

## PRAISE FOR *THE ELEPHANT*

‘A beautiful book – not just heartwarming but heart healing.’ **Chris Riddell**

‘A little book with a huge heart.’ **Karen Foxlee**

‘Carnavas takes the tough topic of caregiver depression and gives it a delicate, graceful touch. His plot weaves tightly together, and the ending twist is a lovely completion. Black-and-white spot illustrations throughout give a visually accessible feel, as do the short chapters ... A delicate, lovely story about caregiver depression that will validate and empower readers.’ *Kirkus Reviews*

‘A warm-hearted book of emotional learning, creative problem-solving, and genuine care for others. Recommended for anyone in need of hope for a path to happiness.’ *School Library Journal*

‘Sprinkled with humour and endearing illustrations, *The Elephant* is a must read. It will not rip your heart in two with unchecked tragedy. It will, however, massage it firmly and then fill it with gladness. I can’t love this enough.’ **Boomerang Books**

## PRAISE FOR *MY BROTHER BEN*

‘For everyone whose brother is a hero, even if they don’t know it yet.’ **Morris Gleitzman**

‘There should be more books like this: gentle books that draw us slowly in and make us want to linger, books fashioned with kindness and family at their heart. *My Brother Ben* made me remember, and long for, times that were simpler. Well done, Peter Carnavas, and thank you.’ **Glenda Millard**

If you’ve ever had – or been, or known! – a brother, the ebbs and flows of their relationship will ring absolutely true and linger long past their story’s end. *My Brother Ben* is absolutely bursting with heart, and with the kind of quiet power of the very best books, the ones that leave an indelible mark. I didn’t know I needed a book about brothers, birds and boats; now I wonder how I was ever without it. Please give *My Brother Ben* to all the boys in your life, and all the girls too.’ **Meg McKinlay**

‘This story about birdwatching, being different and the bond between brothers is told in Peter’s lovely gentle way and it’s a real treat. Kids will love it.’  
**Karen Foxlee**



# My Brother Ben

Peter Carnavas



UQP



*For my brothers*



## PROLOGUE



### *A Strange Feathered Thing*

Last year, I found a dead bird on the road outside our house. A young magpie, grey and white. It lay flat with its head on the side, one wing stretched out and the other squashed under its own body. I crouched down, hugged my knees to my chest, and stared. Wind tickled the tiny feathers on the bird's breast, its legs stuck out like black twigs, and the back of its neck glowed pink in the setting sun.

The bitumen warmed my feet, but my body shivered. Cold, but also scared: a bird had been thumped by a car, knocked out of the air, when all it had wanted to do was fly. Now it lay

dead on the road, and the only person around was me. I stretched my fingers towards it, but pulled back. My hand shook and I swallowed hard. I reached again and my fingers brushed its feathers. Then a dark shape was suddenly behind me, getting bigger, roaring closer.

I jumped too late and the car punched my side. Threw me off the road. I hit the ground and rolled, a mess of arms and legs across the dirt. I choked and coughed, trying to suck air back in. Somebody was on top of me, shaking me, screaming my name.

‘Luke!’

It wasn’t the car that hit me. It was Ben, tackling me out of the way. The car disappeared around the corner in the fading light.

‘Luke!’ Ben yelled into my face, shaking my shoulders. ‘What were you doing?’

I rolled out from under my brother and sat on the gutter until my breathing slowed down. I squinted and pointed at the magpie. It lay in the same position, unmoved by the rushing car. Ben walked onto the road. He bent down, gathered the bird in his shirt and held it close to his belly. But he didn’t just hold it. He

cradled it, like he was nursing a bowl full of jelly that hadn't set. I caught up to him as he headed home.

'What are you gonna do?' I said.

'Find a box.'

'To bury it?'

Ben stopped, his eyes dark and serious. 'Could be alive.' A streetlight flickered on, lighting the side of his face. 'Trust me.' He always said that.

We found a big cardboard box under the house and set it at the end of the verandah. Stuffed it with too many blankets and rags, and filled an old yoghurt cup with water. As Ben slid the magpie inside, I still didn't know if we had made a nest or a coffin. But the next morning, we padded outside to find the magpie awake, huddled in the corner of the box, testing its voice with a soft gargly song.

'Wonder what it's saying.' My voice cracked with sleep.

'That you've got bad breath,' said Ben, heading back inside.

The thrill of saving a bird's life was over for Ben, but not for me. I sat with the magpie on the

warm verandah, still in pyjama shorts. I offered more water in a cup, then I whispered so that only the bird could hear. ‘You’d better be more careful crossing the road, buddy. Or at least fly a bit higher.’

It watched me with a chocolate-brown eye and tilted its head, as if it understood. We held our stare for a few seconds before a thought sailed into my mind. I ran to my room, grabbed a book from under my bed and returned to the verandah. I read the title to the magpie. ‘*Field Guide to Australian Birds.*’

Aunty Gem had given it to me a few weeks earlier, just after Dad left. I’d hardly touched it until now. Inside the front cover was a message in Gem’s looped handwriting.

*Dear Luke,*

*Things don’t always work out the way we hope they will. But even on the dark days, birds still sing. So open a window and look outside, for when you open your eyes to birds, the world opens itself in return.*

*Love Gem.*

I didn't really know what it meant but I liked the way it sounded. I watched the magpie beside me, and tried to open my eyes a bit more, like Gem had written. Its beak was sharpened to a dark point, thin feathery trousers grew halfway down its legs, and one scaly toe was bent. Then I found the page of magpies in the book. It was beautiful. I ran my fingers over the coloured illustrations and read words I'd never even heard before. Plumage. Underwings. Fledgling. Bird words, wonderful and strange. As the verandah boards grew hotter under my legs, I learnt everything there was to know about magpies.

For the next few days, I sat beside the box and watched over the bird. It didn't take any of the bugs and worms I offered but it drank lots of water. Along the way, it woke up enough to perch on the box and bounce on to the railing. Sometimes I read pages from the bird guide out loud and the magpie turned its head at the sound of my voice.

One morning, Ben wandered from the kitchen, scooping cereal from a bowl.

'You still here?' He laughed. I didn't know if

he was talking to me or the bird. Then his face softened when he saw mine. ‘What are you so happy about?’

I hadn’t felt the smile on my face, but I knew it had something to do with the magpie and Gem’s words – my eyes opening, and the world opening up in return. I’d stopped thinking about Dad, and had focused on the bird, this strange feathered thing reborn in a cardboard box on our verandah. I wanted to know more: all things about all birds.

Ben nodded at the magpie as it scratched under a wing with its beak. ‘You should give it a name.’

I smiled. Somehow I knew it was a girl. ‘It’s not that original, but ... Maggie?’

Ben tipped his bowl and slurped the last bit of milk. ‘Cool.’

As soon as I’d named her, Maggie hopped from the box and landed on my shoulder. I ducked and laughed, then relaxed. I scratched the feathers on her chest and she tilted her head. I thought of her lying still on the road a few days before, and I reread Gem’s message in the front of the book: *Things don’t always work out.* It

was true. Parents don't always stick around. Birds get knocked out of the sky. But this was my chance to make one of those things right.

'I'll stick with you,' I said to Maggie. I wasn't worried about Ben hearing me. 'Trust me.'

As I said his favourite words, it felt like I was in charge of something. The kind of feeling Ben probably had all the time.

A moment later, Maggie leapt off my shoulder and landed on the railing. She shook her feathers and tested her wings with a few flightless beats. Then she flapped a wobbly path to a branch in the poinciana tree, right outside our bedroom. She threw back her head and sang a song to the bright summer sky. Happy, like me, to still be alive, thanks to my brother Ben.



## CHAPTER 1



### The Jumping Tree

We sat in the boat, facing each other. I gripped the side and a piece of white paint flaked off under my fingernail. Ben lay back, put his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. ‘This is it, Lukey. A life on the water.’

I lay back too and rested my head on the rough wooden edge. Water lapped nearby and Maggie sang from a tall tree. Nearly a year after we’d found her, she was still with us. Scratching around the verandah, keeping watch from the roof and singing outside our bedroom almost every morning.

‘Where should we go?’ Ben said.

I closed my eyes, just like him. Imagined the water rocking me along, taking me anywhere I wanted. ‘Let’s go and find that eagle’s nest.’

‘The big one?’

‘Yep. White-bellied sea eagle.’

We lay like that for a while. Ben whistled a lazy tune. A few swamphens honked to each other, far away.

Then Maggie squawked and Ben jolted up. ‘Quick! Someone’s coming.’

We grabbed our stuff – his shirt, my sketchbook – and jumped out of the boat, landing hard on the ground. We hadn’t really been on the water. It wasn’t even our boat. Just an old dinghy tied to a tree in someone’s backyard. A man’s voice yelled and we sprinted out of the yard, through the bush and down to the creek. Our feet slapped along the muddy bank. We dodged mangrove shoots and dipped under branches. Climbed over rocks, kicked through scrub and didn’t stop until we reached the Jumping Tree.

We collapsed on the ground and caught our breath. Ben’s feet were cut up and I had scratches all over my legs. He walked ankle-deep into

the saltwater to soak his feet. We were both hurting and puffed, but my head tingled with the excitement of it all.

‘Who was that guy?’ I said. ‘Did you see him?’

‘Dunno.’ He lifted a foot to inspect the cuts. ‘Good job keeping up for once.’

‘Me? I was faster than you.’

He smiled. We both knew it wasn’t true.

I sat on the bank and brushed dirt off my hands. ‘Lucky we didn’t get caught, though.’ It was the last thing Mum needed, us getting in trouble. She was already working till dark and doing everything herself.

‘He was never gonna catch us,’ said Ben. ‘Nobody knows the creek like us.’

‘You mean, nobody knows *the edge* of the creek like us.’

Everyone with a boat knew the rest of it: the deep channels and secret inlets. And even though we all called it a creek, it was much bigger. More like a cross between a river and a lake, a band of salty brown water that snaked behind the houses and breathed up and down with the tides. Some parts were narrow enough

to throw a rock to the other side, but most of it was wide like the school oval.

I opened my sketchbook and scratched my pencil across the page to draw a heron. Ben started to climb the Jumping Tree, a huge paperbark that stood like a twisted giant among the mangroves and clumps of spiny grass. He clawed his way up the trunk, then crab-walked along the thick branch that hung over the water. Maggie sat on a higher arm of the tree and cocked her head.

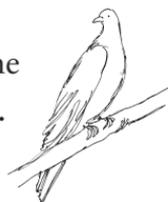
‘Don’t worry, Maggie,’ I said. ‘He’s just showing off.’

She gargled back.

Ben stood on the end of the branch, ready to jump. I stopped drawing and looked up. A white-headed pigeon cut across the sky and the rattling song of cicadas swelled around us like a drumroll. Ben closed his eyes and stretched his arms wide, as if it all belonged to him: the trees, the creek, the disappearing pigeon. He puffed his chest, then jumped.

For a moment, his arms were like wings. The air held him up. He was a king parrot, a dancing brolga, a wedge-tailed eagle taking

flight. For that second he was in the air, everything else seemed to stop. The birds stopped singing, insects fell quiet, the creek lay still. Then he crashed into the water and the world clicked back into gear. Maggie and the other birds lifted to the sky. Colour seeped back into branches and leaves. And the creek woke up as Ben's splash sent circles rippling to the banks.



He rocketed back up through the surface. 'Come in, Lukey!'

I never jumped from the tree, but there was another way in. A length of rope was tied to the branch, and we kept the end coiled to a stumpy shoot that stuck out from the trunk. I dropped my sketchbook and unwound the rope, then gripped it like a vine. I pushed off from the muddy bank, swung out over the creek and let go. The cool water swallowed me and I sank until my toes dipped into the mud at the bottom. Then I rose up, floated on my back and watched the paperbark leaves dance against the sky. Ben did the same. We were two sea stars spinning slowly on the surface.

## CHAPTER 2



### The Boat

We started to walk home from the Jumping Tree. Ben once worked out it was a forty-minute hike – as long as a maths lesson, but with a lot less yawning. Grey mud squelched between our toes as we went, and sandflies buzzed around our legs. Maggie came and went, darting off on bird business, then reappearing on branches ahead of us. We stepped out of the mud and scuffed along the dirt path that ran beside the creek. Sometimes it was jungle-thick, other times the trees were spread out and we saw houses in between the trunks and branches. They were all old

Queenslander houses like ours, wooden boxes on tall stilts, with wide verandahs and stairs at the front and back. Not many people had fences, so the yards joined up with the bush. I could've chucked a cricket ball from most back doors and landed it in the water. Ben could have cleared the whole creek.

It wasn't long until we spotted the boat again, tied to the tree like a forgotten pet.

'What would you do, Lukey? Where would you go first?'

I knew what he was talking about. All the time we'd lived on the creek, we'd never had a boat.

'I'd follow that bird,' I said, as a kingfisher swooped to the other side. 'I reckon there's loads more over there.'

I didn't ask him. I knew he'd tell me.

'I'd go exploring. Follow the creek as far as it goes.' He turned and looked at the water, like he was picturing himself there. 'Can you imagine? Just being able to take off? Catch fish. Camp wherever. Sleep in the boat during the day.'

I closed my eyes and saw it all. Snoozing in the boat, pulling a fat whiting out of the water

for dinner. It was Ben's dream – not mine – but I'd follow him anywhere.

'The first place I'd go would be The Pocket,' he said.

Ben was always talking about The Pocket, a passage of deep water that was home to the biggest fish in the creek. We'd never been there but every other kid in the world had, because every other kid had a boat. Even Dad had talked about it: adventures from his childhood we wished were ours. Now it seemed so far away and all we had were secondhand stories.

'I heard Emily in Grade Six caught ten bream in a row,' I said. 'All keepers.'

'And Jason Singh caught a flathead a metre long, he reckons.' Ben measured a rough metre between his hands. 'Imagine that – a metre!'

Then Maggie sang, waking us from our thoughts, and we kept pushing along the track. On the way, we passed a girl about Ben's age. She wore a floppy hat and held a long crooked stick like a hiking pole. After she'd passed, Ben stood as still as a fence post and gazed at her until she was gone.

I threw a twig at his head. 'You okay?'

‘Yeah. Why?’

‘Thought you were gonna blow her a kiss.’

He glared at me. ‘You’re dead.’

I laughed and bolted along the path and he chased me home.

## CHAPTER 3



### Bird Calls

Our backyard was all dirt and patchy grass, a chook pen on one side, clothesline on the other. A few rotted posts marked where a fence once stood, but now the yard just rolled into Cabbage Tree Creek. A wonky wooden jetty reached from the bank into the water, and the surrounding scrub reminded us we were on the outskirts of town. Hardly any kids lived near our place, and that was why it was usually just the two of us. Most people were clumped in houses closer to school and the main street of shops. That was a half-hour bike ride away, less with the wind behind me.

I sat facing the creek with my back to the house. Mum would still be working, typing articles on her laptop until night. I opened my sketchbook and started drawing a kingfisher. Ben stepped into a handstand.

‘Not long to go,’ I said.

‘Huh?’ Ben walked on his hands for a few seconds, then pushed himself to land back on his feet. ‘Till what?’

‘School,’ I said. ‘Remember school?’

‘Oh.’ He scratched the back of his neck. ‘Hadn’t thought about it.’

I shook my head. ‘You hadn’t thought about starting high school?’

He looked at me with those dark eyes. People said we were similar, and we sort of were, except he had everything in the right place, the right size. At twelve, he already had proper muscles. Two years younger, I was all skinny arms and big ears.

‘Don’t wanna think about it,’ he said. He faced the water, stared back the way we’d come. Probably thinking about escaping in a boat. ‘What about you, little Lukey?’ He put on a pretend baby



azure kingfisher

voice. ‘Will you be okay without big Ben to look after you?’

I laughed. ‘Are you serious? No one stealing my lunch? Can’t wait.’

But I wasn’t looking forward to it. I tried to picture myself in the covered area at school without Ben and his mates around. He was always there, in the corner of my eye, but in the middle of everything, like the sun surrounded by all the planets.

He sat beside me and pulled at some grass. ‘You ever gonna jump out of the tree? It’s like flying, you know.’

I shrugged and scribbled some shading on my kingfisher, but made a mess of it. Jumping out of trees was a Ben thing to do.

‘What are you scared of?’ he said.

‘That my face’ll hit the water too hard and I’ll end up looking like you.’

He laughed and pushed me over, rubbed my head in the grass. He let go and we both sat up. It took me a while to stop giggling.

He folded his hands behind his head and lay back on the grass. I did the same. As I listened to the birds throw their songs across the creek,

I thought of their names. Butcherbird. Corella. Dusky moorhen.

Ben flashed me a look. ‘Go on, then,’ he said. ‘What can you hear?’

This was my thing, what Mum called my party trick. Ben could jump out of trees, climb on the roof, kick a ball into the next neighbourhood. But this was mine. A Luke thing to do.

The first one was easy. A pretty, warbling song.

‘That’s Maggie,’ I said.

Next, a thin, high-pitched whistle. Just one note.

‘King parrot.’

Tiny chirping.

‘Red-backed fairy-wren.’

I closed my eyes and drifted into the birdsong, heard nothing but whistles, trills and squeaks. The calls swam around me, overlapped and answered each other. I named them all. Robins, wrens and wagtails. Ducks, doves and lorikeets. I even caught the distant squeal of a whistling kite.

Then something strange. A scratchy call, a

sort of squeak. Like a parrot, but nothing I'd heard before. I opened my eyes. There it was again. A soft, chirpy squeak.

'I don't know that one.'

Ben stood, brushed the grass off his shorts, then grabbed my hand and pulled me up. 'Must be a new bird in town.'

It was getting dark. We left the creek behind us and walked up the yard to the house.