



THE LORIKEET TREE

When your world enters a tailspin,
you never know where you'll land ...

PAUL JENNINGS

**THE
LORIKEET
TREE**



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THE LORIKEET TREE

**PAUL
JENNINGS**

**ALLEN & UNWIN**
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*To Linda Moulds and all the wonderful staff at
Warrnambool Veterinary Clinic.*

Thank you for caring for Ditto so lovingly.

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WHAT'S
GOING ON

Or

AS IT
HAPPENS

by

Emily Mortimer



part one

SUMMER

I

OUR PROBLEMS STARTED on the day we learned that Dad was dying. My brother, Alex, was peering intently under our house at a family of cats that had taken up residence there – a black mother with white patches and her five kittens.

‘Don’t get your hopes up, Alex,’ I said. ‘I know that you want one of those ferals but we can’t keep them. We just can’t.’

The four ginger kittens were jumping on each other and having fun. The grey one with the little white socks kept taking a dab at its mother. Each time it received a whack in return, which sent it tumbling head over heels.

Alex spoke to the mother cat as if she could understand him.

‘What are you hitting your own baby for? It’s not fair.’

‘Life isn’t fair,’ I said. ‘Bad things happen to everyone. I know it’s hard to understand, Alex, but that’s the way it is.’

The drama with the grey kitten continued. *Dab, whack. Dab, whack. Dab, whack.*

‘That one is not too smart,’ said Alex. ‘It just keeps coming back for more.’

‘It’s a survivor,’ I said. I wanted to add, *Like me*, but didn’t. Alex was clever in many ways but he was vulnerable to life’s knocks. And he, and sometimes even Dad, failed to see that at times I had my own problems.

Alex snatched one last glance at the grey kitten. ‘I really want it, Emily. Talk to Dad about it. He lets you do anything. The little grey one. I really, really want it. Just to love.’

I sighed. *Just to love*. Most fifteen-year-old boys wouldn’t say something like that. Alex didn’t know it, but my new friend Matthew, a forest and wildlife officer, was coming to take the mother cat and its litter away sometime in the next few days. I had called him myself.

I shook Alex by the shoulder.

‘Come on, Dad wants to see us.’

‘Don’t give me orders,’ he said. ‘Don’t boss me around. I’m older than you.’

He loved this little joke but I didn’t bite. I wanted to say, *Yes, but only by ten minutes. And I’m always the one watching out for you.*

But of course I didn’t. He was my twin brother and I loved him.

We made our way inside. Dad’s bedroom was full of light. He rarely closed the curtains because he liked to be awoken every morning by the sun as it climbed over the tops of our trees. The mood in the room, however, was sombre. Dad seemed deflated, drained of energy. He was propped up by pillows and struggling to keep his eyes open. His face was pale and he was breathing slowly.

He had a visitor.

Dr Price was Dad’s best friend. They had known each other since their primary school days. Every Thursday night until recently, they had met in the local pub for a meal and a few drinks. They loved to argue over politics and the state of the world. Jack liked to tease Dad over his left-wing leanings. On that day, however, his expression was that of a caring doctor, not a best friend.

‘Your father has some bad news,’ he said. ‘This is going to be very hard for you to accept, but I want you to know that I’m going to do everything I can to support you.’

Dad looked at us both seriously.

‘As you know, I’m pretty sick at the moment. I’ve been spending a lot of time in this bed and getting headaches and dizzy spells. Over the past month or so Jack has investigated every possibility. Things are not looking great.’

He paused and then sighed. He seemed to be having trouble finding the right words. Dr Price took over.

‘Your dad has been in and out of hospital a lot. We’ve done exhaustive testing and brought in several specialists. Now we

have a diagnosis. It's not great news. I'm sorry to say that Phillip has a brain tumour and it's growing quickly.'

My whole body seemed to turn to ice. If this had been about some stranger, I would have immediately realised what these words meant. But with Dad it was different – I didn't want to know the terrible truth.

'What's going to happen, Jack?' I whispered.

'He will gradually get weaker and will need a fair bit of medication and help.'

The reality of the situation suddenly hit me. I spoke without thinking.

'Is it terminal?'

Jack nodded.

I felt as if he had just tossed me an invisible medicine ball that was too heavy for me to hold. I moaned and then threw myself onto the bed with my head on Dad's chest.

Alex couldn't or wouldn't take it in. 'What do you mean, "terminal"? That's ridiculous.'

Dr Price tried to take the heat out of the moment.

'Nothing is going to happen straight away,' he said.

Dad reached out for Alex's hand. 'I'm dying, mate. There isn't any other way to say it.'

Alex stood paralysed, staring at him with wide eyes.

Dad tried again. 'Everything will be all ...'

Alex covered his ears with his hands, screamed and then ran from the room, stumbling and yelling as he went.

'Alex,' I called after him.

Dad spoke softly.

'He's going to need you more than ever now, Emily.'

He's gone to his usual hideout, I thought. I just hoped that his old magical thinking hadn't returned.

His problems could be traced back to one of the stories our mother used to read us at bedtime.

Alex's favourite was the Hans Christian Andersen fairytale about the poor little orphan girl who was freezing to death out in the snow. Every time she lit a match a wonderful scene appeared and she was warm and safe inside a cosy house for a few brief moments until the match flickered out. In the end she burned all of the matches at once, died and went to heaven where she was reunited with her beloved grandmother.

When Alex and I were six, our mother died in a car accident. It was a terrible time and we cried for months. Dad took over the story reading and at Alex's request he read *The Little Match Girl* every night. In the end I began to protest. I wanted something different and finally Dad stopped reading it altogether and hid the book.

Was this the right thing to do? Who can say? But one thing is for sure. It was the beginning of Alex's strange behaviour.

Dad had planned an overnight trip to Melbourne. He was going to leave us in the care of a lady we didn't know named Bree. Alex didn't want Dad to go. He was terrified at the prospect of his father driving so far and possibly dying in another car accident.

He built a tiny house out of a matchbox and made a plasticine figure of a boy, which he placed inside it. After this he lit a match and made a wish.

And sure enough – Dad didn't go to Melbourne.

Not long after this Dr Price told us that his cat, Bella, was dying.

Alex built a new room on top of the first one and placed the plasticine figure inside it. Once again, he lit a match and made a wish.

'Bella won't die,' he said.

And he was right, Bella lived for another three years.

Not long after, when the lower parts of Warrnambool were threatened by floods on the Merri River, yet another room

appeared on top of the matchbox house.

The floods subsided as they always do and of course Alex thought that he had made it happen.

Dad took him see a psychologist but after one visit Alex refused to go again. Dad didn't make him return because two good things had come out of the session. Alex gave up lighting matches and he stopped talking about his magic wishes.

However, he kept building his little rooms right up until three years ago, when a fierce bushfire was approaching our home. Predictably, another level appeared on the matchbox tower.

What really saved us was a sudden change of wind and the work of the Country Fire Authority. But I was almost certain that in Alex's mind the new toy room had done the trick.

In order to spot future fires before they reached us, Dad and Alex built a lookout platform halfway up a very special tree. Interestingly, this was the exact time that Alex stopped building rooms on the tower in his bedroom. And just as well, because the wobbly structure had almost reached the ceiling – forty-five storeys in all.

Did he abandon his obsession because he could go no higher? Or did the new fire lookout have something to do with it?

I wasn't sure, but I knew that was where I would find him the day he fled after hearing about Dad's tumour. He had been very busy up there over the last three years.

'I'll go after him,' I said to Dad.

'Take it gently,' he replied.

I nodded. 'Don't worry. We'll talk it through and work things out.'

I must have sounded quite controlled. But inside I was struggling with my own grief.

I walked along the corridor and passed Alex's bedroom. His little tower seemed so silly and futile. Just a fantasy.

I stepped out of the front doorway and looked up at the heavens angrily. There was no help coming from there.

One day there would just be me and Alex.

2

I LEFT OUR sprawling wooden house and walked along the track that led to the highest point on our land. There were several kilometres of these dusty pathways meandering through the shrubs beneath the more developed eucalypts and wattles.

Our property is located on the Great Ocean Road some distance from the rural town of Warrnambool and is totally covered in native bush, which makes it stand out from the surrounding farms like an island in an endless sea.

In winter the south-westerly winds shriek ashore from the ocean, transforming the protesting treetops into waves; always running, running, running but never able to leave.

On that day, however, our new woodland was motionless, baking and waiting. Begging for rain.

One hundred and fifty years earlier a thousand-year-old forest had covered the entire landscape. This had been almost totally cleared. The new green paddocks were grazed hungrily by thousands of dairy cows.



Twenty years ago, my father purchased one of these bare farms and turned it, once again, into a thriving forest – a refuge for koalas, wallabies, spiny anteaters and countless birds. Over this period, he seeded, planted and lovingly tended the reintroduced native plants until they could stand on their own.

The main species of tree Dad had planted was manna gum. These can grow as high as fifty metres and are particularly liked not just by birds but also koalas, which munch contentedly on the narrow glossy leaves.

It will take another fifty years before our trees can reach such a height. At the moment they are only a quarter of this, and can't yet provide the rich habitat of a mature forest with its dropped limbs and natural nesting hollows.

But it will happen – we are well on our way, with hundreds of indigenous birds, mammals and reptiles already in residence.

At the time of purchase, the property boasted only one tree, a magnificent manna gum. This thriving eucalypt was home to a huge flock of squawking lorikeets. From its branches they could stare down imperiously on our developing forest.

As I walked towards Alex's refuge my thoughts leaped between hope, confusion and despair. Life without my father was an idea I couldn't fully comprehend. And tucked somewhere behind those thoughts was the gnawing prospect of life with no one but Alex for company. We would have to leave this property. We could never manage here by ourselves.

The summer scent of eucalypt was heavy on the air and the sounds of dry leaves crunching beneath my feet gave warning that another bushfire could turn this silent forest into a blazing hell. A large blue-tongue lizard sunbaked on a nearby rock, blessedly unaware that life is a gift that can be snatched away without warning.

The sun had brought out a small family of tiny fairy wrens, each with its cheeky tail feathers flicking and twitching from side to side. These little birds made a wonderful display; the females in their drab coats of grey and the males so splendid with patches of brilliant blue.

Finally, I reached my destination. I stared up and blinked painfully in response to the merciless sun. As my eyes adapted, I could make out the trunk of the huge manna gum up to the point where it split into three branches. Sitting squarely in the middle of them was a small, bent cottage. It had a solid door and walls made of split logs. A tubular metal chimney twisted into the air like a broken arm. The whole thing reminded me of a painting ripped from the pages of a child's book of fairytales.

Access could be made by climbing planks which had been nailed one above the other into the trunk. These crude rungs ended at a platform, which was surrounded by a set of low railings.

Far above the cottage, an enormous canopy of scented gum leaves shaded the building and provided protection and roosting perches for the lorikeets.

I stared at my brother's addition to the fire platform from my safe position on the ground. Without any help from Dad, he had turned it into something magical.

Alex might have been sensitive and vulnerable but he sure had a way with tools and imaginative design.

'Alex,' I called. 'Come down. Please.'

He wouldn't have heard me. He couldn't have heard me. The lorikeets were screeching in the branches above his head. At times the noise was so loud that it almost drowned out my thoughts.

I loved these beautiful parrots. I stood there transfixed. Each one had a dazzling blue head and belly. Brilliant green, orange and yellow patches covered their backs. Their beady eyes and hooked beaks gave them an appearance of alert curiosity.

I would have done almost anything to protect them. I wasn't really happy about the treehouse, which might have driven off the lorikeets, but so far they seemed to tolerate Alex's residence quite well.

Like me, Dad was a bird lover. He would talk for hours about them, pulling out his worn bird book in which every second page was marked with a little sticker.

'Look at these,' he would say proudly. 'Every bird is new to the area. Brought back from the brink of extinction. All we had here before were introduced starlings. Now they've been scared off by the kites and other raptors attracted back here. All because of this new forest. There's nothing like the sight of a wedge-tailed eagle floating on a prayer. Or the sound of a boobook owl hooting in the dark of the night.'

I admired his extravagant way of speaking. I even adapted it into a style of writing that I could use to impress Mrs Henderson, our literature teacher at school.

Dad always finished up with the same chant, waving his hands in the air like an actor on the stage.

‘Magnificent. Glorious. Free.’

My thoughts returned to Alex.

‘I know you’re up there,’ I called again.

I picked up a stone and threw it with all the care I could muster. It hit the metal chimney with a clang. Alex would have heard the stone hit its target, even over the sound of the squabbling parrots. Normally I would have smiled, pleased at my accuracy. But not today.

I waited for a face to appear at the railing.

Nothing.

I picked up more stones and began to throw them at regular intervals. *Clang, clang, clang.*

Without warning the lorikeets rose in one squalling cluster and fled across the treetops. I felt guilty for disturbing them but I was confident that I had not put them in any danger.

Still no sign of Alex. If he was up there, he was definitely lying low. I threw more stones. The sound of my successful shots echoed through the bush. *Clang, clang, clang.* Every single one hit the target.

Silence was my only reward. Was he up there? Was he weeping silently? Had grief torn him apart? Or – I tried to stop the unthinkable entering my mind – was he still alive? I had to get up there and find out.

I looked at the rungs and started to feel giddy at the thought of putting my feet onto those crude, rough-cut planks. I had a terrible fear of heights. I couldn’t do it.

I sat down on the hot ground and waited. And waited. I thought that if I stayed there long enough, he would poke his head over the side and give himself away. I started to grow anxious, not just for Alex but also for Dad.

Was Dr Price still with him? Were they discussing some miracle cure that was being trialled in a far-off country? I needed to know more.

Half an hour passed. *Please, Alex*, I said to myself, *please come down*.

Still nothing.

‘Okay,’ I shouted. ‘I’m going.’

No reply. I decided to hide in the undergrowth.

I checked around for any hidden reptiles. Last year I had come across two tiger snakes and almost stepped on a red-bellied black. The summer before that I had seen one of the most dangerous of them all – an eastern brown.

I stamped the ground with my feet. ‘No, snakes, no snakes,’ I called out to the heavens.

I waited a few minutes and then crawled between some of the head-high saplings and dense wattles that sheltered beneath the maturing eucalypts.

It was uncomfortable and dangerous sitting there in the thick undergrowth. I began to feel resentful about the way I always had to help Alex in times of trouble.

Many thoughts swirled around in my mind as I lay there in the grass looking up at his handiwork.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, there was a movement.

Yes. There he was, peering over the rail, checking to see if I had gone. I remained hidden. I waited until he was on the ground and then stepped into the small clearing that surrounded the tree.

3

I WAS RIGHT about the tears. Alex wiped them away with a grubby hand. I tried to think of ways to help him. He was sensitive about so many things.

When he saw me, he jumped, obviously alarmed. Then he threw a look up at the treehouse. I wondered if he was going to scramble back.

‘It’s all right, Alex,’ I said as gently as I could. ‘We have to talk about ... Dad.’

A look of pain crossed his face.

‘Well done,’ he said.

‘What?’ I exclaimed.

‘Hitting the chimney with those stones. How many times did you miss?’

‘None,’ I said.

He nodded. ‘You’re almost as good as me.’

I let that one pass. I wasn’t going to be led away from what I wanted to say. I tried again.

‘You have to face up to it, Alex. Dad is ...’

He clapped his hands over his ears and yelled, ‘No, no, no.’

We stared at each other in silence. Finally, he lowered his arms.

I tried again.

‘Look, we both know that everything comes to an end sometime, okay?’

He remained silent, thinking about it.

I decided to stay with this theme. ‘Trees, insects, birds, mice and people. No one knows how long they have to live. You know that.’

He didn’t respond. I could almost see his mind ticking over.

Finally he said, ‘So how long has Dad got?’

At last – some recognition of the truth. This was a step forward. I had to be careful at this point. I couldn’t lie but I had to be gentle.

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘Yes you do. Tell me.’

‘No one knows.’

‘Guess then.’

This was so difficult. I had my own fears. And hopes. Doctors are sometimes wrong in these matters – maybe Dad could live for years. This time it was me blinking back tears.

What should I tell Alex? I struggled to find a path between truth and deceit.

‘A tumour reaches a point where there is nothing more doctors or chemotherapy can do,’ I said. ‘It’s beyond the help of science. There is nothing in this world that can save him.’

Alex stood peering up at the treehouse without saying anything. Finally, we began to walk towards home. He turned around several times and stared back along the track.

‘Forgotten something?’ I said.

He shook his head.

As we wandered along, a bunch of restless flycatchers caught my attention. They were similar in shape to fairy wrens; a little larger and black with white patches rather than coloured. Their flicking tails drew curious flies to their doom.

Nature was amazing. I imagined for the thousandth time what this part of the country would have been like before the settlers came.

Or, as Matthew, the forest and wildlife officer, would say, ‘Not settlers – invaders.’

I didn’t really like thinking about my ancestors in that way but I had to agree with him. The Gunditjmarra people had lived

in this region for thousands of years. Nobody knew it better than they did.

Matthew's people were from Europe, but as far as knowledge of the local birdlife went, in my eyes, he was second only to the Indigenous people.

The restless flycatchers were totally at home on our property. Every day our forest became more and more like it had been for thousands of years. Not an introduced species of any sort to disturb the wonderful balance. Not a fox, not a blackberry bush, not a single rabbit. Every creature in its allotted place.

There's no way Alex is getting a cat, I said to myself.

I knew that a kitten would take his mind from Dad's impending death. But a cat was not the answer. We both had to somehow accept the facts and work together to make Dad happy in whatever time he had left.

I would have done anything to help Alex cope with his anxiety. Except bring a feral intruder into our forest.

Finally, we reached the house. Alex ran inside but I paused and looked further down the hill to where our property bordered the road. I was just in time to see a panel van idling inside our front gate. Matthew had come and collected the cats and was about to leave.

I wiped away any sign of tears and ran towards the car.

4

I TOLD MYSELF that I was hurrying to open the gate for Matthew so that he wouldn't have to get out of his van. But it was more than that. Like me, he cared deeply for animals and the bush. He knew the name of every insect, reptile, bird and mammal in the area. He was also kind, contained and comfortable in his own skin.

I could feel myself trembling. What was going on? Why was I acting like a foolish schoolgirl?

Because that's exactly what you are, I told myself.

He gave me a friendly grin from the driver's seat. I hoped that he didn't notice me puffing.

'I'll get the gate for you,' I said. I undid the latch and swung it open. He rolled the car forward and stopped. He really was handsome.

'I collected the cats,' he said. 'It wasn't easy.'

He showed me the back of his hand, which had two red lines etched into the skin.

'Ouch,' I said.

'Just a scratch,' he replied.

'I bet it was the little feisty one,' I said.

He shook his head. 'The big female. She's vicious. It was tricky but I finally got all five.'

He indicated the rear cab of his van. Even though the windows were down to let in fresh air I couldn't see the cats from where I was standing. But I could hear the sound of soft meowing.

'What will happen to them?' I asked.

'The kittens will go to the RSPCA and be put up for adoption,' he said.

'And the mother?'

He shook his head. ‘Once a feral, always a feral. We’ll have to put her down. But you already knew that, Emily.’

‘They’re such a worry,’ I said. ‘They can kill four or five birds a night. Last year one took a ringtail possum – our first one. Cats don’t belong in this country.’

He gave me a mock wise nod. I felt my cheeks redden. I must have sounded patronising. He probably saw me blushing because he let me off the hook.

‘How’s your dad?’ he said. ‘I didn’t want to disturb him so I just took the cats without knocking.’

I shook my head. ‘Bad news – the worst. He’s got a brain tumour. We’re all in shock.’

I could see him searching for words.

‘Oh, Emily,’ he said. ‘I’m so sorry to hear that. How’s Alex taking it?’

I paused. It was difficult to explain.

‘Not good,’ was all I could say.

He took a few seconds to process this, then said, ‘If there is anything I can do, let me know. I’ve got the use of the van. I can get things from town for you.’

‘Thanks so much,’ I said. ‘That will help a lot. And your company would be good. It gets lonely out here.’

Loneliness was my biggest problem. I did have friends but being so far out of Warrnambool I didn’t see much of them out of school. It would be nice to have someone calling around whom I could relate to. But then I thought, *Loneliness is different to being alone. It’s not just anybody I want to see – it’s Matthew.*

I was suddenly embarrassed. Had I said too much?

‘I’ll make a point of dropping by,’ he said.

Was he this nice to everybody? I thought about asking him how old he was but changed my mind.

I stared at the red P-plate on the front windscreen of his van.

‘How old do you have to be to get P-plates?’ I said.

He gave a small grin.

I tried to cover my query. ‘I’ll have to learn to drive now that Dad is in such a bad way.’

‘How old are you?’ he asked.

‘Fifteen.’

‘Three years to go,’ he said.

I guessed he’d seen through my ruse. He was probably warning me off.

I waved him away with what I hoped was a casual gesture and closed the gate.

As I walked up towards the house my thoughts returned to Dad. I couldn’t imagine life without him. He would be suffering so much himself. We had to do everything we could to make his last months peaceful and happy.

Alex and I would have to keep the property running as smoothly as possible. There was the cooking and cleaning. Chopping the firewood. Managing the money. Supervising Dad’s medicines. Keeping on top of the weeds and rabbits. Repairing fences. Washing the windows and floors. Buying petrol and diesel for the chainsaws, portable generator and tractor. How could we possibly do all that on our own?

Everything about our place was a bit odd and would need special care. The main building was a sprawling, unpainted weatherboard. The grey timbers gave the impression of age but in fact Dad and Alex had knocked down our little soldier-settlement cottage and built its replacement only a few years ago.

The windows and verandah posts were made out of railway sleepers. A series of stacked decks were framed with flowering native plants and shrubs. Sculptures made out of rusting steel gave the whole place a carefully crafted industrial feeling.

Inside, practically every wall was covered in shelved books. Dad and I were both readers. He had once taught children with

disabilities at a special school but after Mum died he had retired in order to care for me and Alex. We were only little kids at the time, so there would have been a lot of work looking after the property and caring for us. We never had much money – most things in the house had been made from scrap by Dad and Alex. Every spare dollar was spent on the property.

With all this in mind, I quietly opened Dad's bedroom door. The blinds were down to keep out the afternoon sun but I could see that he was asleep. His breathing was normal. He seemed comfortable but frail.

Once he had been strong. Every morning he had read books and written articles in his study. In the afternoons, it was all physical: labouring on the property, digging, planting, building, fixing up the generator. Carting around railway sleepers and digging out rabbit burrows.

I blinked back tears, thinking of all the good times we would never see again. I went inside and softly tapped on Dad's bedroom door. He opened his eyes and for a moment seemed not to know where he was. Then he saw me.

'Emily,' he mumbled.

He struggled to sit up so I quickly grabbed a spare pillow and put it in place behind his back. I also switched on the ceiling fan.

'How's that?' I said.

'Very comfortable, thanks. Did you find him?'

'Yes, he was up in the treehouse. He's pissed off with me.'

'I'm so sorry to be leaving you with so much to worry about.'

He looked reflective. I knew that more was coming.

'There is the little matter of who is going to look after you both.'

He fell silent.

I couldn't tell Dad that I had already let a fantasy slip into my mind. An image, a picture; sad but hopeful. A future where Alex and I could live together on the property and, with the help of Matthew, face anything that the universe threw at us.

'Matthew is going to help us with the shopping,' I said.

'That's kind of him,' said Dad. 'He's a nice lad. But don't get too fond of him. He's much older than you. You're only fifteen. And he's ...'

I cut him off and brought the conversation back to Alex. I could feel my face burning. I hope Dad didn't notice it.

'I love Alex,' I said. 'He's really smart. Top of the class in maths. Can make anything at all with his hands. It's just that he gets so anxious.'

'Well,' said Dad. 'You've seen how much he is suffering. I've got an idea to cheer him up.'

'What?' I said.

'Did you get rid of those cats?'

'Yes. Matthew came while you were asleep. They've all gone.'

'Oh, that's a shame.'

'What's the matter?'

'I thought we might let Alex have one of them.'

My heart sank.

Dad was definitely losing his marbles.

I COULDN'T BELIEVE what Dad had just asked me to do. He shifted in his bed and repeated his request. He actually wanted me to give Alex one of the kittens that Matthew had just taken off to the pound.

‘Could you please take care of it, Emily?’

‘You’re joking, Dad,’ I said. ‘What about the birds? Remember what it was like at the beginning. Think back, Dad. The starlings will return and the pardalotes and New Holland honeyeaters will be gone. Eaten.’

From an early age I would listen, enraptured, as he talked about the forest. But at this moment, I was surveying him with narrowed eyes. He seemed to have forgotten all that had gone before. I wondered if the tumour was addling his brain.

‘Now suddenly you want a cat,’ I said. ‘I can’t believe it.’

He smiled at me.

‘Alex’s already lost his mother. He needs a bit of joy in his life.’

‘It might kill the lorikeets.’

‘It can be a house cat.’

I wasn’t convinced. ‘It would still escape,’ I said. ‘It’s impossible to keep them inside the whole time.’

‘He needs something ...’

‘Just to love?’ I said bitterly.

‘Now don’t be like that. He is so soft-hearted.’

An old memory made him smile again.

‘Remember that mouse that used to get into the kitchen at night?’ he said.

‘I’ll never forget it,’ I answered. ‘Neither will Alex. The poor thing was caught by the tail.’

‘And it ran around the kitchen dragging the trap behind it.’

‘Alex was furious,’ I said. ‘He made you let it go outside in the long grass.’

‘And then made me chuck the cheese out after it so that the mouse would have something to eat.’

We both laughed.

‘When he loves, he really loves,’ said Dad.

We were silent for a moment but then I couldn’t help making one further observation.

‘I wonder what he would have said if a cat had arrived with the mouse in its mouth. Which one would he have felt sorry for then?’

‘He was only six,’ said Dad. ‘That’s a bit young to be coping with existential questions like that.’

‘Fifteen is old enough,’ I said. ‘He knows the damage cats can do.’

Dad looked pained but I couldn’t help myself. Alex didn’t need a cat. It was a betrayal of the property. Of nature. Of our adopted land.

‘Ring up Matthew,’ said Dad. ‘Tell him to keep one of the kittens. Alex is in a bad way.’

I replied without thinking.

‘*I’m going to ...*’

I couldn’t finish the sentence: ... *lose you too.*

‘You’re strong,’ said Dad. ‘It’s a wonderful gift.’

‘It’s not a gift,’ I complained. ‘It’s something I do. It’s hard work. It’s putting up with the pain. I hate being strong. It hurts but I just keep going because I have to. And it’s lonely.’

‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry, Emily. You’re too young to have all this put on your shoulders. But promise me you will get him one of those kittens.’

Dad’s face suddenly screwed up in pain and he clasped his head in his hands.

‘Quick, my pills,’ he gasped.

I hurried into the bathroom and came back with two white tablets and a glass of water. I helped raise his head from the bed as he took the medicine.

He relaxed back onto the pillow and closed his eyes.

‘Can I get you anything else?’ I said softly.

He shook his head.

‘Just go and find Alex, darling. See what he’s up to if you can. I’m worried about him. Please let him have a kitten. It will help him, and you, when I’ve gone.’

I didn’t want to think about him being gone. My own advice to Alex came back to mock me.

Life isn’t fair. Bad things happen to everyone. I know it’s hard to understand. But that’s just the way it is.

I realised how stupid those words had been. ‘Just the way it is’ offers nothing in the face of longing, pain and sorrow.

Nothing at all.



Despite my supposed insights into the nature of human suffering, I didn’t do anything about the kitten. Alex didn’t mention either the mother cat or her litter. I was surprised that he had given up and not even asked where they had gone, but I was pleased that he’d lost interest.

Dad didn’t mention the matter either and it occurred to me that he might have forgotten about the cat because his memory was failing. I had heard that people in decline often lose their short-term memories but retain the ones from long ago.

Three or four weeks passed. Dad grew slowly worse. Sometimes he dozed off in the middle of a conversation. At other times he seemed to improve and could get out of bed. Then an almost childlike silliness could envelop him. On these occasions he might put on a piece of music and do a wobbly dance with an invisible partner. Sometimes he would recite poetry to the stars. Or weep at the sight of a flower.

I tried everything I could to get his interest and stop him slipping further away from us. Alex and I made a pact to keep him amused. On weekends we played dominoes or darts in the family room and there was much laughter over these simple games. In the evenings I sometimes read to Dad as he lay in bed. He particularly liked Chekhov's short stories. Sometimes he would fall asleep before I reached the end of one. It felt strange. Not so many years ago, he had been the reader and I a child drifting off in the middle of a tale.

I knew that there was nothing we could do to halt Dad's slow decline. But we would have to look after ourselves so that we could care for him. I was happy for Alex to head off for the comfort of the treehouse as often as he could. He loved it up there. He often came back with a big grin on his face.

Matthew often called by with supplies from the supermarket once or twice a week, which helped us both.

'I think Alex is up to something,' I said to him one morning. 'He still won't believe that Dad is dying. He'll listen to me now when I talk about it but he seems to think that Dad will live for years and years. And he's up to something inside that treehouse. I know he is.'

'Would you like me to go and check it out?' he said. 'I'm a good climber.'

'Better not,' I replied. 'We don't want him to think we're spying.'

At that moment Alex entered the room.

'Who's spying?' he said suspiciously.

'No one,' I answered. 'Don't go getting paranoid.'

He stomped out of the room.

I was now, more than ever, keen to know what Alex was up to. Over the years he had made many changes to the treehouse. Originally it had no door – just an opening to clamber through. He had constructed one out of logs and decorated it with an image of an eagle made of twigs. He definitely knew what he was doing. But now something different was going on.

The next day I confronted him.

‘What are you doing up at the treehouse, Alex?’

‘Renovations,’ was his only answer.

The churning sensation this caused in my stomach told me what I had known for a month but just couldn’t face – trouble lay ahead.

It was time to go and visit his lofty residence. After giving Dad his lunch and making him comfortable I waited for Alex head off to the treehouse.

Then made my way after him.

WARRNAMBOOL SECONDARY COLLEGE

STUDENT FEEDBACK SHEET

Emily, I enjoyed reading Part One of your memoir very much. It is extremely moving.

I only wish that I had known about your father earlier. You are going through some hard times and should consider having a talk with the school counsellor.

Now. Just a few comments about Part One. I am glad that you left the description of the forest until the point where the reader is hooked into your story. But perhaps the 'running, running, running' treetops might be a little extravagant, don't you think? Maybe do a bit more work on your metaphors.

Omitting the question mark from the end of your title was clever.

A fine piece of writing.

I look forward to reading Part Two at the end of this term.

Signed: *Mrs H*
Henderson,
Head,
Literature
Studies



part two

AUTUMN



6

IT HAD BEEN a long hot summer and the early autumn air was still uncomfortably warm. The scorched tracks were dry and bush flies buzzed around my face as I made my way towards Alex's refuge in the sky.

On reaching my destination, I saw something totally unexpected.

He had removed the whole roof from the treehouse and had built the frame of another storey on top of it. The old roof had been moved into the fork of one of the branches.

The changed structure now leaned drunkenly to one side. The ceiling of the first level had become the floor of a potential new room.

The birds above this growing nightmare screeched and squawked in seeming protest, their flapping wings showing briefly in the sunlight that flickered through the dark green foliage. My knees began to feel weak.

Alex was standing on the ground beneath the tree, heaving on the end of a looped chain. He had attached Dad's block and tackle to one of the thick limbs. A bundle of sawn-off tree branches hung from the pulley's hook and swung dangerously in the breeze. He was staring up as the chain rattled through the ratchet; he was puffing and out of breath. He suddenly saw me and let go of the chain.

'What's going on?' I exclaimed. 'It's not safe. You can't go up there. I'm telling Dad.'

'Then he'll die,' he said.

'What?' I exclaimed. 'What are you talking about?'

'When I add a new room it will bring luck. For everyone. It never fails. Dad will get better. I know it.'

'Don't be silly,' I said. 'You nitwit. Your renovations can't save Dad. It's superstitious. You need help.'

He glowered. Once again, I had said the wrong thing.

‘Don’t you call me a loony,’ he said.

‘I didn’t use that word,’ I answered.

‘No,’ he spat out. ‘But it’s what you think.’

I was lost for words.

God help me, I said to myself.

‘I’m not a nitwit,’ he shouted. ‘Who took out the maths prize at school?’

I softened my tone. ‘Look, a renovation is not going to save him. Come home. There are things we need to talk about with Dad.’

I took his hand but he broke out of my grasp and stomped away from me.

‘You’ll see,’ he yelled. ‘You don’t know everything.’

I hurried after him. I was aware that he was quite capable of running back and climbing up to the treehouse where I could never follow.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘You’re not a nitwit. I didn’t mean to say that.’

He glared at me but said nothing.

When we reached the house, I was surprised to see Matthew’s panel van pulled up outside the front door. He was standing there waiting for us.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘But—’

‘You know about Ditto,’ said Alex in a low, controlled voice. ‘You’ve been spying. You’ve come for her. No one gets Ditto. No way.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I said.

Matthew also looked bemused. His reply sent my head into a spin.

‘Emily. It’s about your dad. He’s been taken to hospital. He had a bad migraine and a breathing problem. You weren’t home and I found him in trouble. I called an ambulance.’

I began to shake. Matthew gestured to his van and Alex and I quickly squeezed into the front.

The trip into town seemed to take forever but finally we reached the hospital. We hurried inside to the reception desk. The nurse and Dr Price looked up.

‘Everything is fine,’ he said. ‘It’s all under control. Nothing to worry about.’

He pointed down the corridor.

‘Room seven.’

‘I’ll wait here,’ said Matthew. ‘You don’t need me.’

I hesitated. ‘Okay,’ I said.

Alex and I hurried towards Dad’s room. To our surprise he was sitting up in his bed looking tired and pale, but leafing through a wildlife magazine. This cheered me up, but only for a second. I took it from his hand.

‘You’re holding it upside down,’ I said.

‘I never could fool you,’ he replied with a weak smile.

‘Why would you do that?’ said Alex.

‘Because he wants us to think he is better than he really is,’ I said.

Alex flinched.

‘You look good, Dad,’ he said. ‘You’ll be better soon. When are you coming home?’

‘Tomorrow,’ he replied. ‘Everything is okay.’

I shook my head.

‘I’m talking to Dr Price.’

I left Alex with Dad and rushed back to reception.

‘What’s going on, Jack?’ I said. ‘He’s just got here and now he’s talking about going home.’

He spoke in a serious tone.

‘The brain tumour is growing and it’s spread. He’s declined further therapy which, to be honest, wouldn’t have made much difference at this late stage. All we can do now is increase the pain medication to make him more comfortable.’

‘Is that wise?’ I said.

‘He wants to be at home with the two of you. When it gets too much for him, he can come into palliative care. It’s his choice. He’s a fighter, but in the end, if it gets more than you and Alex can handle he will choose to come back here. Believe me.’

‘When will he ...’

I couldn’t bring myself to say the word. But I didn’t need to. Dr Price answered the question anyway.

‘Look, it could be a year. Maybe only a few months. You can never really say. You and Alex try to stay involved in life. Enjoy the little everyday moments. Sitting around worrying will just make things worse.’

I decided not to tell Jack about Alex’s building activities. It would take time to deal with that fantasy.

I walked back to Dad’s room.

‘Jack says—’

Alex cut me off. ‘I don’t care what the doctors say. Dad’s coming home and he’s not going to die.’

He strode out of the room.

‘Try to keep him busy,’ said Dad. ‘I know how you feel, but could you try to get that kitten? They might still have it.’

I didn’t reply. Alex was already occupied with building up the treehouse. I didn’t need a bird-killing feline to add to our problems. That kitten would have grown quite a bit by now. And with any luck it might have been adopted by someone.

WE DROVE BACK from the hospital in silence for the first ten kilometres or so. Alex kept wiping the tears from his cheeks with a sodden tissue.

‘Here, have this,’ I said, giving him a fresh one.

‘We have to hurry,’ he said. ‘I’ve got building to do.’

‘Alex,’ I said, ‘your treehouse hasn’t got any relevance to Dad’s situation. You have to stop building. It’s dangerous.’

‘No, I know he won’t die if I do it.’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘You can’t stop me. And don’t call me silly.’

His voice was becoming hysterical. I had to change the subject. I touched Matthew’s arm. It felt warm and strong.

‘Why were you at the house when Dad went to hospital?’ I said shyly.

I had foolishly and secretly hoped that he might have found some excuse to see me.

‘Those kittens,’ he said. ‘The RSPCA have just placed the last one of them. I thought you might like to know.’

‘You could have phoned,’ I said.

Was I flirting? If I was, he ignored it.

I was aware that Alex was listening intently. Even though it wasn’t the right time, he needed to understand that all the feral kittens had been placed.

‘So the little grey one has gone to a good home?’ I said.

‘There was no grey one,’ Matthew answered. ‘They were all ginger.’

It took a moment for me to take in his words.

‘How many kittens were there?’ I exclaimed.

‘Four.’

I turned and stared at my brother. I had to give him full marks for guts. But he could be so annoying.

‘Alex,’ I said softly. ‘You’ve got that grey one. You took her from under the house that day you ran off. You little ...’

‘Nitwit?’ he said.

‘Yes, yes, yes. Nitwit. Cats kill over a million birds every day in Australia. Some species have already gone forever. As you perfectly well know.’

‘You’re not getting Ditto,’ he said. ‘I love her, I love her, I love her.’

He said the words in rhythm, mocking my, ‘Yes, yes, yes.’

Our eyes met, locked in a furious face-off.

Ditto, I thought. *What a name.*

More silence as we bumped along the road. The van threw out a vortex of dust behind the back wheels. I felt both sad and annoyed at the same time. I had wondered where all our fish and chicken scraps were going. But where had he been keeping her? Probably under the house somewhere. Finally, Matthew spoke up.

‘Let him have the kitten,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ yelled Alex.

‘Matthew, you can’t be serious,’ I said. ‘What does it say on the door of this van? Come on. What?’

‘Department of Environment?’

‘Yes. It’s your job to look after birds and lizards and native wildlife. That includes getting rid of the ferals that feed on them. What about your love of our native bushland?’

‘What about your compassion?’ he said gently.

‘What do you mean?’ I said.

‘He’s been caring for it,’ said Matthew. ‘And playing with it, probably. It will be tame by now.’

‘Domestic cats still hunt,’ I said.

‘Keep it in at night.’

‘It will get out. You know that.’ I looked at Alex. ‘Where is it?’ I said.

‘In the treehouse.’

‘The treehouse,’ I exclaimed. ‘Right under the lorikeets. Breakfast, lunch and tea, right on hand.’

‘He loves the cat,’ said Matthew. ‘Think what he’s going through.’

‘What about me?’ I said. ‘I’ve got feelings too.’

‘You’ve got the birds,’ he said. ‘And the forest. And ...’

‘And what?’

He fought for the right words.

‘Well, I’m always here to help.’

I suddenly felt ashamed. Matthew was right. There was no way we could take the kitten from Alex. He had lost his mother and now was facing the death of his father. If I was at the point of collapse over it, I could only imagine what he was going through.

‘Okay,’ I said slowly. ‘But Ditto stays in the house. And she never goes out.’

‘Yes,’ Alex yelled. He punched the air with his fist.

‘And one more thing,’ I said.

‘Anything.’

‘You stop building on that treehouse. Dad is not going to be saved by that.’

He didn’t respond.

‘Alex?’

‘He might die soon. You don’t know.’

‘I do know. Say it,’ I growled.

He hesitated. ‘Okay. I’ll stop building.’

‘If you break your word, I’ll kill you,’ I said.

‘And if you hurt Ditto, I’ll kill you. Promise you won’t touch her.’

I nodded.

‘Say it.’

‘I promise. I won’t touch Ditto,’ I said.

I think Alex understood that in some way, by using the cat’s name I had endorsed it as a member of the family. There was no turning back on that promise.

Matthew stopped the car and I jumped out to open the gate. I knew that I had handled the whole thing badly. I should have let Alex have the cat in the first place like Dad asked. What was wrong with me?’

At this moment I admitted to myself that Alex wasn’t the only one who needed help. I couldn’t settle on any one emotion. Dad was dying. Alex was needy and confused. Matthew wasn’t interested in me. I felt angry, scared and lonely all at the same time.

I waved Matthew on and followed the car back to the house. By the time I arrived he was heading back in his van. He waved without looking at me.

I was left there alone with my misery.

8

DAD CAME HOME the next day. It was a good time of year for Alex and me to renew our efforts of support. The autumn weather was changing – cold, clear nights followed by frosty mornings and brilliant blue skies. On the other hand, the occasional storm, borne on south-westerly winds, would hint at the fury to come.

My father's new medications seemed to have made some difference to his mood and agility. He managed to get himself out of bed in the morning for the first few days, although by lunchtime he was worn out and had to take a nap. After that he would retreat into his head and lie gazing out the wide bedroom windows that overlooked our valley and his young forest of wattles and eucalypts.

He was looking older than his forty-eight years. To my mind he was losing his critical edge. He had eagerly accepted a cat onto the property. Once he would never have allowed such a thing.

My gloomy thoughts were suddenly extinguished. Before I could even blink back a tear, Alex rushed in with Ditto. He dumped the kitten down and held out a toy he had made himself.

It consisted of a whippy fishing rod with a small length of cord tied to the end. Attached to this was a cork embedded with three or four feathers he had found in the bush. He drew this little creation slowly across the floor. Ditto was mesmerised. She crouched down and stared at it with flattened ears and quivering shoulders.

Suddenly she pounced with incredible energy and agility. Fast. But not fast enough. Alex whipped the feathered lure away and buried it under one of Dad's pillows. Ditto followed at speed and began digging and scooping, desperately seeking the prize. In the end she tunnelled furiously under the pillow and emerged from beneath Dad's head with the feathered toy in her mouth.

Dad laughed but I wasn't really enjoying the spectacle. I bit my lip. That cork would one day be a native mouse or a fairy wren. And she would catch it.

'Give me a go,' said Dad.

I was torn. The kitten was cute. And funny. And affectionate. And it liked Dad. And he liked it. But it had a wild side. If you picked it up at the wrong moment it could suddenly bite or scratch.

Dad pulled on the rod but Ditto was not letting go for anyone. She bit on the cork with all her might as Dad slowly raised it into the air. Ditto was lifted onto two feet and struggled like a fish on the line. Finally, she let go and did a furious lap of the house, venting her fury by leaping over chairs and climbing the lounge room curtains.

'You are training it to hunt,' I said. I walked out of the room in disgust.

Later that evening Dad raised the matter with me. Perceptive as always, he could tell that I was upset.

'Go and look at Alex now,' he said.

I glowered.

'Go on. Go and look.'

I tiptoed down the corridor and peered through Alex's open door. He was flat on his back with closed eyes and a gentle smile on his face. Ditto was fast asleep on his chest, with her paws stretched out like a supplicating child. The kitten's face was totally trusting.

Over thousands of years, nature had refined this little creature into a living poem, totally unaware of its own beauty: the fragile whiskers, the exquisite nose, the perfect symmetry of its grey and white stripes. And, in more recent years, a projected innocence that masked its savage instincts.

I closed the door quietly and crept back to Dad.

'What do you think?' he said. 'What do you think of Ditto now?'

I scowled.

‘The seed of the Devil,’ I said.

Dad gave a mocking laugh, picked up a pillow and threw it at me. It was good to see him back to his old self, if only for a few hours. I knew that I had to smother my resentments and give him more of these moments. I was going to have to learn to live with Ditto.



The cat grew quickly. All the playing with Alex and Dad was honing its skills. Sometimes Dad’s involvement made me worried. Was he becoming childlike or was it all just a bit of fun? I couldn’t tell.

Sometimes Dad would talk to himself or recite lines of verse to the silent view. He was growing sentimental. One warm afternoon I overheard him talking to a family of fairy wrens that were flitting around outside his open window.

‘You little guys are so lovely,’ he said. ‘And next year there will be even more of you.’

He stared at them with a smile that slowly faded, and added a final thought.

‘Not that I will be here to see it.’

He flopped back on the bed and sighed. My heart was breaking.

Dr Price began to visit Dad every couple of days, not just for medical reasons but because they were friends. And I knew that he was also keeping an eye on me and Alex.

One day when Dr Price and I were chatting to him, Dad fell asleep. We sat watching him quietly as he dozed. Without warning he began to mumble. He suddenly opened his eyes and stared at me, startled. He shook his head, not seeming to understand where he was.

‘Bree,’ he mumbled. ‘Bree. You’ve come.’

He took my hand and smiled at me in a sappy sort of way.

‘I never told you how I felt,’ he said. ‘I knew it was love. That day you rushed off. I never saw you again. It broke my heart.’

He started to mumble. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

‘Dad,’ I yelled. ‘It’s me, Emily.’

He blinked furiously.

‘Oh, sorry,’ he said in a distressed voice. ‘I thought you were someone else. I must have been dreaming.’

Dr Price and I exchanged glances.

‘Give us a few minutes,’ he said to me.

I stood up and walked into the kitchen. I started to absent-mindedly make myself a coffee. I could hear their voices mumbling softly behind the closed door. Every now and then I thought I heard the word ‘Bree’.

After about an hour, Dr Price emerged.

‘How is he?’ I said.

‘Well, he was hallucinating,’ he said. ‘And it’s probably going to happen again. It will upset you because he won’t seem to be himself. It won’t necessarily worry him, although it might.’

‘Who is Bree?’ I said. ‘Is she a real person?’

‘Patient confidentiality. You would have to ask him that,’ he said. ‘But not now. He’s asleep again.’

I nodded but said nothing.

I was extremely upset over Dad’s hallucination. And while part of me was curious about someone called Bree, another part of me didn’t want to know.

More worrying developments occurred the next day. Dad began confiding in the cat. His relationship with Ditto was real love. He fed her treats. He laughed at the way she would lick his face and purr when he stroked her. But he had started talking to her as if she was a person. And some of the things

he said were strange. You could hear him from the lounge and kitchen. Honestly, it was a bit embarrassing. At times he seemed to go into a sort of trance with it.

‘Dear little Ditto. You are the best cat in the whole world.’
Things like that.

He even started talking to her about Bree.

‘I can tell you anything. You can keep a secret – Bree was very, very lovely.’

His bouts of incoherence began to overwhelm me. It was all becoming too much. I had so many problems: I could not make Dad better and I could not make Alex happy. And I knew that I would not be able to stop Ditto from catching birds.

I had once told myself that I was a survivor. But at that particular moment I didn’t believe it. I felt like a leaf drifting down a stream with no way of steering a course.

WARRNAMBOOL SECONDARY COLLEGE

STUDENT FEEDBACK SHEET

EVALUATION

Emily, it's only been a week since Mrs Henderson's disabling stroke and you will appreciate that as a relief teacher, I have a lot to catch up with. However, I have read Parts One and Two of your lovely memoir and would like to make a few comments.

You have sown a number of seeds here which leave the reader wanting to know what happens next. In fact, at times, this piece reads more like a novel than a memoir.

The descriptions of your dad's deterioration are very sensitively done. So is your honesty about your feelings. This frankness in a memoir is good. It shows that you are respecting the truth.

I know that you haven't yet seen the school counsellor as Mrs Henderson advised. You should do so as soon as you get back from the school holidays.

You are very talented. Lovely writing.

Signed: *Gabrielle*
Longford,
Relief
Teacher



part three
WINTER



THE WHOLE SCHOOL had been saddened by Mrs Henderson's stroke and we all wished her well and a speedy recovery. But we were also anxious about any teacher who might replace her. However, the new literature teacher, Miss Longford, turned out to be just as nice.

Over the next few weeks, I thought about the suggestion she had made in my last assessment. I didn't really want to visit a counsellor so I pushed the possibility out of my mind. But she kept on about it right from the first day of term and wouldn't let up.

If I hadn't liked her so much, I would have become annoyed. I didn't need that sort of help. Nothing was going to save Dad's life – I just had to be strong.

Dad's next bout of cat conversation was one of the worst. I went into his bedroom one day to find Ditto curled up in the crook of his arm, sound asleep. My heart ached.

He suddenly woke up. Ditto raised her head.

'Hello, lovely cat,' he said. 'I'm going to tell you a secret. About Bree.'

'Dad,' I said. 'You're talking to the cat again. Sharing inappropriately.'

He looked around.

'Oh, yes. Sorry, love. I've been dreaming.'

He closed his eyes and slept some more. I sat there next to his bed and held his hand. It reminded me of the times he did the same for me when I was a child trying to fall asleep after a nightmare. He would slowly begin to release his grip in order to sneak out, but if I was still awake, I would clutch his fingers to stop him leaving the bedroom.

Finally, he awoke. He saw me and smiled.

'Ah, Emily. How long have you been sitting there?'

‘About an hour.’

‘Was I rambling?’

‘A bit,’ I said. ‘Well, more than a bit, actually. About someone called Bree. You were talking to Ditto.’

He thought about this for a while. Now he seemed to be perfectly in control of his thoughts.

He said, ‘I loved Bree very much.’

That stunned me. This really was private. But I couldn’t help asking a few questions.

‘How old were you at the time?’

‘Thirty-nine.’

I did some quick calculations. Alex and I must have been about six years old.

‘That was only a little while after Mum died,’ I exclaimed.

‘Yes.’

‘You couldn’t really have loved this Bree.’

‘Who says?’

‘It’s wrong.’

He took my hand but I pulled it away and stood up. I have to admit that I was disappointed in him for forgetting my mother so quickly.

He spoke quietly, thinking about every word.

‘We are all responsible for what we do, Emily. But we can’t help what we feel.’

‘Just what did you do?’

‘Nothing. Sit down and I’ll tell you all about it.’

I reluctantly did what he said. I sensed that it was going to be another one of his dramatic accounts.

‘I was teaching at the secondary college looking after children with special needs. I had about twenty-five kids in my care. Some were survivors of accidents. Others had cerebral

palsy or learning problems. A few had difficulties fitting in with the other students. Things like that. Every now and then I would take some of them to the Warrnambool Art Gallery. They really enjoyed going there.'

'For excursions?' I said.

'More than that. Bree was the education officer at the gallery. She was wonderful with the children. She told them interesting stories about paintings and sculptures. She had a room out the back where they could draw and create their own works of art or make illustrated books. They loved making up their own stories.'

I didn't interrupt him. He was on a roll. More lucid than he had been for weeks. Almost back to his old self.

'She would ask me to help. We also took the class out for walks down to the beach where they could seek inspiration. We loved being together and we both had a deep commitment to those kids.'

'Was she married?'

'No,' he said.

I wanted to know more.

'Did you tell ... Bree how you felt?'

'Yes.'

'Did she say that she loved you?'

'She didn't have to. You just know.'

'It was still a betrayal of Mum,' I said.

'That's a bit harsh,' said Dad. 'You can't make yourself fall out of love.'

'How did it end?'

He didn't answer for quite a while.

Finally, he said, 'I'm baring my heart to you here, Emily. But maybe it might do some good.'

I held my breath.

‘It was the end of the school year. She was leaving the art gallery to take up another position. On the last day of school she asked me if I would drop her home in my car.’

‘Yes?’ I said.

‘I stopped outside her flat and we just sat there in silence, not knowing what to say. Then she suddenly leaned over and kissed me. Very gently.’

‘You kissed,’ I exclaimed.

‘Yes. Then she said, “It’s too early for you to start up again with anyone else, Phillip. You can’t have healed from the death of your wife yet. I’m not going to see you again. So please don’t contact me. We both have to put this behind us and move on.”’

‘What happened next?’

‘She burst into tears, jumped out of the car and ran off.’

‘Did you see her again?’

‘No. She moved to Melbourne and I lost track of her.’

‘Surely you got over it?’ I said.

Dad looked at me carefully.

‘It’s the unfulfilled loves that cause you the most pain,’ he said. ‘You never forget them.’

Love. That word again. Why was he telling me all this? It certainly answered a few questions. I often wondered why he hadn’t started seeing anyone. He was a good catch.

My feelings of outrage began to dissipate. It was obviously a sensitive matter for both of them and in the end, Bree did the right thing.

I kissed Dad on the forehead and tried not to cry.



Another month passed. The weather was becoming stormy and cold. Often it would rain for a week without stopping. The wind would sometimes make the whole house tremble. I used

to imagine that a giant hand was shaking it in an effort to dislodge us.

Ditto grew quickly. She became extremely nimble. All the playing with Alex and Dad was definitely honing her skills. I tried to ignore their growing obsession.

Most ridiculous of all was the cat palace that Alex built inside the house.

That's what I called it, anyway. It was a jumbled maze of boxes and poles all lined with soft materials, ropes and cushions. It had lookout platforms and ladders with soft toys hanging from them on rubber strings. Ditto would peer down from the top shelf.

'The queen surveying her subjects,' I said at breakfast one day.

'It's er, er, triffic, Alex,' said Dad. His voice was trembling and he seemed to be having trouble finding the right words. 'People go crazy over those, er, what do they call them? Cat climbing thingies. You should make some and sell them, Alex. You could make a fortune.'

My brother couldn't hide his enormous smile. He loved a bit of praise.

Ditto, who was crouching on the floor nearby, suddenly sprang up the side of the cat palace, jumping from shelf to shelf in a grey blur of speed. It was incredible. She seemed to reach the top of it before she had even left the floor.

I shook my head. One day this young cat would get up a tree in two blinks of an eye. Ditto peered down with flattened ears, pretending that we were the enemy.

'They do that with their ears when they hunt,' I said. 'So that they can peer over rocks and logs without being seen.'

'She's different,' said Alex.

'We've committed to Ditto, Emily,' said Dad. 'I never thought I'd see a cat here, but that's the way it is. And I love her too.'

'I can see that,' I said.

Every weekday Alex and I would walk down to the front gate and wait for the school bus. I usually sat up the back with the kids from year ten. Most of us talked about exams or swotted for one of the many tests set in our third-last year of school.

Alex and I didn't like leaving Dad all alone every day, but he was holding out against getting in any help. Ditto would sit behind the glass door and peer out as we left.

At night Ditto slept with Alex, often with her little face tucked up under his chin. And during the day she snoozed with Dad, purring from the pillow I had given him for Christmas.

I could hardly bring myself to think about a world without Dad. But I was aware of another impending loss. There was no way that the authorities would let two fifteen-year-old teenagers live alone on a sixty-acre country property. Dr Price knew that Alex and I had an uneasy truce. He would probably recommend a foster home even though he knew that leaving the property would break both our hearts.

Despite the fact that Miss Longford kept nagging me to see a counsellor, I have to say that she was also very helpful to me at school (I'm not sucking up here, Miss L. It's true).

She was firm in the way she handled the students but very approachable. We all looked forward to discussing our work with her. Her encouragement helped keep me going. I spent every spare moment polishing my memoir and couldn't wait to hand in the next section and see what she thought of it.

During this time I also wrote a short poem for the school magazine and she told me it was a lovely piece and said I might have a future as an author. I was rapt to hear that.

Alex was fond of her too. She gave him special coaching during her lunch hour because he was struggling with literature. He was more interested in practical subjects like maths and graphic design.

She made a few efforts to get him to see the counsellor too, but he wouldn't talk about Dad's illness to anyone. Not even me. He was certain that Dad had a long life in front of him.

Without Miss Longford's help during those terrible months, I doubt that Alex and I would have coped with school at all.

'I understand why your dad wasn't able to come to the parent/teacher evening,' she said one day. 'So I thought I might come out and pay him a visit and tell him how well you're doing in literature studies. I'm sure he would like to hear about Alex's progress too.'

I was thrilled about this. I didn't know what to say. It was so generous of her.

Fortunately, at this point Dad had not suffered any more hallucinations but he was becoming weaker and more forgetful.

Alex and I were getting along reasonably well with each other. He would sometimes just start drying the dishes when it was my turn to do the washing up. And I would help him with his essay writing if he asked me.

This spirit of friendly cooperation lasted until the morning Ditto suddenly disappeared.

For the whole day.

IO

ALEX AND I pulled on our parkas and began to search for Ditto among the trees and shrubs. We combed the forest and searched every track but it was hopeless. I contacted Matthew and he came out to help us after he had finished work. He always acted like a big brother or a kindly uncle towards me. It was comforting but I must admit I always hoped for a little more.

I turned my attention to Alex. He was terribly upset over Ditto's disappearance.

'Maybe a wedge-tailed eagle's taken her,' he said, trying to hold back tears.

'I don't think so,' said Matthew. 'Not while there are plenty of rabbits around. Feral cats are like an exploding box of nails if they're caught. I learned that the hard way.'

'She's not a feral,' said Alex.

'An eagle doesn't know that,' Matthew replied.

We gave up the search and went back to the house to wait. It began to grow dark. From the porch we could see the forest washed in the gentle light of a rising moon.

I lit a fire in the outdoor chiminea that Dad and Alex had made out of cast-iron plates. Its cosy glow gave a little warmth to the cold night.

'She could be down near the road,' I said.

That was not the best observation I could have made. I shivered at Alex's next words.

'She might have been run over,' he exclaimed.

He ran to the front gate and began walking up and down the road. Finally, he gave up the search and rejoined us on the back deck.

'No sign of her,' he said. I could see that his lips were trembling.

‘All we can do now is wait,’ I replied.

We sat around the picnic table and stared into the night.

‘Do you believe in heaven?’ Alex asked suddenly.

What a question. The prospect of a squashed cat on the road must have got him thinking. Or maybe, somewhere in the depths of his mind, he was starting to face Dad’s slow but undeniable decline and recognise that his last days were close.

I didn’t want to destroy Alex’s hopes or belief in an afterlife. I had to be careful with my answer.

‘It depends how you define heaven,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t necessarily mean that we all meet up again and go on like before as if nothing has changed.’

‘What’s the alternative?’ he said.

‘Well, your brain and your mind could be two different things. The conscious part of you could be outside of yourself. And when you die it could still be there. And so could Ditto’s.’

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘We will call that a soul. But you didn’t really answer the question. What you really think is that there’s no heaven at all. If Ditto is dead, we will never see her again. And when Dad dies, he won’t be there waiting for us. The lights get turned off and there’s nothing but darkness. Life doesn’t have any meaning. That’s what you think, isn’t it?’

I didn’t know what to say without lying. I felt like telling him that there are no magic charms or toy buildings that bring good luck either.

Matthew had been listening carefully and at this point he decided to have a say.

‘Maybe after we die, we all become part of the whole,’ he said. ‘Everything in the universe could be connected, including dogs, cats, plants and people. Maybe even stones and stars. Everything that’s ever lived or is going to live could be part of one big conscious whole. Maybe that’s what heaven is. And when a person dies, it’s like a drop of water falling into a pond of love.’

I looked at him in total admiration. He had saved the day.

‘What a beautiful thought,’ I said.

Alex took the opportunity to give his own view.

‘Well, if all that is possible,’ he said, ‘so are other things. Every time I built one of those little rooms in my bedroom, my wish came true. Every time.’

‘That’s magical thinking,’ I said. ‘Other things intervened. Medicines saved people. Or emergency workers. Or caring neighbours. Those matchbox rooms you built were just coincidences.’

His face grew stormy.

‘You lot wanted to send me to the loony bin,’ he said. ‘But I know what I know. When I build and make a wish it always works out. We all have to die one day, I know that. But Dad’s not going to be leaving us soon. Trust me. It will work out.’

He stood up and walked inside. My mind drifted through many memories as Matthew and I sat silently on the deck. There was still no sign of Ditto.

I wished Dad could have joined in that conversation; he would have known what to say. He and Dr Price were always talking about such things.

I let family memories float through my mind. Dr Price was a kind man. He often asked us to tea in his conservatory. It was a huge room full of plants with the ceiling and walls made of glass. There were tree ferns and orchids and even a flowering gum tree in the middle of it all. It was like being inside and outside at the same time.

A tap on the shoulder brought me back to our present situation. It was Matthew.

‘We have to let your dad know that Ditto’s gone missing,’ he said. ‘Let’s go tell him.’

Dad was concerned for Alex. But also for Ditto. By this time he had abandoned the last skerrick of guilt about owning a cat.

‘She’ll come home,’ he said. ‘Cats like routine. And a good feed.’

I walked to the back door and looked out. That's when I saw her.

Ditto, looking up at me happily with a young lorikeet in her mouth.

The bird's head dangled from its flopping neck. Ditto proudly laid her catch at my feet.

I didn't know it at the time but at that moment our whole lives changed.

'Matthew,' I screamed.

I picked up the tiny creature and examined it. The young bird's eyes were cloudy and its skin damp and clammy.

Matthew hurried to my side. He hadn't seen the lorikeet. He bent down to pick up Ditto.

'Hooray,' he yelled. 'Good girl, Ditto. You've come home.'

The cat slipped from his hands and started pawing at my legs. Her claws bit painfully into my skin. She wanted the lorikeet back. I shook her off and pushed her out of the way with the side of my foot.

An angry cry filled the air.

'You kicked Ditto.'

Alex pushed past me and grabbed Ditto. I almost fell with the lifeless bird cupped in my hands.

I shouted back at him. 'Your cat has killed this little bird. Murdered it. Just for fun.'

All philosophical thoughts about love and heaven had vanished. I was outraged.

Alex stared at the tiny creature in my hands.

'Ditto didn't know what she was doing,' he shouted. 'She is just being a cat.'

He hugged Ditto tightly and then turned around to see Dad leaning on his new walking stick, staring at us.

'She kicked Ditto. Emily kicked Ditto. Dad, Dad, Dad.'

‘I saw what happened,’ said Dad. ‘I ...’

He couldn’t find the words. His eyes were full of shock and pain. He turned and slowly walked back to his bedroom and flopped on the bed.

Matthew took the limp bird from my hands.

‘Go look after your dad,’ he said to me. He turned to Alex. ‘Get a cardboard box. I think it’s still alive.’

The two of them rushed inside. I made a call to Dr Price. He came straight away and after he had seen to Dad, he walked into the kitchen and talked to me in a serious voice.

‘We have a problem that needs to be addressed,’ he said. ‘Alex can’t accept that his dad hasn’t got long to live. And now he’s scared that he will lose Ditto. There’s nothing he can do to stop her escaping and catching birds so he’s denying that problem too.’

‘He’s too touchy,’ I muttered.

I knew immediately that I shouldn’t have said that.

Dr Price frowned. ‘That’s not the problem at the moment,’ he said. ‘Right now, this is about your father. How and where do you want him to spend the last few moments of his life?’ He looked around and gestured at our property. ‘Here? Where he loves it, with his birds and animals and trees?’ He paused and stared straight into my eyes. ‘And loving children?’

‘What can we do?’ I asked. I already knew the answer.

‘There’s no reason that he can’t stay here for the moment if you handle it right. Surround him with peace and love. That squabble you just had over the bird upset him big time. His blood pressure went through the roof and his breathing problem kicked in.’

I hung my head and started to cry.

He put his hand gently on my shoulder.

‘It’s not your fault. Any other person of your age would have done the same. I know how much you love those birds.’

Make up with Alex and let your dad see that you're happy together.'

'It's going to be hard,' I said. 'Alex is a stubborn little ...'

I omitted the expletive that I was about to utter.

'I know,' said Dr Price. 'Let's go talk to him.'

We walked out onto the deck where Alex and Matthew were crouched over a cardboard box.

Alex looked at us nervously. 'Ditto didn't do anything,' he said. 'That bird could have fallen out of the tree.'

Matthew was holding an eye-dropper in his hand. He gave me a smile and released a droplet of fluid into the tiny lorikeet's mouth. It immediately started cheeping for more.

'I think we can save it,' he said.

He put a hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. My heart sang.

'I'll get a special mixture from the pet shop,' he said. 'And in no time at all we'll have her on seed.'

'You are a hero,' I replied.

He smiled, but in a worried sort of way.

'It's okay. She's going to live,' I said to Alex.

'Good,' he replied. 'She was probably wounded by a possum and Ditto saved her.'

I let that outrageous comment go unremarked and took the eye-dropper from Matthew's hand.

'Give me a go.'

Matthew and I spent the next half-hour alone feeding the greedy bird a mixture of water and honey. This happy time finally ended when Dr Price joined us with Alex following close behind.

'Can I have a moment alone with these two warriors?' he said to Matthew.

‘Of course,’ Matthew answered. He said a quick goodbye and headed out to his van.

Alex and I faced off like a pair of boxers eyeing each other for the first time.

‘Well?’ said Dr Price.

I could see that it was up to me to start.

‘Alex, I’m sorry that I ...’

He didn’t give me time to finish.

‘Kicked Ditto,’ he said.

‘No, I’m sorry that I pushed her aside with my foot.’

‘Boot,’ he growled.

‘Now, now,’ said Dr Price.

I tried again.

‘We have to be nice to each other. We can’t go arguing and upsetting Dad. Life has to be happy again. I promise I will be nice to Ditto.’

‘You broke your last promise,’ he snapped. ‘You said you would never touch her.’

We stared at each other. I couldn’t think what to say next but he had no problem finding a few more words.

‘As far as promises go, if you don’t have to keep yours, I don’t have to keep mine.’

I tried to process his words. This wasn’t going anywhere.

‘Start again,’ said Dr Price in a stern voice.

I couldn’t give another promise so I did the next best thing. I held out my hand.

‘We will be kind and loving to each other and never let Dad see us arguing or being mean.’

Alex reluctantly took my hand and gave me a single shake.

‘Good luck, kids,’ said Dr Price. ‘I’ll see you next week.’



I have to say that Alex did his best to keep his word. We cooperated with the household duties just like before. I cooked the meals and chopped the firewood and Alex washed up and carried in the logs.

For no particular reason, Alex gave me a gift. He presented it to me in front of Dad. A packet of bird seed especially mixed for lorikeets. Dad was so pleased.

‘Good on you, Alex,’ he said. ‘That’s a thoughtful gift. Very thoughtful indeed.’

Dad knew that I had fallen in love with the little lorikeet, which clearly couldn’t fly. Matthew, helpful as always, examined the bird for me.

‘Its wings are okay,’ he said. ‘It could have some sort of nerve or spinal problem. All you can do is wait and see what happens.’

He borrowed a good-sized bird cage, which I kept on my dressing table. Alex agreed to keep Ditto well away from my bedroom.

This was difficult because Ditto would scratch at the closed door and try to slip in. She knew what was in there.

And so, the days and weeks passed. Things between me and Alex were polite but not loving. There was a veneer of kind words and good manners but they were forced, and Alex and I both knew it.

But the thought of Dad having to go into care or dying before his time kept us both on the right track. When we had to be together, we kept our distance and rarely spoke. After school and on weekends he always headed off for the treehouse.

‘You will have to look after Ditto while I’m not here,’ said Alex. ‘I wouldn’t want her eating your bird.’

‘Little Lorrie,’ I said.

That was her name but Alex refused to use it. It was nerve-racking watching over the bird. Sometimes she would stop feeding and I always dreaded entering the room and finding her lying still and stiff on the bottom of the cage. But slowly, slowly, she began to recover. She hopped around animatedly; tentatively trying to flap her wings.

I became very fond of her. No, it was more than that. I had found a little, feathered soulmate. What the cat was to Dad and Alex, Little Lorrie was to me. But as my feelings of attachment grew, so did the knowledge that a cage was no place for a bird. One day she would have to be released.

Letting things go seemed to be a motif for my life.

II

BY NOW THE warm days had almost totally disappeared and the furious south-westerlies began to blow. Ferocious storms attacked the whole coast and the winds were often strong enough to bring down power lines and uproot trees.

Alex cooperated by keeping Ditto inside. And in return I made sure that I was kind to the cat. I didn't hate it. I knew that it was programmed to hunt and there was nothing I could do about that.

On one particularly cold day, Alex and I were stacking firewood on the front porch when a rather beat-up Land Rover made its way up our winding drive.

'Look who it is,' said Alex.

'Miss Longford,' I said enthusiastically. 'She's probably come to do a parent/teacher interview. I thought she must have forgotten all about it. Dad will be surprised to get a visit from a teacher.'

She stepped out of the antiquated vehicle and gave us her usual smile.

'I love your forest,' she said. 'On the way in I saw a sacred kingfisher.'

'A sacred kingfisher,' I exclaimed. 'Are you sure? We've never seen one of them before. Dad will be over the moon.'

'I'm a real greenie,' she said. 'And I especially love the native birds.'

We talked about the property for a few minutes and then Alex and I took her into Dad's bedroom.

'Look who's here,' I said to Dad. 'It's my teacher, Miss Longford.'

He blinked and stared.

'Bree,' he gasped. He lay there with his mouth open. For a moment I thought he was unable to breathe. He stared at her

with wide eyes, searching for words. Finally, he managed to find his voice.

‘I didn’t even dare to hope that you would come. It’s really you, isn’t it? You’re not a hallucination, are you?’

My head began to spin. He had made another delirious mistake.

This was terrible. Miss Longford’s face was ashen and she appeared frightened. Dad started up again in a broken voice.

‘I sort of knew that the kids had a new teacher called Miss Longford but I thought my mind was playing tricks. Is it really you?’

‘Yes,’ she said softly. ‘It’s really me.’

I tried to make sense of all this. Then it hit me. Like a hammer blow. On the Student Feedback Sheets she signed off as Gabrielle Longford.

I once knew a girl called Gabrielle. When her father picked her up after kindergarten, he used to call her Bree. It was a nickname.

They stared at each other, both trembling, not knowing what to say. Dad found his voice first.

‘You told me never to contact you again,’ he said.

‘I thought I had no choice,’ she said in a soft voice. ‘You had other loves.’

She looked at me and Alex.

‘And I didn’t know them.’

‘I loved you,’ said Dad.

‘I know,’ she answered. ‘And I never said it back. But you knew that I loved you too. There hasn’t been a day go by when I haven’t thought of you. When I arrived back here and found that I had two students named Mortimer, the penny dropped.’

Dad held out his hands and she rushed to the bed and threw her arms around him.

I didn't know what to think. They were hugging each other and weeping. Alex and I exchanged a glance and fled from the room.

Alex was excited but I was puzzled. Our new teacher had once been Dad's secret love. And after all these years she had come to visit him.

'I wondered why she was being so nice to me at school,' said Alex.

'She's like that with everyone,' I said. 'Even the kids who're rude to her.'

Miss Longford stayed with Dad for over an hour. Then he called us in.

'I'm not going to say too much right now,' he said. 'But Bree is going to be a regular visitor from now on. Does anyone have problems with that?'

It wasn't really any of my business but I couldn't help asking her a question.

'Why didn't you tell me and Alex who you were at the beginning of term?' I said. 'When you first arrived.'

Her face filled with pain. She wiped a tear from her eye and continued.

'We had lost contact. I just assumed that Phillip would have remarried. Then, when I came to Warrnambool and found that I had you both in my literature class I didn't know what to do. Maybe my presence would aggravate old wounds at a time when you were suffering.'

'What made you change your mind?' I said.

She smiled sadly. 'When I got to know you and Alex I realised what I had missed. What we had all missed. Every day for the last three months I told myself that I would tell you. But I didn't have the courage. Until today. I just took the plunge. I thought you might let me ...'

She ran out of words but then said, '... help you all. Can I?'

There was really only one answer to that question.

I threw her a smile. ‘No worries, Miss, er ...’

I hesitated. ‘... Bree. As often as you want. We would really like that.’

She rushed over and embraced me. It was a lovely moment, but it was quite strange to be hugged by my teacher. Alex shifted uncomfortably. He didn’t look like he was up for a hug.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘It’s okay with me too. But I’ve just got one more thing to say.’

There was an embarrassing pause.

‘I think that my last essay was worth more than a C plus.’

We all laughed and then Alex and I left them alone for the rest of the afternoon.

After that, Bree was a regular visitor. She came by at least once a week. Dad’s spirits lifted every time. I always made her feel welcome. Anyone who could make Dad happy was more than okay with me.



Every day when the weather permitted, I would take a walk and look at my birdboxes. I had about twenty of them, all made by me and placed in the forks of various eucalypts. Many were occupied – I could tell this by sounds of cheeping and also the tufts of dried grass and twigs that poked out through gaps in the woodwork.

After one of these rambles, I returned with excitement. I hurried inside to find Alex and Ditto sitting on Dad’s bed.

‘Guess what?’ I said. ‘There’s bits of bones and a heap of white droppings under box fifteen.’

‘Wow,’ said Dad. ‘Fantastic.’

‘What sort of bones?’ said Alex.

‘Mice,’ I said. ‘Lizards, and possibly rabbit.’

‘It’s probably a powerful owl,’ said Dad. ‘They are a beautiful bird. I’ve been hoping for one for years.’

An image of a cat climbing up and taking any newborn chicks filled my mind. But a different image filled Alex's.

'Could it kill a cat?'

'Possibly,' said Dad.

Alex's face fell.

'Unlikely,' I said. 'Cats have sharp claws. They can fight back.'

And so time passed. Dad grew weaker. He sometimes became confused and forgot where he had put things. But we all got along reasonably well.

For a long time Little Lorrie had been rather subdued. She could hop around the cage but that was all. Sometimes she would go off her food. I grew more and more worried. It was as if the bird was a living metaphor for my father. I couldn't actually put my silly thoughts into words, but I felt that if Lorrie died, Dad would too.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, I said to myself. *Superstition and fantasy. I'm no better than Alex and his two-storey treehouse.*

The night on which our problems really began to spiral out of control was black and moonless. I had opened Lorrie's cage to replace her water when suddenly all the lights in the house went out. I couldn't see a thing. I fumbled around and then spilled the bird's water all over myself. I brushed it off my jeans but then dropped the container. In panic I felt around for the cage. *Where is Lorrie? Where, where, where? Yes, got it.*

Without actually seeing the wire door I managed to close it and secure the catch.

But was Lorrie inside or had she hopped out? I didn't know. I couldn't even see my own hand when I held it in front of my face. I couldn't open the wire door of the cage in case she escaped. *Think, think, think.*

I guessed that something had tripped one of the circuit breakers, which were located on the wall just outside the back door. I groped my way along the corridor and stepped out into the cold night. I felt something brush past my leg but had no

time to think about it. In a total panic I opened our fuse box and located the torch we always kept there.

Yes, all of the switches were in the on position except the main. I flicked it and the whole house lit up.

I raced back inside and stared at the cage. Lorrie was pecking at her seed tray.

‘What happened to the lights?’ said a voice.

It was Alex. He looked at the open back door.

‘Where’s Ditto?’ he said.

Oh, no. I had let her out.

‘Don’t worry,’ I yelled. ‘She will come back.’

Dad tried to get out of bed but he couldn’t manage it. ‘Stay there,’ I said. ‘We will find her.’

‘Poor little Ditto,’ he said. ‘Watch out for the owls.’

We called out into the gloom. ‘Ditto, Ditto, Ditto. Little cat, little cat, where are you?’

Our cries sank into the sullen night. Alex and I walked all around the lawn – right up to the edge of the young forest that surrounded it. We flashed our torches hopefully. Maybe she was on the woodshed roof. Or under the deck.

In my heart I knew that she had vanished into the forest. She was strong and lithe but still a kitten. She might get lost or even taken by a fox. If anything happened to Ditto it would be the end of the truce Alex and I had been trying to maintain.

‘Ditto, Ditto, where are you?’ screamed Alex.

‘It’s no use,’ I said. ‘It’s two a.m. We all need sleep. She’ll probably come back for a feed first thing in the morning.’

We headed to our bedrooms. Alex glared at me but said nothing.

I set my alarm for seven in the morning and tried to sleep. I was up before it had time to ring. I stepped out into the first hints of a scarlet sunrise.

And there was Ditto. On the deck staring happily up at me.

With a headless adult lorikeet in her mouth. Not Lorrie, but a mature bird from the forest. She laid it at my feet like a trophy. I quickly bent over and picked it up.

Behind me I heard a loud yell. ‘Have you found her?’

It was Alex, running down the corridor. In my hand I held a gory, decapitated lorikeet. I was filled with rage at my brother and his cat. But this was immediately swamped by another emotion – fear. Fear for my father’s wellbeing in his few remaining days.

If I showed the bird to Alex the truce would be over and we would be at each other’s throats again. I would win the battle of guilts but at the expense of Dad’s happiness.

Blood was dripping from the dead lorikeet’s neck. There was nowhere to hide it. I put my hand behind my back and slipped the bird under the elastic of my pyjama pants. Then I wiped my bloody hand dry by swiping it under my armpit.

‘I found Ditto in the woodshed,’ I lied.

Alex picked up the cat and rushed inside.

‘Dad, Dad, she’s back. Emily found her.’

I walked across the lawn backwards until I reached the forest’s edge. I didn’t dare turn around and reveal the stiff and terrible present that Ditto had brought us. I reached behind my back with one hand, clutched the bird and flicked it into the bushes.

Alex was grateful to me for finding Ditto. But he continued to argue for her ‘right’ to leave the house.

‘Couldn’t we just let her out for some walks?’ he said. ‘Under supervision so that she doesn’t run off. She wants to get outside and smell the grass and see the trees and go chasing butterflies.’

I was in no mood for his sentimentality. I was still shaking over the sight and feel of the headless lorikeet.

‘Definitely not,’ I said. ‘She stays inside. Look at this house. She’s got the whole place to herself.’

‘I am looking,’ he said. ‘And there’s not one plant anywhere. Not even a bunch of flowers.’ He picked up Ditto and gave her a little kiss on top of her head.

‘She’s unhappy.’

‘How do you know that?’ I said.

He held her out at me.

‘You can see the sadness in her eyes.’



The next morning Matthew paid us a visit. I told him what had happened.

‘What a terrible thing,’ he said. ‘For all of you.’

‘We have to do something,’ I said. ‘But I don’t know what.’

I turned my attention back to Little Lorrie. She was reasonably safe in her cage, but the birds living near the treehouse were another matter.

‘We can’t go on like this,’ I said to Matthew. ‘Ditto has already caught two birds and she’s not even fully grown. She must have visited the lorikeet tree. She will do it again for sure.’

Everything was starting to overwhelm me.

‘We could take Ditto to the RSPCA,’ said Matthew. ‘Alex will just think she’s lost.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘You can’t separate them. Alex needs her.’

And in my head I said, *And I need you.*

I pushed that idea out of my mind. Matthew was at least eighteen and I knew that he didn’t feel like that about me. Dad would become really distressed if anything more than friendship happened between us.

Matthew broke my train of thought.

‘I was the one who told you to let Alex keep Ditto,’ he said. ‘But I wasn’t taking your concerns into consideration. And I thought you could keep the cat inside. But it’s obvious that

you can't. It's the cat or the wildlife,' he said. 'What a terrible choice.'

I raised an eyebrow. 'I thought of sedatives but I don't want her drugged,' I said. 'She wouldn't be her proper self if we did that.'

'I know,' he said. 'But on the other hand, we can't just let Ditto roam around killing native animals.'

I took a deep breath.

'There is another way. Clip her claws.'

He looked at me seriously. And shook his head.

'Some people clip their cat's claws,' he said. 'They say it's for health reasons, but it's more likely because the cat is scratching the furniture or the children. I don't like it. She wouldn't be able to defend herself or climb to escape predators.'

'Does it hurt them?' I asked.

'Not if you do it properly. You have to use special clippers. And only take the very tip – if you remove any of the quick it will bleed.'

It was another of those problems with no answer. I went over and over it in my head. *If the cat stays, birds die. If the cat is taken away, Alex and Dad will never cope.*

'I can't think of any other way,' I said. 'We have to trim her claws. I take the responsibility.'

I looked at him beseechingly. 'Could you do it?' I said. 'Please.' I knew I was taking advantage of his kindness but the hopelessness of the situation was overwhelming.

He nodded silently and then said, 'It will take two people. You'll have to hold her.'



The next day, shortly after Alex left for the treehouse, Matthew arrived with a pair of clippers. I picked up Ditto and took her into the kitchen. Dad was fast asleep, snoring gently.

Ditto purred in my arms.

‘Hold her firm and keep her distracted,’ said Matthew. ‘And feed her these.’

He handed me a packet of cat treats.

Ditto immediately started chewing on one while Matthew went to work. He was amazingly skilled and gentle. Ditto wriggled from time to time but a treat always did the trick. At last, there was only one claw left to do.

‘You take her now and I’ll clip the last one,’ I said.

Matthew raised an eyebrow but passed me the clippers.

I took Ditto’s paw and snipped the tip off the last claw.

‘Why did you want to do that?’ said Matthew.

‘It was important,’ I said. ‘For a lot of reasons.’

At teatime I unpacked the supplies Matthew had brought us and made some lasagne. He stayed with us for the meal.

‘Delicious,’ said Dad. He patted his stomach and hobbled back to bed.

Ditto, who had been sitting on the floor, made a sudden jump at her cat palace. She slipped and fell down with a thump. She tried again and once more fell to the floor. Five times she attempted the jump before she gave up and crept to her other favourite spot in front of the fire.

Alex ran over and picked her up. He examined her legs.

‘Something is wrong,’ he said.

He continued his inspection.

Oh, no. What were we thinking? What have I done?

Alex stroked Ditto’s paws and then screamed.

‘You’ve clipped her claws,’ he shouted. He pointed an accusing finger at my face.

‘You horrible, horrible ...’ He couldn’t think of a bad enough word.

I held a finger up to my lips and pointed to Dad’s bedroom.

Alex dropped his voice to a furious whisper.

‘You’ve cut off her claws. Clipped her nails. I’ll get you for this. You broke your promise. All bets are off.’

‘It was me,’ said Matthew. ‘I did it. I’m sorry. I just wanted to stop her ...’

Alex pointed at me. ‘She asked you,’ he yelled. ‘Didn’t she?’

Matthew didn’t know where to look.

‘No,’ I said. ‘*We* did it. Both of us.’

‘I’m sorry, mate,’ said Matthew. ‘We should have known better.’ He stood up and walked out to his van.

Alex was staring at me in silent contempt. The realisation of what I had done numbed my whole body. I had injured Ditto and made Matthew go against his natural instincts. I was thoughtless and foolish. If Dad found out it might make him worse. And my heart was breaking.

I had never felt so alone.

WARRNAMBOOL SECONDARY COLLEGE

STUDENT FEEDBACK SHEET

Emily,

As you know, Miss Longford has passed your memoir on to me to assess as she has a personal connection with your family and doesn't want to be seen as favouring you when it comes to the final mark for your whole project.

She will of course continue as your teacher and help you in any way she can.

Part Three was a lovely addition to your memoir. I enjoyed the philosophical discussions and the claw-clipping episode was extremely tense and moving.

The personal issues you have with other people are critical parts of your story and you weave them skilfully into conservation concerns and the adventures in the treehouse. I know that you are discussing sensitive matters with Gabrielle so I will not get involved with those.

It's a lovely piece of writing. Congratulations.

Signed: *Graeme
Wheeler,*
**Humanities
Teacher**





part four

SUMMER

12

I WAS PLEASED with the A I received for part three of my memoir. It gave my spirits a lift in those troubled times. And so did the weather.

In western Victoria, the contrasts brought by spring are extreme. Flowering gums boast shamelessly beneath brilliant skies. Subtle grasses hide shyly in the shadows. Fresh sea breezes soothe the senses. Gusting winds and pollen irritate every pore. Fire and flood. New life. Old wounds.

The third term holiday break arrived. Every day Alex disappeared along the track to the treehouse. He took the small tractor and packed lengths of wire and bits of rusty corrugated iron into the trailer. Mostly he left Ditto at home with a good supply of food.

Several days passed. On the surface, Alex and I continued as before. We pretended to like each other when Dad was around but when it was just the two of us the tension was almost unbearable. Alex either ignored me completely or gave grudging replies to my requests.

‘Dad is the only one who is allowed to touch Ditto,’ he told me.

Alex constantly gave her tidbits and played with her. When he was away Dad and Ditto were inseparable. She slept with her head on his shoulder. She purred under his touch.

Was the cat suffering at all because her claws had been clipped? She had certainly stopped climbing the curtains and was more careful when leaping onto a chair or the bed, but at times she also seemed a little sad. It filled me with guilt.

In the event of her escaping, I was confident that her clipped claws would prevent her climbing trees.

I spent as much time as I could with Dad. Every moment was precious. We became closer than ever and in his lucid periods talked about life and death and eternity. And something else that I had been thinking about a lot.

‘How would you define love?’ I said one afternoon.

He looked at me inquisitively, probably wondering what was behind my question.

‘There are different types of love,’ he said. ‘It’s complicated.’

I laughed. ‘Give it to me in one sentence.’

‘That’s really tough,’ he said. ‘There’s romantic love which has to do with feelings and there’s another sort which is more concerned with what you do.’

‘Tell me about the second type,’ I said.

He thought for a bit and then spoke carefully.

‘A definition I like is this: *love is giving of yourself to see another person grow.*’

‘In what sense would you give of yourself?’ I said.

‘A parent would give up things for their child.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘Time, health, possessions and the toughest of all: letting them go when the time comes.’

‘Letting them go?’ I exclaimed.

He nodded. ‘It’s something you might have to do for anyone – if you really love them.’

Neither of us spoke for quite a while. I guessed at the time that he was thinking about what had happened between him and Bree. But my thoughts were all about him.

Increasingly these discussions grew shorter and often Dad would lose his train of thought and sit staring out of the window as if I wasn’t even there.

On the other hand, he was more and more loving to me and Alex. And Ditto. He continued talking to the cat as if she could understand him. He would hold her close to his face, close his eyes and let her lick his nose.

‘Dad,’ I said after one particularly extravagant show of affection, ‘why do you do that?’

‘They like it if you close your eyes,’ he said. ‘Cats feel safe. She knows I’m not a threat. And her licks are a sign of affection.’

Ditto followed him around. She loved rubbing herself on his shaky legs. She often turned herself upside down at his feet, hoping for a little scratch under the chin. At night she would sometimes leave Alex’s room and sleep outside Dad’s closed door. Alex didn’t seem to mind. He enjoyed the happiness that his cat had brought to his father.

Bree was now a daily visitor. She brought us food and helped me chop the wood. And she spent hours talking with Dad. Alex and I became more fond of her. She was extremely perceptive.

‘I know you’re really suffering, Emily,’ she said one afternoon. ‘Is there anything you want to talk about?’

I hesitated, I had resisted seeing a counsellor but now I was so relieved to have her ask me that question. I started crying. ‘I don’t know where to start,’ I said.

‘Begin with your dad,’ she said. ‘And then Alex and the cat. Or anything else you are worrying about.’

We talked for hours, and every time she visited after this, we had a deep discussion. They inevitably started with the same little ritual. She closed the lounge room door and put a box of tissues on the coffee table. They were always needed.

On the third session I told her about my feelings for Matthew. She listened attentively as I poured my heart out.

Finally I said, ‘I know that you think it’s just a crush, but to me it’s more than that.’

‘What does he feel?’ she said.

‘I know he likes me, maybe as a friend or big brother but that’s all.’

‘Well, you are an easy person to like,’ she said. ‘But it’s for the best. If things got out of hand, he would be the one to suffer. You are underage – he is over eighteen. It wouldn’t be

right for him to allow himself to even put one foot on that path.'

I felt a little resentful at this. I couldn't help myself.

I changed the subject. I had a feeling that she was going to suggest something that I didn't want to hear. And anyway, there were so many other problems to be faced.



Weeks passed. Dad was obviously growing weaker. At times he still had his wits about him. He could tell that something was terribly wrong in our little world and it made him sad and somewhat suspicious.

'Alex is up to something,' he said. 'He must be working on his treehouse.'

I didn't tell Dad about Alex's crazy renovations. He was already focusing on his final days and I didn't want him worrying about us.

'Before I go,' he said, 'I would just like to know that you two will care for each other. That's all I want.'

'Don't worry, Dad,' I said. 'I will look after him.'

'But what about you?'

'I'm doing fine,' I said.

But I wasn't doing fine. Alex's long silences and the guilt I was carrying over the claw-clipping incident were weighing me down. And the prospect of Dad's death made me question the value of life and the point of it at all. And Matthew was probably avoiding us.

Things were coming to a head. Dad, Alex and I were all suffering terribly. Something had to happen.

And it did.



The fateful morning began when I noticed that Alex had disappeared without telling me where he was going. I searched

for Ditto and found her missing too. I often did this to make sure he hadn't taken her to the treehouse. I decided to investigate.

The air was fresh and not yet warm enough to bring out the bush flies. I walked slowly up the track because I didn't really want to meet up with him and have another confrontation. On my way I was startled to see a red fox about twenty metres in front of me. It stood its ground, unworried. I started to walk towards it. The confident animal waited until I had taken seven or eight paces and then unhurriedly slipped into the forest.

I walked on, lost in thought, only becoming aware that I was nearing my destination when I heard the lorikeets' discordant squawks. Finally I stepped into the clearing around the tree.

I couldn't believe what I was looking at.

ALEX HADN'T JUST added one more storey to the treehouse. He had built a ramshackle but magnificent set of rooms stacked unsteadily on top of each other. In part it resembled an ancient fortress hanging from a cliff on the Scottish coast. But then, threaded through it in a totally inspiring way was a bush accent of rough timber, wooden slats and corrugated iron, which located it clearly in Australia. It was bizarre. It was marvellous. It was insane.

The rooms clung to each other like small koala bears sleeping on their mother's back. The chimney climbed at odd angles and at one point had a corkscrew twist that seemed to have no purpose at all. The whole structure seemed to defy gravity as it perched between the smooth limbs of the tree.

Was this some type of unconsciously constructed tribute to Dad? A tombstone with no inscription? A group of empty graves in the air? I brushed these fanciful thoughts from my mind and looked around.

The pulley that Alex had used to lift his building materials swung halfway up the trunk. Tools and boxes of nails littered the ground. An axe and a chainsaw were sleeping side by side.

But where was Alex? I called out his name. No response. I picked up four stones and put them in my pocket. Then I began throwing them, one at a time, at the chimney.

Clang, clang, clang.

Still nothing.

This was a replay of my last visit. A mixture of fear and anger swept over me. Was he up there with Ditto, ignoring my pleas? What could I do to get him down?

I sat on the grass and buried my face in my hands. *Stay calm. Stay calm. Try to think about what is really important.*

Slowly my angst receded. Alex could be irritating. And he was superstitious and couldn't face up to the fact that his

father was dying. But he was my twin brother. I loved him as much as I loved Dad. But he didn't know this. He viewed me as an enemy and a cat hater. I needed to do something.

I walked slowly over to the base of the tree and looked up. A wave of nausea swept over me. I bent over and dry-retched. Then I put my foot on the lowest rung.

The plank was nailed on firmly. I started to climb. Up and up. *Don't look down. Don't look down.* My head began to swim. I knew that I would die if I fell. I forced myself to peek below. The ground seemed to yaw and swell. I felt as if I was clinging high on a ship's mast in a storm. Terror numbed my legs. Fear froze my fingers.

I glanced up and mounted another rung. At last I reached the platform and, with trembling arms, pulled myself onto it. I had never been so close to the lorikeets' home before, but my fear was so great that I hardly noticed them roosting in the branches far above. On hands and knees, I crawled over to the door and banged on it.

'Alex, are you in there?' I shouted.

No reply.

I shouted even louder. 'Please. Alex, open up.'

He appeared at the door. 'Get off my treehouse.'

'You have to stop this insane building,' I said. 'I'll have to tell Dad and we can't have that.'

'I've done all this for Dad,' he said furiously. 'And I've made a room for Bree. And Dr Price. And Matthew. So that nothing happens to them.'

I was like a trembling dog at his feet. On all fours, too frightened to move. But I somehow managed to focus on what he was saying.

'Don't be stupid,' I said. 'All this building won't achieve anything.'

He stared at me with narrowed eyes. 'There's even a room for you,' he said. He was piling on the guilt.

‘I don’t want it,’ I yelled. ‘I don’t need it. You need help.’

The lorikeets screeched restlessly.

‘No, *you* need help,’ he said. ‘You have no answers and no belief in anything. I’m going to get back to my tools. Stay as long as you want.’

Alex stepped over me and began to scramble recklessly down the trunk.

‘Don’t leave me.’ I trembled. I was too frightened to even look down at him as he descended but I heard his angry voice coming up at me.

‘Stupid, am I? We’ll see.’

‘Alex, Alex, come back,’ I yelled.

I gave up shouting. He was out of his mind.

Only the muted squawking of the lorikeets disturbed the silence of the forest. Until there was the sound of a chainsaw starting up. Alex was already at the foot of the tree, cutting more logs.

The noise unsettled the birds and they began to flap and shuffle in the branches.

The prospect of peeking over the edge made me shake. My knees collapsed, leaving me prone on the platform. I crawled forward on my stomach like an oversized lizard and forced myself to peer over the edge.

Alex was attacking the logs with furious intensity. It was as if nothing else in the world existed except him and those logs. He had not put on his earmuffs but there was no point in calling out.

The chainsaw stopped. I wriggled back from the edge and stared at the huge hook that was hanging in the air nearby. I heard the sound of the chain passing through the winch and saw the hook as it began to descend.

What was Alex going to do next? I had to get down there. But I couldn’t move. I lay there facedown, unable to move. For how long, I couldn’t say.

Finally, still on my stomach, I turned and wriggled backwards towards the edge of the deck and allowed my lower half to droop down. I kicked my left leg wildly in the air and sought a foothold. More by luck than anything else, I found a rung and put my weight on it. Trembling with fear and despair I began to descend.

Without warning, the sixth rung broke away. It tumbled towards the ground, leaving me hanging in the air. I screamed and screamed but then calmed myself. Somehow, I managed to clamber back up one rung.

I called out to Alex but he had started up the chainsaw again and was too busy to hear my cries.

I was stuck: too terrified to climb back to the treehouse and unable to get any further down. My limbs were numb and shivering. I closed my eyes and clutched the ladder.

My arms began to ache and I knew that in the end, after countless, agonising minutes, my weary limbs would tire and I would plummet to the ground.

I couldn't bear to think about it. A few terrifying seconds of falling. And then ... *thump*. Oblivion.

I felt my fingers slowly losing their grasp. This was the end.

At that precise moment the chainsaw stopped and I heard a cry from below.

'Emily, don't move. Stay where you are. Just hold on.'

Alex started to heave on the chain of the pulley. I could hear it clanking slowly through the sprockets.

'Hurry, hurry,' I shrieked. 'I don't want to die.'

The chain continued rattling through the cog wheels. The sound continued, on and on. After what seemed an eternity, I heard Alex's voice nearby. I opened my eyes and risked a quick glance beneath my feet. The ground below shimmered and beckoned and pulled at me like a magnet. A voice inside my head said, *Jump and get it over with. End this terror.*

I didn't.

Alex was now hovering just above me with one foot wedged into the huge hook attached to the end of the pulley chain. A little below his feet was a loop of short rope hanging close to my ankles.

I looked up and saw, just above him, a sight so dreadful that I could hardly process it. Ditto was lying on a branch with her legs wrapped around it trying to get some kind of purchase. Her innocent little face was staring at us, meowing pitifully. We had unknowingly let her out of the treehouse. And it was my fault.

Alex suddenly spotted her. ‘Ditto,’ he cried. ‘No, no, no. Hang on, I’m coming.’

At that moment I felt my fingers beginning to lose their grip.

‘Alex, I’m going to fall,’ I screamed. ‘Help.’

He looked up at Ditto. He looked across at me. He had to choose.

The poor cat was starting to slip sideways around the branch. Her meowing grew louder and more pitiful.

Alex reached out and grasped a rung with one hand. Then he pulled himself towards the trunk in such a way that the noose brushed against my boots.

‘Step into the loop,’ he shouted. ‘And then grab my legs.’

I fumbled with my right foot. It’s not easy to put a heavy boot into the end of a swinging rope, but somehow I managed to do it. I wrapped my free arm around Alex’s legs and then released my hold on the rung.

We swung free, dangling high above the ground like a couple of riggers swinging on the end of a crane.

Alex started to pull on the free chain with his left hand while hanging on to the other one with his right. Once again, I heard the ratcheting sound. Inch by inch we began to descend.

Up above I could see Ditto still trying to hold her position. She was starting to slip sideways.

‘Hurry, hurry,’ I implored.

The ground was still far below. I snatched another look up at Ditto. She was hanging on to the branch upside down with all four legs wrapped around the tree. Her rear legs suddenly slipped and she hung attached only by her front paws, her back legs now kicking hopelessly in the air.

A ball of flailing limbs plummeted past us.

‘No,’ screamed Alex.

Amazingly, Ditto hit the ground the right way up. She didn’t move. All I could see was a small mound of motionless fur.

Her silent fall had raised no reaction from the forest. Not at first anyway. She could have been dozing in front of the fire at home. Alex furiously continued to pull the chain through the sprockets. We still swung in the air, descending slowly, slowly, slowly.

On the other side of the clearing an impassive pair of eyes surveyed the scene.

It was the red fox.

The small ball of fur that was Ditto shivered and came to life. She stood up hesitantly, obviously dazed. Maybe she was unhurt. Maybe she would live.

The fox shot out from the forest fringe and snatched up its prize. It raised its head and stared up at us swinging helplessly on the end of the chain.

‘No, no, no,’ screamed Alex.

The fox disappeared into the bushes with Ditto still in its mouth.

Alex waited until my feet had touched the ground and then recklessly jumped down from above me. I expected him to run after the fox but he simply stared into my eyes.

‘Oh, Emily,’ he said. ‘I thought I had lost you.’

‘Ditto,’ I said. ‘Get Ditto.’

Alex seemed not to have heard my words.

‘You are okay. You are okay,’ he said. He began to shiver. His nose was wet and his lips trembled uncontrollably.

Behind him, about twenty metres away, I noticed the fox standing silently with Ditto still gripped in its jaws. The cunning animal stared at us with arrogant confidence. There was no way we could catch it.

I slid my hand into my pocket. And took out the fourth and final stone. I slowly moved my right hand up behind my ear. I held out my other arm and pointed straight at the fox.

I waited for the moment. Not moving. In charge. Every neuron focused on the fox. I held my breath.

And let fly.

THE STONE MIGHT have been a bullet. It vanished from sight the moment it left my fist. Time froze.

The fox jumped, dropped its prize and in a flash was gone.

We both ran to the spot where our little grey cat stood meowing. Its tiny squeaks were no louder and no more complaining than the ones she always made when her dinner was a bit late.

‘Ditto, you’re alive,’ shouted Alex. He examined her carefully. There were a couple of patches of bare skin on her back and stomach but otherwise she seemed unharmed.

We both started to cry.

‘It’s all my fault,’ I sobbed. ‘I’ve messed up everything. We shouldn’t have clipped her claws. She would have been able to hang on to the branch. And she might have even given the fox a bit of a fight. I’m so sorry, Alex. I really, really love you.’

‘You saved Ditto’s life,’ he said. ‘What a shot. You hit the fox. Stupid feral.’

He didn’t seem to see the irony of his words. And he was embarrassed at my display of affection.

‘You saved my life,’ I said. ‘You chose me.’

‘Don’t be a nitwit,’ he said. ‘Of course I chose you.’

He dropped to the ground, crossed his legs and put Ditto onto his lap. He stroked her fondly and spoke to me without looking up.

‘I could not have gone on if you had died, Emily. My life would be nothing without you.’

They were beautiful words, made even stronger by the knowledge that I knew he found them hard to say.



When we returned to the house Dr Price was with Dad in the bedroom. We told the two of them about the fox but not the rest of the story. Dr Price examined Ditto. He felt her paws, raised an eyebrow and exchanged a look with Dad. But he made no comment other than to tell us to put some disinfectant on her wounds.

I stared out over the tops of our young trees to Mount Warrnambool. Everything seemed so peaceful. Something had shifted inside all of us. The world had moved forward and was suddenly a more friendly place.

Dad gave me a big smile. ‘Jack has something to tell you and Alex,’ he said excitedly. ‘You’ve both seen his conservatory.’

‘Yes,’ I answered. ‘It’s amazing.’

‘Fantastic,’ said Alex.

‘It gets lonely living in that big house all on my own,’ said Dr Price.

I thought he was going to announce that he was getting married. But Alex figured it out before me. He knew what was coming.

‘You are ready to have another cat to keep you company,’ he said.

‘Right on,’ was the quick reply.

‘It would be the perfect place,’ Dad said in a shaky voice. ‘With a little cat flap from the house into the conservatory, she could go in and out and climb and run around among the plants whenever she wanted. And sleep on Jack’s bed at night.’

‘And she wouldn’t be able to catch birds,’ I said. ‘And we could visit.’

‘Whenever you like,’ said Dr Price. ‘I’ll even bring her out here to see you now and then.’



The next day Dad's happy mood was still in place. He had a request to make and it was not one I wanted to hear.

'I want to see that treehouse,' he said. 'I know there have been developments.'

'No, Dad,' I said. 'There's no way you can get up there.'

'Yes there is,' said Alex. 'I want him to see it.'

'I know about his new constructions,' said Dad.

My heart sank. Alex must have told him.

Dad continued. 'I already knew about Ditto's clipped claws, Emily. How could I miss that? I didn't say anything because I could guess why you did it. And I knew what you were going through.'

I hung my head. 'I'm really sorry, Dad,' I choked. 'It was wrong.'

'You were under pressure,' he replied. 'You've always done your best for everyone.'

'She saved the day,' said Alex. 'That last stone. Unbelievable.'

'The most important thing for me,' said Dad, 'is that you are reconciled. You are going to need each other.'

We all started to weep. For quite a long time.

After we had recovered, Dad hobbled into his bedroom to fetch his new walking frame. Alex took the moment to share a few thoughts with me.

'It was my fault you climbed that tree,' he said. 'And my intervention that rescued you. It was also your great shot that saved Ditto.'

'So?' I said.

He looked straight into my eyes and held my gaze for a couple of seconds before speaking.

'Magic had nothing to do with it.'

I was going to shout out my joy at these words but at that moment Dad returned and we made our way outside to where

Alex had parked the tractor. Dad sat on the trailer with his legs hanging over the back. It was wonderful. The three of us together. Out in the bushland we loved so much.

We finally reached the treehouse and stared up in silence.

‘Sorry, Dad,’ said Alex. ‘I was out of my mind. It was a silly thing to do.’

‘But it’s magnificent,’ Dad exclaimed. ‘What a work of engineering. Brilliant. And those overhanging beams. And the cantilevers on the deck. Are they strong enough?’

‘I know there’s a cantilever formula,’ said Alex. ‘But I didn’t really need it. The beams are so thick. And the load is almost nothing.’

Dad shook his head in awe. ‘It’s the creativity of it all. It’s a work of art. You’re a genius.’

I hadn’t seen Dad that happy for years. I don’t think Alex had ever been called a genius before. I pretended not to notice that he was blushing.



Several weeks later there was a new development in the household. Alex and I entered Dad’s room to find him holding Bree’s hand and looking a little apprehensive.

‘We have something important to ask you,’ said Dad. ‘We would both like it if Bree could move into our spare room. We want to share what time I have left.’

‘I would be helping with the household expenses,’ Bree said excitedly. ‘And the wood chopping and cooking.’

Alex was the first to respond.

‘Wonderful,’ he said. ‘Emily’s cooking is even worse than mine.’

I said nothing but instead rushed forward and gave Bree a hug.

‘I’m hoping to stay for a long time,’ said Bree. ‘Unless you kick me out, that is.’

‘Never,’ I said. ‘You’re always welcome here.’

‘Yeah,’ added Alex with a grin. ‘But no bossing us around.’

We all laughed at that.

WARRNAMBOOL SECONDARY COLLEGE

Hi Emily,

What more can I say. You topped the class. And not one exclamation mark in the whole book.

Congratulations – a wonderful memoir.

Final Assessment



Signed: *Graeme Wheeler,*
Humanities Teacher



epilogue

SUMMER



I STILL VISIT the treehouse at least once a week and sit there, remembering those days and what they led to. The wheel has turned. Another summer. Another circle. Another chance at life and love.

I continued at school and took a part-time job as a receptionist in Dr Price's surgery. With Bree's help I'm continuing to work towards becoming a full-time writer. I had some success with it while I was at school but this is my first attempt at a book. I'm going to try fiction next.

There's this rather nice kid at school who has written a short story and actually had it published. He always tries to sit next to me on the school bus and the other girls are starting to give me a hard time over it.

If you are reading this account of my year as it happened, it could mean that I'm on my way to getting published myself.

Alex visits Ditto at Dr Price's house almost every day. He has commenced a building apprenticeship and has already made a lot of money selling his cat palaces. The one he made for Ditto in Jack's conservatory is magnificent. It runs all the way around the walls and across the ceiling. At one point it corkscrews up like the crazy chimney of his treehouse.

Bree brought an enormous amount of joy to Dad's last few months. Alex and I came to adore her. She became our mentor, guardian and friend.

The last time that I saw Matthew was the day he told us that he had taken a job as a trainee forest ranger working for the traditional owners in the Kakadu National Park, three and a half thousand kilometres away.

He gave each of us a book as a parting gift. Alex's was about creative house design, Dad's, predictably, a reforestation manual, and mine an Australian bird guide.

My gift to him was a somewhat forced smile when he told us about his new girlfriend who worked at the South Alligator Ranger Station.

I will always be grateful to Matthew. We would never have got through that fateful year if it hadn't been for his friendship.

Alex made many visits to the treehouse. He transformed it into something new and different. He took out the door and removed the glass from the windows. Then he made holes in the chimney and roof. Having done that, he gathered many small shrubs and branches and poked them into these openings. These new additions made the whole thing look as if it was coming to life – a sort of bushy birdhouse in the sky.

Finally, he removed the rungs from the trunk.

The lorikeet tree is still there for the birds to perch on and survey the forest beneath them in complete safety.

Dad's time finally came in a way and a place that would have pleased him. His last moments passed in the bedroom where he could see his trees and the fairy wrens hopping around outside the window. Alex, Dr Price and Bree all joined me to gather around his bed. Dad told us how much he loved us and we, each in our own way, said it back.

After a bit he dozed off and we left the room for a chat in the kitchen.

We returned a little later to find Ditto curled up in the crook of his arm, her head resting under his chin. We gazed at the man and the cat without speaking.

Finally, as if to tell us what we already knew but couldn't say, Ditto sat up, licked Dad's nose a couple of times and quietly slipped off the bed.



On one brilliantly blue day, Alex, Bree and I carried Little Lorrie's cage to the clearing that now meant so much to all of us.

We looked up at the treehouse and saw that it was covered in a moving cloak of red, blue and green feathers.

Alex picked up the urn containing our father's ashes.

He said, 'Dad, you loved the trees and the birds and the wildlife. You even loved a cat. And we know how much you cared for us. We will never forget you.'

He sprinkled some of the ashes and passed the urn to Bree.

She shook out about half of the remaining ashes. 'Phillip, you were the nicest man I ever knew. I was so lucky to spend these last

three months with you and Alex and Emily. We will look after your forest together.’

I sprinkled the rest of the ashes and simply said, ‘Thank you, Dad, for giving of yourself.’

I bent down and opened the door of the birdcage. We all stood back to watch as Little Lorrie hopped around and finally peeped out.

The lorikeets above us chose that precise moment to take to the sky. They wheeled around the treehouse in a cloudburst of colour and a cacophony of screeching.

Lorrie flapped her wings tentatively and then, without hesitation, took flight. In a second, she was swallowed by the flock. They swooped and screeched – some sort of glorious magic allowing them to turn together.

‘Look at them,’ said Alex. ‘You can’t see Lorrie. She has become one part of the whole.’



About the Author

Since the publication of *Unreal!* in 1985, readers all around the world have loved Paul Jennings's stories, and he has sold more than ten million books. The first two seasons of the top-rating TV series *Round the Twist* were based on Paul's popular short-story collections and he received two Awgie awards for screenwriting episodes. He was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to children's literature in 1995, was awarded the prestigious Dromkeen Medal in 2001 and was made a Fellow of Monash University in 2010. In 2019 he was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Children's Book Council of Australia. He lives in Warrnambool with his partner, comedian, actor and author Mary-Anne Fahey.