

JUNGLE ESCAPE

A hand holding a bone and a spider on a web. The hand is positioned between the words 'JUNGLE' and 'ESCAPE', holding a bone vertically. A spider is on a web, positioned over the letter 'A' in 'ESCAPE'.



NATHAN LUFF



WALKER BOOKS

AND SUBSIDIARIES

LONDON • BOSTON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

Jungle Escape

first published in 2025
by Walker Books Australia Pty Ltd
Gadigal and Wangal Country
Locked Bag 22, Newtown
NSW 2042 Australia
www.walkerbooks.com.au

Walker Books Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the country on which we work, the Gadigal and Wangal peoples of the Eora Nation, and recognises their continuing connection to the land, waters and culture. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present.

Text © 2025 Nathan Luff
Cover illustration © 2025 Walker Books Australia Pty Ltd
Cover illustration by Josh Durham

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN: 9781760659257

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise – without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Typeset in 13 pt Adobe Caslon Pro
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press
EU Authorized Representative: HackettFlynn Ltd, 36 Cloch Choirneal,
Balrothery, Co. Dublin, K32 C942, Ireland. EU@walkerpublishinggroup.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury

**FOR THE COUSINS UP NORTH:
BELINDA, AMANDA, JESSICA AND SARAH.
I'D VISIT MORE EXCEPT ALL OF YOUR
LOCAL WILDLIFE WANTS TO KILL ME.**

These are ADVANCE UNCORRECTED PROOFS for reviewing purposes.
Please note that all contents and publishing information are subject to change.
When quoting from this book, please check publishing details and refer to the
final printed book for editorial accuracy.

JUNGLE ESCAPE

RESORT SERVICES AND FEATURES:

1. ADULTS ONLY AREA	1
2. FREE ENTERTAINMENT	9
3. FIRST CLASS TRAVEL	18
4. AIRPORT SHUTTLE	30
5. ROOM SERVICE	41
6. FINE DINING	54
7. KIDS' CLUB	65
8. BREAKFAST INCLUDED	78
9. EARLY CHECK OUT	89
10. VALET PARKING	99
11. WILDLIFE SPOTTING	106
12. NATURE WALKS	117

-Your oasis in an oasis -

13. PRISTINE RAINFOREST	125
14. STATE OF THE ART SECURITY	138
15. JUNGLE VIEWS	147
16. OUTDOOR POOL	158
17. HOUSEKEEPING	170
18. GAMES ROOM	179
19. CERTIFIED HEALTH INSPECTION	188
20. FREE UPGRADE	196
21. LUGGAGE DELIVERY	208
22. LEISURE TIME	216
23. TURNDOWN SERVICE	229
24. LATE CURFEW	237

1.

ADULTS ONLY AREA

Mum swanned into the room like an exotic butterfly, half her face hidden behind large black sunglasses and her expensive silk kaftan billowing in her wake.

‘Skiing in Aspen is confirmed! We leave on Boxing Day,’ she called out before seeing me sprawled on the couch. She gasped and clutched dramatically at her heart. ‘Don’t sneak up on me like that, darling.’

I sat up and grinned.

‘Oh, Aspen’s not for you,’ she quickly added, pouting her lips. ‘It’s strictly adults only. You understand.’

The grin melted from my face.

‘Oh don’t act like that. Your father and I are sending you somewhere special, at great expense, I might add.’ She patted my arm.

‘If I came to Aspen, I could be extremely quiet. You wouldn’t even know I was there,’ I said, pushing my bottom lip out.

‘No, no, no. You’d skulk around, and people would feel obliged to engage with you out of politeness. You know, not all adults find kids interesting. When you’re older you can come along to these things, okay?’

I must have looked upset – how very uninteresting of me – because Mum sat down beside me and took off her sunglasses. Every room in our house features at least one floor-to-ceiling window and because most of the furnishings are a crisp white, the result is blinding. She hastily put her sunglasses back on. ‘It would be so dull for you. There won’t be any other children, only boring old grown-ups—’

‘Drinking expensive champagne and hobnobbing with the elite of Hollywood stars,’

Dad called out from his adjoining office. Mum squealed and then snorted a little.

‘Henry, do you have that brochure?’ Mum shouted, getting back to her feet. ‘Bring it so I can show Branson.’

Dad appeared, brochure in hand. He came over and shook my hand, like we were business associates.

‘Hello, son,’ he said.

‘Dad, I’m a good skier now. I’ll be able to keep up, I promise,’ I said.

‘I wouldn’t hear of it. While we’re having a boring old time in Colorado, you, my dear boy, will be living a life of luxury in Far North Queensland.’ He dropped the brochure into my lap and I only casually glanced at it.

‘I hate holiday camps. I really don’t mind being on my own—’

‘Jungle Escape is no holiday camp,’ he said. ‘It’s an exclusive retreat and spa for young people. I only wish I’d had an opportunity like this when I was young. Look at it, won’t you?’

I sighed and picked the brochure up. There

were pictures of ferns and a pool. It mentioned an exclusive summer camp program with cuisine, interior decoration and business skills classes. That was my parent's idea of a fun summer, not mine.

'The Daintree Rainforest is divine,' Mum chimed in. 'You'll love it. You might even make a friend – wouldn't that be something?'

It was clear that my parents had made up their minds.

'May I be dismissed?' I asked. Both Mum and Dad nodded.

'But get yourself ready for the party and make an effort tonight to socialise,' Mum said.

I'd purposely forgotten about the Christmas Eve party they were hosting. It had become a tradition. An annual nightmare.

I walked, calmly as I could, to the door and then, once out of view, I ran to my bedroom and threw myself on the bed.

I was going to be an orphan during the school holidays. Again.

I screamed into my pillow for a good couple of minutes. I don't know why they bothered

having a child – my very existence was nothing but a nuisance to them. The worst thing was how awkward they were around me, as though instead of being a child, I was a different species or something. They'd either bypassed or repressed their own childhoods and had no understanding of what it was like to be young.

Exhausted, I flipped over onto my back. I hated my room. Mum and Dad had some famous interior designer work on it and I hadn't been consulted at all. There was minimal furniture and all my clutter had to be contained in this large ash cupboard, where the shelves were crammed with the latest gadgets and gold-plated snow globes from the places my parents had been without me.

I imagined bringing that cupboard crashing to the ground and smashing everything into little pieces.

Dad would be appalled.

'This hot-headed approach of crying and screaming is for cave men,' Dad once told me when I was a toddler, after I'd just recovered from a significant tantrum. 'No one acts rationally when they're full of anger. No, the best way to express

yourself is through a sternly worded letter to the manager!’

Dad was the king of writing complaint letters, often writing up to ten each week – he said people deserved to know when they had displeased him.

I snatched up my writing pad and fancy pen.

Dear Mr and Mrs Hawthorne,

It has recently come to my attention that you have decided to spend these holidays away from your only son, me. Perhaps it has slipped your mind that you have a son, perhaps you weren’t aware that it is the duty of parents to spend time with their children, particularly during the holiday season. I will certainly be nominating you for the Worst Parents of the Year Award and wish you every success in that competition. I hope you break your legs on the skiing field and that you have to spend the entire trip stuck in an avalanche.

Yours sincerely,

Branson

(your son, in case the name doesn’t ring any bells)

I finished scribbling then re-read the letter. Of course, I would never actually give it to them. Even if I did, I’m sure they wouldn’t read it. They’d never consider something I’d written interesting enough to read. I scrunched the letter up into a ball and threw it at the bin. It missed and landed among other scrunched up balls of similar content. I wished, not for the first time, that I was a kid in one of my favourite books. Those kids were brave and strong-willed and even if they were scrawny and burdened with a family like mine, it didn’t matter because they’d soon discover they had hidden magic talents and were destined to save the world ...

With a deep sigh, I got up and started cleaning the rubbish from the floor. In doing so, I stubbed my toe on a hardcover book. I was in the process of drafting a sternly worded letter of complaint to the offending book when I noticed the title.

A Beginners Guide to Magic.

Maybe I did have magical talents after all ...

Soon there would be hundreds of people in our house and I would have an opportunity to show

my parents and everyone they knew just how interesting I really was.

I would introduce them to Branson the Brilliant!

I wouldn't skulk around the party.

I would be *the life* of the party!

'Oh you simply must bring Branson with you to Aspen,' they would say. 'He's an absolute delight.'

I picked up the magic tutorial book and began to read.

2. FREE ENTERTAINMENT

The thing about magic (or illusions, as us professionals refer to them) is that it all comes down to two things: confidence and misdirection. Confidence has always been something I've struggled with but I remembered Dad once telling me that if I wanted to *feel* like I owned the world, then I had to *dress* like I owned the world.

So I wore a tuxedo, which made me look very suave and sophisticated. The thing that really stole everyone's attention, however, was my top hat and purple cape.

Our house was positively blooming with both people and elaborate floral arrangements. I stole a red rose and carefully placed it inside my inner jacket pocket. It was part of the surprise I had planned.

‘I didn’t know it was fancy dress,’ someone said as I sauntered past them, but what I think they really meant was: ‘I had no idea Branson was so fancy.’

I winked at them. You don’t get much fancier than Branson the Brilliant.

Mum rushed over to me, seized me by the arm, and pulled me aside.

‘What on Earth are you wearing?’ she asked.

‘I’m dressed to impress,’ I said.

‘Darling, the only people who can successfully wear capes are women over the age of eighty. Get rid of it, and the hat. And the tuxedo is a bit much.’

She pushed me towards the door whilst simultaneously greeting a new guest.

I didn’t leave. I continued to mingle, though after the initial responses, people stopped paying me any attention whatsoever. Their eyes glazed

over me as they moved through the party, heads held high, like they belonged. In contrast, my shoulders were slumped and my head was bowed as I scurried about like a rat. I looked completely out of place and I shouldn’t have. This was my house!

A man stepped on my cape and it anchored me to the spot, half choking me.

‘Excuse me, could I just get my cape?’ I said. The man ignored me. I tried speaking a little louder but with no success. I tapped him gently on the arm and he swatted at me absent-mindedly. In the end, I had to wait a few minutes for him to finish his conversation and move on.

As I was being released, Mum stepped up onto the makeshift stage that had been erected beside the grand piano. She stood before a pre-set microphone, a glass of champagne in hand.

‘Is this thing on?’ she said and her voice boomed out of a set of speakers, the crowd quietening in its wake. ‘Okay, now people keep pestering Henry and I to sing.’ I had literally heard no one ask them to sing. ‘We don’t even have anything prepared,’ she continued. I’d heard her and Dad practising

songs every night since I'd returned home for the holidays. 'But if you all insist so much, I guess we can't disappoint.'

A concert pianist they'd hired moved over to the piano and Dad made his way to Mum's side, an extra microphone already in his hand. The pianist started playing and my parents sang, if you could call it that.

Dear Mr and Mrs Hawthorne,

On behalf of all the party guests, I feel obliged to let you know that people don't like Christmas music at the best of times. When sung by you two, the displeasure is intensified beyond compare. Were ears able to speak, they would surely be crying out, 'Stop, stop! The pain is unbearable!'

I'm sure you will take this criticism in the constructive way it is intended.

Yours sincerely,
Branson

I made my way to the drinks station and helped myself to a glass of punch. An elderly gentleman approached and held up two fingers.

'Two please,' he said.

'Oh, I don't—' I started to say.

'And make it snappy,' he added, turning away with a grimace as my parents attempted singing in harmony.

I filled two glasses and handed them over. The man moved on but an elegant woman quickly took his place. Her fingers, her wrists, her ears, her neck – they were all dripping in diamonds. I secretly nicknamed her Twinkles.

'Do you have anything French?' she asked me. I had somehow, accidentally, become part of the wait staff.

After I'd dealt with Twinkles, I managed my escape. My parents were finishing up their first song and I bundled up my cape in my hands to avoid anyone stepping on it as I rushed for the stage.

Now was my moment. I was going to change everyone's opinion about me.

Under the cover of polite applause, I snatched the microphone off Dad and stood blocking my parents. I let go of my bunched-up cape and it dropped behind me like a theatre curtain.

‘Behold, Branson the Brilliant,’ I said. My voice wavered as it passed through the speakers and it didn’t sound like me at all. Was my voice really that high pitched?

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ Mum asked through the corner of her mouth, though her microphone still caught every word. I forced a smile.

‘Do you believe in magic?’ I asked the crowd. A few people coughed. Some laughed nervously. ‘Well you will!’ I raised my hands in the air and walked back and forth across the stage in a highly dramatic way. I should have prepared some music. It would have been more impressive with music. I tried to suggest to the piano player that he should play something but he didn’t pick up any of my hints – now that I think of it, my constant eyebrow raising at him probably made me look a bit unhinged. Instead, I was forced to sing my

own music. ‘Magic, magic, it’s spectacular. Magic, magic ... it’s not a spatula.’

I’ll be honest, it wasn’t going well.

‘Behold,’ I shouted, and the speaker whined painfully with feedback, ‘as I make my mother’s glass of champagne disappear right before your very eyes!’

I was up to the misdirection part of the act.

With my right hand, I held my cape up in front of Mum’s champagne glass. She was smiling for the crowd but it was not a happy smile. I pulled out a wand from my jacket pocket with my left hand and held it in the air. Everyone’s attention was on the wand. No one was watching as I carefully took hold of Mum’s glass with my right hand and switched it with the rose I’d taken earlier. It is very difficult to do all this with one hand, whilst also holding up a cape – I just want to point that out.

‘Abracadabra,’ I shouted, and waved the wand over the hidden glass. I swept the cape free with my right hand and revealed the rose now in Mum’s hands.

The crowd should have gasped in amazement but they didn't.

A couple of things had happened:

Firstly, I understood why the magic book had suggested doing this trick with a fake rose. Fake roses don't have thorns. Real roses *do* have thorns. The thorns had somehow cut Mum's hand during the trick and there was quite a lot of blood. Mum screamed and the microphone amplified her horror.

Simultaneously, I also understood the importance of doing the trick with an empty glass of champagne, not a full one. The act of whisking the glass away had sent its contents flying out into the crowd. It splashed right in the face of none other than Twinkles herself, making her drip now in both diamonds and champagne. She screamed in perfect harmony with Mum (I felt like pointing out to Mum and Dad that this was what a proper harmony sounded like, but the look of fury in Dad's eyes suggested it wasn't the time).

As I stood there, my face burned and I knew one thing for certain: no one was wanting me

to go along to Aspen and share any more of my hidden magic talent with them. I would absolutely, definitely, one-hundred percent be going to this lame summer camp for spoiled brats on Boxing Day.

'May I be dismissed?' I asked into the microphone but I didn't wait for a response. I performed one final act of magic and disappeared from the party.

3.

FIRST CLASS TRAVEL

Dad's driver, Max, was to drive me to the airport. Mum was frantically packing and barely looked up when she said goodbye. Dad patted me on the back.

'Enjoy,' he said, 'and try not to embarrass us, or yourself.' It was so typical of my parents to put themselves first that I'd stopped reacting to it and merely waved goodbye.

Max let me sit in the front with him.

'Cheer up,' he said as we pulled away from the house. 'It's a festive time of year.'

'Not for me. You wouldn't understand.'

'Actually, Christmas was a difficult time for me when I was a kid.'

'Yeah, well I bet your parents never sent you away,' I said.

Max sighed. 'I wish they had. Instead, first thing Christmas morning my parents would make me pick one of the chooks – the closest thing I had to pets – and it was my job to cut the unlucky chook's head off and pluck out all the feathers so we could eat it for lunch. I still have nightmares every Christmas morning about headless chooks chasing me, blood everywhere ...'

There was a long stretch of silence. I looked out the window.

'But you're right,' he added, 'I was never sent away to a luxury hotel in a tropical rainforest. My parents weren't that cruel.'

I turned the radio up and closed my eyes.

* * *

There were two flights. The first, to Brisbane, was first class and the flight attendant treated me like I was four years old.

'You're such a brave little man flying on your

own,' she said as soon as I'd sat down. 'I think we might have a super special colouring book you could have.'

One of my pet hates is when adults treat children like children, though I guess it's marginally better than being ignored altogether.

I made a mental note that when I got home, I would have to write a letter of complaint to the airline.

Dear Manager,

I was recently a guest upon your airline service to Brisbane and I found myself positively outraged by the attitude of your flight attendants. I was treated like a child, and as such, my recommendation is that your punishment should be to do the same to them. I suggest an hour or so in the naughty corner.

With regards,

Master Branson Hawthorne, Esq.

The flight attendant returned, carrying a colouring book and pencils. I was too polite to refuse them. So, I thanked her and she pinched my cheek. With nothing else to do, I started colouring.

A girl, roughly my age, sat in the seat next to me. She too appeared to be flying solo. She had jet black hair, thick eye makeup, black lipstick, and was dressed head to toe in black. She also had a pierced nose and a whole row of piercings running up and down each ear.

'What are you staring at?' she asked me. I didn't realise I was staring.

'Oh, umm, no, I wasn't looking at you, it's just, I was looking out your window.' She turned around to look and I realised the shade was down blocking the window entirely.

'Enjoying the view?' she asked.

My skin was on fire. 'Yeah, right, no. I mean, well, they do say that eyes are the windows to the soul, don't they?'

That was worse. That was *way* worse. Why did I even say that? She recoiled in disgust. I laughed. She didn't.

She looked down at my colouring book and raised an eyebrow.

‘Oh this isn’t mine. No way. I’m not a baby. This is ... umm, it’s my brother’s, actually. My younger brother, yeah, it’s his.’

‘Where is your brother?’ she asked.

‘Oh, well, that is a very good question, isn’t it?’

I smiled. She waited.

‘Well, where is he?’

‘Oh yeah. You know what? He’s somewhere, I wouldn’t worry.’

The girl called the flight attendant over despite my many protests.

‘This boy seems to have lost his brother,’ she said. ‘I’m worried – he’s very young apparently.’

I tried brushing the flight attendant away with a shake of my hand. ‘No, no, I mean – well, I don’t *actually* have a younger brother, but, you know, I always wanted one, so in a way he is lost to me, if that makes any sense.’ It didn’t. Nothing I was saying was making any sense.

The flight attendant’s brow furrowed. ‘I’m confused. Have you lost someone or not?’

‘No, it’s a simple misunderstanding,’ I said.

The flight attendant retreated slowly and the girl next to me smiled. It was a cruel smile.

I sank into my seat and focused on colouring in between the lines instead.

Another attendant, a middle-aged lady, leaned over the seat in front of us.

‘Hello there,’ she said. ‘I’ll be responsible for chaperoning you both and the others on to your next flight, so look out for me when we land, okay?’

Brilliant news – it appeared the girl next to me, who clearly thought I was an idiot, was going to the same resort as me.

Boy did she look like she was a barrel of fun!

Straight after landing, as promised, the lady reappeared to collect me and the girl in black. She had another two children trailing behind her. One was a boy who was constantly rolling his eyes – at first, I thought he might have dust or something caught in them but then I realised he

was just terribly inconvenienced by our existence in his life. Every item of clothing he wore was embroidered with an expensive brand name. The kid next to him was a tall, gangly girl with teeth that were too big for her mouth and, as a direct result, permanently on display.

‘Stay close,’ our chaperone said.

No one said a word – we were too busy surreptitiously looking each other up and down. From the plane, we were escorted to a different gate where a bunch of tired people were waiting.

‘I’m sorry, but shouldn’t we be waiting in the first-class club?’ the brand-name boy asked. The chaperone smiled apologetically at the other passengers.

‘This flight is one class only, I’m afraid,’ she said.

The boy looked shocked, then appalled. Finally his face settled on disgust, as though he’d just stepped in something gross.

‘Are we all going to Jungle Escape?’ I asked, trying to break the ice.

The toothy girl grinned, revealing her teeth to be even larger than I’d first thought. They were

like icebergs, their greater part concealed beyond the lip’s surface. ‘Oh splendid! I rather hoped I wouldn’t be alone,’ she said. She spoke in a posh English accent, like she was a member of royalty or something. ‘I’m Victoria.’

I offered her my hand. ‘Branson.’

The girl in black ignored us and the other boy was busy on his phone, probably letting his parents know about the third-world flight situation.

‘So your parents have abandoned you too,’ I said to Victoria.

She shook her head. ‘Oh, well, I wouldn’t look at it like that. My parents have recently separated and mother has moved from our home in England to Australia. The plan is for me to live half the year there and half the year here.’

‘So why aren’t you with your mother?’ I asked.

‘Well there is a spanner in the works, as they say. Mother’s new husband is rather unfortunately agoraphobic – that’s what they call a fear of crowds. With the three of us all at home on our private estate, well, it’s a bit much for him, so I’ve been sent here while he adjusts. It’s quite understandable.’

‘Is it?’

‘If you ask me, you’re as unwanted as the rest of us,’ the girl in black said. ‘With any luck for our parents, our plane will go down.’ She said it in a way that I didn’t know if she was joking or not. It didn’t sound like the sort of thing you should joke about.

Our chaperone left us in the care of a young man and because of our age, we were boarded first. The brand-name boy took the lead but stopped in his tracks once he was shown his seat.

‘Oh no. There is definitely some mistake,’ he said. ‘Where’s the rest of the plane? This can’t be it.’

Victoria laughed – no, she guffawed, that’s the best way of describing it. ‘I actually quite like the idea of living like a regular person. It’s strangely exotic,’ she said.

While the brand-name boy was demanding to see the manager, I glanced at everyone’s tickets and made a note that the girl in black’s name was Addison and brand-name boy was Elton. Dad always harped on about the importance of learning people’s names. How else will you be able to personally address your letters of complaint?

‘If you could sit down while we board the rest of the plane, I’ll have someone come to your seat to discuss your concerns,’ the flight attendant said.

Elton groaned but did as he was told.

Victoria and I had seats next to each other, and, across the aisle, Addison and Elton sat together.

‘Where is my day-bag supposed to go, then?’ Elton asked.

‘Under the seat in front of you,’ the flight attendant said.

‘Oh, you have got to be kidding me! It doesn’t get its own seat?’ Elton took out his phone and was soon shouting at someone.

Addison leaned over to me.

‘Switch seats?’ she said.

‘No thanks, Addison, I’m quite comfortable here.’

She recoiled a bit. ‘How do you know my name?’ Whoops.

‘Ummm ... I don’t.’

‘Yes, you do. You just used it. Are you stalking me?’

‘No. I saw your ticket, I’m sorry.’

She shook her head. ‘You rich snobs, you think you’re so entitled—’

‘Well, what about you?’ I said before I was aware I was even going to speak. ‘You’re heading to the same place as us. Aren’t you one of us?’

‘No. I’m ... well, it’s complicated. Shut up!’

She retreated back into her seat and I turned my attention to Victoria instead. She was wedged in tight, her knees firmly pressed into the seat in front of her.

‘Isn’t this delightfully quaint?’ she said.

I took out a book and started reading, doing my best to ignore Elton’s voice. Despite all of his protests, he kept his seat and the plane took off. The flight wasn’t long but it was certainly eventful. We experienced turbulence the entire way, with the seat belt signs never being switched off. I noted that Addison was gripping her armrests so tightly that her fingers were blanched white.

I had a suspicion that the captain was creating the turbulence on purpose because none of the staff wanted to deal with Elton. He spent the flight screeching out things like, ‘Just what on

Earth does the Captain think they’re playing at?’ and ‘I haven’t even been offered a beverage!’

When the plane came bouncing down hard on the tarmac at Cairns, all the passengers gave a collective cheer. I’m sure they were excited about getting as far away from Elton as possible.

Not me though. Oh no, this was just the beginning. I was going to be spending the next two weeks with him.

4.

AIRPORT SHUTTLE

As we passed through the arrival gate, I noticed a woman holding a makeshift sign that read, *Jungle Escape*. The woman was dressed in khaki shorts and a white singlet. Her hair was greasy and pulled tightly back into a ponytail.

‘Welcome to Caaairns,’ she said. Her Australian accent was so thick that I thought it was a joke. I laughed and she looked me up and down. ‘What’s so funny about that?’

‘Nothing,’ I said, realising that this was the actual way she spoke.

‘He says and does strange things,’ Addison explained.

The woman snorted. ‘Well, I’m Sal, and I’ll be taking you lot out to Jungle Escape so let’s grab your bags.’

‘That was absolutely hideous,’ Elton said, using a disinfectant wipe from his day-bag to clean his hands. ‘I can’t wait to get to the spa and actually relax.’

‘Oh boy are you in for a treat,’ Sal said with a chuckle.

She led us to the baggage carousel and waited while we spotted our bags.

‘Ohhh, that one, that’s mine,’ Elton said, pointing to an expensive looking bag. No one moved and the bag passed by us. ‘It’s that one, the brown one with the gold stripes.’ Elton pointed again and still no one moved.

‘Well, are you gonna grab it or what?’ Sal asked. Elton laughed. ‘No, you can’t be serious.’

Sal sighed, took a few steps forward and reefed the bag clear. She dumped it in front of Elton.

‘Please tell me the rest of you can manage,’ she said.

We all nodded and as our bags came out, we pulled them clear ourselves.

'I love it,' Victoria said. 'It's like we're in a Dickens novel. Next, we'll be working in a factory.'

Sal shrugged. 'You might be surprised. Right, follow me.' Sal marched towards the door and we followed, except Elton.

'Ummm, excuse me, should I just leave the bag here? What if someone takes it?' he called out.

'Bring it, leave it, I don't really care,' Sal said.

Victoria turned back and took hold of Elton's bag for him.

'It looks rather more complicated than it is,' she explained. 'Our butler once showed me how – see the handle pulls out like this and then you just kind of drag it. Isn't it a laugh?'

Elton ignored her and walked on, his thumbs flashing furiously over his phone. Victoria was forced to carry both her bag and Elton's.

In the parking lot, Sal led us to a beaten-up white van. She had to unlock each door manually.

'No way! She just used, like, an actual key,' Elton said, laughing.

'Oh, I say,' Victoria said. 'It's like we're living in the olden times. Extraordinary!'

Sal hauled each of our bags into the back before sliding the side door open for us to get in. 'Jungle Escape is another couple of hours drive. Get yourselves comfy.'

Elton peered in and shook his head. 'No, this won't do. I'll be needing to speak to the manager at Jungle Escape immediately.'

'Honey, you *are* talking to the manager of Jungle Escape.'

Elton looked at Sal's clothes, her hair, her flip-flops.

'No, I don't believe that. This is some reality TV show, isn't it? I'm being pranked!' Elton checked his hair and looked around, pouting for the invisible cameras.

'Believe what you want, just get in.'

We clambered in and Sal wedged herself into the driver's seat. When started, the van vibrated violently and it smelt of petrol.

In my seat at the back, I took out the brochure that Mum had given me. In the pictures, the buildings of Jungle Escape emerged from the rainforest like a shining oasis. It looked majestic

and luxurious. It didn't look like the sort of place that would have an old beaten-up van as its shuttle option. Perhaps their luxury transport was at the mechanics?

I looked at the three other kids and considered what an odd assortment of people we were. I assumed once we arrived at Jungle Escape, we'd all be keeping to ourselves – that's how these sorts of places worked. I don't know how Mum and Dad expected me to make friends at places like these; it was hard enough making them at school.

Sal had a loud voice and she used it to conduct her tour once we got out of the airport.

'You lot probably aren't used to the heat, so prepare yourselves. The days and the nights are hot and humid. Where we are is deep in the Daintree and there's just us, surrounded by kilometres of pristine rainforest. Now, it may be beautiful but it's dangerous so be careful. We like to protect our environment and live at peace with the creepy crawlies around us – I'm talking about the spiders and the bugs but there is one exception to this rule: the cane toads. They're pests and you have not

only my permission but also my encouragement to exterminate them however you see fit. Poisonous little buggers! You know what a Cassowary is?'

'Big bird, like an Emu,' Addison said.

'Good to see we've got at least one smart one. But, unlike the Emu, which is pretty skittish, the Cassowaries are territorial and protective. They've got hard heads and sharp claws and they ain't afraid to fight. Keep clear but if it comes to the worst, I hope you know how to climb a tree. When it comes to snakes, obviously keep clear of the taipans, browns, adders, and blacks but the pythons are harmless enough. We've got ourselves a tree goanna that's impressive to look at but don't get too close – it's a nasty bite they leave. Oh and before I forget, whatever you do, keep clear of the Gympie Gympie.'

Our eyes were all wide. Our mouths open. Our brains racing.

'What's that?' I asked, for everyone's sake.

'Only one of the most venomous plants in the world. You get stung and you'll have months of excruciating agony.'

Sal stopped talking to let everything sink in.

‘Right, so let me get this straight,’ I said, trying to act a lot braver than I felt. ‘There are poisonous toads, snakes, vicious lizards, countless spiders and bugs, killer birds, and even a plant that can attack us. Anything else we need to worry about?’

Sal chuckled. ‘There sure is. I saved the best for last. You’ll see, before too long.’

She refused to say anything further and I turned my attention to the lush, deadly landscape rushing by outside. I did have the thought that if I did get attacked by something out there, I’d surely be rushed off to hospital and then Mum and Dad would have to rush to my side and pay me attention. Wouldn’t they?

Throughout the first part of the trip, Elton was on his phone and Victoria soon fell asleep, snoring. Her large teeth worked like a trumpet’s bell, amplifying the sound.

I opened my mouth to ask Addison a question but she shut me down.

‘Don’t speak to me,’ she said.

You only have one chance at a first impression

and I’d blown it. The annoying thing was that, despite her attitude, Addison was my favourite of the other guests.

Dear myself,

Stop being so weird.

With regards,

Master Branson Hawthorne, Esq.

It was about an hour and a half into the journey before Sal spoke again, right after she’d brought the van to a halt. She switched the engine off and the contrasting quiet made me think for a moment that I’d gone deaf.

‘This is the Daintree River ferry – only way into the Daintree. You can stretch your legs if you want,’ Sal said.

We were all happy to get out of the cramped and smelly van, but outside the heat hit us hard. Almost instantaneously, I was sweating. I closed my eyes and pretended I was in Aspen, rugged up by a fire

and drinking hot chocolate. Addison knocked hard into me as she passed and my eyes shot open. The van was parked alongside a few other vehicles on a barge. A man put up a barrier to stop any more vehicles from boarding, and then the barge started its slow journey across a wide, brown river.

‘What’s the dangerous thing you saved until last?’ I asked Sal.

She pointed out at the river. ‘If you watch closely enough, you might see it.’

We all stared out at the river but it was Addison who spotted it first.

‘See that log,’ she said, pointing at a thing floating nearby. I nodded. ‘Well, it has a long nose and a tail so I’m guessing it’s not a log.’

As if hearing her speak, the crocodile flicked its tail and submerged itself. The thing was huge, both long and thick. My body seized up a little. The barge looked very old and it was holding up the weight of a number of vehicles.

‘The salties up this way are real beauts,’ Sal explained, ‘so I’d be keeping clear of any waterways you might come across.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Elton said. ‘The only waterway I’ll be in, is a pool.’

‘Yeah, crocs have been known to end up in pools now and then. Mostly during the floods.’

Elton laughed nervously. ‘Where are the hidden cameras?’ he said, looking around again, trying to spot them. ‘And if this is a TV show, shouldn’t I have my own assistant?’

We spotted another three crocodiles, lurking like assassins, before the barge reached the other side. Sal ushered us back into the van and once safe, the ferryman lifted the barrier and we were free to continue our journey. Sal started the van and our ears were assaulted once again by the roar of the engine. Though I felt my whole body relax once we were on firm land again.

‘Ummm, huge problem here,’ Elton said, shaking his phone. ‘There’s no phone reception. Anyone else experiencing this?’

‘You won’t get any coverage anywhere around here. It pretty much dries up back on the other side of the river. Nothing better than a detox from your phone, if you ask me.’

Elton turned white. 'It's okay, I'll be fine once I connect to the wi-fi. I'm assuming free wi-fi is included in the package.'

'We'll go through all the arrangements and amenities once we arrive, 'kay?'

I noticed that Sal hadn't actually answered the question.

Sal turned the vehicle off the bitumen road and started following a dirt path, which made the van bump and rattle even worse than before. Red dirt flew up from both sides.

I was getting a strange vibe about the whole thing.

About twenty minutes later, we arrived at our destination. I held the brochure up against the real thing, and kept glancing between the two.

The real Jungle Escape was crumbling and the paintwork was faded and peeling. A large branch had fallen onto the main roof. All four of us were so shocked we couldn't speak. Sal brought the van to a halt and killed the engine.

'She needs a bit of work, but together, I think we can get her back up and running, don't you?'

5. ROOM SERVICE

We had been duped!

But before I could say anything, a kid roughly my age came out from the main building. With his messy hair, his unwashed shirt and his torn pants, he matched his surrounds perfectly. The door slammed closed behind him and the impact sent dry paint scurrying down the walls. The boy scowled as he looked at us, except for Addison; he smiled when he saw her, which in turn made her scowl.

'This them, Mum?' he asked.

'No, it's a bunch of hitchhikers I picked up. Of course it's them!' Sal turned to us. 'This is Roy.'