

death wish

Swigging the last of the water from his bottle, David lifted his bike onto his shoulder and started down the eroded track. Sharp stones pressed into his feet.

“Ouch!” Tony yelled. “My feet are killing me.”

“That’s good,” David replied. “At least you’ll forget about your cramp for a while.”

Tony shuffled along for several more metres, groaning with every step. Though he experimented with pushing his bike, he slowly fell behind. “Wait up, guys!” he yelled.

“We should just leave him,” Sai complained, stepping into the shade of a wattle tree. The branches were covered with yellow, scented flowers.

“Yeah,” David agreed, nose crinkling, “we should take off and let him panic. He’s so slow with everything!”

“I can’t believe he made you crash.”

“Me either.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Tony asked as he caught up.

“Nothing,” Sai said, stepping back onto the track. Ignoring Tony, he began to walk away.

“Hang on a bit,” Tony pleaded. “Why don’t the stones hurt your feet? I don’t get it.”

Sai grinned. “Maybe it’s because I’m just tougher than you.”

“Yeah, right.”

David saw his opportunity and took it. “It’s because of his Asian ancestors,” he said to Tony. “You know, all that running through the Cambodian jungle and stuff. He was probably born with tough feet.”

“Get lost.” Reference to his heritage always annoyed Sai.

“Maybe he doesn’t feel the pain because he has a small brain.” Tony paused before adding, “He isn’t as smart as us.”

“That’s more like it.” David laughed. “Confucius say, ‘No brain, no pain.’”

“Hey,” Sai objected. “That’s racist and stupid. If you knew anything at all, you’d know that Confucius was Chinese.”

“Same thing.” David winked at Tony.

“No. It isn’t.” Sai would have protested more had they not emerged from the thick undergrowth. Immediately in front of them, the bush gave way to knee-high grass. Beyond that, the undulating headland ended abruptly in a series of cliffs and ledges. At their base was a craggy stretch of wave-swept rocks.

Sai’s eyes roamed south to a beach and he whistled approvingly. A wave peaked up and broke in both

directions, leaving behind a small but perfect A-frame of white foam. "I am soooo going to come back here for a surf," he declared.

"Me too," David agreed. "This place is choice."

"Look!" Tony was pointing in the other direction, toward a small horseshoe inlet carved out of the headland. Something in his voice made the other two turn immediately.

Although the sight was fleeting, what David saw made his eyes widen. "That's sick! Let's do it!"

"I'm in," Sai declared.

"No way." Tony let David and Sai overtake him. "There is no way I'm going to jump off that!"

With Tony grumbling, they pushed their bikes down a thin but worn path that wound its way through the wind-blown grass of the exposed headland. Mercifully, the gravel gave way to clay and they made quick progress. Moments later, they arrived at a ledge that overhung the horseshoe inlet. The sun shone directly above them, enabling them to see down through the sparkling water.

"There," Sai said admiringly, pointing at a head bobbing in the waves. It was the same person they had seen jump moments earlier and, while they watched, the distant figure swam toward a rock platform. The only distinguishable feature from this distance was a red rash shirt, the sort worn under wetsuits or as sun protection on hot days.

"It's at least five metres," David said, trying to calculate the height of the jump. "But if they can do it, so can we."

“I’m so keen,” Sai replied. “Let’s get changed.” He lay his bike down in the thick grass and rustled through his backpack, pulling out a pair of faded board-shorts.

“No way,” Tony said, shaking his head. “I’ll get changed into my swimmers, but I am not jumping off this cliff. No chance!”

A wave thundered into the inlet. When it sucked out, the water level fell, revealing an ominous line of rocks immediately below their vantage point.

“We’ll need a run up,” Sai observed.

“Absolutely!” David added. “If we slip and hit those rocks, we’ll get smashed. At least the water looks deep in the middle. If we time it properly, we can land on the back of a wave. That will give us at least another metre of water.”

“What happens if you get washed into the cave?” Tony inched forward. His feet dislodged a stone that plummeted down into the shallows below. From this angle, he could see that the inlet narrowed into a channel. The narrow waterway led to an impressive overhang, under which the water surged rhythmically, washing through a thick bed of seaweed that swayed in the current.

“If I get washed in, I’ll just swim out,” David explained, stripping off his sweaty riding jersey. “It’ll be fine.” Sorting through the pack he threw a packet of nuts onto the grass, as well as a small notepad and pen that he had been using to keep track of his training. “Come on, Chubs. You can do it.”

“I said no.”

“Aw, come on. It’s going to be awesome!” David spoke

with excitement. Jumping from heights was something he loved and he struggled to understand why Tony did not share the same passion.

“I’m not doing it, David. What if my leg cramps? Huh? What then?”

“I don’t know. What are you going to do instead?”

“I’ll get changed and wait here. Someone needs to keep an eye on the bikes anyway. It might as well be me.”

“Suit yourself.”

David stripped down. Turning away from the others, he peeled off his lycra and pulled on his swimmers. There was no point reasoning with Tony when he had made his mind up.

“Hey, watch this.”

Checking his phone, Sai ran quickly toward the bushes where Tony was stripping off. Once there, he inched forward quietly.

This is going to be funny. David watched intently. *Sai’s in stealth mode. What’s he going to do?*

Sai stepped around the bushes just as Tony dropped his pants. Although David could only see mottled patches of white flesh filtering through the greenery, he could still make out the general shape of Tony’s body. He grinned at the roar of anger and indignation that momentarily drowned out the sound of the surf.

“Ha, ha, ha!” Sai laughed, returning at a run. “I got him! Oh, man. You should have seen his face. He was going off!”

“You got everything?”

“Yep.”

“Show me!”

“Alright. But I’m almost out of charge. I have to turn it off.”

Peering down at the small screen, David couldn’t help but laugh. In the picture, Tony’s mouth was opening with surprise, his hands plunging downwards in a futile effort to cover up.

“That’s so funny,” David said admiringly as Sai pressed the off button.

Before either of them could respond, Tony charged. Oblivious to their proximity to the cliff edge, he skidded to a stop in front of David and Sai. With the ocean at their backs, there was no room to escape.

“Give it to me!” Tony bellowed. His lips were stretched tight against his teeth, bared in a snarl. David had never seen him so furious.

Sai took a half step backwards, glancing anxiously over his shoulder at the edge. “Whoa there,” he said. “Relax, bro.”

Tony was quivering with rage. “Give me the phone or I swear I’ll throw you over the cliff!” Somehow, Tony seemed to tower over Sai. Such was his anger that it would take just one push—or the slightest of slips—and Sai would plunge to his death on the rocks below.

“Before I give it to you, tell me what you’re going to do with it.”

“If you don’t give me your phone right now, I swear I’ll . . .”

Sai glanced sideways at David, wondering if he could trust him. “Chill out, Chubs. It’s not even turned on.

See for yourself.” He held the phone, flashing the blank screen at Tony.

Tony scanned the phone, then Sai’s face. “You’re lying,” he said. “Give it to me.”

Sai glanced at David again. “I’m not lying, Tony. OK? I snuck up on you and acted like I was taking some video. I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did.”

“No, I didn’t. I did not take any video, Tony. Tell him, David.”

David did not know what to do. Behind him, a large wave roared into the inlet, pounding itself against the headland with all the futility of the millions of waves that had gone before. *If I tell the truth, I’ll betray Sai*, he thought, half aware of the water that surged into the cave and sucked back out again. *But if I lie about the phone being turned off, I’ll betray Tony*. Eventually he just nodded, promising himself that he would delete everything as soon as he could.

“I know you filmed me.”

“I didn’t. That’s why you didn’t hear any noise, Tony. If you promise not to do anything stupid to my phone, you can check it out yourself.” Sai extended his hand and offered the phone to Tony. “See, it’s not even switched on.”

Tony took the phone. The screen was blank and lifeless. The fury that had welled up in him began to drain away. His shoulders slumped and he gave the phone back to Sai. “I’m sick of you guys paying out on me!” he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. “Leave me alone.”

“Aw come on, Chubs,” Sai protested innocently. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m sick and tired of your stupid jokes!”

For several awkward moments, Tony stared beyond them to where the sea met the sky. *He’s going to cry, David thought. And I can’t believe Sai just lied to him. Maybe when he cools down, I’ll tell him the truth. Sai has been such an idiot lately.*

The silence was broken by Sai. “Alright, I get it. I’m sorry. Really. Now, are you going to jump with us or not, Chubs?”

“No! I told you already, Sai. Get it into your thick head. And stop calling me Chubs. How would you like it if I called you Little Asian? Or Stumpy? Or something stupid like that? How would you like it?”

“OK. Tony, be cool. I’m sorry!”

Tony shifted anxiously from one foot to the other. He retreated from the edge, allowing David and Sai to follow.

David tried to smooth the way. “Remember when we climbed that tree beside Dora Creek last summer? That was heaps higher, Tony. You’ve got this.”

“You have a death wish, David. There is nothing that would make me want to . . .” Tony stopped mid-sentence, aware that David and Sai were staring at something to his left. He spun around to see what it was.

“Hi,” a dark-haired girl said breathlessly.

“Hey,” David replied.

She laughed. “Are you guys jumping, too?”