

I'd never been to Grandad Barney's farm, even when my grandad was alive. He'd grown bananas in the middle of Woop Woop, at a place called Mission Beach.

'Look Dad! That sign says Mission Beach. We're nearly there!'

We'd been driving for two days, travelling nearly 1,600 kilometres from Brisbane, and it felt like we were almost at the tip of Australia. I thought Dad would be happy we were getting close, but his face was growing darker with every passing kilometre.

Grandad Barney had died almost a year ago, but whenever I asked Dad what happened, he said it had been 'an unfortunate accident' and quickly changed the subject. So I really had no clue about Grandad

Barney, the farm or Mission Beach. In fact, everything to do with Grandad was a mystery to me.

‘Not yet, mate,’ said Dad.

I sighed. How much further? My friends back home would be watching the cricket and playing new Christmas computer games, while I was stuck in the car with Dad. If Mum hadn’t got night shifts at the hospital, she’d have let me stay home with her, but since she couldn’t get any time off, it was just Dad and me.

On an abandoned banana farm.

For two whole weeks.

With no TV, no internet, and no clue about anything.

‘We’ll take the next turn off, Flynnnie,’ said Dad, ‘and then it’s only fifteen minutes from there.’

‘Dad, don’t call me Flynnnie, remember? I’m nearly ten.’

Dad had been working on the mines since I was five, and it was like he thought I was still a little kid.

We passed endless sugarcane and a couple of banana farms, before turning off the highway.

Finally!

I leant forwards. Would the beaches have crashing

surf and jagged rocks? Or long sandy stretches lined with shops and tall high-rises?

But there was only more boring sugarcane. I wriggled in my seat, deciding this was going to be the worst summer holiday ever.

‘So, Dad, what was Grandad Barney like? Was he tall, you know, like you?’

‘Sorry, mate. What did you say?’ Dad was an expert on avoiding the topic of Grandad.

‘Grandad Barney. How did he die? Was it really an accident?’ I’d always assumed Grandad had fallen from his tractor or had some other farming type of disaster. Why else would Dad always say it was an ‘unfortunate accident’?

‘Let’s talk about it later, hey?’ said Dad, pressing his lips together. ‘It’s been a long day, and I need to concentrate on driving.’

Typical. Never answers. Always excuses. Like, ‘Sorry, mate, I can’t talk now. I’m racing to catch a plane’. Or, ‘I’ll tell you later, I’m tired from working 20 days straight’.

I shuffled my feet. Why wouldn’t Dad tell me? I had a right to know. He was *my* grandad. I looked up

to ask again but stopped before the words came out. There it was. The sparkling ocean. With tall palm trees bending like old men towards the waves, and white-sailed yachts bobbing in the distance.

‘Wow! It’s awesome!’

‘Beautiful, isn’t it? Look, there’s the jetty.’

A long jetty stretched into the ocean. Two kids stood at the very end, their fishing rods silhouettes against the water.

‘Can we go fishing, Dad?’

‘No, mate, we didn’t bring any rods.’

‘Maybe Grandad Barney has some? Didn’t you go fishing with him when you were a kid?’

‘Me and my father?’ Dad snorted. ‘Not likely.’ Dad’s jaw was tight, his voice bitter.

I slid my eyes across to him when something big stepped out from the bushes on the road up ahead. It looked like a giant emu but with jet black feathers and a long blue neck. Its scaly legs reminded me of a dinosaur.

‘Dad?’

But Dad was looking in the rear-vision mirror at the jetty.

The creature ran out onto the bitumen.

‘Dad! WATCH OUT!’ Dad returned his eyes to the road just in time and wrenched the steering wheel sideways. I was thrown against the passenger door, my seatbelt digging into my chest. We were halfway into the other lane when a loud thud echoed through the air. Dad and I were jerked forwards, and our bags crashed to the floor in the back.

‘Hold on!’ Dad shouted above the squealing tyres.

The car skidded to a stop on the wrong side of the road.

My heart pounded. I yanked my seatbelt off and turned to look out the rear window.

The animal lay on the side of the road, its head raised, its long legs waving helplessly in the air.



Dad gripped the steering wheel. His knuckles were white, his breathing heavy. ‘Are you okay?’ It sounded like he was squeezing the words from his throat.

Like him, I could hardly speak. ‘Yes, I’m fine,’ I stammered, my pulse throbbing like a jackhammer in my ears. ‘But what about ...’ I turned back to look at the fallen creature. ‘Can we go see if it’s alright?’

‘No, absolutely not!’

‘But it needs help. It looks injured.’ The animal’s long legs were cycling around frantically, like it was trying to get up. ‘Please Dad?’

‘No, it’s too risky,’ he said, pulling the car away from the wrong side of the road. ‘Cassowaries are dangerous enough without being injured. I’ll ring the

park rangers as soon as we get to the farm. Come on, buckle up.'

'But ...'

The cassowary became motionless as we drove away. I lost sight of it as we cleared a small hill. My stomach clenched.

We hadn't been driving long when a huge crack started spreading across Dad's side of the windscreen.

I pointed at the crack. 'We have to stop!'

'We'll be okay,' said Dad, staring vacantly ahead. 'I'll just drive slowly.' But he didn't look okay. His shoulders were hunched and his eyebrows were clashing like dark storm clouds.

I tore my eyes from the spidery lines, hoping the whole windscreen wouldn't cave in on us. A bright yellow road sign with a picture of a smashed car and a long-legged bird flashed past. The sign said, *Are you speeding?*

'We don't get signs like that in Brisbane,' I murmured.

Dad blew air out his mouth, like he'd been holding his breath. 'Very observant,' he said. 'No cassowaries down there, thank goodness.'

I peered curiously into the trees. ‘Will there be cassowaries at the farm?’ I asked.

‘Hope not.’ Dad’s eyebrows were clashing even more than before.

We turned off onto a skinny side road where tall grass grew on either side.

‘Here we are,’ Dad murmured, his voice shaky. He stopped the car at a letterbox that said, *Hutchinson, 132*. Beyond the driveway was nothing but two sets of tyre tracks: one set branched right towards a group of sheds, and the other left, towards what must be my Grandad’s house. I waited, expecting Dad to get out, but he sat staring at the padlocked gate, like he was stuck to his seat.

I wished Dad would take us back to check on the cassowary. The sound of the thud was playing over and over in my head.

But I knew better than to bring it up again. I waited, glancing sideways at Dad. He was leaning on the steering wheel like it was a life raft in the ocean.

‘Have we got a key?’ I whispered to break the silence.

‘Right. Yes. Of course.’ Dad took a deep breath and eased himself out of the car.

Once he'd unlocked the gate, he drove us slowly towards the house. My chest grew tight as we grew closer. The house wasn't anything like what I'd expected. It was made of pale blue bricks, with a sloping tin roof that stretched over gloomy verandas. The windows and curtains were firmly closed and the garden out the front was full of weeds.

'Coming?' asked Dad, once he'd parked in the empty carport.

I opened my door, but my legs wouldn't swing out. The house looked lonely and sad.

'Don't worry, we'll have it cleaned up in no time,' said Dad, trying to sound cheerful, even though he looked like he'd eaten a rotten sandwich for lunch.

I dragged myself out of the car. The buzz of cicadas was deafening, and the smell of grass filled my nose. Away from the shade of the carport, the sun on my head felt hot enough to roast a lizard.

It'd been over a year since Dad had come up for Grandad's funeral. He'd turned down all offers to care for the place, and now dead leaves piled across the front veranda, cobwebs hung thick in every corner and gecko poo littered the pavers.

When the key wouldn't turn in the lock, Dad leant his shoulder against the door and shoved. Geckos fled for cover as sweat dripped down Dad's face. How would we ever get this place ready to sell in two short weeks?

Eventually the door swung open. Inside, the house was dark, and smelt damp and musty. 'Right,' said Dad, his voice husky. 'I'll lead the way.' But he stood still.

I shivered despite the heat. The air was very still. And quiet. Spooky quiet. I rubbed my hands over my arms and felt small hairs prickle on my neck.

I shot a look at Dad. Was this where Grandad had died?

'Come on, we have to do this sometime,' said Dad, taking a deep breath and letting it out with a whistle.

I followed him inside. The floorboards creaked under our feet as my pulse thundered around my body.

Dad tugged open the curtains in the kitchen. The house was flooded with afternoon light, and my hammering heart settled. Dust flew around the room but everything seemed neat and in its place. What had I been expecting?

A green tree frog clung to the outside of the kitchen window, with webbed toes and a smiley mouth. It

didn't hop away when it saw us, and I wondered if it had been there, all alone, ever since Grandad Barney's accident.

'Let's freshen things up a bit, hey?' asked Dad, unlatching the windows. A welcome breeze sent the stale air from the house. A trail of ants marched from the window to the cream laminex bench, where a diary lay open. I peered closer. It was open on the date Grandad died. Just over one year ago. 'I'm glad you're here to keep me company,' Dad said, closing the diary. 'Couldn't face the house on my own after the funeral. Nothing but bad memories, this place.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'll go get our things,' Dad said, taking off out the front door.

Same old story. Always changing the topic.

'Wait for me,' I said, running after him. I didn't want to be alone in the house. Seeing Grandad Barney's things, untouched from the day he died, was giving me the heebie-jeebies. 'I can carry my stuff.'

'Okay, if you're sure,' said Dad. He carried in his bag, and the bread and milk we'd picked up on the way, while I pulled in my wheelie suitcase and backpack.

My suitcase was heavy, jammed with my favourite books. I couldn't decide which ones to bring, so I'd packed them all.

'Where should I put my things?' I asked.

Apart from the kitchen and the family room, there were two small bedrooms, a bathroom with no windows, and a separate toilet. I tried not to be disappointed. It wasn't quite the sprawling farmhouse I'd imagined.

'You can take Grandad Barney's room,' said Dad. 'And I'll sleep in my old room down the hall.'

I gripped the handle of my suitcase. Grandad Barney's room? Where Grandad had slept? I turned to protest, but then I changed my mind. I didn't want to give Dad anymore reasons to think I was just a kid. Anyway, Grandad's room might give me some clues. Who was Barney Hutchinson, and how did he die?

I pulled open the curtains. There were two big bookshelves holding serious-looking books: butterfly books, bird books, books on fertilisers, books on rainforests and books on farming. Grandad was more book-mad than me! I decided to make a space and line my books along with his. On the middle shelf,

three picture frames glinted in the sun. I moved closer to have a look. Although Dad said I'd met Grandad when I was little, I couldn't remember what he looked like.

In the first photograph, two people stood smiling at the camera. Grandma and Grandad? It must have been an old picture because Grandma had died when Dad was really young. She was small, and looked straight at the camera with a twinkle in her eye. In comparison, Grandad was tall, like Dad, but with snow-white hair and a big beaming smile. He wasn't wearing a shirt, so I saw his lean muscly chest. He was exactly how I imagined a banana farmer would look.

The second picture was of Dad and Grandad. Dad looked old enough to be in high school, and neither he nor Grandad were smiling.

'Hey, what's this?' I wondered out loud, picking up the third photo frame. It contained a faded certificate with the words: *To Mister Cassowary. From your feathered friends at the Cassowary Rehabilitation Centre. In appreciation.*

Mister Cassowary? What did that mean? I thought of the cassowary lying helpless on the side of the road.

I found Dad sending a text in the kitchen. ‘Just letting Mum know we’re here,’ he explained. ‘In case she’s worried. All unpacked?’

‘Dad. Who’s Mister Cassowary?’

‘Where did you hear that?’

‘I found a certificate. In Grandad Barney’s bedroom. Was that you?’

Dad grunted. ‘No mate. Not likely. Far from it, actually.’

A return text beeped from Mum.

‘So was it Grandad? Was he Mister Cassowary?’

‘Go grab your hat,’ said Dad, as if I hadn’t spoken. ‘I’ll take you for a tour outside before it gets too late.’

Dad pulled on his hat and walked out of the room.

‘Dad! Was it Grandad they called Mister Cassowary?’

I persisted, chasing after him. Dad headed left off the veranda and marched past a large machinery shed. Finally he stopped at the gate of the first paddock.

‘Oh no!’ said Dad, clasping his hands over his hat. ‘What a mess!’

I frowned. Instead of rows and rows of tall, healthy banana plants, like the trees we’d seen on the way, long spindly vines wound up and over everything.

I followed Dad through the gate. We waded through weeds growing waist-high and crunched over knee-deep banana fronds. It smelt of rotten fruit and sweating compost. Yuck.

A few minutes later, Dad gave up trying to walk through the weeds and we stopped. ‘Doesn’t take long for the rainforest to move back in, does it?’ he muttered taking off his hat to wipe his brow. Sweat soaked his hair, and trickled down the side of his head. ‘We should have done this months ago. We’ll never have this lot ready for sale in two weeks. I must have been dreaming.’

I wished we’d done it months ago, too when it wasn’t so sweltering hot. My T-shirt stuck to my chest and my head felt dizzy and light. With the heat plus all the questions about Grandad flooding my brain, I could hardly think straight.

I swatted away a red-winged beetle whizzing past my head. Suddenly the bushes behind us rustled. I turned, expecting to see a scrub turkey, like at home. But the leaves stopped moving, and I couldn’t see anything.

I looked at Dad. His shoulders were rigid.

‘Come on, Flynnie. Let’s go!’ he shouted, wheeling back towards the house.

‘Dad! What ...’ I ran after him, only pausing to shut the gate. Cicadas whined and cockatoos screeched as I struggled with the latch.

‘Come on, leave that, Flynn. Quick!’

I dropped the latch and sprinted.

Dad’s hands shook as he poured us both a glass of cold water when we got inside.

‘What did you see back there?’ I asked.

Dad took a long swig of water. ‘I don’t know. But I’m not going to worry about it now. I have some calls to make.’ He poked out his shaking thumb. ‘Firstly, I should call Roadside Assistance about the windscreen. And secondly,’ he raised his index finger, ‘we need to call Mum. I said I’d let her know we were okay once we’d checked out the farm.’

‘Don’t forget the rangers. We have to tell them about the cassowary that we hit, remember?’

Dad ran his hand through his sweaty hair and sighed. ‘Okay, I’ll call the rangers,’ he said.

A picture of the cassowary struggling on the side of the road flashed in my head. I shuddered, and willed it away.

While Dad dialled numbers on his mobile, I took my glass of my water down to Grandad Barney's room. The heat was making my head spin.

I sat down on the bed and cleared a space for my glass on the bedside table. A small picture frame sat tucked behind the lamp. In it, a huge cassowary stood between Grandad and Dad. It was so tall that Grandad Barney had to reach up to place his arm over the cassowary's feathered back. Dad looked like he'd rather be anywhere else than beside the cassowary. His eyes were narrow and his lips were turned down.

'Flynnie?' I slipped the photo under the pillow as Dad stepped into the room. 'Mum wants to talk to you,' he said, holding out his mobile.

'It's Flynn,' I hissed at Dad as he walked out. Then, 'Hey, Mum.'

'Hi, honey. How's the farm?'

'Good. Did Dad tell you about the cassowary?'

'What cassowary?'

‘We hit a cassowary on the way here. It cracked our windscreen.’

‘Really? Are you okay? Were either of you hurt?’

‘No, but Dad went all weird and shaky, and the cassowary wasn’t moving when we drove off. I think it got hit pretty badly.’

‘Oh, that must have been scary.’

‘Dad was going to ... hang on.’ I put my hand over the phone and called out to Dad.

‘Did you call the rangers, Dad?’

‘Yep. I spoke to a lady called Cassie, or Cathy, I think. She said they’ll look for the cassowary now.’

I took my hand off the phone. ‘Dad called the rangers. Hopefully it’s not dead.’

‘I’m sure it’ll be fine, Flynn. Well, I’d better dash. I have to go get ready for work. Night shift’s hardly my favourite. But you take care and look after your dad, okay? You know it’s hard for him, seeing the old farm and everything.’

‘Okay. Bye, Mum.’

‘Bye, honey.’



Dad was rubbing sunscreen on his face when I found him in the kitchen the next morning. I hadn't asked him anymore about Grandad Barney last night, or about what he'd seen in the bushes. He'd been quiet and frowny all evening, so I hadn't even complained about having jam sandwiches for dinner.

We'd gone to bed early, and even then, it felt like I'd hardly slept. When I had, I dreamt of black feathered birds, lying still on the side of the road.

If only they were just dreams.

'Here, have some sunscreen,' said Dad, squeezing a dollop on his hand and reaching for my nose.

I turned my head away. 'Let me do it myself, Dad,' I said, offering him the palm of my hand instead.

Dad shrugged and handed me the tube. ‘Well, don’t forget the back of your neck.’ he said, hovering over me.

I stepped away and lathered my face with cream. ‘Are we starting with the clean-up today?’

‘No. We should walk into town first, before it gets too hot. I want to see if we can get the windscreen fixed, and we need some groceries. Here, I’ve made you some toast.’

He’d buttered four pieces with jam. I didn’t tell him I made my own breakfast at home and that I preferred peanut butter.

‘Turns out I’m not covered with Roadside Assistance anymore,’ continued Dad through a mouthful of toast. ‘Typical. Paid for 25 years and let it lapse a year ago. I’d have forgotten my head if it wasn’t screwed on. Anyway, Grandad used to know a bloke in town and I thought I might chase him up. Did you bring runners?’

‘Yes, Dad. Of course. I packed my own bag, you know.’

*

At the end of Grandad Barney's driveway, instead of turning back the way we'd come when we'd arrived, Dad turned right. So much for heading out before it got too hot. It was only eight o'clock but, with no breeze, it was like breathing the air from an oven. A salty humid oven. We walked along the coast road, where we could see dazzling blue water washing over the rocks. Gangly trees dotted the beach, their fat sausage roots sticking above the sand, just like the ones back home.

'Maybe we could come down here for a swim one day?' I asked.

'No, mate. It's too dangerous.'

'Mum already told me I have to swim in the stinger net areas.'

'I'm not talking about the stingers.'

I breathed out a long, exasperated breath. 'Well, what then?' I grumbled.

Dad marched along like we were late for school. A big circle of sweat was beginning to stain his T-shirt between his shoulder blades.

We veered away from the coastline and crossed a small bridge. The water below gushed and frothed,

tripping over the rocks in its rush to reach the ocean. A green-and-yellow dragonfly hovered over the water before darting away.

‘Crocodiles then? Is it the crocodiles that are dangerous?’

Dad turned and raised his hands like stop signs. ‘Look, mate, it’s just dangerous. Dangerous, full stop,’ he snapped. I kept my eyes on my shoes. ‘Better you and I just get on with fixing the farm, okay? We’ve got lots of work to do, and only a couple of weeks to do it in.’

Not long after the bridge, we passed another yellow cassowary crossing sign. This one had two triangles, one above the other. The top triangle had a picture of a cassowary standing upright, with the word, *BEFORE*; the bottom triangle had a picture of a cassowary lying horizontal, with the word, *AFTER*.

A sinking feeling gnawed at my gut. The bottom triangle was way too familiar. ‘Dad, did the rangers call back about that cassowary?’

The heat must have really been getting to Dad. He didn’t seem to hear me, and the whole back of his T-shirt was now soaked with sweat.

I ran to catch up with him. ‘Dad?’

‘Not now, Flynn. Look,’ Dad waved an arm towards the street in front of us, ‘we’re here.’

This was more like what I was expecting. Kids rode bikes and skateboards on the footpaths, and cars and campervans were parked along the curb. A mower roared up ahead, and a man wearing only board shorts and reflector sunglasses stood trimming his hedge.

Everything looked neat and tidy, not like the farm.

A lady in a floppy hat gave us a friendly wave from outside a caravan park as we walked past. I waved back.

Dad finally slowed his stride outside the Visitor Information Centre. ‘We’ll pop in here first,’ he said. ‘See if we can track down Grandad’s mate about the windscreen.’

I lingered beside a life-sized statue of a cassowary standing in the centre’s garden. It had a bright blue neck and a sharp beak, just like the one we’d hit.

‘Have you seen the humongous statue on the way into town?’ A girl with long brown plaits had appeared out of nowhere and now she stood beside me. There was more hair out of her plaits than in, and her bare

legs were dotted with insect bites. ‘You know, the big cassowary?’

I shook my head.

‘Shame. He’s pretty impressive.’ A grey-haired man walked over to join the girl. ‘Hate to meet that fella on a dark and stormy night.’ Wiry chest hair poked out from the top of his faded singlet, as well as from his ears, and his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled.

‘Just the man we’re looking for,’ said Dad, walking over to us.

‘Well, well, look who the cat dragged in. G’day Steve.’ The man held out his hand to Dad. ‘Long time no see. What’s it been, a whole year? Boy, I can hardly believe Barney’s been gone that long.’

My ears pricked. This man knew Grandad Barney?

Dad’s face darkened. ‘Just over a year, give or take,’ he said.

‘About time you showed up. The old place’s going to wrack and ruin out there by itself.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know. That’s why we’re here. Getting it ready to put on the market.’

The man scratched his grey head. ‘Finally going to sell the farm, hey?’ he said. ‘You know it’ll be gobbled

up by developers, don't you? You sure you want that? After all your old man's hard work planting—' He stopped when he saw the clouds forming in Dad's eyes. Instead, the man glanced down at me and smiled. 'Don't tell me. Is this your young fella? Looks just like your old man when he was a youngster,' he said, cheerfully. 'Skinny little tacker he was too.' He reached to shake my hand. 'How do you do, young man? What's your name?'

'Flynn,' I said.

'Hi, Flynn. I'm Walter. Pleased to meet you.' He gave me a wink as he released his grip. 'This is my granddaughter, Abby. Abby, meet Flynn. His grandad was my good friend. Remember Mr Hutchinson?'

Abby's eyes widened. 'The one who ...?' She hesitated and glanced sideways at Walter. She was taller than me and had curious green eyes. Walter made a small shake of his head. 'Well, anyway, hi,' she said.

'Hi,' I said, standing a little straighter.

'Abby's giving me a hand at the rehab centre over the holidays, aren't you, love?'

The rehab centre? Wasn't that the place on the Mister Cassowary certificate? I leant a little closer.

‘I’m retired now, of course, but the cassowaries are keeping us busier than ever. I give the rangers a hand when they need me, otherwise, I’m here, volunteering at the information centre. So many tourists want to see a cassowary, it’s becoming quite the thing.’

Through the window behind Walter, I could see pictures of birds and butterflies and lizards. Where were the cassowaries?

‘You wouldn’t believe how many we’ve lost these past—’

‘Sorry to interrupt,’ said Dad, raising his voice over Walter’s. ‘I’m chasing a new windscreen. We’ve got ourselves a ...’

While Dad explained about the spidery crack, Abby turned to me. ‘We’re going to get ice-creams. Want to come?’

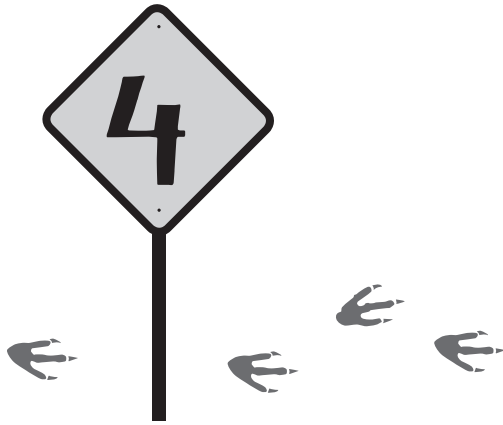
I looked up at Dad but he was still talking with Walter.

‘You won’t get a replacement windscreen in a hurry round here,’ Walter was saying. ‘We’re not exactly inner-city Brisbane, you know.’

Abby tugged at my arm. ‘Come on. We’ll eat them in the park while we wait.’

‘The park?’ said Dad, stopping mid-sentence. ‘No, I don’t think so. Better you kids stick with us, don’t you think? You just never know these days.’

‘Fiddlesticks,’ said Walter, digging into his pocket for loose change. ‘This isn’t the city, Steve. The kids’ll be fine. Tell you what, I’ll grab my LandCruiser while you get your windscreen sorted, and then we’ll drop you back at Barney’s. Here,’ he passed Abby a handful of coins, ‘go and get something cold for the two of you. We’ll pick you up in half an hour.’



People smelling of sunscreen, and dressed in shorts and thongs passed us on the way to the ice-cream shop. Most of them seemed friendly, nodding or saying g'day to Abby, but Dad insisted on walking with us, as if we were in the middle of New York.

Different coloured ice-cream towered in delicious piles in the cabinet. My mouth watered. I could already imagine my first icy lick.

'I'll just be getting groceries, if you need me,' said Dad, lingering beside me. 'Just—'

'You go, Dad. I'll be right.' Why was he so embarrassing? I wasn't five.

'I'll look after him,' said Abby, with a dimply smile.

My face burnt as Dad finally left for the supermarket next door.

‘How’s your day?’ asked a girl behind the cabinet.

‘Good,’ I murmured, trying to decide between Mars Bar Dream and Heavenly Chocolate. They both looked delicious.

‘Awesome,’ replied Abby. ‘Can we please have two singles of Hokey Pokey?’

‘But in Brisbane I always have chocolate!’

‘It’s okay. Hokey Pokey’s the best,’ said Abby, handing over the money.

The girl smiled. ‘She’s right,’ she said. ‘*The* best. Here you go. Enjoy.’

‘Has anyone told you your dad looks like Dracula?’ said Abby, leading me to a park across the road.

I frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You know, tall and scary looking. He doesn’t have blood-sucking fangs, does he?’

‘Ha ha, very funny!’ I snorted.

We sat on a bench and licked our ice-creams.

‘The Hokey Pokey *is* good,’ I admitted.

‘Told you! Are your parents’ divorced?’ Abby asked.

‘What kind of question is that?’

‘Where’s your mum, then?’

‘She couldn’t get time off work.’

‘Well my parents are. Divorced, I mean. Now Mum works double shifts at the servo, and Dad ... well, I don’t know where he is.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry.’

‘That’s okay. It’s not your fault.’ Abby wiped ice-cream from her chin. ‘Hey, have you got a dog? I’ve got a boxer called Obi. I really wanted a horse, but Mum said Obi would do. He likes to jump on the trampoline with me. Do you have a trampoline?’

‘No to both. My dad thinks they’re dangerous.’

‘Oh.’ Abby paused, then said, ‘Does your dad let you do anything?’

I kicked at the pebbles lying under the bench. ‘My dad’s away a lot with work, and he doesn’t really ... He’s not used to being around me.’

‘Oh, okay. Here, hold this.’ She passed me her ice-cream cone and flipped a cartwheel on the grass. I waited, hoping I could ask her about Grandad, but after the cartwheel, she did a handstand, and finished up with an upside-down backbend. Her tummy stuck into the air and her plaits dragged on the ground.

And her ice-cream dripped on me while I licked mine.

‘What’s with the gymnastics?’ I asked, holding out her ice-cream. ‘Yours is melting.’ But Abby was trying to flip out of the backbend and didn’t answer. Her tongue poked out of her the side of her mouth in concentration.

‘Hey look, there’s Cathy. Hi, Cathy!’ yelled Abby, waving, even though she was still upside down.

A lady in a pair of sturdy boots, khaki shorts and matching shirt waved from across the road.

‘She’s a ranger at the rehab centre,’ Abby explained. ‘She’s so cool, she lets me sneak Fanta from the staff-room when I’m there with my pop.’

I watched as Cathy stepped into a ute with a big metal box in the back tray. Hadn’t Dad talked to a ranger called Cathy? I wanted to run after her, but I didn’t want Abby to know we’d hit a cassowary.

‘So, Walter said you help out at the rehab centre,’ I said. ‘What exactly is it?’

Abby twisted her head to look at me. ‘It’s a place for injured and orphaned cassowaries,’ she said, as if everyone knew this information. ‘Haven’t you been to

Mission Beach before? I thought your grandad used to live on that banana farm near Clump Point?’

‘He did.’ My stomach swirled as Abby’s prying eyes searched mine for answers. ‘But I’ve never been here before.’ My words whooshed out in a rush. This was all I needed, an interrogation from a bossy upside-down girl. The whole dad-not-wanting-to-talk-about-grandad thing seemed weird enough to me, let alone trying to explain it to a stranger.

‘What, never?’ said Abby, her mouth open.

I shook my head, my ice-cream sticking to my throat.

‘How come?’

I finished off my ice-cream, wishing Abby would eat hers and stop asking questions. ‘I’ve got no idea. He never wants to talk about it,’ I muttered. ‘What’s with all the questions? Here, take this.’

‘Oh.’ Abby tumbled out of her backbend and retrieved her ice-cream. She crunched on her cone and said, ‘Maybe he’s scared of something?’ She stared at me, her big green eyes getting even bigger. ‘I mean, after what happened and everything.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You know, with your grandad. It was pretty terrible.’

‘You mean his accident?’

‘Yeah, of course I mean the accident. What else would I mean?’

Why did she say ‘terrible’ like that? Like maybe a *terrible* unfortunate accident?

‘So, you know what happened then?’ I asked. ‘To my Grandad Barney?’

Abby’s eyebrows arched. ‘Are you serious? You mean you *don’t*? He was *your* grandad.’

‘Yeah, of course I know,’ I said, feeling warmth rushing up my cheeks. ‘I just wondered what *you’d* heard, that’s all. To see if it was the same—’

Abby looked at me, waiting.

‘Please?’ I begged.

‘Okay, so, you have to promise not to tell your dad. My pop said he was pretty cut up by what happened, and Pop’ll get mad if he thinks I’ve told you. So, do you promise?’

I nodded and waited, holding my breath.

‘Well, your grandad loved cassowaries, right?’ she began.

I thought of the cassowary picture beside Grandad's bed. And the Mister Cassowary certificate. 'I guess,' I murmured.

'Well, my pop told me that, ages ago, when your dad was little, your grandad found this orphaned chick. Apparently, he looked after it so well, it used to run after him like a puppy. That was before people knew not to treat cassowaries like pets, and everyone thought it was so funny, watching the chick dart around town after your grandad. But then the cassowary chick grew up ...'

'So?'

'It grew huge,' Abby whispered. 'Cathy said it might have been because of all the bananas your grandad fed him, but basically, it became the biggest cassowary in history. A monster.' She had a moustache of ice-cream over her lip, but I didn't want to mention it, in case she changed the subject.

'The cassowary in the picture beside Grandad Barney's bed *was* big,' I admitted.

'See! Told you. Let's just say its name was Big Blue for a reason.'

'Big Blue?'

Abby gave me a glare. ‘Stop interrupting. One day, when your grandad went out into the paddocks, the—’

A white LandCruiser rattled up beside the park. It had a nasty scratch down one side and a large dent in the bonnet. Walter honked, then wound down his window. ‘Hop in, kiddos,’ he shouted. ‘And give your door a good hard bang to close it,’ he said once we’d climbed inside. ‘The old truck’s not as young as she used to be.’

Dad was sitting in the passenger seat and he turned to check on me. ‘You okay, Flynnie?’ he asked. ‘Enjoy your ice-cream?’

I glanced at Abby, hoping she hadn’t heard Dad call me Flynnie. ‘It’s Flynn, Dad. Flynn,’ I hissed.

The LandCruiser spluttered and popped as Walter pulled it away from the park. ‘Want a quick stickybeak around, Steve? You’ll hardly recognise the place these days.’

I hoped Dad would say no. I wanted to get back and take another look at the photo beside Grandad’s bed. Was it a picture of Big Blue?

But Dad didn’t answer, and Walter started by pointing out where a new Woolworths was going

in next year. Then he showed us the skate park and concrete basketball court at the end of the road.

Walter looked into the backseat at me. ‘You shoot hoops, young man?’

Dad gave a strangled kind of snort. ‘Who, Flynn? That’ll be the day. Always has his head stuck in a book, this one. Quite the bookworm, aren’t you, Flynnie?’

I shrank in my seat. I wished Dad would just keep quiet. Yeah, I loved books, but ...

‘I love riding my bike, too,’ I protested. ‘And I’m good at tennis. You’re just never around to find out.’

Dad cleared his throat.

Walter winked at me in the rear-vision mirror. ‘Just like your old man, then,’ he said. ‘Can’t recall you spending too much time on the basketball courts hey, Steve?’

‘Things have changed, Walter,’ Dad mumbled. ‘That was a long time ago.’

‘Things have changed here, too,’ said Walter, turning off the main road into a street lined with brand new houses. ‘Take a look at these eyesores.’

The estate was called *Rainforest Retreat* even though there wasn’t a single tree in sight. The houses were so

big there was no room left for gardens. They had two stories with satellite dishes on the roofs, and air-conditioning units on the walls.

The next estate Walter drove past was called *Beach Breeze*. Some of these houses weren't finished yet and Walter explained the lots were being sold so fast that the builders couldn't keep up.

There wasn't much of a breeze coming through my window.

'This is exactly what your old man was worried about,' Walter said to Dad. 'We couldn't believe all this was happening. He and I watched hundreds of trees being cleared to make these estates. Imagine what he'd make of the place now—'

'Just imagine,' muttered Dad. As far as I knew Dad didn't care much about trees. Trees didn't exactly matter when you worked on the mines.

Walter glanced at me in the rear-vision mirror again. 'Did you know your grandad's farm is sitting on some of the last undeveloped land between the rainforest and the beach around here? He wanted to plant it out with native trees, to make a corridor for the cassowaries, but then ... well ...' He sighed.

Abby threw me a look. ‘I told you so’ her raised eyebrows seemed to say.

I chewed my lip. What did Walter mean by ‘then’? *Then* there was an accident? *Then* Grandad died? Was it something to do with the cassowaries? Grandad must have loved cassowaries, that much was clear. The rehabilitation centre had given him a certificate of appreciation, plus called him Mister Cassowary. They must have done that for a reason. Abby said he’d raised a giant cassowary called Big Blue. But what had happened? Why would Abby be afraid of making Dad mad by telling me?

There had to be a good reason why Dad wouldn’t tell me how Grandad Barney died. I had to find out what Abby had been about to tell me. An ‘accident’ didn’t explain anything.

I was so thick in thoughts that it was a few minutes before I’d realised we were now heading back to Grandad Barney’s farm. We were passing over the creek when I decided what I’d do. I’d have to trick them into telling me.

‘Are there crocodiles in there?’ I asked. If I asked enough questions, maybe they’d slip up and leak out the truth about Grandad.

‘Tell Flynn the story, Abby,’ said Walter, chuckling.

My heart leapt. That was easier than I thought.

Abby smiled. ‘Well, a few years ago there was this really, really big cyclone, and—’

‘Cyclone Yasi,’ interrupted Walter.

‘Yeah, Cyclone Yasi. Anyway, there was water everywhere, and the Livingstone Crocodile Park had their fences wrecked.’

‘Because of the flooding,’ added Walter.

‘Yes. Because of the flooding. Anyway, every single croc escaped. There were crocs everywhere!’

‘So, of course they put out a call for help.’ said Walter.

‘And 156 crocodiles were returned.’ Abby laughed and Walter slapped his hand against his thigh.

‘They only had 70 of the blighters in the first place,’ he said, as if that explained everything.

‘One hundred and fifty-six?’ I squeaked. It didn’t seem very funny. One hundred and fifty-six crocodiles? My skin crawled. No wonder Dad said it was dangerous around here.

Abby pouted. ‘You don’t get it, do you? One hundred and fifty-six crocodiles? More than double the number they had to start with?’

I shrugged and folded my arms across my chest. My plan wasn't going very well. Everything seemed a mystery around here. No one wanted to tell me anything.

Walter finally pulled his LandCruiser to a spluttery halt outside Grandad Barney's.

'Thanks for the lift,' said Dad, opening his door. 'We owe you one.'

'And I know exactly how you can repay me,' said Walter.

'How's that?

'We're running a working bee on Sunday, at the rehab centre. We're—'

'The rehab centre?' I asked, my hand resting on the door handle. Perfect. I could definitely do some snooping about Grandad if we went there. 'Can we go, Dad?'

'We're a bit late this year,' continued Walter, 'but it's our annual clean-up before the cyclone season. They're predicting the first cyclone as early as next week, so we're keen to get it sorted. Why don't you bring Flynn along? We could do with a couple of extra hands.'

'Dad! We could go, couldn't we? We'll have heaps of the farm fixed up by Sunday.'

But Dad didn't say anything.

I turned to Walter. 'Will we be allowed to see the cassowaries?'

Dad shook his head. 'No way, Flynn.'

Abby pulled a face. 'Couldn't Flynn just come?' she asked. 'We could pick him up on the way, couldn't we, Pop?'

'Yeah, Dad,' I said. 'Couldn't I just go for a little while?'

'No, I don't think so,' Dad said. 'Reckon we've got our hands full here. Especially if there's a cyclone coming. Thanks for the invite anyway.'