

Summer Holidays



Sophia DeLuna

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By
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advice and encouragement.

Summer Holidays

We were here, my mum and I, to spend four weeks of my precious summer holidays at my aunt's place - a farm in the middle of nowhere with access to the beach. Some people would probably have envied me. I'd much rather have liked to stay at home in Sydney and spend my time hanging out with my friends in the city or reading and playing games on the computer. But my mother insisted that I needed fresh air and a change of scenery, and that it would do me good to spend time with my cousins, with whom I had about as much in common as a peacock and a bucket full of cane toads. Why she thought that spending time with a bunch of country bumpkins at the beach where I'd certainly get sunburnt and develop skin cancer would be good for me, I know not. But she had made up her mind and she was absolutely adamant.

Thus, here I was, only half listening to my cousins' chatter. Admittedly, the place was pretty, and had it not been so freaking hot I might even have enjoyed it. However, feeling like a roast chicken on a spit did kind of dampen any appreciation I might otherwise have felt for the place. And I stared out at the sea, wishing I were one of the sea gulls that could fly freely wherever they damn well pleased.

"Aaaleeex!"

I was roused from my musings by my youngest cousin, Kevin. His tousled blond hair sticking in all directions as usual, he planted himself between me and the sea, and started waving his dirty hands in front of my face. Obnoxious little shit.

"What?" I asked grouchyly.

"We're going for a swim. Want to come?"

"No."

I had already guessed that a simple 'No' would not be accepted, but when he grabbed my arm with his dirty, ice-cream-sticky hands, trying to pull me up, calling me a lazy couch potato, I'd have liked to strangle him. Alas, I was aware that my aunt would probably not appreciate it if I suffocated her little darling, and luckily I could summon up enough self-control to keep me from acting on my impulses. However, I did tell him in no uncertain terms that he should keep his paws off me and that they all should leave me alone.

All five of my cousins as well as the bunch of their friends headed for the water, calling me a spoilsport. I could live with that, if only they left me alone.

They did. At least for the next hour or so, and I was left to my musings.

The longer I stared out at the sea, hardly noticing my cousins and their friends frolicking in the water, while the sun was mercilessly burning all the areas that weren't covered by my sports bikini, the more I hated my mother for dragging me here and for taking away my iPad and my iPhone at the last minute on top of it. And I started to wonder which would be the quickest to cause my death - the cancer would definitely take the longest time, so it was either a heatstroke or sheer boredom. Could one even die of boredom? I wasn't sure. But judging by the feel of it, I thought it possible. 17 years, almost 18 actually as my birthday would be in three months, I had dwelled on this earth and I had never been bored. I had never been able to understand people who said they were bored, I just couldn't relate to such a feeling - now I could. And I did not like it. I'd have preferred to remain ignorant of this torture. Bereft of my friends, my computer and the internet, I was left with nothing to do. All my books were on the iPad or on the desktop PC, and I had already read both of the novels my mother had bought me for the journey. And the small hope that I might be able to borrow a book from one of my cousins had proved futile - there was no way I was going to read Lilly's romance novels or Sarah's or Kevin's children's books and Noah and Daniel didn't seem to read at all apart from

boy scout guides, maps and schoolbooks. Why couldn't at least one of them read fantasy books or at least science fiction? I had been tempted to ask my uncle for his car magazines, at least those would have been remotely interesting, but I didn't think he'd allow me to take them to the beach - he was rather anal about his collection.

With a heavy sigh I flopped back onto the hot towel, glaring at the disgustingly cloudless sky that seemed to taunt me with its brilliant blue. Normally there'd be far more rain here at this time, but this year the rain just wouldn't come, even though just a few hours inland they were dealing with floods. Life was just not fair.

#

Hours later, my cousins and their friends had joined me again and we were having sandwiches, I suddenly noticed a woman walking towards the edge of the cliff at the far end of the beach. I stopped chewing as I watched the woman stepping closer and closer to the edge. I had just recently read a fantasy novel where someone jumped off a cliff, driven by the spell of a sorcerer. The scene I was now watching reminded me frightfully of that book. Swallowing the remains of the sandwich, I called, "Shit!" and jumped up.

"What's the matter, Alex?" asked Noah.

"She's going to kill herself!" I shouted and was about to sprint along the beach towards the cliff, but Daniel stopped me by grasping my arm.

"Chill, Alex!" he said, "She won't kill herself."

"How do you know?" I asked him, shaking him off but staying put - for now - while focussing on the woman on the cliff, who had halted now.

"She stands there every day around this time," explained Noah.

"She's nuts," said Sarah.

"She's a witch," said Kevin, by the sound of it spraying breadcrumbs everywhere as he talked.

While listening to the others chattering, I kept watching the woman. She stood there silently a few metres from the edge, her long dark hair and her white summer dress flowing in the breeze. It was a beautiful sight!

"She isn't a witch. There's no such thing as witches."

"Is too!"

"Well, I don't know if she's nuts or if she's a witch, but she's definitely not normal."

"Why do you say that?" I asked, still watching the woman. To me she looked perfectly normal; though I was still not comfortable seeing her standing so close to the edge.

"She rarely ever comes down to the village."

"And she never talks to anyone."

"And my mother said she asked for chicken gizzards and other yucky stuff at the butcher's," said Daniel's girlfriend, Jessica.

"She's probably using it as a sacrifice to the devil."

"I thought they are doing oracles with stuff like that."

They went on hypothesising, while I was wondering how many of all these rumours were actually true. And even though I didn't know her, I felt pity for the woman, for being the subject of the others' badmouthing.

#

Aside from the fact that I was nursing a rather nasty sunburn despite using 30+ sunscreen, the following days were surprisingly pleasant. We had been shopping, and I had found several fantasy novels that I hadn't read yet. And my mother - probably having a bad conscious over my sunburn - had shown mercy and bought them for me, so I didn't even have to use my

pocket money. The days were still spent at the beach, mostly without the adults, but at least I had managed to convince my cousins to set up our stuff further down the beach where a few lonesome trees provided at least a modicum of shade. My cousins had given up trying to engage me in their activities, and thus I spent most of the time reading. I would have loved to borrow Daniel's scooter for a ride to explore a bit of the area, but Daniel insisted he needed it himself, which was rather a lame excuse as apart from the ride to the beach and back the scooter was just standing there, roasting in the sun. He had graciously offered me to use his bike, but really, who in their right mind would want to pedal in 30 plus degrees heat? I had gratefully declined. And I vowed to myself that if he ever asked to ride my BMW Sertão, I'd make sure that I *needed it myself* all the time.

Today there was a cool ocean breeze blowing, which, combined with being in the shade, made the heat almost bearable. I had just finished reading the last of my newest acquisitions when the others returned from whatever they had been doing. Kevin, the little pest, flopped down beside me and shook his head wildly, spraying me - and my book! - with droplets of water.

"Stop it!" I barked at him, but he only grinned and reached towards the cooler.

The others were chatting and laughing as they fell on the sandwiches like a pack of vultures on a carcass.

I looked at my watch. In about half an hour the 'Lady of the cliff', as I had dubbed her, would appear. The others had been right in that regard at least. So far, every day around six the lady had appeared from behind the trees that were shielding her property from view and had walked towards the edge of the cliff, halting a few metres before the abyss, facing the sea. From our new spot I could see her much better, and as far as I could judge she looked very young, maybe in her early twenties; and unless the distance was fooling me, she was stunningly beautiful. Though, admittedly I had not seen the right side of her face yet, as she never turned to face the beach, but always turned round the other way. But as much as the others had badmouthed the lady, they had never said anything negative about her looks, so I doubted my impression would be too far off. Despite finding my interest in the lady very peculiar, my aunt and uncle hadn't hesitated to provide me with all the gossip they knew about her. Among other things I had learned that the lady had only moved here a few months ago, that she hardly ever talked to anyone and no one knew what she did for a living. And I learned that even my uncle and aunt thought she was strange and had, as most people of the township, told their children not to venture anywhere near her property - just in case - and they expected me to follow their advice as well. After all, one could never know of what such strange people were capable if you provoked them. I thought these country people, including my aunt's family, were frightfully suspicious and I silently wished the lady were indeed a witch and would teach them a lesson for their stupidity. Alas, judging by what I had seen and what I had heard about her, I strongly suspected that the lady was a totally normal person, albeit perhaps a rather shy one, who was wrongfully accused of all sorts of things, just because she didn't fit in with the country people. I knew that feeling. And I hoped the lady would turn the other way around just once, so I could wave to her and show her that I did not belong to these country bumpkins, and that at least one person around here was not thinking badly of her.

Sighing, I grabbed one of the sandwiches the others had left and focussed on the cliff, waiting for the lady.

The others were mocking me for my interest in the lady, and Daniel and his friends were cracking tasteless jokes about lesbians, but I hardly listened to them.

I smiled when I spotted her dress, a red one this time, before she even emerged from behind the trees. However, the smile left my face when I saw her walking past the spot where she usually halted. Frozen in horror, I watched as she moved closer and closer to the edge.

Then, as if in slow motion, I saw her raising her arms and spreading them wide as if to signal to the wind 'Come, take me'. Damn! What if she had finally decided to end her life? I had to get her away from the edge before the wind obeyed her request. I shook myself out of my stupor and looked for Daniel. He was walking along the beach with his girlfriend. The others had strolled away too, except for Lilly who was playing a game with her girlfriends at the picnic table a few metres behind me. Good. My eyes scanned the area for Daniel's rucksack. There it was. Casting a quick glance towards the lady, I heaved a sigh when I saw her still standing at the same spot, arms still raised. I crawled over to Daniel's rucksack and opened the little front pouch. I had seen him put his keys in there once, and luckily they were there now. I grasped the keys, got up and sprinted to the scooter. Daniel obviously guessed my intention and yelled after me. Damn, the seat was hot! I'd surely be getting blisters on my precious bum, but it couldn't be helped. Then Daniel shouted to Noah, who was closer, to stop me, but I had already started the engine and backed up. Seeing that Noah wouldn't reach me, I pointed towards the cliff, shouting, "I must stop her!" and accelerated.

I manoeuvred the scooter out of the parking area as fast as I could and turned left into the lane from which further up the private road branched off to the lady's property. Once on the lane, I turned the accelerator throttle as far as it would go, racing up the hill. But even at full speed I wasn't sure how long it would take to reach the lady. Could I even make it in time? What if I couldn't even get through to her? What if there was a gate I couldn't get through? Wasn't it a pointless endeavour to try rescuing her? No, I decided, I must at least try, and I turned left into the private road.

It was rather a steep road and even with the throttle at the limit the scooter slowed down considerably. I wished I had my Sertão.

Finally the terrain levelled out and I could see her house. There was no gate - thank goodness! But the path that led around the house was only made up of stepping stones. I didn't dare drive over that. I'd probably ruin her path as well as Daniel's scooter. So, I parked the scooter in front of the house and sprinted over the stepping stones as fast as I could. I have never been particularly good at running, but damn, if I'd run this fast at school, I'd have received better marks in sports. At last I reached the end of the path. An open grassed area stretched out in front of me and my heart skipped a beat as I spotted the lady to the far right. She didn't seem to be standing as close to the edge as before. Had she backed off or was it just a matter of perspective? Did the angle from down on the beach make it appear as if she was closer? Whatever. She still did stand too close to the edge for my liking, and she was still staring out to the sea, even though she must have heard me by now. I slowed down to a walk and said as calmly as I could, "Please, don't."

Turning around to face me, her eyebrows raised in puzzlement, the lady asked, "What?"
"Please," I wheezed, "Don't jump."

Tilting her head, she smiled and said, "I had not intended to."

"Oh," I uttered, feeling rather stupid, while I was standing there, sweating like a horse and still fighting for breath. And I was just about to apologise for the misunderstanding, when the lady said, "I am waiting for my dragon."

My jaw dropped on its own volition, and gaping at her I thought, "*Shit, the others were right, the woman is a few fries short of a Happy Meal.*" I was about to bid a hasty goodbye, when the lady broke into laughter.

Thinking in horror that now she had lost it completely, I wanted to turn around when the lady said between chuckles, "You really bought that, didn't you? Gosh, you should see your face! Priceless! Hahaha."

I kept staring at her while conflicting emotions were battling inside of me. I was miffed at her for having fooled me, and I was miffed at myself for having let her fool me so easily. But looking into those eyes, those beautiful, deep blue eyes of hers, I felt drawn to her like my smiley magnet to my reading lamp. I had already thought her to be beautiful from afar, but

seeing her standing just a few metres in front of me I was stunned. And now she was tilting her head again, her left eyebrow rose, and she looked at me with a lopsided grin.

"I'm Alina, and who are you, if I may ask?"

"Uh... , Alexandra, but most people call me Alex," I stammered.

"Hi Alex. I guess you didn't like my joke. I'm sorry."

Somehow, her apology made me feel bad. But how could I explain to her that her joke had failed to amuse me and instead had terrified me because the talk of my ignorant family had affected me more than I would have liked, and that therefore I had suddenly felt as if I were standing in front of a potentially dangerous deranged witch. It sounded awful even just thinking about it, so I just said, "My mistake. No need to apologise. I just wanted to ... well ... I guess I was just stupid."

"You actually thought I was going to jump and wanted to rescue me?"

I nodded.

"That's not stupid. I think that was very sweet of you. I wouldn't have thought anyone here would care."

I shrugged and said, "I'm not from here. I'm just spending the holidays at my aunt's."

"I see," she said, and with a gesture towards the house she asked, "Would you like something to drink?"

#

Hours later, we were sitting in her kitchen, and I was wondering how anyone could ever have thought badly of Alina. She was intelligent and witty, and she had a great sense of humour, even though the latter was perhaps not appropriate in all situations ... and the best of all was - she was a computer geek and she loved fantasy stories.

Yes, some of the rumours were true. Alina did occasionally buy chicken offal - her cats loved it! And she didn't talk much to the people in town. So far no one had ever approached her, and she simply felt no need to socialise with people with whom she thought she had nothing in common. She was a digital artist and she loved standing on the cliff, looking out at the sea, feeling the breeze and smelling the salty air, especially in the early mornings and after she finished her daily work at the computer.

Looking at the clock, I said regretfully, "I guess I should head home."

"I thought you told your mother where you were when you called her earlier."

"I did. But I'm sure my aunt and my cousins have told her enough horror stories of you by now that she can't help but worry." I scrunched my face and rolled my eyes to show her what I thought of my aunt's family.

"But you are still reluctant?" Alina had correctly guessed my hesitation.

"Well, apart from that I'd love to stay longer because I enjoy your company, and I really don't enjoy being with my aunt's family ... it's also that Daniel probably thinks that if you don't roast me on a spit, he'll do it for stealing his scooter."

"You didn't 'steal' it, you just borrowed it," said Alina.

Shaking my head I said, "No. He had made it clear that he didn't allow me to borrow it, so it was stealing."

"It was an emergency," argued Alina.

Again, I shook my head. "It wasn't. I only thought it was."

Raising an eyebrow, Alina said, "They don't know that, do they?"

I grinned at her attempt to rescue me, but I shook my head nonetheless. "Thanks for the offer, Alina, but I'm a terrible liar, and I wouldn't want to lie anyway. I want them to know that you are a wonderful person, and that all their silly rumours are just that - silly. And for that I think it is best to tell them the truth."

Alina nodded her approval.

Sighing, I got up.

Alina accompanied me to the door and asked, "Would you like to come back here tomorrow?"

Smiling, I turned on the threshold to face her. "I'd love to."

She smiled as well, and said, "I have just finished the biggest of my projects today. I could take some time off if I wanted ... So, you could come whenever you like." And as I hesitated, she added, "You can bring your mother, if you like ... To show her that I'm not a child molester." She winked at me.

"I'm not a child!" I protested.

She smiled and suddenly she looked so much older - or rather wiser, than her actual 22 years, and she said calmly, "You will always be your mother's child, Alex."

And I don't know why, but suddenly I could understand my mother's point of view. Why she had insisted on bringing me here. Why she wanted me to interact with my cousins, and even why she had confiscated my iPhone and the iPad. She was worried about me. Worried I might miss out on 'real' life with 'real' people and 'real' interaction. I had always been quick to defend myself, telling her that my life was just as 'real' as hers, and that she just didn't understand me. Well, she probably really couldn't understand, but I realised then that this wasn't entirely her fault. She was working two jobs to support the two of us, and had it not been for my father's mother, I probably wouldn't even have an iPhone or an iPad, and I'd certainly not have my Sertão. My mother had never had the time or the means to get accustomed to this computer generation lifestyle. And I hadn't really made an effort to explain my life to her either. Realising this now, I vowed to spend more time with my mother, and to share more of my thoughts and activities with her.

"Are you waiting for something?" Alina asked, an amused smile tugging at her lips.

I shook my head slightly to get myself back into the present. "No," I said, "You just made me realise something very important."

"Ah, that's good."

"I will tell my mother you invited her too, and if she agrees, perhaps we could come sometime after breakfast?"

"I'd be delighted," she said, and again I stood there, mesmerised. The sun had set some time ago and the light in the hallway made her eyes appear almost violet. The cicadas were chirping in the garden and the balmy breeze carried the fresh, salty fragrant of the sea. For a moment it seemed as if she would take a step towards me, but perhaps it was just my imagination. Then she nodded almost imperceptibly and with a smile on her lips she said, "Good night, Alex. See you tomorrow."

"Good night," I sighed and turning around I walked to the scooter.

#

At three o'clock in the morning, I was still lying in one of the two beds in my aunt's guest room, while my mother was peacefully snoring in the other. By then I was actually grateful that she had dragged me here. Had she not insisted, I wouldn't have come, and I wouldn't have met Alina. We had a long talk that night, my mother and I. After me enduring Daniels verbal abuse and doing a fair amount of apologising to him; and after I was interrogated by the whole family. I didn't think I succeeded in convincing them that Alina was an absolutely wonderful person. But I hoped I at least managed to shed light upon some of the things they were wondering about, and I hoped they would stop badmouthing her. My mother told me afterwards that she was proud of me for standing up for an outsider I didn't even know. Who'd have thunk it? I thought she'd be mad at me for coming home so late and for having snatched Daniel's scooter. She also seemed to be very pleased that Alina had invited her, but she said she'd pass on the invitation and just drive me there after breakfast.

It was probably around four o'clock when I finally fell asleep. I just couldn't stop thinking about Alina. I was already sure that we'll become great friends. However, I was wondering if there might be any chance for more. This and the excitement about seeing her again the next day had me lying awake with fantasies running through my head that might have been less tormenting had my mother not slept in the same room.

The next morning my mother woke me at eight bloody thirty. Had she just woke me with the intention to get me to Alina, I might not have been as grumpy. Her reasons, however, were less enjoyable. Noah and Daniel were already off with some of their boy scouts friends, my aunt had to take Sarah to the dentist and had asked my mother to drive Lilly to her riding lesson. Now, guess who was left to take care of the little pest, Kevin? Right. Needless to say, I was not amused to have been woken from my sweet slumber for *that*.

Cursing under my breath, I quickly showered and went into the kitchen where my mother greeted me with a quick, "Thank you! I'll be back in about two hours." and then hurried off with Lilly who was already waiting, dressed in her riding gear.

Kevin grinned at me, his face smeared with Vegemite. "Now we are all alone."

I wondered why on earth he found that amusing. After all, I hadn't been exactly nice to him, and I didn't feel like being nice to him now either. But for some unfathomable reason, the kid seemed to have taken a liking to me regardless. "Clean your face," I tried to discourage him, while I put two slices of toast in the toaster.

Surprisingly, he did actually wipe his face, albeit on a tea towel. Then he looked at me and asked, "Why are you being so grumpy? It's not even hot today."

He was right. The cool change had finally arrived and brought some much needed rain over night. It had stopped raining now, but the ground outside was still wet, and the temperature was rather pleasant. Putting the toast on a plate, I sat down opposite him and told him truthfully, "I haven't slept much, and I wanted to visit Alina after breakfast."

"Alina is the witch who isn't a witch, yes?"

He was already been in bed when I came home the previous night, but the others had obviously informed him. "Yeah," I said, while spreading Vegemite on my toast.

"We can visit her together," he suggested brightly. "Then I can tell my friends that I've been to the witch's place. That'd be cool!"

"Forget it!" I stopped his enthusiasm as soon as I had swallowed a bite of toast and could speak decently.

"Why?" he persisted, "If you are grumpy because you want to go to Alina, we should go to Alina. Then you won't be grumpy anymore."

I couldn't deny that there was a certain logic to his deduction. Nonetheless ... "We can't. We've got no transport, and it's too far to walk there and be back in time."

He exaggeratedly rolled his eyes at me and stated, "Boy, are you dim!"

I could have slapped him.

But he went on, "Nobody said we have to stay here or be back at a certain time. They just don't want me to be alone. You can write a note, and we can cycle over. It's not *that* far."

"It's too far for a bike ride as well," I insisted, knowing that I certainly didn't want to push Kevin's bike up the steep hill that led to Alina's place. Hell, I didn't want to take Kevin with me under any circumstances, and to totally discourage him I said to him, "Anyway, forget it, Kevin, your mother would have my guts for garters if I took you to Alina's." My aunt might have changed her mind to a degree after what I told her, but she certainly wouldn't agree to me taking her precious darling to the woman who was still a suspicious stranger to her.

Kevin seemed to mull this over, while I finished my toast. Alas, he was not to be deterred from spending a happy day with me. And somehow I couldn't help starting to admire his persistence as he said, "The witch ... sorry ... Alina has a car, hasn't she?"

"She does," I admitted, already guessing what he would propose next.

He grinned. "Then you can call her and ask her to come over. And then we can go down to the beach together and have some fun there."

Okay, I had not guessed the beach part, and my first reaction was to tell him that I hated the beach, even when the sun wasn't scorching my skin to a colour that resembled a boiled lobster. However, I stopped myself as a second thought crossed my mind: On the beach he would probably just go and build a sand castle, as on a day like this even he would probably not be too keen on going into the water. We would just have to watch him and would have more peace than I would have if I stayed here with him. And I thought I should call Alina anyway to tell her that I would come later, so I could just as well ask her if she was up to babysitting Kevin with me. "All right," I said and got up to clear the table, "I'll call her and ask her."

"Yay!" he yelled, and as I sent him a disapproving look, he added whispering, "Thank you!"

Maybe there was hope after all, that he would learn to behave in a less annoying manner when he was with me, I mused as I was putting the dishes in the dishwasher.

#

Half an hour later, we arrived at the beach. Alina had agreed to the change of plans and had called for us. I had left a note on the kitchen table to let the others know where we were, omitting the fact that we were going with Alina.

We were just about to get the cooler and the blankets from the boot when Kevin said, "Wait. Would you like me to show you a secret place?"

I shot him a doubting look. Since my early childhood I had been here more often than I would have cared, I didn't think there was any place here that deserved to be called *secret*.

"Sure, why not?" said Alina, and the smile on her face made my annoyance evaporate to be replaced by the urge to pull the corners of my mouth upwards to form a silly grin. I felt like an idiot, but I couldn't help it. "Okay," I squeaked, my voice breaking awkwardly.

The knowing grin on Kevin's face as he looked from me to Alina and back would normally have caused me to shoot him a scorching look, however, for some unfathomable reason my face muscles seemed to be uncooperative and instead turned into an even wider grin. I could have slapped myself. But that would have made me look even more stupid, so I decided to resign to my fate of having a happy day with the little shrimp, at least until I regained control over my body.

His face turned serious, and he said in a conspiratorial voice, "You must both promise not to tell anyone!"

Although I was inwardly rolling my eyes (actually doing it didn't work as my eyes seemed to be disobeying my commands as well), we both promised, and as he led us along the beach, into the opposite direction to Alina's cliff, he turned towards us and said, "I've never showed this place to anyone before."

I wanted to ask him why he was showing it to us then, but Alina responded quicker and said, "Wow, then we are honoured. Thank you for your trust."

Kevin grinned happily, and after checking that nobody was following us, he turned and pranced ahead, hopping and skipping.

Why Alina was being so nice to the little shrimp, I knew not. But all questioning thoughts left me as she took my hand and said, "Come on, let's catch up with him," and pulled me with her into a run.

Running had never been my forte, but since I had my Sertão, I had, admittedly, become even more unfit; thus the thrill and enjoyment of holding Alina's hand was unpleasantly dimmed by my struggle to keep up with her, praying that my heart wouldn't burst through my chest in order to escape the abuse. It surely felt as if it were attempting to do so.

As Kevin reached the end of the beach some metres before us, he looked back at us, grinned, and called, "Come on," before turning around again and scrambling up the rocks.

I had to catch my breath before even attempting to go after him. I knew where he was headed, anyway. There was a small cove on the other side of the cliff. It certainly wasn't a secret place, and it was hardly worth the climb, as the way down to cove was even steeper than the way up onto the cliff, and you had to fit whatever you wanted to bring into a rucksack. And then there wasn't really much to see anyway. It wasn't even particularly pretty there, as the rocks were full of guano from the seabirds that were nesting there.

Alina indulgently waited with me, while I was trying to hide my face, which was flushed red not only from exhaustion but also from the terrible embarrassment I felt as I saw her smiling with amusement at my unfit state. Here I was, bent over, hands on my knees, huffing and puffing like a walrus, while she just stood there, relaxed and gorgeous like a goddess, breathing only slightly heavier than normal. I vowed to myself to start some serious fitness training as soon as I got home.

"We are coming!" called Alina.

Looking up, I saw Kevin up on the cliff, gesticulating and putting his finger on his lips. It was already surprising that he hadn't yelled for us to follow, but this gesture had me wondering if he had been taken over by aliens. Kevin, the little pest, who could hardly keep quiet at the best of times, was silencing *us*?!

Touching my shoulder, Alina said, "Come on; let's see what he's up to."

"All right," I nodded, still out of breath, and followed her up the rocks.

As I finally reached the top, Kevin was already a few metres ahead and gestured us to crouch down. I was about to give him a piece of my mind, but Alina gently tugged at my arm, urging me with a smile to indulge him. Sighing, I crouched down and followed Alina and Kevin on all fours.

"Oh my!" whispered Alina as she sat down at the edge on the other side of the cliff. A beaming smile on her face, she stared down at the cove.

Curious as to what had caused her to form such an angelic look on her face, I crawled the last metre to the edge. The sight that greeted me was the cutest I had ever seen, apart from Alina. A small colony of fur seals with several pups amongst them was sunbathing in the cove.

We sat there quietly for several minutes, watching the seals. And when I leaned against Alina, and Kevin crawled over to lean against me, I felt so at peace that I ruffled his notoriously tousled hair and whispered, "Thanks for sharing your secret."

He beamed at me and gave me a hug before settling down again, and this time I put my arm around him as he leaned against me.

Shortly after, he said in a low voice, "They taught us about seals at school. My teacher said that in the past there were a lot of them around here, but there haven't been any for a long time. She said it's because they were hunted." He looked up at me and then at Alina. "You won't tell anyone that they are here, will you?"

A lump formed in my throat, and I shook my head and croaked, "No, I won't." And while Alina assured him that she would keep his secret as well, I hugged him close and wondered how he could suddenly be such a gentle kid when he was usually such a pest. Then, looking at the pups below, I suddenly thought that, perhaps it wasn't really he who had changed, but rather my own viewpoint. After all, what had he done that I regarded him as a pest? Granted, he was always dirty and loud, but weren't most kids like that at his age, especially when they were with other kids? Here, he wasn't with kids but with adults. And here he wasn't playing and frolicking with other kids. He seemed to know very well how to adjust his behaviour according to the situation. But did I? I had insisted on my computer lifestyle attitude even though I didn't even have a computer with me. Burying my frustration in books, I had refused to adapt to the circumstances, and let myself be irritated by the others' exuberant behaviour

instead of joining them. Granted, I had been extremely angry at my mother for dragging me here. But instead of accepting the fact and going with the flow, I had let my anger get the better of me. Kevin on the other hand had gone with the flow quite marvellously. Instead of being pissed about having his grumpy cousin as a babysitter and keeping up his exuberant behaviour, he had calmed down considerably and suggested doing things that he thought I would like. Surprised, I realised that the little shrimp had actually taught me something really important.

#

As we finally returned home, it was already noon. Kevin and I had insisted that Alina come with us for lunch, and even though she didn't seem to be thrilled, she had accepted. My aunt didn't seem to be too thrilled either. And since I knew that she always cooked enough to feed at least one more person, and that she never minded when her kids brought friends home for lunch, it was fairly safe to assume that it was more to do with *whom* we brought with us. Nevertheless, she was polite enough to give her okay to the invitation. Perhaps her curiosity was getting the better of her, as at first I thought she was trying to think of an excuse.

As we were gathered around the table and Sarah was telling her sister the horror story of her visit to the dentist, my uncle surprised me by addressing Alina and asking her if, as a computer specialist, she knew how to build a website.

"I'm just a digital artist," corrected Alina, "But I have built a few websites for friends, and I built my own of course. Why?"

"My mates and I were thinking of having a website for our 4WD club, but none of us has any clue as to how to build one. Could we hire you to build one for us?"

Smiling, Alina said, "No, you can't. As I said, it's not my job. But, you do grow macadamia nuts, don't you?"

"Yes," said my uncle, and his initially disappointed look turned into a grin.

Grinning as well, Alina said, "I happen to love macadamia nuts. How about I help you with your website, and you share some of your macadamias?"

"Deal!" said my uncle and reached over the table to seal the deal with a handshake, which Alina readily accepted.

Initially I thought this was truly wonderful, even if my aunt still looked at Alina with suspicion. But when we had finished lunch and my uncle dragged Alina into his office, I was less pleased about this new deal. However, Kevin distracted me by dragging me up from my chair in order to follow him. At first my annoyance flared up again and I wanted to protest, but when he looked at me, I remembered our morning at the beach and sighing, I followed him to his room.

Once I was inside, he closed the door and asked me to stand in front of it and let no one in. I didn't know why he was making such a fuss, but I said, "Okay," and leaned against the door. However, when he then switched on the light and let down the blinds, I couldn't refrain from rolling my eyes. He didn't notice, though, as he had already headed over to his bed, pulled out a box with his Legos from underneath it and then half crawled under the bed. As he reappeared, he held a brightly red coloured miniature cash box in his hand. He came over to me, sat down cross-legged and fumbled to unlock the box with a tiny key he seemed to have magically produced. Perhaps he had retrieved it from under the bed as well. Curious as to what he was up to, I sat down in front of the door. As he finally got the lock open, he emptied the box onto the carpet between us, and looking up at me he asked in a low voice, "Do you think this will be enough for a digital camera?"

There was a 50 dollar note, probably the one he got from my mum for his birthday, and a rather huge pile of coins of different value. I quickly sorted the coins, while he waited and every few seconds cast an anxious look at the door. Finally done, I announced, "You've got 88

dollars and 93 cents. I fear that won't be enough, if you want a camera that takes decent photos."

His face fell, his shoulders slumped and he looked down at the money box he still held in his hands.

"Why are you so secretive about it? Can't you just ask your parents to bump up your savings and buy you a camera?"

"They say I'm not old enough to get a camera," he said sadly. "I thought if I had saved enough I could ask you to buy one for me."

I wondered why my aunt and uncle thought he was too young for a camera, but then thought that it was probably just because they needed to keep limits on expenses since they had five children to care for, after all. Then I suddenly had an idea. "You know what? I have my old camera with me. How about I give you that?"

His eyes widened in surprise, "You would do that?"

"Sure," I grinned, "I haven't used it at all. I'm not much of a photographer."

"Ouch!" I cried out as my head bumped against the door when the little shrimp pounced on me in delight.

"Sorry," he said and scrambled back.

"No worries," I said, rubbing the back of my head. "But we'd better gather up your treasure." The coins had been scattered all around when he flung himself at me.

As we quickly put them back in the box, I suddenly stopped. "We've got a problem."

"What?" he asked as he put in the last coins and locked the box.

"You want to photograph the seals, don't you?"

He nodded.

"Well, to view the photos of a digital camera you need a computer. But when your father puts them on his computer, he will know of the seals. So, either you will have to give up your secret or you need a computer of your own."

He thought for a moment, then his face lit up and holding up the box he asked, "Will it be enough for a computer?"

Shaking my head, I said, "No, Possum. A computer costs a lot more than a camera."

The following silence was interrupted by a knock on the door that made me jump.

Looking up, Kevin asked, "Who is it?"

"Alina. Is Alex with you?"

"Yes," called Kevin, "Are you alone?"

After a few seconds of hesitation, Alina responded, "Yes."

"You can let her in," said Kevin to me, and I got up and opened the door. As soon as she entered, Kevin gestured her to come further in and asked me to close the door again.

"What's up?" asked Alina.

"We've got a problem," I said as I sat down again and gestured for her to sit next to me.

"What kind of problem?" she asked as she followed my invitation.

"Kevin wants to take photos of the seals. He can have my old camera, but he needs a computer to view the photos, and he doesn't want to reveal his secret to his dad."

"Oh," said Alina, "But I'm sure your father can keep a secret."

"It's not just my dad," said Kevin. "My mum uses my dad's computer too. And anyone except me and Sarah can use it if they ask."

"Hmm, would you be interested to learn how to use a computer?" asked Alina.

Kevin nodded enthusiastically. "I would love to! But my parents say I'm not old enough."

Looking thoughtful for a bit, Alina finally asked, "What if I offered you to teach you and provided you with an old laptop of mine? Do you think your father might agree to that?"

Kevin's initial delight faded, and shrugging his shoulders, he said, "I don't know."

"Well, we can ask him," I said.

"And I think it would be good to let him in on the secret," said Alina. "If he knows what's

motivating you, it might be easier to convince him."

With furrowed brows, Kevin sat there thinking for a while before he finally said, "Okay."

"Great," said Alina and got up. "Let's ask him now. He's probably still in his office."

"Wait!" cried Kevin, and we waited, watching him put his money box and the Legos box back under his bed, pull up the blinds and switch off the light. "Now, we can go," said Kevin grinning.

After we explained everything to my uncle, he agreed to the deal and promised to keep the secret under one condition, that Kevin would always tell him before he went to see the seals. My uncle had not been pleased when he learned that Kevin had climbed the cliff on his own, but remembering his own adventures as a boy, he could relate to his son's adventurous spirit very well. However, he did explain to Kevin that he wanted his son to be safe and that at the very least he wanted to know when he was going off on adventures alone.

Kevin agreed to his father's conditions and the deal was sealed. I would show him how to use my camera, and Alina would bring her old laptop and teach Kevin how to use it on the weekends.

As we left my uncle's office, Kevin begged Alina and me to accompany him to the cliff again to take a few photos right away. Since it was still early, we agreed, and after taking a few photos for him, I showed him how to operate the camera, which wasn't too difficult as most things worked automatically anyway. And when we were finally on our way home again, Alina asked me if I would like to come and have dinner at her place. Needless to say, I agreed at once.

#

Now, three weeks later, I'm sitting in the car next to my mother. We are on our way home, and I have my eyes closed, so she thinks I'm sleeping. Though, perhaps she can gather that I'm awake as I can't seem to get the silly grin off my face. It's funny how this holiday turned from being an absolute horror trip to being the best time of my life.

I will visit Alina on the weekends. It's a three hour drive from Sydney; I can manage that with the Sertão. I promised to visit Kevin as well. And I don't even mind. Strange how the little shrimp has grown on me. Sure, he is only doing his first learning steps with the camera and the computer, but he is so enthusiastic about it, it's a delight to teach him. And to be trusted with his secret is really awesome. I love watching the seals with him and Alina. Alina ... I can't stop myself from sighing happily. The time I spent with her was better than I could ever have dreamed, and I'm definitely looking forward to the weekends - especially the nights. However, since she has to work and I will have to study, the distance between us doesn't bother me too much. And of course we will bridge the days between the weekends with Skype calls.

And once I finish uni ... oh well, let's not think too far ahead. One of the things I've learned on this holiday is that it's better to have no preconceptions and instead go with the flow.

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