

# 1

Finally I'm doing something I've always dreamt of: diving on a wreck. Mei and I have been having group lessons in the holidays with Mr Pengelly, the town's tour guide, down at the jetty. Our jetty is the best in all of South Australia for practising diving. And today is the day. Today we are actually going to dive in the ocean on the *Clan Ranald*, our closest wreck. There are thirty-five wrecks around our part of the coast. Treacherous shoals near here, but putting a lighthouse on the island in 1855 stopped ships getting wrecked.

Mr Pengelly is taking our group out to the *Clan Ranald* on his tour boat. This dive is one thing I want to get right. I've never been one for rules but diving's got lots of them. There are even special rules for diving on wrecks. Mr Pengelly reminds us, 'No disturbing

the historical evidence. Have you got that, Joel Billings?' Now why does he single me out? Shawn Houser sniggers. Mei gives him a frown – she's a real mate.

'Do you feel okay?' Mei asks me.

I think she's talking about Shawn so I say I'm cool.

'The dive,' she prompts. 'To tell you the truth I'm a bit scared. Are you?'

That's Mei – she'll say if she's scared but she'll go ahead and do what she has to anyway. I reckon that's brave. As for me I'm not sure whether the jumping in my guts is excitement or nerves – maybe both.

'Yeah,' I say, and she gives me a thumbs up.

When we're out over the wreck, Mei and I check our tanks and put on the first stage regulator – we still need help with that. Mr Pengelly explains the steps slowly as if it's the first lesson. Shawn Houser's done it all before with his dad. 'Hey, Biliious, do it like this.' He smirks as he attaches his hose before Mr Pengelly says to. Shawn used to bother me a lot. It's hard but I try to ignore him now. Mei and I help each other into our gear and check the air supply is okay.

Then we sit on the side of the boat to put our fins on. Before we roll in, Mr Pengelly asks us all one question: 'Do you really feel like doing the dive?'

I look at him like he's crazy and grin at Mei. *Try to stop me now*, I hope my eyes say. Her eyes behind the mask are clear and excited, no sign of fear. Only one old

duck backs out. 'I'm not feeling the best,' she croaks, and Mr Pengelly nods like she's passed a test.

The moment comes. Mei and I tip backwards into the sea. Mei pinches her nose as we sink through the water. I'm used to snorkelling but diving is way different. I have to switch to my regulator now, and I'm hit by that scary moment of whether it will work or not. Every time I think, *Will I really be able to breathe?* But every time I can. Guess my biggest fear is getting the bends coming up – that's decompression sickness, a terrible pain in the lungs. See, I've learnt lots this summer. Mr Pengelly says we won't get the bends if we follow his instructions. 'Never swim up faster than your bubbles,' he always says.

I keep the anchor line in sight. Mei is just above me. She's my diving buddy and we've learnt the hand signals for going up and down, for trouble, running out of air. I hope I don't need that one. Mei and I even have a few hand signs of our own. Right now, she signals the 'round okay' with her thumb and forefinger.

Colours fade the lower we go and Mei's red mask turns brown. The wreck sprawls below us, like a reef. When I first see it close up, I get this eerie feeling. Down here it's cold and quiet except for the bubbles and my breathing, which sounds like thunder. Mei and I fin a bit to stay in the same spot. The oldies fin too fast and stir up the sand. The ship's deck isn't easy to see since there's

so much algae growing on it. Weeds and kelp wave at me and fish flash by.

Then I have a chilling thought. There's a mass grave in our town for the blokes from this ship who didn't make it, but what if they didn't find someone's body? Would he still be here? I look for Mei. She'll be thinking the same as me, for sure.

We swim to the deck to check it out. This is the deepest I've been: twenty metres. I imagined diving would be easy, just like snorkelling, but the thought of all that water on top of me makes me glance up to check the surface is still there.

We explore the deck and after what feels like only a few minutes, the others start to surface. They have no sense of adventure. Mr Pengelly's boat is not far away. I can see its shape above us, and that's when I catch a shadow out of the corner of my eye. I do a slow circle. Was it anything? Or just a strap on my mask? Mei's signalling, making a fist for danger. She's seen something too.

This time I see a flash. Something bigger than a fish. It looms above me now and I feel the water swing around me. Fish are swimming away, flitting one way, then the other. What is it? A shark? We get white pointers in these waters. How big is it? Mei's close, signalling thumbs up – she wants to rise – then I feel the water shift again and the thing bumps my tank. I see it glide over us. Yes, a

shark, but not a white pointer. It's smaller, about a metre long – a gummy maybe?

One thing I do know: we can't surface right now. It's too dangerous. I pull Mei's arm and signal for her to lie on the ocean floor. She understands and lies close beside me but it's the hardest thing to do: keep still while a shark roams nearby. What if it sniffs us out and mistakes us for lunch? I'm hoping we'll be so quiet it'll go away.

But no, it heads straight for us. I can see its pointed nose and the white dots on its grey body as it swings its head from side to side. Surely it eats only little fish. I grab Mei's hand, shut my eyes and breathe out bubbles. I feel a whoosh of water as the shark darts straight over us. Sand rises and settles. We lie there waiting for it to come back but it doesn't. I sit up to check the water. We're the only people down here now. The shark has gone too.

Mei keeps hold of my hand as we kick up to the boat as fast as we're allowed. I wish we could go quicker but I think of the bends; I just have to remember to keep breathing. I swear I see a shadow on my right – the shark again? This time we have to surface. My legs feel like they've been shoved into a hornet's nest – they'll get bitten for sure. I wish I could tuck them close to my body. Just our luck: we dive on our first wreck and see a shark. We're not far from the boat now. We surface and Mr Pengelly pulls us in.

'Good thing you came up when you did,' he says once Mei and I have taken off our masks. 'Look.' Sure enough, there's a fin gliding through the water ten metres from the boat. Mei and I look at each other, weighing up what we should say. It's like we both come to a decision at the same time. She shakes her head slightly and I agree. No point spilling the beans, saying it was down there with us. Gran and Mei's mum might ban us from diving. Mei's used to seeing sharks from when she helps out on her dad's trawler but I can tell she's spooked at being so close to one in the water. Her hands shake as she takes off the rest of her gear.

You're more likely to die of a bee sting, or a bike crash, than from a shark attack, but I know how scary they can be. Right now I have a shark of my own to deal with, and that's Scott, my biological father. He tried to kidnap me on Gala Day over a year ago. He tried it when I was a little tacker too. I don't remember that time though. Scott thought he could get Grandad's money if he was looking after me, but he's crazy. Drugs have wrecked his brain. Now I've been called to give evidence in court against him for the latest attack.

If I don't go it will be called 'contempt of court' and I'll be in bigger trouble than a sea lion in a shark tank. Dev, my foster dad, has got time off from the trawler to take me on Monday. This sort of suspense I can do without. I wish it was over.

## 2

Dev's brought me to Adelaide to appear in court. We came on the Harley so I'm wearing the leather jacket Dev gave me last year. We have to sit in this little waiting room with some other people in suits. Dev's leaning back into the couch but I can tell he's ready to spring: the muscles in his neck and arms are tight and his eagle tats look like they're ready to fly off. Dev's been in jail too – that was before I met him – and I wonder if being at court is reminding him of it.

I haven't told Dev how scared I am. I wish he was my dad for real. I'm sure I wouldn't have so many problems if Dev had been my dad from the start. Zoe, my biological mum, had me when she was still in high school and she gave me to Gran and Grandad to bring up; her lifestyle didn't include a little tacker, or so Grandad said.

When she was old enough she married Scott after all, but they're divorced now; she got too frightened of him. I never knew any of this until he turned up to grab me over a year ago.

Then the lawyer, Ms Sardis, marches in. She's a lot like Zoe and wears a short skirt and shiny high heels. She's dynamite, like a lawyer I guess, but real easy on the eye. I didn't expect that. She glances at Dev. I'm sure she'd find him attractive, but maybe she thinks he's too old at forty. She just nods at him, says, 'Hello, Mr Eagle' and plonks herself right beside me with this huge folder on her lap. She tells me again the things I can't say about Scott. I can't say that we think he was dealing drugs, nor that he kidnapped me when I was a little kid to get access to Grandad's money. I never knew courts were like this; I thought you just told the truth and nothing but the truth, but Ms Sardis said we can only talk about what Scott is on trial for at the moment. We mustn't confuse the jury, I guess.

'What if the other lawyer asks me those things?'

'They know not to talk about them too.'

How weird is that? If I said how bad Scott was and how he'd tried to kidnap me before, the jury would put him away forever. But all I can say is what happened on Gala Day when Scott broke his parole and tried kidnapping me again. This time he wanted custody of me. I thought he wanted me because he was my dad, but he

just wanted to control the trust fund Grandad left for me. To him I was just a meal ticket. Luckily Dev saved me. He's done a lot of that since he turned up in our town. All because I put an ad in the newspaper for a dad. Stupid idea, hey? I love Gran, she's my mum legally, but I thought my problems at school would disappear if I had a dad. I was lucky it was Dev who answered the ad and not some crim like Scott. Dev might look like a scary biker but he's a top bloke. His wife and kid died in a bike accident; that's how he ended up in jail. He probably wasn't long out when he answered my ad. He said he changed in there and wanted to make a difference for someone when he got out. He's sure done that for me.

I never want to see Scott again but I have to go into that courtroom and he'll be there. 'Are you okay with this?' The lawyer is staring into my face. She's about five centimetres away and it's very distracting. 'Would you rather be questioned privately? It's not too late to change your mind.'

We've been through this, and she's being kind, but when I found out that Scott would still get to see the video of my answers, I reckoned I'd just have to get it over with. 'I'm okay! I'm not a little kid; I'm about to start high school. I just won't look at Scott. Ms Sardis said he'll be behind glass and there's no way he can get out of there. Besides, Dev's allowed to come into the courtroom with me.'

There has to be something wrong with Scott but I'm not allowed to say that either. He is the meanest guy I've ever met and it worries me. Not just that he could try and get me again if he's let out of jail, but what if I turn out like him? Dev says not to worry about stuff that will never happen, which he reckons is mostly what's in people's heads. But it's easier said than done. 'Cross that bridge when you come to it,' Dev always says. I want to be like Dev. Since he roared into my life on his Harley, the road's been easier for me to travel.

We have to wait all morning: the other people giving evidence are taking a long time. I don't mind if it means there's more evidence to put Scott away. A detective comes in and talks to us for a while. He's a nice guy, tall, wears a suit that doesn't hide all his muscles. You wouldn't want to run into him in a dark street if you were a crim.

Dev and I go down to the market for lunch. We get Turkish bread sandwiches and real juice. Dev looks kind of sorry for me but he's keeping quiet, so I don't start feeling sorry for myself as well. We buy two packs of cards and when we arrive back in the waiting room we play two-handed canasta until three. That's when the lawyer strides in again.

'It's your turn, Joel. They're running behind but they'll let you go next since you've travelled so far from Edithburgh! She gives me an encouraging smile, but it makes me feel like there's something to be frightened of in the

courtroom. She reminds me about bowing to the judge when I go in and out. I like the way Dev's close by but he doesn't ask how I feel right now. Gran would be telling me not to worry and to be strong. I don't need to be reminded.

The lawyer and detective walk in through the sound-proof doors with us. We all bow towards the judge, and Dev and I sit where the lawyer points, then she sits in a row with the other lawyers, all looking at computer screens. I wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of that judge: his eyebrows almost cover his eyes, and his mouth is a straight line. It feels like he can tell what's in my head and he doesn't appreciate it very much.

After I sit, it doesn't take long for me to notice where Scott is – behind some protective glass at the front corner. He can't get out but it doesn't make me feel better. One glance shows me he hasn't changed – he still has a skinhead and crazy ice-blue eyes. I keep my gaze lowered and check out the loose threads on my jeans.

It's another half-hour before my name is called. Ms Sardis is nodding at me, telling me where to go. I put my hand on a Bible that a guy in a wig holds out to me and I repeat the truth words. Ms Sardis told me that if it bothered me everyone would take their wigs off when I'm in the courtroom. They do that for little kids who have to give evidence, but I said I'd handle the wigs just fine. I feel sorry for anyone younger than me having to do this though.

Ms Sardis starts first and asks me all the same questions she asked in the waiting room. I give the answers she told me to.

Then it's the other lawyer's turn. Scott's lawyer. What sort of guy defends someone like Scott? He looks at me as if I'm scum. Maybe he saw me walk in with Dev, who's wearing his leather riding vest and jeans. I haven't seen him wear anything else, except his boxers, of course. It's a hot day so his tats are in full view. They give people the wrong idea about Dev. I guess the fact every other bloke is in a suit doesn't help either.

There's a smug look on the lawyer's face. 'I hear your grandfather left a sizable trust fund for you in his will. Also you inherited his personal possessions, even his boat. Is that correct?'

This isn't on the list of things I'm not allowed to say and I wonder if I should answer it or not. It's true at least so I nod my head.

'Is that a yes or no, young man?'

'Yes,' I say.

'You go out on the boat, is that correct?' He looks at his notes. 'With your companion, Dev Eagle.' He makes 'companion' sound like a dirty word and he smirks when he says Dev's name. I have to stay calm. It's one of the things Dev warned me about before we came. 'They'll try to rile you, mate.' Forget Shawn Houser bullying me at school – this lawyer could teach Shawn a few things.

I nod again, then remember to say, 'Yes.'

'You like going out in the boat, don't you? You even won a fishing competition. You must be good!' I stare at him; now he's almost smiling at me. What a turnabout. 'What else would you like to do at the beach, hmm?'

I don't answer straightaway but he says, 'Hmm?' again and louder.

'Kite surfing?' I venture.

'Or diving?' He sounds almost chatty. 'That would cost a lot of money, to have your own equipment, wouldn't it?'

I nod, trying not to let the panic set in. He's not asking any questions about the kidnapping like I thought he would.

'But the conditions of the will are that you won't get your inheritance until you're of age. The person who has custody of you can administer it for your benefit. Is that right?'

Will he get me for using the boat before I'm eighteen, is that it? 'Yes, but—'

'Wouldn't you like to get some of that money now?'

I shake my head. 'No.' Suddenly I see where I've been led: right into a no-through road. Ms Sardis is flipping through her folder. I suppose there are rules about sign language in court but I could sure do with some help right now.

The lawyer's tone changes again; he flaps his papers around. 'I think you lied about the kidnapping . . .' he

glances at Dev when he says this. 'You begged Scott Trenwith, your father . . .' he hovers over that word 'father' so that no one can miss it, ' . . . to be your guardian because you were unhappy with the influences in your life . . .' another glance at Dev, ' . . . and you thought if Mr Trenwith was in charge of the trust he would let you do the things you wanted to.'

'No, it's not like that.'

'Your grandmother wouldn't let you use the money on diving. Mr Trenwith wouldn't either so you wanted to punish him—'

'Your Honour, I object.' Ms Sardis stands. She's stuck up for me at last. I think she's won because the other lawyer sits down after saying, 'No more questions.' But he looks like a dog that's pulled a sausage off the barbecue. I glance over at Dev; he's not smiling at all.

'You may sit down,' another wig says to me. I walk back over to Dev.

Everyone is staring at me – especially the jury – feels like it anyhow. Are they checking to see what sort of person I am, and if I'm telling the truth? Can you tell just by looking? I remind myself to take no notice of Scott sitting behind the glass. He hasn't made a sound. I sneak a quick look and wish I hadn't. He's turned towards the jury and has a very pained and fatherly look on his face. Has he changed? Or is it an act? When I reach my seat Dev whispers, 'Do you want to leave?'

I nod and we make our way to the door. This time when I take one final glance at Scott, he's not facing the jury and he doesn't care how ugly he looks. He mouths some words at me. I don't misunderstand. He says silently, 'I'll get you.'

Dev sees too and he pulls me through the heavy doors. The detective comes out with us. Before Dev can speak to me, the detective takes him into the little waiting room, but I stay outside. I don't feel like talking. Scott was just as scary as I remembered, like some evil life force. Even though he's in police custody, he can get me anytime he wants – in my head. Now I know he just wants to hurt me. I hear a murmur from the waiting room. The detective is most probably telling Dev how I've ruined the case for them. That's when I remember I didn't bow to the judge when I left the courtroom. Why can't I do anything right?