

The Ship Sails

‘**P**EARLIE,’ the man said. He stepped towards her, holding up her bracelet and smiling nastily. His bright blue gaze cut through her like cold steel.

Pearlie stumbled back. ‘It can’t be you,’ she breathed. ‘It can’t . . .’

‘So, you *are* the real Pearlle,’ Beake the spy said, narrowing his eyes. ‘Little girls shouldn’t lie to grown-ups, you know. That’s when they get punished.’

Pearlie gasped. She wanted to run but it was as if her dress was made of lead. Beake

reached for her and she told her legs to move, and at last they obeyed. But where could she run to? She couldn't go to Old Man Lizard. He wouldn't be strong enough to fight Beake. And if Beake found her there he might hurt her darling animals.

So Pearlie spun on her heel and ran in the opposite direction. Away from Old Man Lizard's shack, away from the ship and town, away from Mum and Dad.

'Come back here you little wretch!' she heard Beake yell.

Pearlie darted through the bush. She had one hand holding onto Tinto in his pouch, making it hard to run fast. Behind her came the sound of Beake's shoes pounding the ground. With each step he seemed to be getting closer and closer. I'll never be able to beat him, she thought helplessly. And I'm running out of time to get back to the ship.

She sped up at that thought, but it wasn't

enough. Beake lunged forward and grabbed her dress. Pearlie was swept off the ground, kicking and screaming.

‘I’m leaving on the ship,’ she yelled in desperation. ‘Mum and Dad are already on board. You’ll . . . you’ll never see me again, I promise. I won’t tell anyone. Please . . . let me go.’

‘I can’t risk that,’ Beake said, coldly. ‘You know too much.’

Pearlie yelled as loudly as she could, ‘Help! Help me!’

But Beake put his hand over her mouth and hauled her behind a thicket of bushes. Before she realised what was happening, his hands were around her throat and he was squeezing, tighter and tighter.

Her breath. She couldn’t catch it. Her lungs felt like they were going to explode. Pearlie tore at his hands, trying to pull them away. Dark blotches floated in and out of her vision.

The world was fading.

Suddenly she felt instant relief. Beake's grip loosened and she glimpsed him spinning away as if he'd been caught in a willy-willy.

She collapsed to the ground, frantically gasping for air. It felt like she was breathing fire. She wheezed and swallowed and coughed.

Gradually her breathing returned to normal and her lungs stopped burning.

Pearlie looked around. Where was Beake? And where was Tinto? She could hear Tinto squealing and Beake screaming.

'Please don't hurt my monkey,' she cried as she staggered to her feet and ran towards the commotion.

Then she saw Beake stumbling through the scrub like a madman, his arms flailing about. Tinto was jumping all over him, biting and scratching the spy's face and arms. Beake's shirt was ripped and dirty and he seemed to have forgotten all about Pearlie. Soon he was

cowering on the ground, his arms over his head saying, 'Get it off me! Get it off me!'

Now's my chance, Pearlie thought. While Beake's wounded and in pain, I might be able to get away.

Pearlie whistled to Tinto, who gave Beake one more screech and jumped off. He scampered along the ground and leapt into Pearlie's arms. Then Pearlie ran.

She couldn't hear Beake coming after her, but she could hear him yelling, 'I'm going to get you, Pearlie Chan! I know where you live . . . I'll find you . . . and your monkey.'

His cries grew fainter and fainter until she'd left them far behind.

Finally Pearlie stopped and leant against a tree. She hugged Tinto. 'You saved my life again,' she said, her voice raspy and hoarse. She hurt all over, especially her throat where Beake had tried to choke her, and bruises had already appeared on her arms and legs.

Tinto put his head against Pearlie's chest and snuggled in under her chin the way he always liked to be cuddled.

'You're a brave little man,' she said, kissing the top of his head. 'Now into the pouch you go. We still have to get to Old Man Lizard's hut. And we have to go the long way around so we don't meet up with Beake again.'

Pearlie knew the area well. The fastest way was through the cemetery. And there'd be no time to stop for a chat once she got to Old Man Lizard's house. She'd have to run like a wild goanna if she wanted to catch the ship before it left.

Her heart stuttered at the thought. Imagine being left all alone. But of course that would never happen. Of course she would make it.

She walked quickly, all the while talking to Tinto who sat cradled in her arms. 'I'll come back for you, I promise, Tinto,' she said. 'Then we'll find Nao.' She stroked the soft mane

around his little face. 'You'll like living with Thomas Hardy. He might look and sound grumpy, but he's really very nice. And you can play with Goliath. That'll be fun, won't it?' Tears welled in Pearlie's eyes at the thought of leaving her dear friend behind, but she brushed them away and quickened her pace.

Pearlie made her way between the graves. The cemetery used to be a fun place where she and Nao often played. Today it smelled of death and loneliness.

Titch picked up Pearlie's scent before she could even see the shack and he began barking. When she appeared through the scrub he was wagging his tail.

'Mr Hardy!' she called when she was almost at the door. He wasn't used to visitors and she didn't want to alarm him.

Old Man Lizard pulled back the heavy hessian cloth and stepped outside. Goliath appeared on one side of him, Rusty on the

other. When they saw Pearlle they raced up to her and danced excitedly around her feet.

‘Hello, my darlings,’ she said, squatting down and giving them both a big hug. Rusty licked her face and Goliath jumped onto her lap.

‘Aren’t you meant to be on the ship?’ Thomas Hardy said.

‘I don’t have time to talk, Mr Hardy. I have to get back to the wharf. My mum and dad are waiting . . . I was trying to sneak Tinto on but I got caught. I have to leave him with you. Is that all right?’ Pearlle said, breathlessly.

Old Man Lizard reached across and took Tinto from her. ‘You better hurry then,’ he said. His voice was urgent.

Titch had begun barking again. ‘Quiet down, Titch!’ he yelled.

From behind the barking there came another sound, low and hollow.

Pearlle looked at Thomas Hardy. Then she

looked towards the wharf and her heart gave a lurch. She couldn't see the ship from where she stood. What she could see was a plume of grey smoke, smoke from a ship's funnel, rising above the trees.

The low mournful sound of the ship's horn came to her ears again.

'Oh . . . no,' she stuttered. Then she turned and ran, her breath sobbing in her throat. I'll make it, I'll make it, she breathed in time to each step.

The harbour came into view through the trees. And then she saw it – the plume of smoke from the ship's funnel moving slowly out to sea.

'Wait!' she screamed. 'Please wait!'

But it was too late.

The *Koolinda* had sailed without her.