelled donut into his mouth and ripped across the wooden deck onto the sand. The corrugated rope bit into his hands and swung back and forth, but soon he was perched at the top of the frame, looking across the grass, almost level with the rooftops. Emmy stood next to him, bouncing on the ropes so everything wobbled and swayed.

‘Now it’s your turn,’ she said. Her bronze hair flew about in the breeze.

‘For what?’

Emmy fixed him with her brown eyes. The redness from earlier was gone, and now she was even grinning. She raised an eyebrow. ‘For a dare.’

Suddenly the ropes felt like jagged rock beneath Isaac’s hands. Mum wouldn’t consider doing dares a sensible decision. But maybe she wouldn’t have to know. ‘What sort of dare?’

Emmy leaned in, her face shining with the winter sun. ‘We’ll take it in turns. I dared us to climb this. So now it’s your turn.’

Isaac thought fast.

This was his first taste of freedom. If he was late back to the cottage, Mum’d never trust him again. Worse, she might freak out, call the police and cancel their whole trip.

So it had to be a relatively quick dare. He looked around, fixed his eyes on the bulbous

limbs of a Moreton Bay Fig that towered next to the chemist. ‘We climb that,’ he said.

Emmy stared at him, shaking her head slowly.

Isaac’s heart sank.

‘Not like that,’ she said. ‘You have to say “dare us to”.’

‘Oh. Okay.’ He blinked with relief. ‘Dare us to climb that tree.’

‘You’re on,’ she grinned. ‘Race ya.’

They scrambled down the web of rope, jumped to the cold sand and then scuffled and scrambled across to the tree’s swollen roots and into its limbs.

In no time the two of them were high in green branches, dangling their legs over the tourists below and tracing their fingers through the letters and ridges of the tree’s knotted bark.

‘So now it’s my turn,’ said Emmy.

Isaac grinned, then remembered the milk and bread. ‘Can we make it for this afternoon? I have to drop that stuff at our cottage. My mum’s ...’

Emmy waved away his doubt with a flick of her hand. 'Don't worry about it. She'll be right.'

She'll be hysterical, Isaac thought.

'My dad's okay with whatever I do,' said Emmy. 'He knows I can look after myself. He trusts me to do whatever.' She reached into the pocket of her shorts, pulling out a mobile phone. 'See. He even gave me a phone.'

Isaac wondered how ancient he'd have to be before Mum trusted him with a phone. He thought of how Mum would splutter if she could see him now, high in the rustling leaves. Of how hard he'd had to work just to go to the shops for a loaf of bread. 'You're lucky.'

'Yeah,' said Emmy breezily. She returned the phone to her pocket, not meeting his eye. 'So anyway, I'll meet you at the jetty, after you've explained to your mum.'

'Explained what?'

She made another face. 'About the dares,' she

said. 'About how you'll be busy for a while. And it's my dare next. And I dare us to jump off the jetty.'

Isaac nearly fell out of the tree. His mum would totally freak.

'Not the ferry jetty.' Emmy grinned, looking at his face. 'The fishing jetty. Don't worry, you'll be fine. You drop your stuff at home, and I'll meet you at the jetty in an hour.'

Easy for you, Isaac thought.

'Sounds great,' he said.

JETTY JUMP

Isaac returned to the cottage, all limbs intact and in possession of a litre of milk and a loaf of bread. He was back within the promised time, but Mum welcomed him as if he'd been gone a week.

He wondered whether to explain to her about Emmy and the daring game. About how he would be busy for a while. About how Emmy's dad let her do whatever she wanted.

He wasn't sure Mum would think trading dares with a boulder-climbing, wheelie-pulling, under-supervised stranger was very sensible. But Emmy wasn't strange. And this was supposed to be a holiday for Isaac as well as Mum.

'Here you are,' he said, delivering Mum's cup of tea hot and milky, just the way she liked it.

‘Thanks love.’ She flicked him a smile, using a finger to mark her place in the book. ‘You want to play cards? Or go for a walk?’

‘Maybe Mum, but not right now.’

Isaac ducked into his room. He changed into shorts, grabbed his bag and shoved in a pair of quick-dries, plus a T-shirt he could use to dry off afterwards. Mum might notice if he took a whole towel.

When he reappeared, Mum was reading again. Mum could really get into her reading. This was his chance! ‘How’s the book?’

‘Mmmm?’ she said, not looking up from her pages. *Yes!*

‘I’ve made a friend,’ he continued. ‘Her name’s Emmy. She’s invited me to hang out for a bit.’

‘Mmmmm,’ said Mum. *Double yes!* This was really happening.

Isaac grabbed a couple of choc chip muesli bars from a box in the kitchen and added them to

his backpack, then he moved towards the door.

‘Okay, back soon,’ he ventured.

He held his breath. He twisted the lock, swung the door open, prepared to step out.

‘Where’re you off to?’ Mum asked, closing her book.

Isaac’s body froze with the effort of suppressing an island-sized groan.

‘I’ve made a friend,’ he repeated patiently.

Worry flicked across Mum’s face. ‘What sort of friend?’

It was a miracle Isaac wasn’t bald. It took all his powers not to tear out his hair. And it took twenty questions, a promise to beware of strangers, use his best manners, and return well before five, before Isaac convinced her he’d be okay.

‘You’ll be sensible?’ she asked finally.

‘Super-sensible.’ He nodded and pulled his most sensible face. He didn’t need to practise the sensible face any more. It was second nature, but

that didn't mean it always worked.

When Isaac slipped out the door, at last, and jumped on his bike, he'd been longer than expected. Would Emmy still be waiting? He pushed hard along the sandy concrete path to the beach. He needed her to be there.

And she was, standing on the sand at the base of the fishing jetty. She wasn't dressed in her bathers, so she wasn't really going to jump. *Phew*. He parked his bike and walked through the sandy scrub to the beach.

'You've been ages,' she said, leaping up the few wooden steps to the jetty. 'Come on!'

He followed her across the weathered slats. This jetty was minuscule compared to the ferry jetty. He could see sparkling water on either side, watch strands of seagrass dancing with the current. He could even see water through the gaps. Mum would be speed-dialling search and rescue.

When they reached the end of the jetty, Emmy turn to face him, mischief all over her face.

‘Ready?’

She pulled off her T-shirt to reveal a pair of bright orange bathers.

Winter wind pricked her skin into goosebumps. No one was swimming. No one else was that crazy. Emmy and Isaac were alone, except for two bobbing boats, and even the boats looked shivery.

‘You’re really going to jump?’

‘Course we’re going to.’

Emmy took off her shorts and stood there in her bathers. The wind whirled bronze hair about her shoulders and she seemed like a bright orange medieval hero. Then she hooted and wrapped her arms around herself like rubber bands. ‘It’s icy!’

Isaac nodded and grinned. What a relief. She felt the same way. It was arctic. Even pretending to swim was ridiculous. He was already deciding

on a new dare. Maybe a ride to the salt lakes. He'd seen them on the map, and it would be great to cycle along the empty roads, right up to the lakes. They could have a picnic, eat the muesli bars ...

SPLASH!

Isaac spun.

Emmy was gone! Someone screamed from below. From deep down in the swirling water. Isaac peered over the jetty's edge, guts in his gullet.

'Aaaaaaargh!' Emmy's mouth was split open with surprise. Her eyes were wide and Isaac felt as if sparks of energy were shooting from them. 'It's freeeeezing!' She breaststroked to the jetty's ladder, dark hair dripping. 'Slushie-cold,' she gasped. 'Aaaaaaargh!'

She disappeared under the waves and Isaac nearly cried out, but then she reappeared, hair swept back by the wash of the waves. She grabbed onto the ladder and pulled herself out with a

single heave. Water streamed from her body and she whooped again, beaming all the while. ‘Wooohoooo!’

Her face was flushed, her knuckles white. She looked up at Isaac with a wild and happy grin.

‘I’m king of the world!’ She climbed the rest of the ladder and jumped about on the jetty. ‘Yeeeeeeeah!’ she cried, then turned to Isaac. ‘You want me to give you a count? Down from three?’

He forced himself to take off his T-shirt, then sucked in a breath so large he thought his shivering chest might explode.

‘Yeah!’ Emmy cheered. ‘Ready? Three, two, one ...’ When Emmy yelled ‘Jump!’ he pushed himself over the edge of the jetty, into the air.

His brain was still on the jetty, debating whether or not to jump. It decided not to.

His body hit the icy water and everything went black. The ocean roared about his ears. Salt rushed at his eyes and into his mouth. His skin



was on fire. He fought for the surface, bursting into the air like an asthmatic whale. He had never felt this cold. Or this alive.

‘Whaaaa!’ His lungs were in shock. His lips couldn’t form proper sounds. Pins and needles jabbed him all over.

Emmy grinned down at him from the jetty. She had a white towel wrapped around her and appeared to be steaming in the cold. Either that or his vision was clouding over.

‘How good is that?’ she asked, face lit up like sunrise.

He swam to the ladder with frozen limbs, lifting himself free from the pin-pricking ice. She handed him a clean white towel. ‘Here, I thought maybe you might forget.’

Isaac took the towel gratefully, pulling it around his chattering body.

‘That was crazy.’

‘I know, right.’ Emmy grinned. ‘We’re total

legends. Let's get some chips to celebrate.'

'And donuts.' Lots of donuts.

They pulled on their T-shirts, wrapped the towels around their waists, and walked across the sand to their bikes. He felt as if sunshine walked with them.

'What do we do next?' Emmy asked through a mouthful of donut. 'I'm thinking the lighthouse. I dare us to bike all the way to the lighthouse, the one in the middle of the island.'

Isaac bit into three salty chips at once, puffing and swishing as their fluffy centres burned his tongue. He puffed and swished longer than strictly necessary while he thought. It was *his* turn for a dare. They were supposed to take it in turns.

Emmy seemed to sense his reservation. 'Next time you can have two in a row,' she promised. 'But for now, I dare us to ride to the lighthouse.'

Isaac's dare was going to be riding to the

salt lakes, but when you biked to the middle lighthouse, you biked past the salt lakes anyway. So it was sort of the same dare, which meant it was sort of like his turn anyway, right?

He was suddenly conscious of the dipping sun and his wet shorts and soggy towel. The glow of their jump was passing. Five o'clock was probably approaching. And he needed to get back to the cottage before Mum transformed into an unstoppable where's-my-boy-zilla and trampled the entire island in her desperate search. 'Can we do it tomorrow?'

Emmy pulled out her phone, made a show of checking the time. 'We could go right now, if we're quick.'

Isaac made a face. 'My mum is kind of big on being sensible. Super-sensible, actually.'

Emmy shrugged, flicking her drying hair. 'We're not babies. We can do what we want.' She looked at him. 'You worry too much.'

Isaac nodded. She was right. Absolutely right. He did worry too much. Especially since Mum worried enough for the both of them. And it wasn't like worrying would actually change anything.

But not-worrying could change a lot. Like if he arrived back late, he'd probably have to sketch at the kitchen table for the rest of his life. He loved drawing, but not that much.

'So tomorrow?' he tried again.

Emmy stared into the trees, as if she were considering. Isaac's stomach burned with chips and donuts and nerves.

Then she nodded. 'Tomorrow. I'll meet you here.' She checked her phone again. 'Say, eight o'clock?'

Eight was way too early. Mum was still making coffee and finishing breakfast. 'Maybe nine?'

She sighed, then agreed. 'Nine. But I'll be way earlier, so you can come whenever.'

The burn in Isaac's stomach morphed into an eruption of excitement. Tomorrow he was biking to the lighthouse! With Emmy!

Now he had to decide what to say to Mum.

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE ...

The next morning, when Isaac cycled to meet Emmy at the mall, Mum came too. She'd insisted.

'I just want to meet this girl,' she'd said. 'Make sure you'll be safe.'

Isaac knew Mum would never in a zillion lifetimes let him disappear all day without knowing exactly where he was, so he'd figured his only hope was to tell the truth. Hadn't he delivered the milk and bread on time and without injury? Hadn't he hung out with Emmy all afternoon and arrived safely home with only slightly damp hair? Wasn't he being an honest, responsible son right now, just by asking? And so Mum had agreed, on condition she got to meet Emmy first.

Now Isaac held his breath. He hoped Emmy hadn't done anything too obviously un-sensible. Like riding in her bathers. Or forgetting her helmet. Or spray-painting her face fluoro yellow with spots. Isaac got the feeling that for Emmy, sensible wasn't actually a priority.

Luckily, Emmy was wearing sensible trousers with a sensible jacket tied around her waist. Her sensible helmet was even on her head. The only thing on her face was a smile.

'Thanks for letting Isaac come today,' she said. 'We'll be super-sensible.' Isaac hid his grin. Emmy proceeded to show Mum the contents of her backpack. 'Water bottles, homemade chocolate muffins, map, money for the lighthouse tour, and this ...' She held up the shining central piece in her Sensible Plan. 'My phone,' she said. 'Anything happens, we can call.'

Mum looked across at Isaac and raised her eyebrows happily. She gave a slight nod that made

his heart leap. She was converted!

Mum gave Emmy her mobile number, just in case, and Emmy handed Mum a pre-prepared slip of paper with her own number on it. Sensible.

Then Mum gave Isaac some cash for the lighthouse tour. Embarrassingly, she kissed him right on the lips.

‘Be safe,’ she said. ‘I love you!’

He grunted and nodded, and he and Emmy took off. He managed to wave goodbye without wobbling too much.

‘How did you do that?’ he blurted, as soon as they were out of sight. ‘You convinced her, just like that!’

Emmy grinned and pulled a wheelie. ‘It’s easy when you know how. Come on!’

She pulled ahead and Isaac wondered about trying his own wheelie. Emmy wasn’t looking, so she wouldn’t see if he flunked out. But she might turn around at any moment. Maybe he’d try later.

They rode quickly, weaving between tourists who crouched low and fed figs to curious quokkas. They cruised past the minigolf and the lodge and the old cemetery, right to the edge of the first salt lake. It spread before them like a shivering jelly, edges whipped into foam.

They cycled on and Isaac realised the lake was lake-ier than he'd imagined. It was huge, stretching across to scrubby hills on the right, the horizon crowned with a whirling wind turbine. But straight ahead he could already see the lighthouse, poking its white head high. It didn't look so far. He was suddenly glad Emmy had dared them twice in a row. She was good at this game. And good at handling parents. Biking to the lighthouse was heaps better than just riding to the lakes.

There weren't any other cyclists, but Isaac spotted a lone grey duck on the water, its head tucked tightly into folded wings. *You know, duck,*

you'd have more fun with a friend, he thought.

They pedalled past another salt lake, then across a land bridge that was bounded by water on either side, but with no sensible fencing or safety protection. Mum would've worried. Emmy whooped. Isaac felt wonderful. The lakes were edged with bright red bracken and the water seemed almost pink. Emmy showed him the tiny, blood-red creatures that hung in its shallows. They looked like miniature mutant seahorses.

Then they hit the first hill, and the real work began.

After that first hill, the flat road became a kicking serpent. For every hill they conquered, another rose up, and the distant lighthouse never seemed any closer. They passed gnarled tea-trees and struggling scrub, saw snow-white daisies bobbing like stars in the wind, and sleeping quokkas, curled into the undergrowth and shadows. And still they rode. Soon it was

too tricky to talk. The wind roared in Isaac's ears, right next to his pulse. He hoped the wind was roaring in Emmy's ears too. He didn't want her to hear how much he was puffing.

He desperately wanted to check Emmy's map, to see how much further they had to go. He was thirsty and hungry and the next hill looked seriously impossible. But he didn't want to be first to beg for a break.

'How 'bout a break?' Emmy asked, turning her head to yell into the wind.

'If you want,' Isaac yelled back.

He gratefully followed Emmy's bike to the side of the road. She'd chosen a spot where the tea-trees offered protection from the wind and the brown earth seemed swept clean, as if by ghostly brooms.

Isaac tried to bring his breath back to normal. His nose was running, his eyes were streaming, his fingers felt permanently handlebar-shaped and

his legs felt like spaghetti. But he made a promise to himself: there was no way he was going to admit how tired he was.

Emmy dropped her bike to the ground and flopped on to her back in the soft dirt, making a starfish shape with her arms and legs. ‘I am totally pooped.’ She sat up, a twig stuck in her hair so she looked wilder than ever. ‘You want a muffin?’

He grinned and let himself collapse beside her. ‘Sure. You want a muesli bar?’

They ate and drank and Isaac could’ve stayed forever, but forever didn’t work out how he’d hoped. Only a couple of minutes into forever, three quokkas bounded in through the scrub, behaving more like shrunken grizzly bears.

‘Your bag!’ Emmy cried. ‘They’re eating it!’

Isaac jumped up and clapped and shouted, doing his best Incredibly Brave Defender impression to shoo the animals away, but they wouldn’t shoo. No wonder the floor was so clean.

‘They’re after the muesli bars!’ He stamped his feet and threw his hands in the air as he yelled. The quokkas just stared at him with their soft, black eyes, and ripped at his backpack with their sharp, black claws.

‘We better go,’ Emmy said.

Isaac darted in to rescue his bag and they jumped on their bikes, pedalling quickly away. Isaac’s body was rippling with adrenaline, but he tried to keep his voice airy. ‘How much further do you think?’

Emmy shrugged. ‘I guess we’re about halfway.’ And it was too late to turn back.



Isaac returned to fighting gravity and fighting the wind and blinking through the streaming of his eyes with every push of the pedals. He and Emmy screamed with excitement on the downhills, panted with concentrated effort on the ups. He began to think of the ride as a giant roller-coaster, speeding down the hills fast enough to steam at least part of the way back up. By the time they reached the signpost at the bottom of the lighthouse road, he'd almost forgotten he was tired.

'We made it!' Emmy whooped, though the lighthouse was still high above them.

'Woohoo!'

They walked the rest of the way, doggedly wheeling their bikes up a steep, curving road that made the other hills look like bumps.



... AND BEYOND!

Isaac and Emmy stood at the base of the towering lighthouse. Close up, the stone was cold and lumpy and almost grey, not the sheeny white he'd imagined. Somehow that made it more real. And it was enormous — so much bigger than he'd expected. No wonder it had looked so close, back at the salt lakes. He wondered about climbing all the way to the top. Was that really part of the plan?

‘Shall we?’ Emmy said, craning her neck to see the landing. It was high enough that Mum would’ve worried about oxygen levels.

He and Emmy paid their money and joined a tour. Their guide’s name was Jim. ‘You waiting for your mum and dad?’ he asked.

‘They’re back at the settlement,’ Emmy said casually.

‘We’re fine,’ explained Isaac, just as if he and Emmy often went cycling in wild places, just the two of them.

Two teenagers arrived on the bus with their parents, joining Jim’s tour at the last minute. Isaac nodded to them nonchalantly. *Wheeee, look at me*, he wanted to shout.

Jim explained the rules — no running, no pushing, no dangling from the roof — and they began to climb.

‘Let’s count the stairs,’ Emmy hissed. Isaac tried, but between gasping for breath and trying not to trip, it proved impossible. The stairs curled tighter than a barrel wave, so some parts were wide and others narrow. The windows were tiny and there weren’t that many, and before long Isaac was dizzy and puffing harder than when he’d been riding his bike.

At the top Emmy dug Isaac in the ribs. ‘One hundred and forty-four,’ she said.

Isaac nodded, trying to catch his breath. He didn’t even have to pretend to be distracted by the view. It was amazing. They were amazing, him and Emmy. ‘Take our picture,’ he suggested. ‘On your phone. You could send it to my mum.’

Emmy shrugged. ‘Maybe later,’ she said. ‘Come on, I want to show you something,’ and she pointed off into the shimmery distance.

Together they looked down at the roads they’d ridden, talked about bringing paper planes to launch next time, then decided whether they’d rather be lighthouse keepers or famous rock stars. Isaac went for rock star, because that would seem cooler, but Emmy chose lighthouse keeper.

‘No more nagging,’ she sighed wistfully. ‘Think of the peace and quiet.’

‘Who nags you?’ laughed Isaac, thinking how lucky she was that her dad wasn’t a total worry

freak, not like some parents he knew ...

‘Yeah, you’re right,’ she grinned. ‘Of course. No one. So I’d be a rock star too.’

When they climbed down, Isaac remembered to count: one hundred and fifty-five steps. Eleven more than Emmy. No wonder his legs were wobbly.

They ate lunch at the base of the lighthouse.

‘How about now for that photo?’ Isaac asked.

Emmy shifted uncomfortably. ‘Hey, check that out!’ she said, pointing at a bird of prey circling the scrub. He hadn’t realised she was so into birds.

The cycle home seemed to take just as long, and Isaac had never been so pleased to see a salt lake.

‘Nearly there!’ he yelled.

‘We did it!’ Emmy yelled back.

At the shop they bought themselves celebratory choc milks and a packet of jelly snakes, then sat on a table with their feet on the

seats. They grinned at each other, snakes hanging out like jelly tongues.

‘What time’s your mum expecting you?’ Emmy asked. ‘Have we got time for another dare?’

Isaac didn’t want to head back just yet. And he didn’t want Emmy to think he had to go home right away. Plus it was his turn to dare. ‘Dare you to snort that milk out your nose.’

So she tried, and it didn’t work.

And they laughed, and then it did.

They laughed some more, till other people started looking at them. Isaac felt their eyes on him and his brilliant friend, so he laughed even louder.

He still had another dare. It was his turn for two in a row.

‘What’ll it be?’ Emmy asked, wiping choc milk dribbles from her nose.

Isaac sucked in a breath of salty air. The island was his oyster, but not in a slimy-chunk-

of-phlegm kind of way. More in a waiting-to-be-discovered kind of way. So what dare should he choose next?

‘Oh no,’ Emmy hissed. ‘Quick!’ She jumped off the table and ducked behind the seat.

Isaac ducked too, his heart strangled in his chest. ‘What?’

From under the table, he followed Emmy’s gaze, scanning for trouble. Her eyes were on the man with the jeans and red jacket, from the jetty. The man was parking his bike, with the toddler still strapped in up front. The kindy kid was behind him, doing wide circles on the balance bike. The man had empty shopping bags tied to the back of his bike and he looked stressed.

‘Come on,’ Emmy whispered. She grabbed her bag and snuck away, off the bakery’s deck and behind the building.

Isaac followed. ‘Was that your dad?’

Emmy nodded, stifling a laugh that sounded



empty. 'Isn't it great? We have this cool game, sort of like hide-and-seek. Dad loves it'

Isaac nodded slowly. The man didn't seem to be loving it, but then again, he was busy looking after two little kids.

'Are they your brothers?' Isaac had always wanted a brother or sister. Did she play hide-and-seek with them?

Emmy threw up her hands. 'I know, right? So annoying. But anyway, check it out. A peacock.'

Out of nowhere, a bright blue peacock had appeared, strutting towards the lodge with its iridescent kaleidoscope tail swishing behind.

'Dare us to follow it!' Isaac said.

So they did. It wandered along the empty road, nibbling at nothings in the shadow of the trees, never leaving its intricate tail too far behind. Sunlight gleamed off the green feathers, almost as if they were glowing. Isaac decided he would follow it anywhere, but in the end it didn't go anywhere good.

Later, when they'd finished following the peacock, they headed to the beach.

'Dare us to carve our names in an old cuttlefish,' said Emmy.

'We can throw them into the sea,' said Isaac. 'Like a message.'

They collected washed-up cuttlefish and sat on the fishing jetty, carving letters into the soft white bone. Isaac carved DAD next to ISAAC, just to see what it looked like. Then he carved MUM next to DAD. It wasn't Mum's fault she was always so worried.

He wondered about Emmy's mum. Was she still around? Or did Emmy need a photo to remember her face, like Isaac needed for his dad?

'You want a really cool dare?' Emmy asked, looking up from her carving.

'Sure.'

Her brown eyes stared into him, then she shook her head. 'Nah. You'd never be allowed ...'

‘Allowed what?’

Emmy shrugged and went back to her carving. ‘It’s just, I heard the salt lakes have something in them, some algae thing. If you go there at night, and you run your fingers through the water, the water lights up.’

‘Like, glows?’

‘Bright white,’ she nodded. ‘It’s something to do with the algae, so when it’s disturbed, it makes light.’ She kept carving. ‘I always thought it’d be cool to see, but it doesn’t matter.’

Isaac thought it would be loads better than cool.

He thought about asking Mum if he could ride with Emmy to the salt lakes in the dead of night. Mum’d ask why. He’d say so we can swish our hands through the algae water and watch it glow. And then Mum would fit both his ankles with flashing electronic cuffs and he’d never again be trusted to make even vaguely sensible decisions.

It'd be vacation care every holidays, for the rest of his life.

To change the subject, he pointed to the waist-high piles of seagrass washed up on the sand in a corner of the bay. The piles looked dry and crunchy.

'I dare us to run across that,' he said.

They stashed their carvings in their bags and sprinted across the soft-hard sand of the beach. Turned out the piles were bouncy, like salty trampolines.

'Dare us to jump from one pile to the other, like we're on the moon.'

They jumped and fell and laughed and jumped some more, and the night stalk to the salt lakes was forgotten. Almost.

That afternoon, when Isaac once again arrived back at the little yellow cottage safe and sound,

Mum said she was happy for him to hang out with Emmy the next day as well. Isaac couldn't believe it. Emmy was like his lucky charm.

That night it poured, so the next morning, they met early at the mall, in search of mud and puddles. They rode along the disused railway track, all the way to the turnoff for the barracks, then they took turns riding through the lake-sized puddles at the bottom of the hill. They rode right through the settlement, all the way to the other lighthouse, on the coast. They rode up rocky paths and down muddy slopes. Then they ate donuts and snorted choc milk.

It was awesome. But that night, when he peered out at the moon beyond the cold glass of his bedroom window, Isaac wondered again about the night stalk. Emmy was right. Mum would never let him. But what if she did? He couldn't stop imagining how it would feel, with the water glowing and Emmy beside him and all around

them only darkness.

The next day, when they rode to the shipwreck bay, he wondered about the night stalk. And that afternoon, when they explored the pitted limestone of the cliffs, he wondered about the night stalk. He wanted to ride in the moonlight to the salt lakes, he really did. He wanted to watch the rippling water bristle with light.

‘What if my mum said okay?’ he asked suddenly. They were high in a fig tree, eating lollies and watching bikes and pedestrians buzz around beneath them.

‘Okay about what?’ Emmy asked, mouth full of sweet witchetty grubs and sour ears.

‘About the night stalk,’ he said, holding a killer python by the neck. ‘To the lakes.’

She grinned a lolly grin. ‘Then I’d say you’re on. Because Dad’s said I can go. So now we can both go. We should go tonight.’

Isaac felt his stomach twist. He hadn’t asked

his mum. He was only thinking about asking. But maybe she'd say yes?

Yeah right, thought Isaac.

'Sure thing,' he said. He bit off the python's head chewing the jelly goodness. 'Tonight.'

'How about one o'clock?' said Emmy. 'Meet you at the mall.'

Isaac didn't hesitate. He just said yes. Mum would be asleep by one o'clock. One would be perfect.

'The mall,' he agreed, already picturing a midnight feast by the magical light of the glowing lake.

PREPARING FOR THE STALK

Isaac did intend to ask Mum about the night stalk. He'd been sensible this entire holiday. He'd come back at the times she'd asked. He hadn't got sunburnt, or dehydrated or attacked by a quokka. He'd hadn't so much as stubbed a toe. But still, he hesitated.

'You're very quiet,' Mum said over spag bol in the little yellow cottage. 'You're not coming down with something?'

Whoops. He tried to think of something sensible to tell Mum about his day. 'We rode to the bay with the shipwreck today ...'

But maybe marine disaster wasn't the best choice of subject ...

'And I found an interesting shell,' he added quickly.

They talked about shells and driftwood for a while. Then Mum asked what he wanted to do in the morning. 'Perhaps we could play minigolf?' she suggested. 'Emmy too.'

Isaac nodded. *Or perhaps I might be crashed out in bed after spending half the night cycling through the wilderness to explore a glowing lake,* he thought. He moved spaghetti around with his fork. He'd ask Mum about the midnight excursion just before bed.

He finished dinner, had a shower, changed into pyjamas, and brushed his teeth. Then he went to kiss Mum goodnight. *This is it,* thought Isaac. *It's time to ask.*

'There you are,' Mum said. 'I thought you might like to play some cards?'

'No thanks,' he said.

'Are you not feeling well?' She examined him, her kind eyes appearing old, and concerned. He tried to imagine how it had been for her, with him still such a tiny baby.

‘Mum ...’ he said.

‘Is that a scratch?’ Her fingers brushed his cheek. ‘Let me put on some Savlon.’

Isaac could hardly feel the scratch. He’d scraped a twig when he and Emmy were climbing the tree. He told Mum it was fine, but she was already fetching the first-aid kit.

‘There,’ she said, nodding with satisfaction. ‘Now, what was it you were going to say, love?’

Isaac shook his head. Mum would never understand. ‘Nothing,’ he lied. ‘I’m just feeling tired. So, an early night for me. Goodnight, Mum.’

‘See you in the morning, love. Thanks for being such a good kid. Hope you’re feeling better tomorrow.’

She gave him a hug, and Isaac hugged her back, in a rip-out-my-shameful-heart kind of way.

He went straight to bed, unable to meet Mum’s eye. He closed the bedroom door behind him and gave himself a lecture. Time to banish guilt from

his heart. Because this was his holiday too, his life. And because it was early to bed, early to rise. Very early. He needed to meet Emmy at the mall, at exactly one hour after midnight.

Safely inside his room, Isaac began to prepare.

Warm jacket. Torch. Water bottle. The rest of the muesli bars. Two apples. The leftover mixed lollies and half a packet of snakes. He wished he had some more exciting, midnight feast kind of food, but maybe Emmy could help with that.

Before he switched off his bedroom light, he changed out of his PJs and into his jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. See how sensible he could be? By preparing now, he'd make less noise later. Now that *was* sensible.

Isaac got into bed and lay there, trying to stay awake. He left the curtain open, so moonlight streamed in his window. He didn't have a phone like Emmy, so he couldn't set an alarm. All he had

was his watch, and he watched it.

It seemed to take Mum ages to finish what she was doing. Page-turning, kettle-boiling, quiet dish-washing. Then eventually, teeth-brushing, followed by the snap of her light turning off. The cottage finally plunged into total silence. All Isaac could hear was the gentle roll of waves from outside.

He waited an eternity, checked his watch over and again, to make sure it hadn't stopped. Then, at twenty past midnight, when he could stand it no longer, he carefully, quietly rolled from his bed. He shrugged into his jacket and swung on his backpack.

Outside, the kitchen was cold and dark and silent. He moved to collect the cottage key from where Mum kept it on the mantelpiece, but it wasn't there. He started to search other surfaces with the stealth of a practising ninja. The kitchen bench. The kitchen table. On top of the fridge. But

there was no key, and it was starting to weird him out, all that furniture, just sitting there, empty and still.

The time was now twenty to one. He still had some minutes to find the key, but perhaps he should think up a key-alternative. He could jam open the front door, but it would be freezing and windy and the door would probably bang. He could leave without a key, but then he wouldn't be able to get back in. He could fashion a key from a hairpin and some baby oil, like in the movies! Legend! He checked the bathroom, but there was only a bar of soap, no hairpins, and no key.

The key had to be in with Mum.

He took a deep breath and cracked the doorhandle to Mum's room. She was asleep on the single bed, her face curiously peaceful without the wrinkle of daytime stress. He spotted the key on her bedside table, on top of her book. Isaac crept closer, reaching out with one long arm. The key



gave a plaintive clink as he lifted it from the book. Mum stirred.

‘Graham?’ she called.

Dad’s name. Isaac’s throat closed like a clamp, his hand still outstretched and the key tangled like weed at the end of his fingers. But she was asleep.

He waited, still and silent as a cliff.

Mum turned in her sleep. She didn’t call out again. A trapped breath eased from Isaac’s chest. He pulled the key in, like he was hauling a delicate fish from the ocean, then he backed slowly out of Mum’s room. When the door clicked closed, he felt as if he’d escaped some desperate trap.

He walked straight to the front door, opened the lock. The door swung wide and the night’s cold air brushed in. Isaac hesitated, remembering Mum’s face. Was this really a sensible decision? Then he thought of Emmy’s face, Emmy’s words: They were old enough. They could be trusted. So, was it a sensible decision? Did he even care?

He slipped through the open door, then carefully pulled it closed, wincing only when the lock clunked back into place.

Outside in the yellow streetlight the limestone walls seemed to leer and lean. Trees swung and moved with the wind, and the ocean waves sounded closer than before.

Isaac felt alive. He found his bike and wheeled it silently from the little yellow yard. Heart busting from his chest, he clipped on his helmet and began the glide down the deserted streets to the mall.

MOONLIGHT ADVENTURE

The mall was empty, except for quokkas. The furry creatures were everywhere. Their tiny shapes covered the grassy valley where families sat to picnic during the daytime. They moved in the darkness beyond the streetlights. They gathered in their dozens beneath the enormous fig tree he and Emmy had climbed the day before. Isaac was forced to get off his bike and manoeuvre carefully through the mass of busy bodies, just to wheel past them, like it was some kind of super-cute obstacle course. They weren't even scared. Worse, some hopped towards him, and he nearly tripped over. His shadow twitched and morphed as he weaved and dodged into the empty mall.

He'd made it.

GENTS



In front of him, yellow streetlights lit silent pavers. No tourists on bikes, no kids in prams, no crows, no seagulls, no peacocks. Just silent quokkas, feasting on figs or cleaning the streets. No Emmy.

Isaac settled down to wait. She'd never been late before. He sat on a bench on the edge of the mall, taking comfort from the quokkas as they went about their business. Wind whistled through the empty street and Isaac thought he could hear the ticking of his watch, or was it his heart?

Something whirled across the ground, catching his eye and rattling straight for him with a crackling and a rustling and ...

An empty chip packet. Isaac swallowed hard. What kind of person chucked their chip packet on the floor? It was dirty, it was ugly, and he'd nearly peed his pants.

Where was Emmy?

‘BOO!’

Isaac jumped so high he left the bench.

‘Emmy! You idiot!’

Emmy dissolved into laughter. ‘You should’ve seen your face! You were like, whoa!’ She made a face that might’ve been funny if Isaac wasn’t so furious.

‘Whatever.’ He bristled, busily preparing his bike to hide his shock. ‘You would’ve been the same.’

Emmy laughed. ‘Not me. I’m not scared of anything.’

‘Well, are you ready already? You’re late.’ Isaac was suddenly regretting his decision to come. Emmy had freaked him out, it was cold, he was cross, and he was tired of Emmy always breaking the rules and doing as she pleased. He thought they were friends.

They cycled in silence through the deserted town, following the yellow dot, dot, dot of streetlights until there was only one street, and it

was no longer yellow but midnight black. Isaac stayed deliberately silent. He hoped Emmy might realise why.

The moon was bright, but the wind was cold and strong. Clouds whipped across the sky, sometimes blocking the moonlight so the island plunged into an abyss of solid black. They just rode right through it. The first time the moon disappeared, Isaac wanted to cry out, but soon riding in the inky black made him feel invincible, as if he could face any challenge and come out unscathed. He even forgot he was cross. The cold bit into his hands as he whizzed down the hill to the lake. It bit into his eyes, too. He imagined his tiny tears sparkling like diamonds.

They seemed to ride faster in the darkness, stopping only when they reached the first lake, where he'd seen the lone duck the other day. It wasn't there now. Probably tucked up warm and safe, cuddling with its other ducks, dreaming

happy duck dreams.

‘Is this the place?’ he asked.

Emmy pulled up. He was pleased to see she was puffing. ‘I guess so.’

In the distance he saw the lighthouse beacon flash, blinding white. Yes, this was it. Would the water glow as white as the light?

Out of habit they pulled their bikes to the side of the road, then stepped carefully over the twisted plants to the lake’s rocky edge.

‘Where’s a good spot?’

Isaac tried to get close enough to put his hand in, without being close enough to soak every inch of his shoes. Just every second inch. This better be worth it.

He sat on his haunches, took a big breath, then whirled his fingers through the moonlit water. Nothing happened. He whirled again, the rush of water echoing in his ears.

‘It’s not working.’

Emmy was crouched a couple of metres away. The water wobbled where she'd touched it, but there was no light. No glow. 'Me neither.'

Isaac tried again. Nothing.

'Perhaps it's not this lake,' Emmy said. 'Perhaps it's that other one, further on. The one with the pink.'

Isaac remembered the pink lake, with the red seahorse creatures in its shallows and bright bracken at its edge. Of course it was the pink lake. What better place for magical glowing lights?

They grabbed their bikes and rode a bit further. Just to the pink lake.

But the pink lake was the same.

'Nothing,' Isaac said, trying to keep the accusation from his voice.

'Me neither.' Emmy sounded confused. She ran her fingers through the salty water again. Currents rushed and ripples danced, but nothing glowed. 'I dunno.'

‘But you said you knew ...’

Emmy stood up. ‘I never said I knew, I only said I thought ... But it doesn’t matter. We’re out, having an adventure. Isn’t that what you wanted?’

She climbed back to the road.

Isaac followed, unsure what to do next. Here they were, alone in all the world, with the moon shining and the night alive. And there was no glowing lake, no magical moment. He’d gone to all this trouble. He’d lied to his mum. Dodged a million quokkas. Developed a lifelong phobia of chip packets. And for what?

The lighthouse beacon shone again. He didn’t want to go home, and he was still a bit cross. ‘How ’bout we keep going? All the way to the lighthouse.’

Because Emmy wasn’t the only one who could have crazy ideas.

He looked at her, but she was staring up at the sky. ‘Look at all the stars,’ she breathed. ‘We don’t

see this many at home.'

He stared up at the universe, listening to water lapping the lake's edge. Something tiny rustled in the undergrowth, probably a lizard or a bird. He breathed deep. It was beautiful.

'Serious,' he said. 'Let's do it. It'll be fun.'

Because it was fun. Being with Emmy was fun, even if she did make him mad.

'Sorry it didn't glow,' she said.

'Me too.' He grinned, trying to cheer her up. 'At least we tried.'

'And sorry I scared you, back at the mall.'

He guffawed. 'You didn't scare me.'

'No, of course not,' she said, with a smile in her voice, so he knew that she knew that he'd been terrified. Still, he felt better that she'd apologised.

'Come on. Dare us to go further.'

So they did.

And Isaac felt a wild kind of joy.

He and Emmy rode together up and down the

hills, yelling and whooping and not caring who heard. They didn't care that their noses ran and their eyes watered. The roads were shiny with moonlight, and Isaac was warm under his jacket, and he felt as if anything was possible.

'Check it out!' Emmy cried, pulling a wheelie as she raced up the hill.

This time Isaac didn't hesitate. He pushed down hard on his pedals, pulled with all his strength on his handlebars, and pulled back, hoping and hoping he could do a wheelie.

He felt his front tyre begin to lift. This was it! He was really doing a wheelie!

Emmy cried out. 'Quokka!'

He heard the screech of her bike braking and swerving, felt his own bike tipping and falling.

Oh no.

They were having an accident. It felt like a bad one. What would Mum say? How would she manage? What —

He crashed, without really knowing where he was or where Emmy was or which way was up or down. For a moment the two bikes were as one, tangled and airborne and struggling to stay upright. Then they tumbled, tore, rolled, slammed into the tarmac. Metal screamed and spokes snapped and fabric ripped and a hot burning erupted in Isaac's shoulder that was at once painful and sticky and wet.

He lay there, limbs tangled in his bike, awkwardly, painfully twisted where he'd come to rest.

The night was silent.

'Emmy?' he croaked.



RECOVERING

For a long time, nothing moved.

‘Emmy!’ he said again. ‘Are you there?’

No. Not Emmy. What would he would do if she was injured? If she was —

Emmy groaned.

She was alive. ‘Are you okay?’ Isaac asked.

The question hung. Isaac began to panic, then Emmy creaked out a rusty, ‘Yeah. You?’

Emmy was okay. She was alive, and she was okay.

Isaac tested his shoulder. *Me too*, he thought.
I’m alive and I’m okay.

Then his enthusiasm passed. We’re miles from home, it’s the middle of the night, half my arm is smeared onto the road, and Mum is going to —

Mum! He really kinda sorta wanted his mum right now.

‘I’m okay,’ he managed.

With all the precision of a painful and intricate dance, they separated bodies from bikes, bums from tarmac, reality from hopeful dream.

Isaac’s bike looked as if it had melted in the sun. His front tyre was buckled, his seat was ripped, and his front brakes were stuck on permanently. Plus his shoulder ached as if he’d slammed into a fast-moving dumbbell delivery truck.

Emmy’s bike wasn’t much better. Her handlebars were twisted, and at least three spokes were snapped where Isaac’s shoe had gone through her wheel.

‘At least we didn’t hit the quokka,’ she said. Her voice cracked in the dark.

Isaac nodded automatically. How were they going to get back? His bike was a wreck. There

was no way he could ride it. He turned his attention to Emmy's BMX. If they could straighten her handlebars, maybe it wouldn't matter about the spokes.

'Can you still ride?' he asked. He could stand on the pegs, hold on to her shoulders. They could dink back to the settlement.

Emmy shook her head. 'My knee ...'

It was hard to see details, but Emmy's trouser leg looked messy and Isaac wasn't good with blood. Maybe he could ride the BMX, and Emmy could hold onto his shoulders. But his shoulder ...

'It's okay,' Emmy said. 'It'll be okay.'

That's when Isaac remembered Emmy's phone. They had a phone. It really *would* be okay.

'We can ring your dad!'

They were saved! Emmy's dad had given her permission to go on the night stalk. He was the kind of parent who understood about independence and responsibility. He had given

Emmy her own phone, especially for occasions just like this.

But Emmy wasn't celebrating. She was silent.

'Your dad wouldn't mind. He could come get us.' He didn't have a car, but he could probably borrow one. Or a luggage truck. They could ride up the back.

Emmy shook her head.

'What? Why not?'

She looked at her shoes. 'It doesn't work.'

'What?'

She looked at her shoes again, then sniffed. 'I nicked it from my dad, okay? It's his old phone. There's no credit, no SIM card, it doesn't work. Plus he'd freak if he found out.'

'Found out what?'

She fiddled with her left sneaker, then cleared her throat. 'That I've sneaked out. I'm supposed to be grounded. He says he's fed up with me always disappearing.'

Isaac felt his head might explode. 'But you said ...'

'Well I lied.'

There was a silence then. When Emmy spoke again, she sounded angry. 'I lied, and so what? I'm sick of being stuck at home with Oscar and Ajay. Dad's only got time for them, so what's the point of me even being there. I'm just someone to fetch nappies and mop spills.' She sniffed again, and Isaac realised she might be crying. Emmy. Crying. 'I hate it,' she said bitterly.

Isaac gulped. What to do, what to say? For a long time, they said nothing.

'What about your mum?' Emmy asked.

'She thinks I'm still in bed.'

'Well then we're both stuffed, aren't we?'

Isaac felt like giving up.

The night sounds had started up again. Above them wind flowed like a waterfall through the leaves. Tiny creatures rustled in the scrub. Except

for these whispers, they were entirely alone.

Emmy was right. They were stuffed. He pictured Mum's reaction in the morning, when she found he wasn't there.

If they weren't back before sunrise, tucked safely in their beds, Mum would find out he'd lied to her. Emmy's dad would discover she'd sneaked out. Both parents would be furious and the rest of the holiday would be a write-off. They'd never trust Emmy or Isaac again. Mum would be more paranoid than ever. He'd probably be a hundred years old before she even let him check the letterbox by himself.

He looked at Emmy. She was crouched on the ground. Her shoulders were shaking. Was it shock or the cold? Because it was certainly getting colder. He had to do something. Take responsibility.

He reached out for an idea.

'Dare us to cover this up,' he said. 'Dare us to

wheel the bikes home, and be back in our beds before morning.’

He waited. The wind blew. Emmy slowly stopped shaking. She wiped at her eyes, sniffed, then stood up.

‘You’re on,’ she said, and there was only the tiniest wobble in her words.

MAKING IT HOME

The first thing they did was eat. One-and-a-half chocolate muffins, two muesli bars and an apple each. Emmy hadn't brought much else, so Isaac made them eat all of it, all except the lollies and jelly snakes.

‘We'll eat them at the salt lakes,’ he said. ‘Like a prize, for making it that far.’

Emmy nodded and Isaac felt warmer with something in his stomach. The sweets were something to look forward to, to keep them pushing on. They drank from their bottles, then prepared for the long trek home.

Isaac swung his bag onto his undamaged shoulder, placed both hands on his handlebars and gave a test push. There was a dreadful grating sound as he forced his bike forward.

The brake pads were rubbing on the twisted rim, protesting each demented turn of the wheel.

‘At least I won’t lose you in the dark,’ Emmy said, and Isaac laughed. It felt good to laugh. Slightly maniacal, but good.

Emmy shrugged on her own bag and picked up the BMX. She had to hold the handlebars crooked, but then the bike went straight. That seemed to work well enough, and the only sound was the plink, plink, plink of broken spokes as the wheel turned around.

‘Yours is almost musical,’ said Isaac, and Emmy laughed softly.

He took a deep breath. ‘Okay.’ And they started walking.

Straight away he noticed the wind. It had been behind them on the way here, now it was blasting in his face. Emmy’s hair flew out behind her like wild oats. Icy cold reached into the gaps in his jacket and made his shoulder ache.

Isaac tried to ignore the grinding and screeching of his twisted wheel. As he forced himself forwards, forced the bike forwards, he looked up at the stars. There was no need to watch the road. There were no cars this time of night, and every creature this side of the island could hear their busted bikes coming.

‘Not too bad,’ he said, forcibly cheery. ‘Moonlight. Few clouds. And we’ll soon be warm with all this walking.’

Except Emmy couldn’t walk, not fast enough to stay warm. She was limping, and there was a darkness that had soaked through at her knee.

‘I’m okay,’ she insisted, but after only a minute, she stopped. ‘Actually, I’m thirsty.’ She made a big show of getting out her water bottle, having a drink. Finally, after she’d packed her bottle back into her bag, she said, ‘I’m good now, I’m okay.’

But now Isaac knew: not everything Emmy said was true.

He took off his jacket and his long-sleeved shirt, the wind cutting into his bare chest like animal claws. He rushed back into the jacket, zipping it tight. Then he tied his shirt around Emmy's wet knee. So maybe first-aid courses *were* good for something.

'I'll take your bag,' he said. 'To make it easier on your leg.'

He expected her to protest, but she only passed the bag over. 'Thanks.'

'You could maybe sit side-saddle,' he said. 'So you could take the weight off.' He showed her how, and after a bit of practice she could sort of scoot along using her good leg as an oar.

There was no more wetness at Emmy's knee, and despite the hill climbs, when she had to get off and walk, they made slightly better progress. Isaac's broken bike was resisting all the way, and he felt himself warm up. This time he didn't care if Emmy heard him puffing and panting. His friend

stayed strangely quiet, so he focused on filling the eerie silence with chatter, and tried to get her to do the same.

‘What if you could only eat one food for the rest of your life?’ he asked. But that was too easy. She chose hot chips. He chose donuts. It was time to up the stakes.

‘Would you rather eat fried tarantula or raw squid?’ he said.

Emmy’s laugh exploded. ‘What?’ But it didn’t stop her from carefully choosing the squid. She wasn’t keen on hairy spider legs, but Isaac went for the tarantula. He figured frying would burn off the hairs.

‘Would you rather go to Antarctica or the Moon?’ Isaac asked next. Emmy chose Antarctica, for the penguins and seals. Isaac chose the Moon. For the bouncing around and peeing in a bottle.

She laughed again and his heart thrilled. They talked like this for a long while, till he asked

‘Would you rather fly, or be invisible?’

They both chose fly, and were quiet after that.

That’s when they heard something moving in the bushes. It wasn’t an ordinary something, not like the soft rustlings and sighings of the night. It was louder. Larger. Chip-packet-scarier.

They stopped dead and listened hard. The wind had dropped and Isaac was sweating inside his jacket, but now he turned cold. Whatever it was, it was coming straight for them.

Isaac put down the bags and his bike, and prepared for combat. They were alone and injured in the wilderness. And now there was an unknown predator coming for them. It was Mum’s worst nightmare. It was his worst nightmare. But he had Emmy now, and he wouldn’t go down without a fight.

When the animals burst from the bushes, there were more of them than he’d imagined. And they came straight for him.



‘Quokkas!’ Isaac’s voice was almost hysterical with relief. ‘They’re quokkas.’

‘Snakes!’ Emmy yelled.

Isaac jumped, wildly searching the ground. But it was too dark, they were too quick, he saw nothing.

‘In the bag,’ Emmy cried. ‘Save our snakes. The quokkas ...’

The furry beasts tore into Isaac’s backpack with their teeth. He raced over, yelling and stomping his feet, but too late. All the lollies had been compromised.

‘They’re still okay to eat,’ Emmy insisted.

Isaac shook his head. ‘No way. Quokkas have germs, on their teeth especially. It’s better we don’t eat them.’ He thought of Mum, thought she might even be proud.

Thinking of Mum added to the crushing loss of the snakes and he suddenly felt tired. They had no food left. They weren’t in Antarctica or on the

Moon; they weren't invisible and they couldn't fly. He just wanted to be home. He bundled the mauled snakes into his bag. It was better the quokkas didn't eat them either.

'Ready?' Isaac asked.

'Ready,' Emmy said.

They scoot-walked and screech-biked on.

They were close to the salt lakes now, Isaac could smell them. But they were also closer to dawn.

Time was running out if they were going to get back to the settlement and into their beds before breakfast. And how was he going to explain his shoulder? Bad nightmare? Savage insect? And what about Emmy's knee?

'We're in trouble, aren't we?' Emmy said.

But Isaac didn't want to give up yet. There was still time.

ONE MORE DARE

They limped past the salt lakes and up the steep hill, past the minigolf and the lodge and through the dawn-coloured mall. The first light was soft but the wind was cool and there was no one about. It was still early. They were still on time.

‘We did it,’ Emmy said softly. ‘We made it back.’

Isaac knew he should be ecstatic. He had the cottage key. He could sneak inside, then complain of a headache when Mum got up. He could spend the whole day in bed. If Mum woke when he was sneaking in, he could say he went out to watch the sunrise, but was now feeling ill. Back to bed. It was easy.

So maybe he was just tired, but he didn’t feel ecstatic. He thought about the carvings he’d made

on the cuttlefish. He thought about Mum, alone in her bed. Trusting him to be tucked in bed too. He thought about Emmy.

‘I don’t think I can do it,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘I can’t lie to my mum. Not again.’

‘Then why’d you lie in the first place?’ Emmy asked.

Isaac looked to the cracked pavement. *Dare you to tell the truth*, he thought.

‘I wanted you to like me,’ he said. ‘I didn’t want you to think I was being bossed around by my mum the whole time.’

There. She probably thought he was a joke.

She regarded him, expressionless.

Then she said, ‘Me too. I wanted you to like me. I wanted you to think Dad liked me too.’ Her voice cracked. ‘I didn’t want you to realise he just didn’t care.’

Isaac stopped walking. ‘Of course he cares.

Why do you think he grounded you?’

Emmy shrugged. ‘Because he’s mean.’

‘No, you meathead.’ Isaac grinned. ‘It’s because he’s worried about you.’

Emmy scowled. ‘Well he sure chooses a strange way to show it.’

Isaac stared at his surly friend. ‘So do you.’

She was quiet then, and they walked some more in silence. Emmy’s hair was knotted and full of twigs. Her bike was wrecked. One of her legs was wrapped in his shirt and stained with black-red blood.

‘I dare us to confess,’ he said.

They’d both be grounded for life, but at least he wouldn’t have to lie to Mum any more.

Emmy stared at him, then shook her head. Isaac’s heart dropped.

‘You can’t dare us,’ she said. ‘Because it’s not your turn. You’ve already had two in a row.’ Then she grinned madly. ‘So *I* dare us to confess,’ she

said. 'At the cafe. Fifteen minutes. You bring your mum. I'll bring Dad. And Oscar. And Ajay.'

'And not a word till then,' Isaac said.

She nodded. 'Not a word.'

When Isaac woke Mum up and insisted she come with him to the cafe, she wasn't happy. She demanded answers.

'Sorry Mum. I'll explain everything, only we've got to get to the cafe.'

Emmy and her family arrived late, but that was to be expected. Oscar was crying for breakfast, and Ajay was still in his pyjamas. Emmy's dad looked more tired than cross.

'What's all this about?' he asked, sliding into the seat opposite Mum.

'I have the same question,' said Mum. She smiled at little Oscar. 'But first some breakfast. And maybe some coffee for us?'

Emmy's dad gave a grateful nod. He organised Ajay, and Mum organised eggs and toast and hash browns and coffees. Mum pulled the first-aid kit from her bag and fixed Emmy's knee while they waited for breakfast, and then both parents turned to business.

'What's going on?' Mum asked.

'And the truth this time,' said Emmy's dad.

Emmy nodded. Isaac took a deep breath. And they told the whole story, right from the very first dare. When they got to the bit about jumping off the jetty, Isaac's mum gasped and Emmy's dad smiled. When they told the part about sneaking out to the salt lakes in the middle of the night, Isaac's mum shook her head. Emmy's dad closed both his eyes.

'You could have been killed,' Mum said.

'We nearly were,' said Isaac. And he kept telling, about the quokka and the crash. About the bleeding knee and skinned shoulder. About



BREAKFAST
MENU

BACON & EGGS

BIRCHER MUESLI

EGG & BENEDICT

TEA COFFEE

JUICES

predators in the night.

‘I can’t believe it,’ said Isaac’s mum.

‘Far out,’ said Emmy’s dad.

And finally, they told how they’d made it to the settlement, all the way safely back. And how they’d decided to tell the truth.

‘Sensible decision,’ said Emmy’s dad.

‘Super-sensible,’ agreed Isaac’s mum, and she smiled at Emmy’s dad.

‘Well,’ said Emmy’s dad, sitting back in his chair. ‘I don’t know what to say, I’m just so pleased you’re back safe. You kids did a good job to stick together, you did well to make it back.’ He had a catch in his voice.

Emmy did too. ‘Thanks Dad,’ she said. She stared at her lap and there was an awkward silence, then she looked up. ‘Sorry I keep running away.’

Emmy’s dad looked surprised but happy, and even happier when they had a hug. While they

were hugging, Mum looked at Isaac.

‘Next time you plan something crazy like this, you need to let me know,’ she said.

Next time?

‘And we need to get you a phone,’ Mum continued. ‘So you can call if you need me. Anytime, you can call me and I’ll come. Okay?’

‘Okay Mum,’ Isaac said.

Thank you, thank you, Isaac thought.

And then he said it out loud. ‘Thanks Mum.’

She kissed him on the head, and he kissed her on the cheek.

‘But you, young lady, are still grounded,’ said Emmy’s dad, pulling out of their hug at last. ‘I need you to stay close to the house for the rest of today. You’ve been up all night and your knee needs rest. I’ll do my best to keep the kids quiet so you can sleep.’

‘Thanks Dad,’ she said. ‘But I’ll help too. I know they’re a handful.’

Isaac looked at his mum. She looked at him and nodded.

‘Maybe I can help too,’ Isaac said. ‘If that’s okay?’ He looked to Emmy’s dad, suddenly nervous, but the big man just smiled. Emmy whooped out loud.

‘That’d be awesome!’

‘Do you like hide-and-seek?’ Isaac asked Oscar.

Oscar took a break from his toast and nodded.

‘Me too,’ said Isaac. ‘Me too.’

THE END



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cristy Burne grew up climbing trees, jumping drains, chasing cows and inventing stories. She is a children's author and science writer with degrees in biotechnology and science communication. She has also worked as a science circus performer, garbage analyst, and atom-smashing reporter.

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