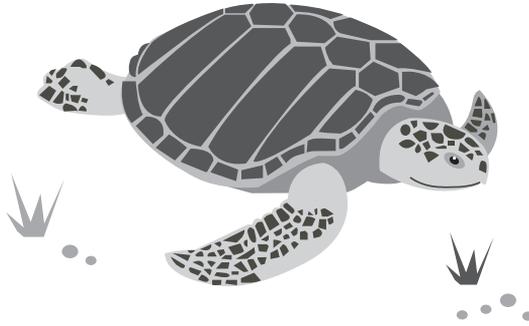


CHAPTER 1



Three spine-tingling wails pierced the night air. ‘Beach stone-curlew,’ I murmured, huddling closer to Mum. A warm, salty gust blasted my face and waves crashed on the shore ahead. The people in front of us whispered, their voices ghostlike in the dark.

‘Everyone ready?’ asked the ranger, Shane, as our group of twenty hurried after him along the track. Shoes shuffled across the coarse sand.

Despite the balmy evening, goosebumps prickled my skin. Mum and I had been living on the coast south of Bundaberg for almost three years now, but we’d never walked along the beach at night. Everything seemed bigger, louder, scarier in the dark. Mum stood close, the smell of her apple shampoo reassuring, but I was jumpy, like a leopard on the hunt.

Shane pointed his dim torch at the web of creeper vines running over the dunes. ‘Watch your step,’ he urged.

I took a shaky breath.

‘You alright, Isaac?’ Mum whispered, reaching for my hand.

‘Yeah, this is awesome,’ I replied. I’d been wanting to visit the turtle rookery at Mon Repos Beach ever since we’d moved here. Everyone said the tours were amazing, the best thing about our coast. ‘Thanks for bringing me, Mum.’

Most of the travellers who came to visit the turtle conservation area stayed at the bigger, fancier caravan parks right next door to the famous beach, but each year some of them stayed with us. The Pines Holiday Village was an old council-owned caravan park forty minutes’ drive south from Mon Repos but, in my opinion, it was the best.

So far, Mum and I had been too busy to visit the turtles. We had guests to check in, guests to check out, toilets to clean and rubbish to remove. As managers of The Pines, we knew our guests always came first.

But this Christmas, Mum had surprised me with tickets for a guided tour. And now, we were finally here!

Shane’s faint torchlight bobbed ahead of us until my eyes adjusted to the gloom. The breaking waves bubbled

and frothed against the sand. The seaweed-scented air swirled around us, sending hair and whispers flying. Further up, another dim light bobbed along the beach as a second group followed their guide.

‘Okay, folks, if we could just pull up here,’ said Shane, coming to a stop.

A small boy pushed past me as we gathered around, and I stepped back to let him through.

‘Does anyone know why I’m using such a weak light?’ Shane asked.

The boy’s hand shot up. ‘In case there’s vampires?’ he said.

A couple of adults behind me chuckled. Shane shook his head. ‘Take a look out across the ocean,’ he suggested, ‘and tell me what you see.’

I looked out over the dark mass of heaving water. My eyes rested on the shimmery glow of the horizon. ‘Something to do with the horizon?’ I asked.

Shane nodded encouragingly. ‘Well done,’ he said. ‘When the baby turtles hatch, they head to the brightest light, thinking it will take them to the water. If we use powerful torches, the hatchlings get confused. They follow our torches and go in the wrong direction instead of following the light of the horizon.’

I puffed out my chest, proud that I’d guessed the answer.

I looked at Mum to see if she'd noticed, but she was pulling her phone from her pocket.

'Mum,' I hissed. 'Not now.'

Mum guiltily slipped her phone away.

'It's important the hatchlings remember this beach, because they'll come back to lay their own eggs,' Shane went on to explain. 'Female turtles spend twenty to thirty years riding the ocean currents before returning to the beach where they hatched, to nest. Scientists believe they use the earth's magnetic field to find their way back, but when they come to shore to lay their eggs, the glow from our houses and car headlights can confuse the adult turtles, too. That's why we use such weak torches here. We call it "Cut the Glow".'

I glanced back up the beach. The faint light from the second group had come to a mysterious stop. Had they seen a turtle already? I scanned the shoreline while Shane began explaining how turtles often mistook plastic bags for jellyfish, and how eating the bags made the turtles sick.

'Avoiding using plastic bags is something everyone can do,' he was saying.

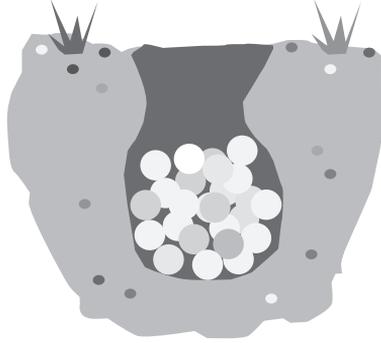
My pulse rose a notch. Something that looked like a large rock had appeared near the shoreline, halfway between us and the other group. About the size of a full

school backpack, its outline was smooth, sloping evenly on all sides towards the sand.

I strained to get a better look. That wasn't there before, was it?

I gasped. Despite the dim light, I was sure I saw it move.

CHAPTER 2



‘Is that a turtle?’ I exclaimed.

‘Shhh,’ said the boy in front of me, holding his finger to his lips.

Shane stopped mid-sentence, his gaze following my outstretched hand. ‘Well, I’ll be,’ he murmured. ‘Well spotted, young man!’ Turning to the group, he said, ‘Looks like we’re in luck, folks.’

Some of the younger kids clutched their parents’ hands, while others stood on tiptoes, straining to see.

‘If you could stand here quietly while our visitor finds her way,’ Shane asked. ‘We don’t want to get too close before she’s chosen her nesting spot. We might frighten her back into the water.’

But as the minutes ticked by and the turtle came no closer, the excited ripple of our group settled. Children

released their parents' hands, and people sank quietly to sit on the sand.

'In some countries,' Shane explained, 'turtles come to shore to bask in the sunshine. But in Australia, they only come in to lay their eggs. We have six of the world's seven species of marine turtle nesting on the beaches around here, and last year we counted over four hundred nests. Each nest can have up to one hundred eggs, so that's a lot of hatchlings!' He sighed and tugged at the collar of his park ranger shirt. 'Sadly, only about one in one thousand hatchlings survive to adulthood. There are so many dangers for them, both on the beach and in the ocean.'

'But when they do make it,' he smiled and peered down the beach toward the turtle, 'some of the old girls nearly sprint to their chosen spot, while others can take as long as an hour to trundle up from the water.' He glanced at the young boy who looked ready to sprint to the turtle himself. 'Either way,' Shane warned, 'disturbing laying turtles could mean they'll swim away and not come back.'

Nearly everyone in our group was sitting on the beach by now, and the turtle still hadn't moved.

'What's she doing?' I whispered.

'Give her time,' said Shane.

We waited. And waited. I could hear the people behind

me breathing. Feet shuffled, and clothes rustled. Someone coughed, and a girl mumbled something about being hungry.

We'd been waiting about thirty minutes when Mum snuck out her phone again. Now I was the one who felt guilty. Summer was the busiest time at The Pines. This tour was taking so long.

Over the ocean, my favourite planet, Venus, was setting to shine on another part of the world. Two black-and-white oystercatchers, their legs like red stalks on the sand, faced the wind. They ruffled their feathers, as if they, too, were waiting.

'Is something wrong at the caravan park?' I whispered when Mum looked up from her phone.

She smiled, but not a smile that reached her eyes. My heart tugged.

'Oh, no, nothing to worry about,' she muttered. 'I can't get reception out here anyway.'

But she was worried. I could tell.

'Do you think the turtle's okay?' I asked Shane, hoping she would hurry up and start digging her nest.

'Yes, surely it should have started the trek up the beach by now,' complained a lady to my right.

Shane shot an anxious glance to the shore. 'We should

have had some movement by now,' he agreed. He flicked his torch back on. 'I usually don't like to disturb them, but I've got a feeling something's not right. If you could just stay here, folks,' he said, taking a step away, 'I think I'll take a look.' His eyes searched the group as everyone nodded.

'Do you need some help?' I asked, but I didn't wait for him to answer. I ignored Mum calling after me and followed Shane, who was walking briskly but quietly to the turtle. The oystercatchers bounced a couple of steps away, then settled down again once we'd passed.

The turtle didn't flinch as we approached. She remained completely still, except for her heavy lizard-like eyelids opening and closing in slow motion. I could see her heart-shaped shell, pale on the edges and darker in the middle, with hexagonal blotches tessellated across. Her wrinkly head and neck were patterned with a network of lines, like a mosaic of tiles.

'Can you hold this?' said Shane, passing me his torch before stepping closer. He placed his hands carefully on the turtle's shell and gently lifted her up.

'Ah, I see,' he whispered. A tangle of frayed rope was wrapped tightly around the reptile's front flipper, pinning it to her body. He looked up at me expectantly. 'What's your name, young man?'

‘Isaac,’ I whispered.

‘Could you reach into my backpack, Isaac?’ He steadied his legs and lifted the turtle higher off the sand. ‘There’s a knife in the top pocket. We need to cut her free.’

As I fumbled in Shane’s backpack, the turtle began pushing her head backwards and forwards in panic. She flapped and wriggled her flippers. Thankfully Shane had a firm grip on her shell.

‘Hey, big girl, settle now. We’re only trying to help,’ Shane soothed. ‘See her large head? And powerful jaws? She’s a loggerhead,’ he explained.

I found the knife and stood wondering what to do next.

‘Can you cut the rope?’ Shane puffed, struggling to hold the wriggling turtle. ‘No, not from the front,’ he instructed. ‘Go behind me and ... yes, that’s the way.’

I reached around Shane’s legs, inserted the knife into the tangled rope and carefully began cutting.

‘We’re pretty lucky to see her tonight,’ Shane continued. ‘Loggerheads migrate hundreds, even thousands, of kilometres from their feeding grounds to their nesting sites. That’s pretty impressive, even without rope around your flipper.’

The turtle opened and closed her beak-like mouth while I worked. Her strong jaw was only centimetres from my

face, but I wasn't scared. Dad and I had rescued loads of animals together in the past. We'd removed fishing wire from around a pelican's head, picked up an injured wombat joey by the road, and helped a sugar glider out of a drain. We couldn't save them all, but we always did our best. Until the day Dad needed rescuing, too.

I blinked. I wasn't going to think about Dad now. I had to concentrate and help the turtle. The rope was tougher than it looked, so I had to saw up and down to cut it.

'There you go. Now you've got it,' Shane encouraged.

Finally the rope fell away.

'Done!' I whispered, snatching it up and quickly stepping back.

Shane lowered the turtle and moved away with me. We watched as she stuck her front flippers into the sand and angled her body towards the dunes. After a few false starts, her flippers straining to grip, she began trundling up the beach, leaving the oystercatchers and us behind.

Shane and I crept back to our group. A couple of adults shuffled aside so I could stand next to Mum. She rested her hand proudly on my shoulder. 'Good job,' she said.

Together, we watched the turtle find a spot for her nest in the dunes. It was a good site, about fifty metres from where we stood, and well above the high-tide mark, where

the vines weren't too thick. Settling low, the turtle swept her front flippers beside her shell, like she was doing breast-stroke on the land. Sand flew every which way around her, like a mini dust storm.

'Follow me,' whispered Shane, once the turtle had levelled the site. When we were only a couple of metres away, he said, 'Find yourself a possie behind our girl so you can see what's going on. But get comfy. Egg laying can take up to two hours, so we could be here a while.'

Mum and I found a spot about three metres behind the loggerhead's tail. We watched as she edged forwards and curled her back flippers into a cone shape. Then she dug down deep with her flipper scoop, spooning out enough sand to make a round hole as wide as a basketball. When it was finally ready, she backed up over the hole, lifted herself up on her front flippers and began squeezing out one slippery, ping-pong-ball-shaped egg at a time.

'Now that she's settled, let's have a better look,' Shane said, shining his torch over the nest so we could see.

Everyone craned to watch as each new, shining egg plopped softly on top of the others. My stomach fizzed like a sherbet bomb. I nudged Mum's elbow and she gently nudged me back. 'Ninety-six loggerhead eggs,' I whispered once the turtle had finished laying.

‘Pretty special, huh?’ said Mum, her hand circling mine.

The turtle began covering up the nest by flicking sand around with her flippers. Some of the sand covered her head and her shell, but most of it hid her nest full of precious eggs.

I felt like I’d been holding my breath for an hour when she finally lumbered back to the water. ‘That was so good, Mum. Thanks for bringing me.’

‘No, thank *you*, Isaac,’ Mum said, looking straight into my eyes. ‘I don’t know why I didn’t listen to you sooner. We should have done this years ago!’

It took me a second to work out what was different. And then I realised. Mum was smiling. A proper smile. With sparkling eyes and rounded cheeks. Like she used to.

‘Amazing sight, isn’t it, folks?’ said Shane. ‘One of the glorious moments of nature, seeing these beauties coming here to lay. Told you, didn’t I? Patience always pays off in the end.’ He pushed a stake into the sand. ‘Since we can have so many turtles laying in any one season, we always label and mark their nests. That helps the turtle trackers to keep an eye on them.’

‘Turtle trackers?’ I asked.

‘Our volunteer program,’ Shane replied, ‘for people interested in learning more about turtles and doing

something to help. Each tracker gets a special kit, which includes our data sheets for recording information about any new nests or sightings, a tape measure, a low-voltage torch and a field guide with all the instructions. We ask that trackers monitor the nests and email the information to the park rangers here at the turtle centre.'

'Can anyone be a tracker?' I asked, trying not to sound too excited.

'Well, we ask for a commitment of one night a week until you complete your training, but then we will require you for the whole season. So, if you're just here on holiday, I'm sorry, but this isn't for you.' His gaze rested on me. 'But if you live here, then ...'

My heart thudded. I *did* live here.

'We run it as a seasonal program,' he continued, 'for anyone over sixteen ...'

I dipped my head. I was only ten, eleven in March.

The girl behind me took a step closer. 'What if you're nearly thirteen?'

'Well, as long as you have an adult with you, we do sometimes take younger people,' said Shane.

I scuffed my shoes in the sand. A parent? Dad would have been a definite. But Mum?

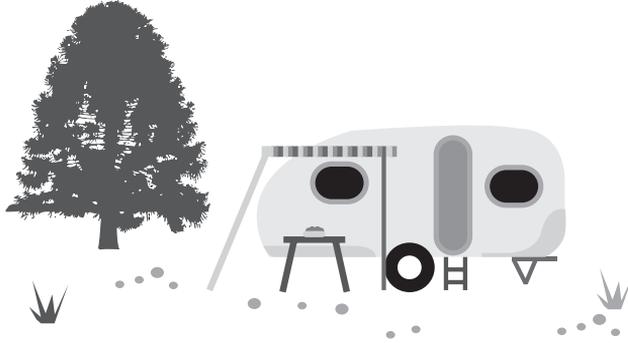
'Righto,' said Shane, opening up his notebook. 'This

nest will be officially called L183, but someone may like to suggest a friendlier name?’

‘The Happy New Year Nest?’ I suggested. ‘To bring us a Happy New Year!’

It *was* the first of January after all. And seeing Mum’s smile reminded me of just how happy we could be.

CHAPTER 3



‘I saw a turtle laying eggs last night!’ I chirped when each guest came in to reception the following morning. Most of the tourists grinned when I told them I’d named the loggerhead’s nest the Happy New Year Nest. But not Mrs Halverson. ‘That’s all well and good,’ she told me, picking up her morning paper. ‘But it’s not going to be a happy new year, Isaac!’

‘Why not?’ I asked, my smile sinking.

Mrs Halverson reminded me of a colourful bird. It wasn’t just her sparkling purple eyeshadow, or her lavender-coloured hair. It wasn’t even her coral-pink lipstick, or her shimmering pink or purple tracksuits. Mostly, it was the way her beady eyes darted when she spoke. Mrs Halverson had lived in the area for years, but after her family moved away, she and her Persian cat, Princess, moved permanently

to The Pines. Some elderly people pushed wheelie walkers if they needed help getting about, but not Mrs Halverson. She preferred to use a pram, which doubled as a place to keep her cat. Fluffy, white and spoilt, with different outfits every day, Princess was more like a pampered baby than a pet. But at least, when all zipped up in her pram, the feisty feline was still technically ‘indoors’, which was our rule for cats at The Pines.

Mrs Halverson sighed. ‘Princess coughed up two hairballs in the night, didn’t you, love?’ she said, bending down to give her cat a kiss.

Today Princess was wearing a small pink hat, like a baby’s bonnet, with two holes for her sooty-coloured ears.

‘And you know what that means, don’t you?’ said Mrs Halverson.

I shook my head as she pressed a two-dollar coin into my hand, for the paper.

‘Hairballs are a sign of change,’ she said. ‘Mark my words, cats can smell these things.’

Ignoring Princess’s scowling blue eyes, I dropped the coin into the till. I sniffed. The air smelt the same to me. Slightly salty, with a whiff of mozzie repellent. Nothing was going to change.

My eyes fell to the family photo beside the counter. Hadn't everything already changed? It felt like forever since I'd sat on Dad's shoulders, holding that freshly caught barramundi. My grin couldn't have been wider. Dad couldn't have looked happier. The barramundi couldn't have been bigger. And with one arm around Dad's waist, Mum couldn't have had sparklier eyes.

But that was three years ago. Before Dad died and Mum and I were left managing caravan parks without him. Before we'd moved here, hoping The Pines Holiday Village would be a smaller and easier park to run, but finding out the hard way that it wasn't.

Before all the fun drained from our lives.

Now all I seemed to do was clean toilets and stack newspapers, run errands and rake paths. None of the kids in my class had to work over summer, but if Mum and I wanted to stay on as managers of The Pines, then that's what I had to do.

I stifled a yawn. It had been midnight by the time Mum and I had returned from Mon Repos and, even then, I couldn't sleep. All I could think about was joining Shane's turtle trackers program.

But how? Mum would never agree to take time off to help me monitor the nests. Perhaps if I chose the perfect

time to ask her, like when the caravan park was running smoothly, and the council wasn't complaining about low bookings, or when the pool wasn't leaking, and our guests were all happy ...

'All okay out there?' called Mum once Mrs Halverson had left.

Even when I was on duty in our park's reception, Mum wasn't too far away. Beyond the shelves of tinned baked beans and bottles of tomato sauce, beyond the washing powder and the toilet paper, the drink fridges and the reception counter, was a door that led to the rest of our lives: to our small kitchen, bathroom, lounge, laundry and two bedrooms. The house wasn't big, but it was big enough for Mum and me.

'How was the lovely Mrs Halverson today?' asked Mum, sliding into the chair beside me. We were nearly the same height, which meant if we ever had an argument, I could stare at her, eye to eye. *If* we ever had an argument. Mum and I didn't have time to disagree!

I blinked. 'Um, excellent,' I lied. Mum didn't need to know about the hairballs.

'Good. Now, who've we got coming in this weekend?' Mum pulled her ponytail tighter. She'd been so fussy with her hair when Dad was alive, using a hair straightener to

iron out the frizzy curls, but these days she just scraped it back in a hair tie or shoved it under her old straw hat. Little brown curls were always escaping, but she just pushed them out of the way.

I grabbed a broom to sweep the floor, while Mum checked the booking sheet on the computer. Like me, she wore our park's uniform: black polo shirt and shorts, hers embroidered with 'Lisa, Manager', mine with 'Isaac, Assistant'. We both had olive skin and brown hair, except Mum's was long and mine was short. Like me, her eyes were brown, but they looked tired and were shadowed with dark smudges underneath.

I sighed. It wasn't a good time to ask about the turtle tracking program now. Instead, I said, 'Are we still doing Happy Hour today?'

Mum and I had been brainstorming ways to make our guests feel more welcome, and had come up with hosting an afternoon tea. Most of our guests arrived on Saturdays, so we'd decided to hold a Saturday Happy Hour on the lawn. Today was the first Saturday of the year.

'Oh, gosh,' Mum said. 'That's right. Happy Hour! What did we say? Four-thirty this afternoon?' She glanced up at the clock. 'And we've got three new vans in today! And four going out! We'd better get a wriggle on.'

I groaned.

‘Now, Isaac,’ Mum warned, ‘enough of that. Looking after the park is what we do. We’re polite, we answer our guests’ questions, we provide them with the nicest possible place to stay. And if we do all that, hopefully some of them will come back.’

The Pines Holiday Village had twenty powered and five unpowered sites, and summer was always hectic. Tourists came and went, while the long-term residents stayed all year round. Like us, permanents like Mrs Halverson, the Wiltshires, and Mr and Mrs Trigg called The Pines their home. Except the Triggs had gone to live with their daughter just before Christmas and no permanent booking had come in to replace them.

‘Can you go and clean the showers?’ Mum asked.

My shoulders slumped. My back and chest were already wet with sweat. It was going to be another summer scorcher, and cleaning was the last thing I wanted to do. But I turned obediently to the door.

‘And after the showers, can you throw an eyeball over the laundry?’ Mum continued. ‘I think Mr Wiltshire’s been fishing again, and ... well, we don’t want any fish heads in the sink to welcome our new guests, do we?’

I rolled my eyes. ‘No, Mum.’

‘Come on. Let’s get this place looking schmick.’

Schmick? With Mum’s eye for detail and commitment to her job, our caravan park always looked schmick. No matter how busy we were.

I was hoping to finish the showers before the new bookings arrived, but Mrs Halverson was standing in the doorway of the ladies’ amenities block, her toiletry bag in hand. With her skin covered in large brown sunspots, she’d spend an age in the bathroom, applying face powder, eyeshadow and lashings of lipstick. I needed to get in before her, otherwise I’d be waiting an hour to clean the ladies’.

Princess was sitting in her pram by the door, tugging viciously at the hair between her toes. I tried to walk past her, but she narrowed her eyes and hissed at me as Mrs Halverson tottered inside and plonked her toiletry bag in front of the mirror.

‘Cleaning again, Isaac? Goodness, if only your mum would get some proper help,’ she said. ‘Wouldn’t you rather be off kicking a football?’

I tipped my chin. I was ‘proper’ help. I was Mum’s right-hand man. Besides, it was no good trying to tell Mum what to do. She and Dad had never needed extra staff when

they'd managed parks in the past and, even without Dad, Mum wasn't likely to change.

I looked over Mrs Halverson's shoulder. No one else was using the showers. 'Um, can I just pop in there before you start?' I asked.

If I could just clean them, then ... I sighed. Then what? Go to the beach and have a swim? As if that was going to happen.

'Do you think perhaps I should have a word with your mum?' Mrs Halverson reached up and gently tapped her hair, making sure the style was perfectly in place. Her weekly set at the hairdresser was about the only time she left the park – Mum and I ran her other errands in town. Her colourful rings, one a large red ruby and the other a sapphire, twinkled in the fluoro light. 'I knew some park managers in Sydney once. Perhaps one of them could have a chat with your mum? Give her some tips about the importance of a work–life balance. Isn't that the new thing? Balancing a career while still having fun?'

I scrunched up my nose. 'Excuse me, Mrs Halverson, if I could just ...'

It was no use. There was no way of hurrying her, and I'd only just finished cleaning the showers an hour later when I heard the first new guests arrive. I ducked my head out

the door to see a campervan with New South Wales plates pulling into site 19. I tugged off my gloves and threw them into the cleaning bucket as a familiar face grinned at me from the back window.

‘Sutto!’ I shouted.