



LET ME BEGIN BY SAYING that it started with a dream.

My dream. I wanted to sail around the world like that guy, Jesse Martin, on the *Lionheart*. Or that girl, Jessica Watson, on *Ella's Pink Lady*. Solo. Did it matter that my name wasn't remotely Jess-ish and that before I'd started building my boat, I couldn't tell a clew from a luff? Or that I'd never been fishing in my life? In my dream I planned to live on sachets of lemon pepper tuna and tins of organic cocoa. I'd sail around the South Pacific, berthing in blue lagoons, swimming with dolphins, trading packets of lemon pepper tuna for coconuts and paw paws. My pale skin would somehow become magically bronzed and my dark hair would turn straw gold beneath the red-hot kiss of ozone-free sunshine.

*What would I do at night?*

That's what Tash wanted to know. That's all she ever wanted to know. Would I smuggle a cute stowaway aboard? A smooth, muscled-up islander, the colour of steaming organic

drinking chocolate, and with a sharp white smile to dash my heart against?

I'd be listening to my iPod, composing guitar tunes from the only four chords I knew – G, C, D and E minor (Bob Dylan eat your heart out) –, be keeping an enthralling, witty log book (with a view to eventual publication) and reading. *Get that – Tash? Reading. R-E-A-D-I-N-G. You should try it sometime . . .*

This was muttered over the multiple hum of sewing machines and annoying reverb from Amber's MP3. Mrs Templeton looked up and frowned over her Dame Edna reading glasses. A reindeer badge drooped mournfully from her blouse: shapeless, crush-free poly-cotton, ugly plastic buttons (it wasn't a shirt or top – it was definitely a blouse). Her face was grey-green under the flicker of the faulty strip light.

I tugged a section of nylon through the sewing machine and heard the needle snap.

Mrs Templeton heard it too. She put down the textbook and sighed. 'Eddie. How many needles does that make it now?'

'Eight.'

'And what is so difficult about lifting the foot on the machine?'

'It's the nylon ribbing,' I complained. 'It's so thick.'

Mrs Templeton rolled her eyes. Her green eye shadow looked like smears of Incredible Hulk paint and did nothing for her general pallor. 'I did warn you it would be difficult,' she said through gritted teeth. 'I think that's enough sewing

for you today, Edie. You can do some theory instead. Copy all of pages 63 and 64 from *Industrial & Non-Apparel Textiles*.’

I ripped the plug out of the wall and stomped over to the bookshelves. When I had first approached Mrs Templeton with my idea for sewing a safety harness to hang from a line on a small yacht, she’d said that it was a ‘commendably ambitious and innovative project’. She’d even commented on it to Ms Dutton, who’d come in to hunt down a missing stash of pinking shears.

Well that had all changed now. I wondered if I should have played it safe – stuck to a piece of clothing like, say, a life jacket. Ha ha.

‘You still cut that Mr Hubbabubba fired you?’ Tash said, not looking up from neatly running a seam along shiny black satin.

‘Mr Halabi,’ I corrected.

‘Yeah, same thing.’

One of the many things I liked about Tash was her blithe lack of political correctness. I *had* to be politically correct because my father was a left-wing social worker at the Department of Community Services and my mother was a post-doctoral candidate. Which meant that when Mr Halabi had fired me, my parents had gone out of their way to justify *his* actions: it was because of the economic downturn; it was the wet season and there were fewer tourists; his poor wife was practically having a mental breakdown with her sixth child on the way (Dad breached confidentiality to mention

that one); the whole retail sector of Cairns, especially eateries and restaurants, was doing it tough . . .

Neither of them wanted to hear how unfair Mr Halabi was being by firing me and not Kevin! It was Kevin who'd bailed me up in the coolroom over a Styrofoam box of iceberg lettuces and grabbed me, wet dog's breath hot on my neck as he whispered that he wanted to look at my 'treasure chest'.

Eew.

I'd crowned him with a glass bottle of tahini yogurt.

My satisfaction at seeing tahini yogurt dripping down Kevin's dandruff-flecked mullet was swiftly demolished by being sent packing, with no pay, for the three shifts I'd already worked because Kevin had been there for four months and he was strong enough to lug the rotisserie meat around.

The incident, and subsequent firing, had left a great, glaring gap in my savings plan. For three years I had scrimped and saved to buy materials to build my boat.

Tash couldn't stand it (she was always mercy-lending me clothes so I didn't look so poyo and so she didn't look bad by association).

Happily I knew she'd never lend me the X-rated corset she was whipping up now. Tash was sewing in a zillion lace holes and bone tunnels to impress her boyfriend on Christmas day. Jason was twenty and worked at a car-parts dealership and had already saved enough to buy her a sapphire ring to match her eyes. The ring was no surprise because Tash told anyone who'd listen. But there was one thing she only told me – her Christmas present to Jason would be . . . herself.

It wasn't Jason's fault that he had a rash of pimples starting from his temples and peppering all the way down to the corners of his lips; two red gashes marking him out from a distance as an unlikely Indian brave. Frankly, the thought of their Christmas day together made me queasy.

I watched Tash now – never the most patient of souls – painstakingly thread a bone into the corset, then double-stitch the end. It was weirdly Freudian. I wondered if, with every flexible piece of plastic boning she poked in – Tash was imagining what it was going to be like.

I'd known Tash since kindy. She'd pulled my long brown ponytail. I'd stamped on her foot. She'd grabbed my faded purple koala – Yaya – and I'd pinched her hard. She'd scratched my arm and the scratches had infected. I still had faint silvery scars. She'd had a packet of mixed Tiny Teddys, plain and choc-flavoured, for morning tea. I'd had a pear and a homemade muesli slice. We'd swapped. And been best friends ever since.

It was amazing how different we'd turned out to be. In high school, Tash had become *numero uno* hot girl – big blue eyes, waterfall of shimmering blonde hair and a gravity-defying Barbie doll figure that made guys turn in the street. It would be boring to recite her list of conquests in Cairns. So why she'd chosen Jason to 'bestow her goddess self on' was a mystery.

By contrast, I was thin and pale with wild, tangling dark hair, and had far more modest successes. That's if you counted a school Formal pash with Darren Monk and a fleeting hook-up

with Bradley Everest, not to mention Kevin groping me with his garlicky fingers. Earlier this year, Alex West had trailed after me in school until I'd finally given in just before Easter holidays. We'd gone out twice. Tash had loaned me her hair straightener and eyeliner. For a split second, while I'd been outlining my eyes big and wide, I flirted with the possibility of flaunting my inner goddess in the way Tash did. Cairns offered plenty of opportunities in the tourist season. Scandinavian gods wandering along the Esplanade, blue-eyed Irish guys hanging around the backpackers bars, Japanese divers...

And with these thoughts, Alex West had suddenly seemed very young and unformed. And he had a mole on the side of his nose. I'd been so ashamed of myself for being so superficial that all through dinner with him I'd made a genuine attempt to divine the depths of his soul. We went to Buckin' Mex and I listened to him blather on about his air force cadetship (yawn) over burritos. Boys, men... I wasn't ready. Seemed easier to avoid the whole issue and sail around the world by myself.

'What do you think?' Tash asked. She held up a scrap of red lace.

'Slutty,' I said, doodling a design for a wind vane onto the textbook margin.

Tash grinned. 'Perfect!'

Tash's honey-gold skin still looked beautiful in the horrible flickering light. Her limbs were perfectly proportioned. Her eyes were kitten-cute and she had cheekbones like cut glass. I sighed, 'But why... *Jason?*'

Tash erupted into that wonderful, wicked throaty laugh: a laugh that always made male teachers, even our dodderly old librarian, stammer and blush.

‘Practice,’ Tash said lightly. ‘Practice.’ She pointed an impeccable passion-pink fingernail at my misshapen creation, now lying in a discarded heap on the floor. ‘Safety harness or chastity belt?’

‘Both.’



‘Here comes my favourite kid.’

‘Your only kid,’ I retorted, rounding the back of our tumbledown Queenslander past a riot of purple bougainvillea that twisted through palm trees still dripping from the afternoon’s monsoonal shower. A *Ulysses* butterfly’s iridescent blue wings fluttered from sight.

As ever, my heart thumped; my own *Ulysses* already had its tarp pulled aside and puddles had collected in the crumpled folds. White paintwork glistened with rain.

‘Come here my little darling! We’ve missed you so.’ Dad, in his patched paisley shirt and stovepipe jeans, beard flecked with raindrops, opened his arms wide.

I dipped my head to avoid copping scratchy beard and Indian-beady breath. Dad used to play with his facial hair a lot – sharp sideburns, a tuft beneath his bottom lip, mutton chop whiskers. Then he gave up and settled for a full, bushy, nicotine-stained beard. I hated it.

‘You’ll get lung cancer and slide towards a tortured death,’ I said, grinding the still-glowing stub into the sodden grass. ‘And I’ll be too busy sailing around the world to look after you.’

Dad shrugged. ‘Stress relief. Would you prefer I die of high blood pressure or emphysema?’

‘Gee,’ I said, fist under chin in classic thinker pose. ‘Tricky decision.’

‘Exactly. So I’m going to do the one that gives me most pleasure. Now,’ he withdrew his tattered accounts notebook, ‘you’re \$367 in hock to me, kiddo. Had to get more marine ply.’

Damn.

‘Pity it didn’t work out at the kebab shop. Looks like you might have to get another holiday job.’

‘You’re joking, right?’

‘Nope. You owe me.’

‘I mean about the kebab shop. Mr Halabi. The man fired me when it should have been that revolting, tabouli-brained creep.’

‘Edie, you knocked the guy out. Poor lad will have a scar and a lifelong phobia about iceberg lettuces.’

Although I glowered, I was pleased Dad had actually listened to my foaming story of outrage.

‘If you’re serious about sailing this baby around the world by yourself,’ he continued, ‘you’re going to have to toughen up.’

‘Bit of moral support might be nice.’

‘Sweetie pie, it’s going to come down to you and the voices in your head. That’s who you’ll be sailing the high seas with. You need to start practising now.’

‘Right now the voice in my head is saying, “Where the hell am I going to get the rest of the money to finish my boat?”’

‘I believe there may be a toilet cleaning position coming up at the uni,’ Mum sang down from the verandah. She appeared above the spiky vines, wild-eyed and tangle-haired, like a princess waking from a hundred-year sleep. As she emptied Polly’s birdcage, a snow of bird crap and seed shook down over us.

I scratched my head and squinted up at her. ‘Sorry, did I mention the words “moral support”?’

‘Good physical work, toilet cleaning,’ Dad said. ‘Strengthens your biceps. Good for rope work.’

This was how it was at my house: we all acted out defined roles – with the most points going to the one with the wittiest repartee or best deadpan banter.

I moaned. ‘So how much more money will I need?’ The *Ulysses*’ shell was complete. We’d even already bought her an auxiliary motor from eBay. But what no one had told me when I’d embarked on this crazy adventure three years ago at the tender age of fourteen was that when you start a building project you need to take the estimated cost, double it and add half again!

What I *had* learned, however, repeatedly, was that owning a boat was like pouring money down a sinkhole. In which case, does the money swirl clockwise in the southern hemisphere?

Apart from Tash, the hardware store had become my worst best friend. I could often be found wandering the barn-like building, aisle after aisle, in an anxious daze. Dad sometimes came with me to make sure I found my way out of the store after literally hours spent gazing at all the things I couldn't afford.

'About four grand, I'd say.'

I spun around, my breath catching.

Dad was staring up at the boat, his eyes narrowed, deep in mental calculation.

'You're kidding?'

He shook his head. 'Nope. Maybe give or take a few hundred bucks.'

'Where am I going to find that?' I wailed.

Dad shrugged. 'I'd like to help you out, Edie, but what with your mother still *farting around* with her thesis...'

Another sprinkling of bird droppings drifted down from the verandah. Mum re-appeared over the railing. 'I heard that.'

'Good,' Dad said. 'Maybe you should be the one getting the loo cleaning job.'

Mum's kinky red hair flamed out from the pale blur of her face. The thorny bougainvillea vines framing her were so out of control they made her look more than ever like a princess in a tower from a fairytale. A deranged princess. 'Your financial support of my work is contributing to the world's understanding of eighteenth-century female spinning and weaving factory workers.'

‘Right,’ Dad said, smacking the side of his head. ‘Couldn’t deprive the world of that. Vital stuff. Consider my salary a grant.’

I glared at them both. Dad would never force her to get a job while she was obsessing about the plight of eighteenth-century female textile industry workers and that meant he would never be able to afford to loan me four thousand dollars on his crappy public servant salary. He’d once even calculated that, in terms of government benefits, we’d be doing better financially if he pushed Mum down the stairs and became her full-time carer.

Impasse again. I thought of Mr Halabi so unfairly firing me and took great satisfaction in imagining his big bum side-by-side with Kevin’s skinny butt slowly turning pink on the meat rotisserie.

Tomorrow, first thing, I’d go shop-knocking. Even if I did have to clean toilets or mop up spew and bilge water out of the tourist dive boats, I’d do it.

Later that night, as I tossed and turned on humidity-sticky sheets, I remembered something my kooky grandmother on the Sunshine Coast had once said. My Mum’s mum. Nanna (she had wanted me to call her Wendy because she was too young to be a grandmother, but Mum had insisted I call her Nanna to annoy her) had once pulled me into a surprise embrace, an incense-burning haze of uncharacteristic grandmotherly goodwill and, while I’d struggled to breathe through the fumes, she’d told me that if I really wanted something, it was all very well looking on the outside, but

what I should always do first was look inside. If I found it in my heart, then the object of my desire would always *find me* (even if I spent all week wrapped up in a doona refusing to get out of bed).



In the mornings I ran; ran away from Mum's appalling macadamia, linseed, amaranth, chia, and sunflower seed muesli creations. I ran through the Botanic Gardens, over footbridges spanning croc-infested tidal tributaries, and up Mount Whitfield.

I started out by sweating. And that was just waking up. The heat in the wet season was revolting. It would have been okay if it were dry heat. But it was often one hundred percent humidity, as though the rain wanted to fall, but instead got stuck in a rancid grey sky that clung to everything it touched, covering it in a slimy film. It was moist and hot and mushy, and the walls got mildewed and washing acquired that vomit smell because it never fully dried. Fungus grew beneath my fingernails and there was the faintest trace of mould on my cheeks...

There had been a special on air conditioners at all the local retailers last winter. I had dreamed our house could be like Tash's. Everything crispy clean and chilled. Mum had pored longingly over the sales catalogue instead of her photocopied excerpt on lathing styles for spinning rods. She'd grown up in Melbourne and drooped in the Cairns heat like a wilting

petunia. Nanna had made clucking noises over the phone from Caloundra and had even offered to pay for three air conditioners – one each for our bedrooms and one for the living room.

But I'd jumped on my renewable resources moral high ground and refused and Dad had backed me up. He'd rigged up a cold shower outside instead. Our dump of a house had cobweb-shrouded fanlights and big cracks in the weatherboards that encouraged any tiny little wisp of a breeze that managed to wheeze its way up from the mangroves. It also encouraged mozzies. Which was why I slept beneath a mosquito net. Which made the bed a whole lot hotter: the whole vicious circle thing.

But the bigger vicious circle, it seemed to me, was that we were the ones causing global warming right now. And we were *making it happen faster* with air conditioning!

Dad had supported me, 'Everyone needs to toughen up. Can't spend life scuttling from one artificially refrigerated building to the next.' All very well for him with his cushy glacially chilled office. Although, I confess, I had been fond of the kebab shop's coldroom, which was why Kevin had known exactly where to corner me...

Kevin's garlic-'n'-sesame-seed-stinking mullet, four thousand dollars still needed to finish my beloved boat, possible toilet-cleaning at the uni... yuck. I pulled on my singlet, wiggled into my running shorts and grabbed my iPod to listen to some tunes. My music tastes were actually quite trashy. But I couldn't let Tash know. Instead, I pretended to listen to opera and classical

music; it was part of my friendship duty to maintain the stiff upper highbrow.

Cairns was asleep. I imagined people writhing in soupy sheets, clinging to cool dreams in an attempt to resist the relentless heat. The murky sky was a fish belly glimmer across the mudflats. I dashed out along the Esplanade, then turned in through the Botanic Gardens, enjoying the thump thump thump of my runners on the narrow metal footbridges, ever hopeful to spot the driftwood bump of a croc snout.

No such luck. I took a deep breath as I slid into Mt Whitfield's rainforest skirts. The stones were slippery with humidity and pungent with the stink of leaf. Above, the canopy was dappled with deep and shallow greens. I inhaled it all and, smiling wryly at the interpretative signs (they always amused me: how to interpret frog; how to interpret butterfly; how to interpret fig tree) started up the zillion steps on the Red Arrow circuit.

I hadn't always been a runner. I only took it up after Dad commented, while I was whingeing about having to haul the shopping up the rickety stairs to our kitchen, that I'd never be any good as a solo sailor if I was going to be such a whining weakling. Sailors needed strength and stamina. He'd even grabbed my pathetic skinny arms and pinched them, testing for non-existent muscle.

He'd earned a semi-kick in the groin for that. I didn't feel too bad – he was the one who taught me that particular self-defence technique. Everyone had picked on him at his redneck outback school because they'd thought he was gay. Sensitive, able to talk to girls without staring at their breasts, artistic,

a good listener, a witty communicator – yep, had to be gay. So when the simian son of the town’s leading farming family paid him out, Dad had figured he had nothing further to lose if he fought like a girl. He’d delivered some pretty hefty scratches, hair-pulling and knee-groining, and subsequently scored the prettiest girl in town (who’d just won the coveted title of Sheep Festival Queen) as his date into the bargain.

The day after Dad had bagged me out for being a weakling I’d set my alarm and taken myself on a humiliating run. More like a stagger. I was out of breath before I’d turned the corner. And my body had screamed every time I’d limped up the school steps for three days after.

Now, I could run eight kilometres without having to stop. I knew it was eight kilometres, partly because there was a sign saying the Blue Arrow track circuit was 7.2 kilometres, but mostly because I’d pocketed the pedometer from the breakfast cereal box at Tash’s. None of Tash’s family would ever dream of walking the four hundred metres down the block to the local shop. They always drove.

Right now I was panting louder than my music, but I was on my way. Inside the forest I felt as though I had entered a fairy world, where butterflies with red, yellow and green wings like traffic lights drifted through stands of bamboo, and big, draping tree roots coiled around stones and snaked across the path. Once on the Blue Arrow track I pushed myself all the way to the lookout shelter. From here, Cairns lay flattened out like a map with the long grey

curve of the Coral Sea sweeping up to the Trinity Inlet and the range beyond.

I pictured my boat out there. *The Ulysses*: the gracious arc of her sails as I tilted into a south-easterly wind; my heart bursting with the thrill of adventures to come. Only I was four thousand dollars away from my dream. Give or take a few hundred bucks. Nanna's words floated back into my head. Did I have to go out and make this thing happen? Or could I just want it so badly that it would come to me?

The town was waking up. Down below there'd now be posses of serious joggers in lycra shorts and middle-aged power walkers with supernaturally white sneakers, as well as that old guy who shuffled through the forest with his shirt off, exposing little sagging breasts and a hairy belly.

I jogged back down the twisting track, breathing the cool green air, forest-filtered for my delectation.

Before leaving, I'd gulped down a couple of glasses of apple mango juice. Now, my bladder felt as if it would burst. Casting a quick glance behind me, I darted into the bush, far enough from the track that I wouldn't be surprised by the old guy or the white sneaker people, mid-squat, shorts around my ankles.

I'd only just pulled my shorts up when a loud crashing blasted through the music. I pulled out an earpiece. Sticks cracked and leaves rustled in dense green foliage only metres away. Probably a wallaby. I stuck my earpiece back in and pushed both palms against a tree, extending my left leg behind to get a good calf stretch.

I swapped legs then froze, mid-stretch.

From out of the forest, emerged a bird – a very tall bird, taller than me. It picked its way through the vines, pearly blue and scarlet feathers glowing against the undergrowth.

The cassowary stared at me with burning amber eyes.

There was no point in running: a cassowary could run fifty kilometres an hour. The signs below warned to avoid nesting cassowaries because they could be aggressive – which had to be the understatement of the year.

People had died from cassowary attacks. Tash's cousin, Jen, grew up on a cane farm and she reckoned that her dad wouldn't go anywhere near the cane fields that bordered cassowary habitat without being on one of the tractors. The cassowary's modus operandi was to give a savage kick and rake the victim's belly with razor-sharp raptor claws, vestiges from dinosaur times...

From this cassowary's intense orange glare, I wasn't sure if it wanted to kiss me with its sharp beak or kick me to death.

I instinctively pulled my belly in and made a lightning-fast calculation. If I tried to run, it might startle and attack and it could move forty-three kilometres an hour faster than me. If I tried to sidle behind the tree, it might also attack. Being kicked and clawed to death by a cassowary wasn't on my list of preferable deaths. Not that I really had a list, but in my darker moments I'd imagined a perfect storm style wave rushing over the *Ulysses*. This, however, was ridiculous; I was on land! Civilisation was only ten minutes away.

So I did all that was left to me – I stared into the creature’s avian eyes. These birds were relics, the latest evolutionary update on dinosaurs, with their swaying neck and humped, feathered back, and those long, muscular legs sprouting talons.

My kooky grandmother had once said that nature offered up little oracles if we were willing to see them. A butterfly coming to rest on my shoulder might bring ‘a missive from the realms beyond’. I didn’t want a cassowary landing on my shoulder if it had a message for me. And then, just before the bird broke eye contact and retreated behind a leafy screen, I realised that it had been completely unexpected. Perhaps nature was trying to tell me that something unexpected was coming my way. Either that or if I didn’t look out I’d get my head kicked in.



‘I nearly got killed by a Cassowary,’ I said, still panting, while I stumbled up the splintery verandah steps.

Mum nodded. ‘Red’s on the phone.’ She didn’t look up from a pile of scuffed photocopied pages as she furiously squeaked a pink highlighter over them.

‘It almost ripped my guts out with razor talons.’

Mum continued highlighting while she took a swig of coffee. The table was leopard-spotted with brown ring marks.

‘But admittedly,’ I said, stalking past her, ‘it wasn’t as if I’d been sliced to ribbons by a wool-carding machine, or garroted

by a malfunctioning spinning jenny. Next time I'll try to make my near-death experience more interesting for you.'

'You'd better hurry; I told him you'd be back any minute. 'Bout ten minutes ago.'

'Which Red? Red, as in Blue? Or Red, the guy from the paint shop, or Red, who reconditioned the bilge pump?'

'Redmond.'

'Your brother? The one you haven't spoken to for the past five years?'

'Uh-huh. He's calling from a satellite phone so you might want to hurry up.'

'It's great that you're so excited to hear from your brother. It gives me a warm cosy feeling knowing how tight-knit our family is. Especially with me being an only child. It's lovely to have that sense of security that if anything should ever happen to you both and I was left an orphan, I wouldn't be alone – I have family who truly care.'

Mum finally glanced up. 'Hardly my fault that your father's sperm swims in circles.'

I thrust out my palm to ward off this gem. 'Please, Mother. Too much information. Did you chat with Red?'

She shrugged. 'He wanted to speak to *you*.'

A jump-starty sensation revved my heart. To *me*? Uncle Redmond, Red, was the solitary white sheep of my mother's family. As in, unlike his hopeless older sister and brother, destined to spend their lives on Austudy or the dole (or in gaol), he had gone off to work on an oil rig at sixteen. Bought his first house at eighteen. And then paid off his very own

beach-front apartments at twenty-eight. He had hammered on, at the one disastrous Christmas lunch at Nanna's, about no-good greenie, hippie, tree-loving, dole-bludging, arty farty types. *And* he voted National Party.

I dashed inside and picked up the phone. 'Hello?'

'Edith?'

How *could* they have cursed me with such a name? I'd once asked my parents if Dad's sperm hadn't swum in circles, and they'd bred up a tribe, would the rest of my unborn siblings been named Marjorie, Alfred, Gladys, Cecil, Beryl and Mavis? Why couldn't I have been named Jessie? To which Mum had replied that I'd been named after Edith Sitwell, a famous poet. Which had made me feel better about being lumped with such a clunky, old-fashioned name, until I'd wikkied it only to discover that Edith Sitwell had had a spinal deformity and spent her girlhood in a body cage and then moved from home to a life of poverty and unrequited love with a gay Russian painter. Thanks Mum.

Dad had said that Mum had been on a potent cocktail of painkillers at the time of my birth, and he had always thought of me more as an Edie. Like Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians who'd made an album called *Shooting Rubber Bands at the Stars*. I'd wikkied Edie Brickell too and she was much better looking.

'Edie,' I corrected him.

'Er... Edie. How are you?'

'Okay.'

‘How’s school?’

‘Okay.’ I could do a mean impression of being my mother’s daughter. Although I was secretly excited by this unexpected contact, it wasn’t enough to forgive him years of pathetic, non-existent uncling. Not even a lousy card on my birthdays. Though we did get a postcard last year after he’d married Lowanna, a Thai woman who, to her credit, had briefly tried to rebuild some familial ties.

I threw him a bone. ‘How’s Lowanna?’

He coughed and there was a crackle of static on the line. ‘She’s great. Ah . . . actually she’s away at the moment. Gone back to Thailand to look after her mother. The mother’s got some kind of bone condition.’

I waited.

‘I sold the apartments and bought an island,’ he announced, suddenly. ‘In the Torres Strait. Got a pearl farm now.’

‘Yeah?’ Maybe he’d send me a string of pearls for my eighteenth.

‘Got a couple of lads working as oyster hands, but it’s a bit tough with the boy and all.’

‘What boy?’

‘My son.’

I dropped the phone, then scrambled to pick it up.

‘Edith? Are you still there?’

I had a cousin! I squeaked out a reply. ‘You have a son?’

He had the grace to sound embarrassed. ‘I meant to get around to telling you, but me and your mother we never . . .’

‘What about Nanna?’ I demanded.

‘Her either,’ he admitted.

‘So you’re telling *me*?’

Red grunted. ‘Life just seemed to run away with me. Got so busy. Never seemed to have the time.’

‘You didn’t have the time to call your own mother to tell her she had a grandson?’

‘Steady on. The boy’s Lowanna’s. From a previous . . . ah . . . relationship. I guess I just forgot to mention it.’

Forgot to mention it? Hid it from us, more likely. I felt a wash of warmth about being who I was with the parents I had. We might speak like characters from a sitcom, but we always told each other the *truth*.

‘So how old is he?’

‘Aran?’

‘Yeah. Is that his name?’

‘Yeah, Aran. He’s four.’ Red broke off. I glanced at the doorway, half-expecting to see Mum standing there. He started up again, his tone desperate. ‘I’m not great at handling a kid, Edith – Edie. And this is a busy time at the pearl farm. I rang because I uh . . . I need a babysitter while Lowanna’s away. I didn’t just want to get in anyone from the island. I want someone I can trust. Family.’

He hadn’t seen me for eight years. How did he know I wasn’t some self-cutting screw-up?

‘Are you on school holidays yet?’ he asked hopefully.

‘Nope. Three weeks of school left.’ Three-and-a-bit weeks of guilt-free air conditioning and unofficially doing nothing. Then six sweltering weeks of officially doing nothing.

‘So there’s no chance of you coming up straight away? I’d need you until at least after New Year.’

Hold your horses, mate. I hadn’t even agreed to go up. I remained silent.

‘I’ll pay you,’ he said.

*Yeah? How much?* I thought about Tash and how she was with Jason and any of the other three hundred boys after her. *Play hard to get.* ‘Actually, I kinda had plans and I don’t know if...’

‘How much do you want?’ Uncle Red demanded.

‘Four thousand dollars.’ I said. ‘Cash.’

There was a sharp indrawn breath from the other end of the receiver.

I thought – give or take a few hundred bucks.

He grunted. ‘Three weeks is a bit far off. How soon can you get here?’

I should have added that few hundred. My exams were over. ‘Should be able to get up there on Wednesday.’ I didn’t want to give him any reason whatsoever to back out.

‘I’ll book your flight.’

It was only afterwards, as I jumped up and down screaming so much with elation that the floorboards bounced and the whole falling-apart house shook on its stilts, that I remembered about nature’s oracle.

This had been most unexpected.