

1

Shawn's watching me like I'm an injured tern flying too close to the rocks. What does he think I am? A loser? Anyone can windsurf. Now kite surfing – that would be so cool – sailing through the sky. Flying and water, what more could you want? No use thinking about it though – Gran would never let me. Though she's been less like a clucky chook since Dev's come to stay.

'Hey, Billings! Head in to shore. I want a turn.'

That's always the problem when a rig isn't your own. Just when the wind gets good you have to hand it over. Just one more tack. The old sailors must have felt like this – so close to the spray, the wind in your face. The rush makes something rise up inside and whisk your breath away. Your stomach too.

Shawn's shouting again. I pull back on the boom, ready to go in, and it's right on the turn that I notice it. A glint of silver. I have to check it out – doesn't look alive – too metallic.

'Billings! That's the last time—' I can't hear the rest. It'll have to keep – this is more important right now. The board's heading up to the metallic thing and I get it at right angles to the wind so it won't move too far. My feet are planted either side of the flapping sail as I take a good look. Shawn can see I'm onto something. He's stopped shouting and he's in the water, swimming out. It's not so far. He reaches me just as I've dropped the rig in the water and I'm off the board.

'What is it?' Then he sees the tinnie lapping in the swell. 'Whose can it be?'

'Dunno! This isn't good. Who'd leave a tinnie to float across the bay? Unless they fell out of it or something. It's as if Shawn can read my mind for we both glance around in the water at the same time.

'Just like you to see it, Joel. Seagull at a picnic, that's you – eyes wide open! He's kind of grinning at me but his eyes look like a cloud's gone across them, and I feel the same. This is too weird. Shawn takes the windsurfer back and I slowly swim in, dragging the tinnie behind me by its rope. There are no oars and the motor won't start. Did they run out of fuel? And who'd take a tinnie out without its oars?'

Shawn's finished de-rigging as I pull the tinnie up on the beach. We look it over. It couldn't have come far – not scratched or rusty enough to have been in the water forever.

'There's food and stuff under the plank, looks like!' Shawn's pulling out a bag.

'Maybe we shouldn't touch anything. Evidence and all!'

Shawn gives me this look, like, what would you know? Guess he wishes he found the tinnie so I add a piece of explanation. 'Dev says the police have to see these things first!' Shawn and I aren't the best of mates, not like Mei and me. Last year Shawn was evil to me but having Dev come to stay changed a lot of that. Though Shawn can still turn heaps nasty, just like a freak gale in the gulf. Like now. He stands up suddenly.

'Go and tell your precious Dev Eagle then, Biliious. Tell him while he's still around. You're such a loser, one dad in jail and the other a phony!' He makes it sound like he knows something I don't and he picks up his board, stashes the sail round the mast, and stalks off up the beach, dragging the rig and board behind him. I just make sure the tinnie's high and dry and head back home.

Dev's sitting out in Gran's cottage garden in the front. Looks like he's just mowed the lawn; he's got a beer. Gran's with him, sipping tea, her secateurs on the outside table. It makes me stop to see them like that,

cosy. Dev's cut his hair – he used to have this black peppery plait down his back; now he's got grey above his ears as well as in his goatee. Six months ago it was just Gran and me. Don't get me wrong – Gran's great, but a kid needs a dad, and I got myself one. I put this ad in the paper. It caused a lot of trouble at the time, but hey, I'm used to trouble. This is like a genie's wish come true: coming back from the wide world and finding your gran and pretend dad sitting quietly in the garden together. Dev's pleased to see me too.

'How'd it go, mate?' He's got this slipped grin on. He knows what I usually think of Shawn Houser.

I'm learning to joke a bit, like Dev does. 'Wasn't bad – we didn't draw blood at least! That's another thing. Dev gets really disappointed if I fight. It's hard not to at times, especially when Shawn's got his face smashed right up into mine, but I can't stand that look on Dev's face when he finds out. You wouldn't believe it to see him – black leather vest over a T-shirt that hardly fits over his sixpack and shows up his eagle tats, but he reckons he's worked that one out the hard way.

'The wind wasn't too strong, was it?' This is Gran.

'Nah, it was okay. Shawn wanted another turn as soon as I got out there though.' I catch something thoughtful in Dev's face as I sit with them on the verandah and tell what else happened.

'Found someone's tinnie in the water!'

'Must have come adrift,' suggests Gran. 'Better ask down at Houser's shop if any of the fishermen have lost one.'

'Couldn't have,' I say. 'The rope was good. That tinnie was either untied or it was taken out. No oars though. Water and food onboard by the look of it but I thought we shouldn't touch anything.' And I remember Shawn's burst of aggro and glance at Dev. He sure doesn't look like someone thinking of moving out. Dev doesn't say much, just gets up to ring the police. He's got to know the local guy well enough.

Then Gran starts in on what has become her favourite topic. 'Have you taken your pill this morning, matey?' On weekdays she puts it by my cereal like it's my only chance at life. Guess my head is quieter. There was always this buzz in the distance that used to gallop in closer, noisier sometimes. And it's clearer in there too – I can see stuff I never knew was there, like in water that's just been de-polluted, you can see the starfish on the yellow sand at the bottom. Mei reckons I'm heaps different, but it's embarrassing. Who takes pills? Only olds, or people going nuts or dying of stuff.

'Aw, Gran, lay off!' And I get up to go inside. Gran is such a worrywart. It used to be strangers – I was never supposed to talk to people I didn't know, or ride fast bikes. Dev fixed those. Now it's pills and I'm sick of it.

2

It's out in the local rag on Monday morning. *Local boy finds abandoned tinnie in bay.* It doesn't even mention Shawn Houser – he'll be in a ripe mood when he sees it. Seems there was a detention gang from the local correction centre working on the island and one guy had tried to escape. So the tinnie was from the island. It must have floated in with the tide. Winds can get really bad out in the gulf at times and with no oars he wouldn't have had a chance. The guy obviously drowned then, but they can't say that until they find the body so it's: *Barber Smith missing, presumed drowned.*

It's a weird feeling thinking you may have been the next person to touch something that some bloke who's just died touched too. Wonder how he got the petrol to start the engine? The old guy living out on the island

wouldn't have left a sign on the tinnie: *Ready for escape, petrol provided.*

I've almost finished my Weet-Bix (and taken the little white thing under Gran's watchful eye) when Dev tells me about the auction.

'Reckon we should go on Saturday, mate. Might be something worth buying.' Dev never tells you everything at once so I don't know what could be interesting at an auction and I don't care either. What's cool is that I'll have Dev to myself all day with a ride on his Harley as well.

'Sure thing,' I say.

Then he shocks me by asking me this next question. 'How much money you got saved, mate?'

Never been asked that before. Private stuff but I answer him. 'Seventy bucks.'

'Better bring it with you. You never know if you'll see something worth having.' So much for saving money, but I guess he knows what he's doing.

Life has sure picked up since Dev answered my ad. Guess it wasn't a smart thing to do when I think about it now, but I was pretty desperate at the time. I was the survivor of a shipwreck and was hanging onto the hull that was going down fast. Dev came riding in and threw me a lifebelt.

School's still like a war zone sometimes, though I feel more like I'm the secret agent. Not so much front-line

hand-to-hand combat – just lying low for a while. Ever since I went to that doc in Adelaide and got these pills, Gran's been saying what I can't and can eat, but I've done better at school. Sure hope Shawn doesn't catch on; that'd blow my cover for sure. I never realised before there was a pattern to those dumb tables we had to learn when we were kids. Reading's better too – not half the battle it was. Only Mei knows about it all. And Ms Bosse. She calls it Medication.

When I walked into her class in early February and saw her name on the board, I groaned aloud. With a name like that she'd have to be worse than Ms Colby, last year's teacher from hell. How far can you go? What's worse than hell? If Ms Bosse heard me she didn't let on. She sure looked different to Ms Colby and she asked us all to say our names and something about ourselves. I watched her like an eagle with an empty gullet when I said my name. I reckoned the other teachers had told her all about me and I said it loud, made it fly like a flag. She's got this mole on the side of her chin with a thick brown hair growing out of it – well, the hair didn't even move. I thought it was safe to say I liked fishing then and no one snickered for once. Guess winning a fishing competition shows I'm good at it. I've done that too.

Then Ms Bosse said something suss, said she'd like to rearrange the classroom and have us sit where *she* wanted for a while. See what I mean about her name?

I started to protest. I mean that is so *bossy*. But she just gave me this steady look, a bit like Dev does, as though I had every reason in the world to be upset. She said if we hated it after a term we could change it. Didn't budge either, but nor did she fume like Ms Colby. You could almost see the smoke coming out of Ms Colby's ears some days. She sure made me feel like I'd stepped out of the school sewer.

So it's turned out that Prescott and me are in the front. Mei's on the other side of me. Shawn's right down the back. It's weird, down at the front I've got nowhere else to look except at Ms Bosse and the board. And if I can't work something out there's Mei to show me. And would you believe it? Shawn's so far away he can't bother *anyone*. There's no one behind him to impress. It's the quietest our class has been since Grade 4. Ms Bosse couldn't have worked it out better if she'd known all about us.

3

Saturday roars around fast. Dev's got the helmets, straps his chinstrap and puts his glasses on; then he gives the throttle a sharp twist. Close up it's like revving a truck. Even when it's idling, Dev reckons his Harley is like a full-body massage. I climb on the back – this has got to be the best. He's got his old leather jacket on; he bought one for me too, at Christmas. Gran's standing out the back door, wearing a pair of jeans. It makes me take a second look. Never seen her in jeans before. She's saying something but I can't hear. Bet she's telling me to hang on, or something equally hopeless. Dev just waves as he settles back on the bike with his knees up, and we're off.

Burning down Park Terrace and onto the main road to Adelaide. Man, is this living! The rush is awesome – almost better than being out in Grandad's boat. Dev's

Harley is old and there's no sound system in our helmets like Shawn reckons his uncle's got; what a wuss. But this is the real thing – if you could bottle a thousand horses and feel their power at the flick of a wrist – that's what riding behind Dev feels like. And hanging onto him I feel like I'm attached. The vibration of the engine rages through Dev and jumps across to me, like a circle of energy joins us together. If only he were my real dad instead of that mean Scott in jail. I'm going to spend the rest of my life making sure I don't end up like *him*. Running into Scott at Gala Day was the pits. It made me wonder if Ms Colby had been right – face to face with the cesspool I came from. It wasn't pretty.

Dev says I shouldn't try too hard at it though. He told me this story about a mate of his learning to ride his bike in a paddock. There was one tree in the middle and he was determined to miss it. Kept his eye on it all the time so he'd know where it was. Guess what he crashed into? I understood that story – better to keep my eyes on Dev, I reckon, and then maybe I'll turn out okay.

We stop at Port Wakefield and Dev buys me a pineapple juice (I would have liked a Coke but we both know what Gran would say if she found out – there are some things Dev supports Gran in, like she's a footy coach or something). Then we're off again. I like the hungry way kids in the back of boring station wagons watch us as we pass. Bet they'd like a dad like Dev.

We end up at this big warehouse with 'Adelaide Auctions' painted everywhere. Dev parks and we go inside, walk around a bit. It's already started – people standing or sitting, listening to this guy up on a platform.

'What'll ya bid? Fifty dollar, fifty dollar.' Never heard anyone talk so fast, and I thought Zoe could talk (that's my biological mum). No one's answering this guy either. How does he know who bid? Then I see a woman lift a number on a card; another man gives a nod, so small, like a fly was on his nose. All of a sudden I can see it all – cool. You can't when you first walk in – it's like a group of dummies giving out secret messages. Imagine being able to see all those movements at once. Reckon I'd like to be an auctioneer. Dev gets a number and leads me over to another part of the floor.

'See here, mate.' And there's a windsurfer – board, sail, the lot. 'What do you think of it?' I walk around it. It's nothing like Shawn Houser's, no foot straps on the board.

'It's old, but it'd still work, I reckon.' I look up at him. He must have known.

He grins. 'Saw it in the paper, mate.' Then I remember my seventy bucks.

'This'd cost hundreds in a second-hand shop, wouldn't it?'

'Don't worry, mate. We'll see what happens.'

Yep. I reckon I'd spend my seventy bucks on a windsurfer, and then Shawn Houser and I could sailboard

in the same stretch of water. Wouldn't have to fight over his.

It seems to take forever for the action to get up to this end of the floor; they go through china bowls and boxes of books, music – all the stuff Gran puts in the church bin for 'those less fortunate'. Finally the group of dummies have moved around the rig. And it's on.

'Lot number 412 – sailboard and rig. What am I bid? As you can see, this is worth six hundred dollars, folks, but we'll kick it off at two hundred!' No one says anything and I start to wonder why we came. 'All right, let's start at one hundred. Any bids for one hundred?' Still no one moves a muscle. The man doesn't seem fazed any. 'Okay, we'll have a low bid. Fifty dollar. Far too cheap. Fifty dollar. Yes. Do I hear fifty-five, fifty-five dollars? Sixty, yes, sixty?' Dev's nodding. 'Sixty to the gentleman in the leather jacket. Sixty-five, sixty-five, yes, can I hear seventy? Seventy?' Dev nods again and shows his number. Another guy by the auctioneer is writing stuff down. I start to sigh in relief but it hasn't finished. 'Seventy-five, yes, seventy-five?' *Seventy-five!* I've only got seventy. Why doesn't Dev stop? He's standing there staring at the auctioneer, real serious, like he's never going to give up.

'I see that, Madam, yes, eighty. Do I hear eighty?' Dev nods again; I can't work out now who's in front. 'Eighty-five, eighty-five over there – ninety, do I see ninety? Ninety!' When's this going to end?

'Yes, a hundred, folks, a hundred, is there a hundred and ten?' Dev shows his number again. Then it suddenly stops – no one wants it for more than a hundred and ten. 'I'll sell this for a hundred and ten. Are you all done now? All done. Sold for a hundred and ten!' And the guy crashes a wooden hammer down on his desk.

'Was it us, Dev? Did we get it?' With all that nodding and showing of numbers I still don't know who ended up with it, but Dev seems happy.

'Yeah, mate, it's yours!' He's looking at me, proud. He knows he's got me something special; he's like a dingo when it brings home a young rabbit for tea.

'You sure?' I say. 'We'd better check!' And then I think of my seventy bucks. 'You forgot, I've only got seventy.'

Dev grins wider then. 'I'm going to chip in, mate. Isn't that what dads do?' I don't know. Do they? But it sounds cool, the way he says it. Surely this means he's like a real dad.

'Thanks, Dev!' I give him the seventy and he pays at the window where he got the number. 'How do we get it home?' I'm itching to try it out. That's when I hear about Dev's sister.

'We'll go to Nancy's for lunch. She'll pick it up and bring it over in her station wagon. She's been at me to meet you.'

'Me?' I'm heaps nervous. People don't always like me first up. And being Dev's sister makes it seem like there's

more to lose if she doesn't. She must be the one that saw my ad in the first place and told Dev about it. Guess I owe her one.

'Okay,' I say.

Nancy turns out to be a bit older than Dev – not much different to Gran really, except she's heaps bigger. It's the first time that I wonder if Gran's not as old as I think she is. I get squeezed into a huge soft hug before I see it coming and can duck. No one's ever done that before, not when they first meet me. Besides I'd never let them get away with it. Guess it's because of Dev I let it go and I tell myself not to mind. Dev's grinning at me, like he knows what I'm thinking. Nancy's made real spaghetti and sauce, full of olives, anchovies and little green things that look suss. It looks heaps hard to eat. She gives me a spoon and a fork and I watch how Dev does it before I start.

Dev's sister sure talks a lot. She's got black curly hair that jumps up and down and her eyes kind of pop when she gets up speed. She'd make a good auctioneer too. It's when Dev goes out to the shed to sort through some of his stuff for Nancy to bring over that she sets in motion a tide that shows me what a sandcastle kind of life I have.

'Yes, it was very timely for Dev, that ad of yours!' And she's patting my hand. I'm not used to all this touching. From Gran, sure, but not someone I've just met. Though, as I squint at her over the orange juice she gave me, I

wonder if she's my aunty now. Maybe I'll have to put up with it.

'Of course, Dev's never been one to settle very long in one place – a year here, six months there . . .'

I freeze. Somehow the juice finds its way back to the table without spilling.

'There was that time he went up to Queensland – some commune in the mountains. Didn't last long. Then he was in jail for age – oops!'

And she stops like I mightn't know about that, but I do. Dev told me months ago that he lost his wife and child in a bike smash – it wasn't his fault. Nancy can tell that I know; I haven't gasped in shock (as if I would anyway). Jumping Jehoshaphat – I can hardly think for all the other stuff she's rattling on about.

'Terrible thing that – his wife was a singer, you know . . . the little boy was adorable – only three.' I wish I had flaps on my ears and could shut them. Has anyone ever called me adorable? Hope she doesn't say his name – I don't want to know.

'Only three when it happened . . .'

Nancy makes it sound like a traffic accident, but I know it was worse than that – it was a biker-club war. Nancy looks sad now. Sad that her little brother can get himself in so much trouble?

I can't forget what she first said – that Dev never stays long in one place. He told me once he'd changed in

jail – become steadier. Not everyone did, he said. I have to hang onto that, but I can't sit here any more; I've been polite long enough for Dev's sake. I mumble something about finding Dev and get out of there. Fast.