

THE BLAKE MYSTERIES

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Time
to
Go

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For Kerry Greenwood, twin and friend and all-round inspiration.

CHAPTER ONE

Blake's eyes flicked open. The room was full of black and grey shadows. She sat up and listened to the silence. Heard the soft, steady scrape of metal against metal, coming from the front door.

Time to go.

She swung her feet off the mattress and into a pair of runners. Her hand closed round the strap of her backpack, ready beside the bed. Two long steps and a pause to grab her jacket. Then she was easing the window open and wriggling through the gap.

Outside she hesitated and listened again. After a few seconds there was a sharp click and the muffled sound of footsteps. Blake nodded. *I was right. Someone's breaking in.* She turned away and edged down the side of the house.

The backyard was smaller than her bedroom - just a square of paving, some pots of herbs, an overhanging tree and a paling fence with two strong cross beams. Blake stared at the cross beams, muscles tensing. It'd be easy enough to climb over and drop down into the lane. Too easy. She changed her mind and sprinted across to the tree.

As she slid into its shadow, her foot landed on something skinny and soft. *What's that? The hose or - oh no!* A loud, angry yowl ripped through the night. And a black cat bolted out of the shadows and scabbled wildly at the fence.

Instantly Blake crouched and filled her hands with dirt. Rubbed it across her face. Tugged a woollen cap from her backpack and pulled it over moonlight blonde hair. Then she plunged deeper into the shadows, flattening herself against the tree trunk.

Just in time. The back door shuddered and burst open. A man hurtled into the yard.

He rubbed his shoulder and looked around.

'Got you now,' he said in a hissing whisper. 'Come on. You're cornered. Might as well give up.'

A torch flashed. Blake squeezed her eyes shut. *Eyes always reflect the light.* She held onto the tree and took slow, soundless breaths, counting the seconds. *Like a kids' game. If I can count to a hundred before he finds me, I win.*

Light flickered across her eyelids. Blake saw red and yellow supernovas, glowing in the dark. Then the torch beam moved on - *fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three* — and the man laughed.

'False alarm,' he said.

Blake risked a quick blink. Saw a circle of light on the fence. In the middle of the circle the black cat hung by its claws, glaring at the man with the torch. She grinned.

Thanks, kitty. You may've got me into trouble but you just got me out of it as well.

Footsteps thudded across the paving and the man tugged at the stiff bolt on the back gate. As the gate swung open, Blake heard the cat jump down from the fence and scamper through the dry leaves under the tree. The man was whispering again.

'She was here, for sure. The bed was warm and the bedroom window was open. Thought I heard her out here but it was just some bloody cat. She must've gone over the fence.'

Talking to himself ... no, wait a minute. There's someone else out in the lane.

'You saying I stuffed up?' asked the second voice. 'Listen, mate, I been here the whole time. She never came over the fence. I woulda seen her.'

'Are you sure about that? You've missed a few things in your time, y'know.'

'Maybe I have. But a little girl who looks like Jodie Foster, in an empty lane at half past midnight - trust me, I couldn't miss that.'

'Yeah, yeah. All right, Thumper, here's what we'll do. First I'll check the lane, just in case, and then you can come and double-check the house with me. Okay?'

'You're the boss, Greg. But I tell you, I woulda seen her.'

More footsteps, trampling down the lane. Blake opened her eyes. The black cat was sitting in a pile of leaves, watching her. It twitched its tail and ran over to the back wall of the house.

A long jump and it was clinging to a thick branch of ivy. Another jump and it was walking along a pipe. The cat paused, glanced up and crouched. Wriggled its backside to and fro. Jumped, clawed at the wall and hooked one paw over the gutter, then pulled itself onto the roof.

Smart idea, kitty. Might try it myself.

Blake stepped out of the shadows. Wedging one foot in the ivy, she swung the other foot out and up until she found the pipe. For a long scary second she clung to the cracks between the bricks, trying to balance. Then the footsteps came tramping back along the

lane.

She stood on tiptoe, flung her arms up, grabbed and heaved. One minute she was sprawled across the gutter, with her legs dangling into empty space and the black cat sniffing at her ear. Next minute she was on the roof, slithering across the tiles on her stomach, like a snake. When she reached the chimney, she ducked behind it and looked round. Down below, the two men were trudging into the yard.

Greg and Thumper. Wonder whether Thumper was named after the rabbit in Bambi or whether he just likes thumping people.

I don't think I'll stick around to find out.

'See?' Thumper grumbled. 'Told you she wasn't there. I bet she's still hiding in the house.'

'Impossible. I've been trained for this sort of thing. I searched everywhere.'

'Then we must've bloody lost her. Does that mean we lose the job as well?'

'Nah,' Greg said curtly. 'The client's filthy rich, remember. He'll keep paying till we find her, no problem. But we better take another look inside, just to keep him sweet.'

The back door banged. Blake stood and stretched. She stared at the dark shapes of the roof tops and frowned. This was the first time she'd had a chance to think and she didn't like what she was thinking.

The two men weren't ordinary burglars. They were definitely after her. Well, she'd known that, ever since she'd heard Greg picking the lock - and she'd guessed all along that she was probably being followed. That's why she slept in her t-shirt and trackpants. That's why she always kept her runners and her backpack close to the bed.

But I wish Greg's blasted client could've left me alone. It was nice, living here by myself. I'm going to miss this house.

With a sigh she turned and picked her way across the tiles. The black cat had decided that she was a new and interesting kind of night animal. It danced along beside her, butting its head against her legs.

At the far edge of the roof Blake stopped to measure the drop down to the porch and the drop from there into her neighbours' front garden. She knelt and patted the slate tiles.

Goodbye, little house.

The tin roof of the porch clattered as she landed. An explosion of sound, jarring through the silence. But by the time the two men arrived at the front door, all they could see was a shadow disappearing over the fence at the end of the street.

Like the shadow of a black cat.

Blake climbed fences. Padded across back yards. Climbed more fences. Luckily, she

only ran across two dogs. The big one was really pleased to see her and she managed to get away from the little one before it chewed her ankles to bits.

Ahead of her she could see the neon glow of the main road. She found a tap in someone's front yard and washed the dirt off her face. Then she waited behind a rose bush until a taxi drove past.

'The airport, please,' said Blake.

Even with a clean face, she had to show the driver her wallet before he would let her into the cab. *But then, I probably look like a grubby little boy right now - and little boys aren't usually headed for the airport.*

She settled in the back seat, leaning her cheek against the window. The night streets went flashing past. Sleeping houses. The lights of a hamburger joint. An empty playground, with a wind pushing the swings back and forth.

After a while Blake sat up and counted the money in her wallet. She found the slit in the padding of her backpack, pulled out a bundle of notes and counted them too. For the next ten minutes she scowled at the city streets, her mouth set in a grim line. Then she unpicked the lining of her jacket and shook out a credit card, tapping it against her thumbnail.

'Excuse me,' she said to the driver. 'Could you stop at the next place with an automatic teller?'

But her hand hovered over the keys for a long time, reaching out and then pulling back at the last minute. It was safe enough. She wasn't worried about that. By the time anyone could trace the transaction, she'd be out of there, hiding in some other city. She just wished she didn't need to use the card at all.

It's my money - but I don't like doing this.

The driver's horn blared. Blake stabbed at the keys and waited. She snatched the wad of hundred dollar notes and stuffed it into her pocket without looking. Then she stumbled back to the taxi, head bent.

Feeling defeated.

The airport terminal was big and empty. Bare stretches of sand-coloured lino, like a desert with fluorescent lighting. Blake headed straight for the nearest sign saying Ladies. In the mirror her face was pale and streaked with dirt. *A grubby little boy, just like I thought.*

Safe inside a cubicle, she relaxed for the first time in three hours. She tried to open her pack but her hands were shaking. So she slumped against the wall, eyes closed, and let herself remember how scared she'd been.

Thank heavens I woke up in time. Thank heavens Greg didn't spot me hiding under

the tree. Thank heavens the cat showed me how to climb onto the roof.

Those men nearly caught me. But they didn't. I got away.

This time.

Blake straightened up. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the memories to the back of her brain. It was over now. And she had things to do.

She rummaged through her pack till she found a short black dress. Off with her t-shirt and trackpants. On with the dress, tights and black sandals. She stuffed some of the money into the slit in her backpack and sewed up the lining of her coat, with the credit card and more money inside. Tucked two more notes under the insoles of her runners. Then she unlocked the cubicle door, peering out to make sure no-one was in the wash room.

At the basin Blake gelled her hair into trendy spikes. She ran a dark red lipstick around her mouth, pressing her lips together carefully. A final touch - a huge gold brooch, pinned to her denim jacket - and she was ready. She turned and looked into the long mirror on the far wall.

Yes!

An elegant young woman stared back at her. Strong, sturdy body. Fine blonde hair that seemed almost white against the black dress. She looked poised and confident - a junior lawyer, maybe, or an editor in a big publishing company.

But do I really look like Jodie Foster, the way Thumper said? Dream on, Blake. You wish.

All the same, she clicked her heels together and saluted her reflection. Fifteen minutes ago she'd looked like a ten-year-old boy. Now she looked like a woman who could be anywhere between twenty and thirty. That should be enough to confuse Greg and Thumper, even if they managed to track her as far as the airport.

Outside, Blake studied the TV screen that listed the times when planes arrived and left. She bought a ticket for the next plane out and perched on a slippery vinyl chair with her fingernails digging into her palms, too tense even to turn the pages of her glossy magazine.

Seconds before the boarding call, two men hurried up, side by side. Blake held her breath. *Trouble is, I only saw Greg and Thumper in the dark, so I don't really know what they look like.* But the men sat down opposite her, opened their briefcases and started talking about their important business meeting, first thing next morning. She let her breath out in a long sigh.

Then, finally, she was walking onto the plane. Waiting anxiously for the sound of the engines. Starting to smile as the plane coasted down the runway. Grinning like a clown as it took off. Peering out of the window at the lights of the city below her, a pattern of sparkling lines across the darkness.

Goodbye, Greg. Goodbye, Thumper. See you again some day - not!

She leaned back in her seat and let her mind go blank. A long time later she fell asleep and dreamed that she was playing with the black cat, in the backyard of her little house.

CHAPTER TWO

Next morning, four hundred kilometres away, Blake caught the airport bus into the city and wandered around, looking for street kids. It didn't take long. In the city square she spotted three boys and two girls, slouched beside a waterfall fountain.

Old jeans. Old runners. Plastic bags, instead of bumbags or backpacks. Hair that's been washed with soap, in cold water. You can't miss it. They've been living rough, for sure.

She drifted towards them and sat at the edge of the fountain, clasping her knees and staring into the spray. After a few minutes one of the boys called out, 'Haven't seen you round here before.'

'Just hitched in this morning,' she called back. 'Got a lift with this mad truckie who drove all night.'

She stood and moved closer. The kids shifted to make room and she settled down among them. They sat in silence, watching the shoppers go past, and then Blake said, 'So, listen, where do you go in this town if you're broke?'

'Here,' said the girl sitting next to her and they all laughed.

Blake shook her head. 'No, I gotta disappear - and I mean *really* disappear. Out into the burbs would be top of the list. But I don't know which of the suburbs here are okay for street kids.'

She sneaked a look around the circle of faces. The others were all checking to see what the guy who'd spoken to her first was going to do. He thrust his hand into his hair,

dyed black and shaved high at the back, and narrowed his eyes. Obviously suspicious.

Well, fair enough. I changed into faded jeans and a torn t-shirt at the airport but I still look fairly well off, compared to them. Clean hair. A backpack. Last year's runners. Pretty fancy stuff, when you think about it.

'You seriously broke?' the guy asked. 'Not even enough to buy a pack of fags?'

She frowned. 'I don't smoke,' she said and the guy sniggered.

'I never said the smokes were for you,' he jeered. 'Just thought you might do me a favour. Seeing as how you want me to do a favour for you.'

'But smoking's bad for you,' Blake told him. 'It rots your lungs. It -'

'Hey, life's bad for me and I haven't given it up,' he cut in. 'Not yet, anyhow. Come on, babe, make up your mind. You wanna talk to us? Or not?'

Blake hesitated. *Rats, I've blown it. Proved I'm not really one of them. I'd better get out of here and try again.* She scrambled to her feet and knocked against the backpack. It tipped sideways and the glossy magazine spilt out.

'Wow, a copy of *Sheila*,' said the girl next to her. 'Haven't seen it for ages. I used to love that mag.'

'It's yours,' said Blake. 'Go on. I read it on the pl - in the truck,' and she picked up her pack and turned away, before she made any more mistakes.

As she hurried down the street, she heard footsteps close behind her. Following her. She spun around, swinging the pack like a weapon. Stared straight at a small, skinny girl who clutched a copy of *Sheila* to her chest.

'You wanted to know where the street kids hang out,' said the girl. 'I can tell you.'

The train rattled through long canyons of factories. High silver walls and tall chimneys. Stacks of containers. Bare stretches of wasteland, where even the weeds had trouble growing.

Blake propped her runners on the seat and scowled out the window. *I thought I knew about life on the run but I've got a lot to learn. I don't look like a street kid yet - and I don't think like a street kid either.*

All the same, she still needed to disappear. The streets were the best place for that and besides, she wouldn't find another house in a hurry. Estate agents wanted too many references and too much ID. She'd been lucky once, taking over the lease on her little house from a girl she met in a coffee shop. You couldn't expect to get that lucky twice.

The train pulled into a station. Blake got out and climbed the ramp to a bridge. She hesitated for a moment, then dropped her backpack and kicked it like a football, all the way downstairs to the street. By the time she picked it up, it was ripped and dusty.

That's better.

She slung the pack over her shoulder and strolled past a row of Vietnamese shops. Windows crammed with pink and green and yellow cakes. Crates full of spiky fruit and bushy vegetables. Glossy red roast ducks hanging by their feet from a steel rail. Blake's stomach growled. She bought a bag of tiny spring rolls and ate them slowly while she studied a display of china goddesses and smiling Buddhas.

Then she followed a side street down to the mall. Another fountain but a cut-price one this time - no waterfall, just some garden hose trickles. Still, there were at least a dozen kids slouched on the benches near by. Kids with lank hair, old jeans, old runners, plastic bags instead of bumbags or backpacks.

Blake sat down at the edge of the nearest group. Straight away everyone stopped talking and turned to watch her. She sighed and slumped and stared at the fountain. Gradually the kids started talking to each other again.

Over the next few hours she drifted from group to group, listening and observing. Before long she realised she'd started to change. She was slowing down. Learning to keep her mouth shut. Remembering to go easy on the questions.

Hanging out.

A guy asked if she needed somewhere to stay but she didn't like the look in his eye. She chatted with two girls for half an hour but then they started to talk about scoring some drugs. Blake kept moving. She was watching the sun sink down towards the roofline of the shops when she heard a boy say, 'That old factory? Wouldn't stay there if you paid me.'

'Why not?' she asked casually and the boy shivered.

'Don't you know? It's haunted. Kids keep disappearing - like, they reckon they're just gonna sleep there overnight but no-one ever sees them again.'

'Yeah, that's right,' said someone else. 'Scuz and Jacko were the first. They'd been living there for yonks and then one day - zappo! Gone.'

'Took us a while to figure it out,' a third guy said. 'I mean, kids are always on the move, right? Then it finally clicked when Big Suze heard the rumours and went ghostbusting. That girl was tough - I woulda backed her against a ghost any day. But next morning ... no Suze.'

Their eyes shone, like children telling ghost stories on a school camp. Except that this wasn't the plot of *Nightmare on Elm Street 6*. It was for real.

'So what's going on?' Blake breathed and the kids shrugged.

'Who knows?' the first boy said. 'Maybe the ghost got them. Or maybe there's a mad serial killer, murdering people and dumping the bodies. Either way, that factory's not a safe place to be. I don't even like talking about it too much.'

'Fair enough.' Blake scrambled to her feet. As she reached for her pack, she added, 'Better tell me where it is, though, so I don't end up there by mistake.'

'It's on Mowbray Street, a few blocks before the truckies' cafe. A big, old tin shed with a really high fence opposite a row of little houses. Stay away from it, right?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'Sure.'

The factory was old, no doubt about that. Some of its iron sheets were flapping in the wind and the rest looked as though they only hung together out of habit. The chain link fence had been added later on. It was as high as a house, with barbed wire looped along the top, and its sheet-metal gate was fastened by a heavy chain.

Blake pushed the gate. The chain slipped out and banged against one of the metal panels. She grinned.

Hey, great security system.

Then a gust of wind hurtled along the street, shaking the gate and blowing it open. Blake heard a long, loud screech, like a tortured cat. *Or a ghost.* She started to back away but, just before she turned and ran, the gate swung a bit further. An even louder screech shivered through the air.

Blake bit her lip. *Calm down, idiot. It's not a ghost - just the hinges on the gate. They need oiling, that's all.*

She walked into the yard and shut the gate, threading the chain carefully through the holes, to make sure everything looked the same as when she arrived. The factory loomed over her. She sidled between dry clumps of weeds and stacks of rusty machinery, hunting for the door.

The wind whistled around her as she struggled with the handle. Blake started to shiver. But inside, the air was warm. She took a few careful steps and tripped on a cobbled gutter. Went staggering across the brick floor and slammed into a huge block of concrete.

Ouch.

Her hands were striped with rust and oil. She wiped them on her jeans and examined the concrete block. Black stains and a couple of enormous rusty bolts. *I suppose that's where one of the machines used to be.*

She leaned against the block while her eyes adjusted to the darkness. By the look of things the people who built the factory hadn't been too keen on windows. There was a long strip of grimy glass, high up on the wall above the door, but that was all. The opposite wall was completely blank.

Still, there was enough light to give her some idea of the layout. Blake peered around. Counted three more concrete blocks. Saw another gutter, running down the middle of the floor. Girders overhead, with fluorescent light strips hanging from them. The tubes of the lights had been smashed. *But I bet there's no power here, anyway.*

Part of the floor was cement and the rest was covered with sheets of galvanised iron. At the far end, wooden steps led up to a platform between the girders. A little room on the right side of the door. *Probably the tea room.* And shadows, oozing towards her from every corner of the big, empty space.

The door creaked. From somewhere behind her, there was a loud clang. Blake whirled around. Light flashed at her from a gap in the wall. A loose sheet of metal, flapping in the wind.

Relax, kid. Old places are always full of noises. You'll have to get used to it, if you're going to stay here.

Am I going to stay here?

She paced across the floor, frowning to herself. The factory was spooky, for sure, but no spookier than spending the night in a park or under a bridge. At least this way she'd have a roof over her head. And no unexpected visitors, because they'd be scared off by the stories about ghosts.

Okay, second question. How do I feel about ghosts?

Well, that was easy. She didn't believe in ghosts. Never had - and she wasn't going to change her mind now, just because of a few noises and some shadows. Serial killers sounded a whole lot more likely but she didn't believe in serial killers either.

On TV, sure. In everyday life, no way.

Still, something was happening in this factory, all right. Something strange. Maybe even dangerous. Blake didn't believe in ghosts or serial killers but she believed the rest of the boy's story. *Kids are vanishing. That's a good enough reason to get out of here, fast.*

Then again, if I was really worried, I probably wouldn't have come here in the first place.

She scrambled onto a concrete block and scanned the factory floor. No clues, so far. Nothing that would explain all those missing kids. It was a mystery. Blake hated mysteries.

And there was something else that she hated even more. *I hate it when bad things happen to kids. Adults can look after themselves but kids - that's different. Like those street kids, for example. Their lives are pretty tough and now some of them are actually disappearing. I can't just walk away.*

I have to find out what's going on.

Blake prowled around the factory walls. The shadows were thickening and she could only see the outlines of the windows and the stairs. Too dark to investigate properly. *Time to find a place to sleep. I can start looking again next morning.*

As she edged round the corner of a concrete block, she bumped into something soft. Blake gasped. Stretched her hand out and patted it cautiously. Chuckled in the darkness.

She fished in the front pocket of her pack and found a small torch. When she swung it in a circle, she saw a couch and two matching armchairs, jammed between the block and the wall. Their covers were stained and torn and some of the stuffing was seeping out. But they looked homely and comfortable, all the same.

Interesting.

She swung the torch beam further out. Its light snagged on a small, shiny triangle. Blake hurried over to take a closer look. Part of the galvanised iron on the floor had come loose. One corner was curling up, rusty on top but bright underneath.

That must've happened pretty recently. Otherwise the iron would be rusted on the bottom as well.

She knelt down and tugged at the sheet of iron with both hands. It swung back, like a cupboard door. Blake felt as though an icy fingertip was running down her spine. She groped around for the torch, eyes still fixed on the hole in the floor.

Suddenly someone grabbed her from behind.

CHAPTER THREE

A big hand muffled her mouth. A big arm wrapped itself around her shoulders. Blake struggled for a second and then went limp. She bent her knee and slammed her heel down hard on a big foot.

'Hey! That hurt.'

Good.

Blake wrenched away and ran. The torchlight had dazzled her eyes and the factory seemed darker than ever. Still, she managed to dodge around the armchair and the couch. Then she tripped over someone's foot and went sprawling onto the floor.

Oops. Two people. Greg and Thumper? But how the hell could they find me so quickly?

She rolled sideways, just as a dark shape came hurtling down towards her. It hit the bricks and started swearing loudly. Blake jumped up and groped across the factory floor. Too slowly. A few seconds later hands clamped onto her from both sides.

She took a deep breath. *Time to remember those karate lessons, long ago – and in another world.* Blake jerked her elbows down, loosening the grip of the hands. Then she flung her arms wide and broke the hold.

Her eyes were getting used to the darkness by now. She raced for the door. *Sensei would be pleased with me. He always said, 'Run if you can, fight if you can't run. That's the first lesson of karate.'*

But the door was shut and while she wrestled with the handle, the dark figures attacked again. The big hands closed round her arm and tried to twist it behind her.

Smaller hands pummelled her back.

Blake pushed at the big hands. *No. Wrong move. Sensei wouldn't be pleased.* She changed direction and went where the hands were pulling. Her arm slipped out of their grasp and the big guy staggered, off balance. *That's better. Use his own strength against him.*

She swung around and kicked hard. *Bull's eye.* The big guy doubled up and clutched his stomach, groaning. Blake made another grab for the door handle. This time it turned. As she flung herself into the yard, she heard a quiet voice say, 'Nice karate kick.'

Wait a minute. That wasn't Greg or Thumper. So who-?

But she didn't have time to finish the thought. Footsteps were trampling down the steps and pounding after her. A lot of footsteps. More than one person, which was strange, because the big guy should still be in the factory, getting his breath back. *Three people?*

Blake glanced over her shoulder and nearly ran into a stack of scrap metal. At the last minute she swerved but her foot caught in a twist of wire. As she wobbled to and fro, arms flailing wildly, two shadows threw themselves at her. She toppled backwards and went crashing to the ground.

One of the shadows was sitting on her chest. The other was trying to pin her arms. Blake kicked out and sent the second shadow reeling. She gripped the first shadow's shoulders and pulled it down towards her, flipping it over her head.

But as she scrambled to her feet, she saw the big guy lumbering out of the factory. He caught her in a bear hug, while the other two dragged at her arms. Blake felt like a hunted animal, pulled down by a pack of dogs.

Sensei! What should I do now? You never taught us how to fight three people at once.

Inside her head, a voice said: *Use their strength against them.* Blake made herself relax. Once she calmed down, she realised that the shadows were trying to drag her back into the factory. So she stopped resisting and slumped towards them, like a dead weight.

The two smaller shadows stumbled and went flying. Blake dashed for the gate. She was running faster than she'd ever run in the races at school - and yet, for some reason, she didn't seem to be getting anywhere. Like her worst nightmare, where she ran and ran and still couldn't escape.

Then she risked a glance backwards and almost laughed out loud. The big guy had lost his grip but kept his balance. He'd grabbed her jacket and was holding on tight. So her feet were just scuffing the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust.

All right then, ditch the jacket.

Before she could slide her arms out of the sleeves, the other two came charging back. They collided, slamming her against the gate. The chain rattled and the gate flew

open.

Blake collapsed onto the footpath. Above her, the big guy teetered back and forth, clutching her jacket with a look of surprise on his face. *Quick. He's going to fall. Get out of his way.* But she couldn't move. She could only watch helplessly as he staggered and pitched forwards.

Landing on top of her.

Knocking the last bit of breath out of her lungs.

After a while she managed to open her eyes. The big guy was sitting up and rubbing his head. The two smaller shadows were lurking near the gate. And there was a pair of shiny leather shoes side by side on the footpath, a few centimetres away from her nose. She lifted her head and saw the checked band of a policeman's hat.

'Well, well,' said the cop. 'What's going on here?'

One of the shadows took a step forward and turned into a tangle-haired girl.

'You gotta arrest that kid,' she said, pointing at Blake. 'He stole our stash.'

Blake leaned against the gate post and studied the three people she had just been fighting. She'd picked up their names in the past five minutes, while they were talking to the cop. The girl was Elissa, the big guy was Marco and the smaller guy was called Tran.

Kids, that's all. Just three kids. Nothing like Greg and Thumper.

They were all wearing old jeans and fraying windcheaters but apart from that, they looked very different. Tran had fly-away eyebrows and pixie ears, a wide mouth and wary eyes. Beside him Marco seemed like a giant, with bodybuilder muscles and the shadow of a moustache.

And Elissa - well, Elissa was harder to describe, because she never stood still. Right now she was jiggling from one foot to the other, lecturing the cop.

'So, okay, I finally save up enough of my dole money to buy this sleeping bag,' she told him. 'Brand new - I got it on special. I'm not stupid, I know you can't leave stuff like that lying around. So, before I go to school, I hide it, along with the rest of our stash.'

'We've got this great hiding place,' said Marco. 'It's -'

'Yeah, well. Constable Maloney doesn't need to know all the details,' Elissa interrupted. 'The point is, when we get back that night - no stash. It's gone. Stolen. And tonight we find this kid searching the hiding place again, just in case he missed something the first time. We caught him in the act. You gotta arrest him.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' said the cop. 'The thing is -'

'Hey!' yelled Elissa, jiggling faster. 'Wait a bloody minute. Are you telling me he can nick our stash and get away with it? Think again, mate. We may be street kids but we

got rights, same as everyone else.'

'Yeah, you do,' the cop agreed. 'There's just one small problem, though. If I file a report on the theft, I'll have to file a report on you as well. And once Human Services finds out that you're living in the factory -'

'They'll send a pack of social workers after us,' finished Tran.

He turned and fixed his eyes on Elissa. Her jigging feet slowed down, until she was standing still for once.

'Rats,' she said. 'It's true. You got a point. I take it back - street kids *don't* have any rights, after all.'

She bent her head and kicked at the edge of the footpath. The cop's freckled hand lifted slightly, as if he would've liked to pat her on the shoulder.

'Of course, I've heard your story now, in an unofficial kind of way,' he said to her. 'So if I happen to come across a stolen sleeping bag, I'll know where to return it.'

Elissa's head jerked up. 'Big deal, mate. Thanks for nothing. In case you've forgotten, I already told you how to find the stash. *He* stole it.'

The cop glanced across at Blake and rubbed his nose thoughtfully. 'Maybe. But you could be wrong.'

'Oh yeah? Prove it.'

'Well, for starters, that kid's not a boy.'

Tran laughed and Elissa glared at him. She prowled over to Blake and stared into her face.

'Hey, you're right,' she said in surprise. 'It's like that trick drawing - y'know, you look at it one way and it's a vase but if you look at it another way, you can see these two faces. I was sure you were a boy while we were fighting. But I can tell you're a girl now, no problem.'

'I knew it all along,' Tran said smugly. 'What's your name?'

'Blake.'

'Hi, Blake,' said Marco, lumbering forward. 'You're a pretty good fighter, for a girl.'

He held out his hand and Blake shook it. *Ouch. This guy is strong. I'm glad he's decided we're mates.* Elissa snorted. She started dancing round them in a circle, trying to catch the big guy's eye.

'Marco! I can't believe you're actually shaking hands with her. She's a thief, remember. She nicked our stash.'

'Did you?' the cop asked Blake.

'No,' she said. 'I didn't. I'm not stupid either - I wouldn't steal from people and then turn up again next day. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't steal from people at all.'

'So you say,' Elissa jeered. 'Why should we take your word for it?'

Blake thought for a moment. 'Maybe because I've already got a sleeping bag of my own. It's in my pack, back inside the factory.'

She took a step forward. Straight away Elissa darted over to the gate. She stood there, arms wide, daring Blake to push past her.

'No way,' she said. 'Don't even think about it. That's our place. I'm not letting you in.'

She stuck her jaw out and stretched her arms even wider, until they were trembling with the strain. The cop cleared his throat.

'Well now, young Blake, looks like we've got a spot of bother here. Want me to escort you into the factory, so you can collect your pack?'

Blake glanced at Elissa. 'No, thanks,' she said. 'I'll be fine. Everything's fine. Just a bit of a misunderstanding, that's all.'

The cop gave her a long, hard look. Then he shrugged and swung away. 'It's your decision,' he said over his shoulder as he strode off down the street. 'I just hope you know what you're getting yourself into.'

Blake watched till he disappeared around the corner and then turned to face Elissa. The girl had pushed her hands deep into her pockets and was backing away from the gate. Half-smiling, half-frowning.

'Well, at least you didn't ask the pigs into our place,' she said. 'Constable Maloney's not bad, for a cop, but we don't want him nosing around, all the same. Come on, you might as well show us this sleeping bag of yours.'

CHAPTER FOUR

The factory was black with shadow by now but there was a small circle of light. Four bright flames from home-made lamps, wicks floating across pools of cooking oil on four chipped saucers. Their steady glow pushed the darkness back a few metres.

Blake dug down to the bottom of her pack and bowled the sleeping bag over to Elissa. She sat back on her heels and watched while the girl shook it out.

'Wow, this is excellent,' she sighed. 'Latest model. I saw one in the camping shop. Warm as toast but it rolls up smaller than a jumper. You're right - it isn't mine. I'll never own anything half as good as this.'

The two boys crouched down beside her and stroked the padding. Marco looked across at Blake with a broad smile on his broad face. 'Beautiful,' he said. *As pleased as if I'd given him a present.*

'See, Liss?' Tran said. 'Blake wasn't the thief. Fact is, you're too suspicious sometimes.'

'Tough,' snapped Elissa. 'You gotta be suspicious when you're living on the streets. I was wrong this time. But I'm not going to say I'm sorry.'

Her chin jutted. She pushed the sleeping bag away, jolting one of the saucers. The flame skidded across the oil and Blake reached out to rescue the bag.

'There's no need to apologise,' she agreed. 'Still, you could do me a favour, if you like.'

'What sort of favour?'

'Well, I need somewhere to sleep tonight. And I was hoping that, maybe, I could stay

here in the factory with you.'

She crossed her fingers and glanced sidelong at Marco and Tran. Both of them seemed to like her. Perhaps they'd let her stay. But the two boys turned towards Elissa, waiting to see what she'd say. *Oh well, that figures. She's obviously the head of this team.*

'You got a lot of nerve,' Elissa commented. 'Why would we want to help you? I mean, half an hour ago you were beating us up. I'm going to be covered with bruises tomorrow.'

'You think that's bad?' Marco said. 'I scored this mega-lump on my knee. Big as an egg. Here, I'll show you.'

He started to roll up the leg of his track pants. Blake shrugged. 'Lumps, bruises - who cares?' she said. 'I've got gravel rash all down my back, from when you knocked me onto the footpath. That's the worst of the lot.'

They stared at each other for a long moment and then started to laugh. Marco gave Blake a friendly punch on the arm and she tried not to flinch.

'It was a great fight,' he said. 'Best I've had in ages.'

'Yeah,' Tran agreed. 'I reckon you could teach us a few tricks, if you stuck around.'

That's my cue. He's giving me a chance. Go for it, Blake. Think of something really good.

She leaned forward and locked eyes with Elissa. 'I could teach you to fight, like Tran said. If you knew how to fall properly, you wouldn't end up with so many bruises.'

Elissa pressed her lips together. She turned her head and gazed off into the shadows, fingers drumming on her knee.

Okay, try again.

'I could find your sleeping bag for you,' Blake said. 'I'm good at that sort of thing. Always have been. I hate mysteries, so I can't help trying to solve them.'

She waited. Elissa drummed faster. Just as Blake was about to give up, the girl jumped to her feet.

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' she snapped. 'Of course you can stay. We couldn't turn you out at this time of night, anyway.'

Blake relaxed, so suddenly that she sat down hard on the concrete. By the time she'd stood up, rubbed her backside and added another bruise to her score, the others had scattered. Tran was collecting some ragged blankets, hidden under the cushions of the couch. Elissa was folding her spare jumper into a pillow. Marco was testing the springs of the nearest chair.

'You can sleep here,' he said to Blake. 'It's not super-comfortable but it's all right.'

'No way,' Blake told him. 'I'm the one with the sleeping bag, so I'm the one who sleeps on the floor. But - how come you're all going to bed this early?'

'What else would we do?' asked Elissa. 'Watch TV?'

'No, of course not. But you could read or something.'

'Ever try to read by this sort of light? It's not easy. Besides, the sun wakes us up early, so it makes sense to go to bed early too.'

Blake opened her mouth to answer and found her jaw dropping in a yawn. *Come to think of it, it's been a long day. I'm well and truly ready for bed.*

Marco tossed her the cushions from the back of the couch. She lined them up, spread out her sleeping bag and wriggled into it, resting her head on the pack. *I don't think Marco or Tran or Elissa would steal my stuff. But it never hurts to make sure.*

She closed her eyes. Heard four long sighs - Elissa, blowing out the lamps. Felt darkness pressing down heavily on her eyelids. Yawned again and started to drift off into sleep. Then twitched awake at the sound of Elissa's voice.

'Oh, by the way, there's something we forgot to tell you. It's not all that important but I suppose you ought to know.'

'What?' Blake asked drowsily and Elissa hesitated for a moment.

'Well,' she said, 'the factory's haunted.'

It was a shock. Somehow Blake wouldn't have expected Elissa to believe in ghosts. Mind you, even in the dark, she had a feeling that Elissa was grinning. But it worried her enough to keep her awake for the next five minutes. Then, while she was still wondering what she'd do if she saw a ghost, she closed her eyes for a few seconds, just to rest them, and fell asleep.

Dreams. Dozens of them - or the same dream, over and over again. She was running from someone, through a huge empty house. And searching for someone, down long empty streets.

Running.

Searching.

Running and searching.

And then, all of a sudden, she was sitting bolt upright, listening to the silence. Thinking: *time to go*. Trying to swing her feet off the mattress and push them into her runners. Searching for the strap of the backpack that ought to be waiting beside her bed.

Hang on a minute, Blake. You're not in your little house any more. You're sleeping on the floor of a deserted factory and no-one knows you're here, except for Marco, Tran and Elissa. You're safe. As safe as you possibly could be.

So what woke me up?

She sat still, hardly breathing, and peered into the night. At first it looked like a thick black curtain, hanging right in front of her face. But, bit by bit, Blake started to sort out

different shades of black and grey. The black shadow of the stairs. The grey of the cement floor. The paler grey rectangle of the windows, catching the light from the street lamps outside.

There was the couch, with Marco snoring like a motor bike. There was the chair where Elissa had curled up to sleep. And there, further on, was the second armchair and the outline of a small seated figure.

Tran.

'Nice to see you again, old man,' he whispered. 'I like having you around. It's good to know you're watching us and looking after us. You *are* looking after us, aren't you?'

Silence. Then Tran's voice again.

'Yeah, I knew you were. You got a kind face, old man. I can see that. Wish you could tell me your story but it looks like you can't actually talk to us. Thanks, anyway. See you around.'

A few soft creaks as he settled back into the armchair and then the factory was silent, except for Marco's snores. Blake clutched the sleeping bag around her, drawing diagrams in her mind. She knew where Tran had been sitting. She could tell which direction he'd been facing. So it was easy to work out where the old man had to be standing.

Just one small problem. No matter how often her eyes searched the concrete floor, she couldn't see anyone there.

So who was Tran talking to?

And do I really want to know?

CHAPTER FIVE

After that Blake was sure she'd never get back to sleep - but next minute her eyes were opening to the morning light. As she lifted her head, her cheek grazed the concrete floor.

Oh no. Where's my pack?

She sat up and looked around. A metre away Elissa was rummaging through the backpack. She glanced up and met Blake's eyes.

'Don't worry, I haven't nicked anything,' she said. 'Here, check for yourself.'

She shoved the pack away but Blake left it lying on the floor between them. 'Why bother to go through it, then?' she asked.

'Because I've been thinking about you,' said Elissa. 'You're a puzzle. I've been trying to put the pieces together and they don't fit.'

Oh-oh. Watch out, Blake. Elissa's getting suspicious again.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, for starters, you don't know much about living on the streets. Still, that doesn't really matter - I mean, we all had to start somewhere.'

'So what's the big problem?'

'Cool it, I'm getting there. The first problem's your gear. It's high quality-good pack, ace sleeping bag. Then there's your voice. One minute you sound like you went to some posh school and next minute you sound like you grew up in a caravan park, which is kind of weird. Plus you're too old.'

'Too old? How old do you think I am - ninety or something?'

'No, but you're older than I thought. When I first saw you, I figured you were about twelve ... but that was when I figured you were a boy. Now I reckon you'd have to be at least five years older than me. And in case you hadn't noticed, most people on the streets are either old derros or too young to get the full dole or an adult wage.'

Blake frowned. 'You're quite a detective, aren't you? Got any more wild theories?'

Elissa scrambled up and started pacing around. 'Yeah,' she said after a while. 'Yeah, I bet I've worked it out. You're on the streets because you want to be, not because you need to be. You're a reporter, right? Working on some hot story about how you actually spent a day or two living with the street kids. Well, I've got news for you, Blake. We don't like reporters. We like them even less than we like cops.'

Blake bit her lip but it didn't help. Her mouth stretched slowly into a grin. 'Hey,' she said, 'you've got a great imagination, kid.'

'So I was wrong? Too bad. Because my other theory's that you're a sneaky little private eye, who's spying on us for some reason or other.'

'A private detective?' Blake said, starting to laugh. 'Where did you get that idea?'

'From this.'

She reached inside her shirt and pulled out a notebook with a black cover. Blake leapt to her feet. 'Here, give it back!'

Quick as a monkey Elissa climbed onto the couch, vaulted over Marco and jumped across to the concrete block. She started dancing on the spot, waving the black notebook over her head.

'No way, Blake. No way known. You're not getting this back till you tell us the truth.'

Blake lunged at her. And Marco sat up, clutching his head. 'Leave me out of it, Liss,' he groaned. 'I'm not interested in the truth. I just want to be left alone, so I can sleep in peace.'

'Ah, stop whinging,' Elissa told him. 'This is important. I read Blake's notebook - she's here because she's looking for someone. She's trouble, Marco. We don't want to get involved with her.'

Marco rubbed the stubble on his top lip. 'Huh? I don't get it, Liss. Are our names in this book?'

'Yes,' Blake said, quiet and controlled. 'That's a good question. Go on, Elissa, answer him. Did you see your names anywhere in my notebook?'

'No, but that's because you haven't found out enough about us yet. And you never will, right? We're never, ever going to let you know anything about us.'

She gripped the notebook in both hands. The cover twisted, the pages tore and Blake lost her temper.

'You're wrong,' she said, even more quietly. 'As a matter of fact, I know heaps about you already. I know that one or both of your parents are dead. I know that Marco had to leave home but he still keeps in touch with at least one of his family - his aunt, I think.'

And I know that Tran's parents are still in Vietnam - they sent him to a relative here but it didn't work out.'

The silence finally got to her and she stopped. The three street kids were staring at her, mouths tight, eyes haunted.

'How did you know about my aunt?' Marco muttered, clenching his big fists.

'How did you know about my uncle?' Tran asked at almost the same moment, bracing his thin shoulders.

'We never talk about that stuff to anyone, except each other,' Elissa whispered. She looked down at the notebook, drew her arm back and hurled the book across the factory.

Blake ran to rescue it. *Oh wow. What have I done? I got mad. I wanted to hit back at Elissa for taking my notebook.*

I didn't realise they'd feel as though I'd stolen their secrets.

'I'm sorry,' she said, hurrying back. 'I promise I haven't gone around asking questions about you. I was just guessing, that's all.'

'Guessing?' Tran said with a spark of anger. 'Are you sure? You were right, every time.'

He turned away and started folding the blankets. Elissa jumped down from the concrete block and headed for the door. Marco pulled on his shoes and followed.

'Wait,' Blake called. 'Please. Let me explain.'

The three kids still kept their backs turned but they stopped moving and stood huddled together in a group. Blake cleared her throat.

'Over the last twenty-four hours I've seen a lot of street kids,' she began. 'Elissa's got more confidence than most of them put together, so I was sure her parents hadn't walked out on her or let her down. Marco's always so kind and polite - there had to be an aunt or a grandmother in the background. And Tran - well, I know Vietnamese families are really close, so it wasn't hard to guess that he'd been separated from his parents.'

For a moment she went on staring at three stiff backs. Then Marco swung around.

'Hey, that's pretty smart,' he said. 'Ever think about doing an act on TV? You could call yourself Blake the Amazing Mind Reader.'

Tran shook his head. 'Nah, people wouldn't like it. I mean, it makes me feel kind of strange myself. Like my whole life story's written all over my face.'

'Me too,' Elissa mumbled, scuffing at the floor. Then she stuck her chin out and added, 'Still, Marco's got a point. It *is* pretty smart. You seem to know a lot about us, Blake. So ... are you gonna tell us something about yourself, in return?'

Rats. She's got me now. I can't say no. Well, I can, but if I do, they'll walk out on me, for sure. What am I going to tell them?

'You were right, Elissa,' she began, choosing her words carefully. 'I *am* looking for

someone but it's nothing to do with you. I'm on the run and I need a place to hide. I'm here because I've got nowhere else to go.'

Elissa thrust her hands into her tangled hair. 'That's a joke,' she said, jiggling from one foot to the other. 'A real joke. You got fancy gear, a good education - and you expect us to believe you're as down and out as we are?'

She's bright, this girl. She's getting too close. I need to think up a story, any story except the real one.

Blake bent her head. 'No,' she mumbled. 'I don't expect you to believe me. But right at this minute, it's true.'

She stared at her feet through a fog of - *No. Can't be tears. I never cry.* There was a long silence. Then, somewhere in the distance, a voice said, 'I believe you.' Blake was so startled that she took a full minute to realise that she wasn't hearing Tran's voice or Marco's voice.

It was Elissa.

CHAPTER SIX

The truckles' cafe was bright and noisy. Postcards from all round Australia stuck into the side of the long mirror. The smell of frying chips. Old fifties hits playing on the radio. The waitress was humming along as she brought their order - four coffees, three toasted sandwiches and two hamburgers with the lot for Marco.

'Elissa, I don't get it,' Blake said. 'You were so suspicious before. Why did you decide to believe me?'

She shrugged. 'Dunno. It's just this trick I can do, like ESP or something. I always know when people are telling the truth. That's how come I've survived this long. I was suspicious of you at first, for sure. But now I know you're okay.'

Fog gathered at the corners of Blake's eyes again. *Hey, stop it. Pull yourself together, you're tired, that's all. Didn't get enough sleep.* She grabbed her cup of coffee and took a long gulp. Tran leaned over and nudged her.

'Looks like Elissa's taken you on,' he said. 'You're one of the gang now. You won't get away from her in a hurry.'

'Yeah, that's how we got together,' Marco told her. 'Elissa picked us. She reckoned we'd make a good team - and we do. She gives the orders and we follow them.'

Blake glanced at Elissa and the girl grinned back at her.

'Yeah, I picked you too, Blake. But relax, I'm not going to waste my time giving you orders. I picked you for a different reason - like, I want to take you up on what you said about finding my sleeping bag. If you're smart enough to guess all that stuff about us,

then I bet you'd be smart enough to catch the thief.'

Marco nodded like a wind-up toy and Tran watched her hopefully. Blake smiled at her three new friends.

'Hey, I told you I can't stand mysteries,' she said. 'I'm on the job already. You could help by telling me a bit more about the factory. For example, how come you're prepared to stay there, when everyone else seems to be terrified of the place?'

'We like it here,' Marco said through a mouthful of hamburger. 'My aunt lives a few blocks away. And Liss goes to the school down the road.'

'Besides, all the other kids think there's a ghost in the factory,' Elissa added. 'Me personally, I don't believe in ghosts but -'

'Hey, wait a minute!' Blake interrupted. 'You told me last night that the place was haunted.'

The girl blushed. 'Yeah, well, I didn't know you then. I was just trying to scare you, so you wouldn't go snooping around in the night. Truth is, we've been there for a couple of weeks and Tran's the only one who's seen anything spooky. Probably because he's Vietnamese.'

'What's that got to do with it?' Tran asked. 'He's not a Vietnamese ghost, y'know - he's an Aussie ghost. I can see him because I believe in him, Liss. You could see him too, if you wanted to.'

'No, thanks,' Elissa said with a shudder.

'But he's a nice old guy. Like *ong noi*, my grandfather in Vietnam.'

'He's still a ghost, Tran. I'm not interested.'

No, neither am I. Not any more. I admit I was a bit worried last night, when I heard Tran talking to an invisible old man. But now it all makes sense. Tran hasn't really seen a ghost. He's just pretending, because he misses his grandfather.

Pretending so hard that he even believes his own story.

'I *did* see the ghost,' Tran said.

Blake jumped but seconds later, she realised he was still talking to Elissa. The girl frowned at him, puzzled.

'That's funny,' she said. 'I could swear you were telling the truth.'

'He *thinks* he's telling the truth,' Blake said gently. Elissa looked relieved and Marco looked confused, until Elissa moved closer and whispered in his ear.

'Oh, right,' he said. 'It's like Tran's got an imaginary friend. My little cousin had one of them. Talked about it so much that I almost started thinking it was real.'

Tran narrowed his eyes. 'What's an imagery friend?'

Marco opened his mouth to explain but Elissa kicked him under the table. Blake cut in quickly. 'Forget about the ghost,' she said. 'It's not important, anyway. Even if the factory's haunted, a ghost couldn't have stolen your stash. We still need to track down the thief.'

And I still need to find out what happened to those missing kids.

Elissa checked the clock on the wall and pushed her chair back. 'Sorry, I gotta go to school,' she said. 'But Marco and Tran can stick around and help. Do whatever Blake tells you to do, guys. Otherwise you'll catch it when I get home.'

She bounced out of the cafe, swinging her plastic bag. The two boys turned towards Blake.

'Hey, I'm an assistant detective,' Marco said, pleased. 'Where do you want us to start?'

'Well, you could go down to the mall and check out the local street kids. They'll tell you a lot more than they'd ever tell me. Ask whether any of them have seen Elissa's sleeping bag - and ask about the kids who are supposed to have disappeared from the factory, as well.'

'You reckon there's a link between the thief and the missing kids?' Tran asked and she shrugged.

'Who knows? But two unusual things have happened in the same place. They might be connected somehow.'

'You'll figure it out,' Marco said, beaming at her confidently. Blake winced.

He trusts me. They all trust me. It's a bit scary. I just hope I'm as smart as they think I am. Still, it ought to turn out okay. I'm good at finding things, just like Elissa's good at knowing whether people are telling the truth.

I can find anything. Except the one person I'm really looking for.

Blake stood in the middle of the factory, hands on hips. Tipped her head back to take a 360 degree view.

It looks different in the day time. Much less spooky.

Time for a proper search.

In her mind she divided the space into six sections. *Gotta have a system. Can't just wander around, like I did last night.* She hesitated for a moment and then decided to start with the far right hand corner, where the street kids slept.

By daylight the couch and chairs looked shabby and sad. A tiny island in a sea of concrete and tin. Blake knelt down to look under the chairs. Levered back the sheet of tin and peered into the kids' hiding place. Felt a spurt of anger at the thief.

The kids didn't have much. But he - or she - wouldn't even let them keep what they had.

She scanned the floor and found some old bottles and scraps of newspaper. *Rubbish, that's all.* Then she worked her way along the wall, stopping to thump the sheets of tin every now and then. The echoes sounded the same each time. So there

were no secret panels. No hidden rooms.

She circled back to check the rest of the floor. As she passed the spot where Tran's ghost had been standing, the hairs down the back of her neck lifted and bristled. Blake forced herself to stop and stamp her feet hard, testing the concrete. Solid as a rock.

Well, of course it is. I already worked out that Tran was just pretending. Come on, Blake, get moving, you don't need to waste time on a ghost.

She'd searched half of the factory by now, without finding anything. But the second half looked more interesting. There was the flight of wooden steps, for example, in the opposite corner. She raced over to them and started to climb.

Halfway up, with her eyes fixed on the platform between the girders, Blake slipped. She flung her hand out - *oops, I forgot, no railing* - and felt herself falling. Just in time, her other hand latched onto the next step. She sprawled full length on the stairs, gasping for breath.

Staring at the step where she'd just been standing. Two old grey planks, split down the middle.

A booby trap? Set up to stop people from nosing round the platform?

She scrambled up and dusted her jeans, jumped over the broken step and looked around hopefully. But there was nothing to see. Except for half a dozen cigarette butts stubbed into a tin lid, the platform was empty.

For some reason, that reminded her of Big Suze, the street kid who'd heard the rumours about the factory and gone ghostbusting. Blake could picture her prowling around, spotting the platform, deciding it'd make a nice safe place to watch from. Suze would've sat here, smoking and staring into the dark. And then ...

Yeah, that's the million dollar question. What happened then?

Blake stared till her eyes watered, as if she could stare back into the past and see what Big Suze had seen. It didn't help. After five minutes, she'd only seen two things that were even slightly unusual. A crumbling chunk of sponge cake, stuffed behind a loose sheet of tin, and an electric wire along one of the girders, covered in red plastic. Brand new, unlike most of the wiring in the factory.

And that's not much of a clue. I bet it was a last minute repair job, just before the factory closed down, face it, I'm not getting anywhere. The step probably broke because it was old and rotten. I'm probably imagining all that stuff about Big Suze.

She edged down the stairs and scuffed across the floor, kicking at the bases of the four concrete blocks. No trap doors. No hidden tool lockers. No bricks that could be lifted out. Nothing.

This is getting boring.

Still, she'd saved the best part for last. The little room, over by the factory door. It was closed in, with glass panels all around it, and she had to thump its door hard to make it open. But the minute she stepped inside, her eyes widened and she whistled

softly.

The tea room was spotless. The floor had been swept. The benches on either side of the sink had been dusted. The cobwebs had been brushed away. And someone had carefully wiped the kitchen chair and the laminex-topped table.

Not Elissa or Marco or Tran. They seem to stay on the other side of the factory. Someone else.

Blake reached the bench in two long strides. Flung open the cupboards, one by one. Four cupboards under the sink, two cupboards above the sink. The first was empty. The second was ...

Rats. All empty.

She collapsed onto the chair and chewed at her thumb. *There goes my favourite theory. I thought somebody might've decided the factory was a good place to hide stuff - drugs, maybe, or stolen goods or something like that. Stuff they wouldn't want anyone else to find. So, naturally, they'd work hard at scaring the street kids away.*

It was a nice idea - and I suppose it could still be true. But I was hoping to find a bit more proof and I haven't found a thing.

Some detective!

After a while she trudged out into the yard and started poking around. *Might as well finish the search, now I've started.* Clumps of weed everywhere, with rusty cans nesting in them. A tower of scrap metal against the factory wall. Two ancient machines, covered with such a thick red fur of rust that Blake couldn't even begin to guess how they used to work.

Around the side of the factory someone had dug a deep hole. *Like a grave.* She ran over to investigate but seconds later she was backing away, holding her nose.

Yeah well, I wondered what Elissa and the others used for a toilet. Now I know.

She backed into the chain link fence and turned to examine it. The fence ran right across the front of the factory and continued on down the sides. But there was no back fence - or, at least, only a short strip of fence, joining onto the back wall of the factory.

Blake strolled to the end of the yard and peered out through the wire mesh. Behind the factory, the ground dropped away sharply. A steep bank, spiked with weeds, and then the muddy edge of a thick brown river.

So they built the factory beside a river, which meant there wasn't room for a fence at the back.

She clung to the wire, gazing at the sluggish brown water. Slowly an idea surfaced on the edge of her brain. Blake wheeled away and walked around all three sides of the fence, studying it carefully.

Too high to climb. Too much barbed wire along the top. And the back wall of the factory is blank, not a window in sight.

So the gate's the only way for anyone to get inside the factory grounds.

She leaned on the gate and pushed it to and fro. It screeched like a tortured cat. Every time. *Interesting*. Blake could feel her new idea stretching and getting larger. She needed to feed it some more information, to help it grow.

But, just as she was about to check the fence again, she heard a feeble shout from outside. She swung the gate open and saw an old woman, propped against a picket fence on the far side of the street.

Waving her stick at Blake.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The old woman leaned heavily on Blake's arm. 'Thank you dear,' she creaked as Blake heaved her up the steps. 'My arthritis is worse this week, I shouldn't really have come outside. But I saw you from my window and I wanted to say hello,'

'Hello, then,' she said with a grin. 'My name's Blake.'

'And I'm Mrs Wilson. My husband used to work in that factory. He - no, the photos will tell you, much better than I can.'

Settling herself in a chair, she waved her hand at the lounge room. Blake looked around. Photos everywhere. On the mantelpiece, on the glass-fronted cabinet, on a dozen small tables, in frames on the wall. She went over to take a closer look.

The biggest photo showed the factory itself - but a very different factory from the one Blake had just been searching. The yard was tidy. The tin walls were straight and bright. There was a freshly-painted sign saying Atlas Rivets. And rows of men, lined up like a school photo, all smiling at the camera.

As Blake moved round the room, she saw photos of the men working at their machines. Then photos of picnics, a car rally, a dance. The same faces kept turning up and she watched them get older as the years passed. Finally she stopped in front of photo of a stocky, grey-haired man, posed in the doorway of the tea room. He had big round glasses and a bushy moustache, as carefully groomed as a prize-winning terrier.

'That's Mr Wilson,' said the old woman. 'It was taken just before he died, when he was still the night watchman at Atlas.'

'How did he die?' Blake asked gently.

Mrs Wilson's hands twitched at the rug on her knees. They were strong, capable hands that looked much younger than her lined face.

She's not as old as I thought at first. The lines on her face must've been put there by the pain from her arthritis. Or maybe by sadness.

'Mr Wilson died of a heart attack,' she sighed. 'At least, that's what the doctor said. But he died two days after they told us that Atlas would be shutting down. So I think he actually died of shock.'

Blake's eyebrows lifted. 'Oh yeah? Can you really get that upset about a factory closing?'

'Not now, perhaps,' said Mrs Wilson. 'But things were different in our day. Atlas used to employ over a thousand people back then, all locals. It was like a little village. We all knew each other. We went on outings at the weekend, with the Atlas social club. As a matter of fact, I met Mr Wilson at an Atlas dinner dance.'

Blake glanced at the photos. Picnics and car rallies. The same faces turning up over the years. 'Okay,' she said. 'I see what you mean. So what happened?'

'Well, the owner was getting old. He sold Atlas and the new owners decided that it would be cheaper to move the business to the outer suburbs. Some of the workers still live around here and drive out to the new factory every day. But it was the end of the Atlas that Mr Wilson loved.'

'I'm sorry,' Blake said. Her eyes flicked from the photos to the window. She saw iron sheets flapping in the wind, an overgrown yard, a faded sign. 'How do you feel when you look at the factory now?' she asked.

Mrs Wilson smiled. 'Oh, I don't mind. My son keeps telling me to move but I like it here. I don't sleep very well, because of my arthritis, so I spend the night in a chair beside the window, watching the factory and remembering happier days.' She chuckled. 'In a way, I suppose I've become a night watchman, just like Mr Wilson.'

The idea at the back of Blake's mind suddenly pushed itself forward. 'Are you really awake all night?' she asked. 'Or do you fall asleep sometimes?'

'I drop off every now and then. But I wake up whenever that gate opens or shuts. As you've probably noticed, it clangs like a church bell. I hear it every time and I see everyone who goes in or out.'

'Really? You must've seen some interesting things.'

'Some interesting things - and some worrying things as well.'

Blake leaned forward. 'What do you mean?'

The old woman's eyebrows pulled down and her mouth pushed up, until all the creases on her face were sharper and deeper. 'It's the children,' she said unhappily. 'A lot of street kids have been squatting there, ever since Atlas closed down. I'm a pensioner, so I can't help them as much as I'd like. But I take a tray of cakes or pies across, whenever I do some baking. I get to know their names and faces and ...'

'And?' Blake prompted.

'And at least nine or ten kiddies have gone into the factory and never come out again.'

That was all Blake needed to hear. But Mrs Wilson was looking upset, so Blake made a pot of tea and sat with her while she told stories about the street kids.

'Scuz and Jacko were the ones I knew best,' she said. 'Scuz was a sweet boy, underneath all his tattoos. And poor Jacko'd had a hard life - and he did love my apple pies. Did I tell you I used to take a tray over, whenever I did some baking? Or, if my arthritis was playing up, I'd ask Cullen to carry the tray for me.'

'Who's Cullen?' Blake asked. Then she had to repeat the question, because someone in the house next door had started shouting loudly. The walls were so thin that she could hear every word.

'Lazy lump of a boy,' the loud voice bellowed. 'Sitting round on your backside, pretending to do your homework. When I was your age, I'd been at Atlas for a year. That was *real* work, believe me.'

A brief pause, while somebody answered, and then the loud voice was yelling again.

'Yeah, I know times have changed. I got eyes - I can see all those no-hoper kids out on the streets. A pack of rejects. Dole-bludgers. You better smarten up or I'll throw you out, just like their parents did to them. At least they're not hanging round the factory these days. Good riddance, I say.'

Mrs Wilson sighed. 'That's Cullen,' she told Blake. 'Cullen's father, at any rate. It's such a shame. Cullen's a good boy - he doesn't deserve to be treated that way. I don't know why people have kids if they're not prepared to look after them properly.'

Blake flinched and turned her head away. *Yeah, Mrs Wilson. I agree. People ought to think hard before they decide to have kids.*

Wish my parents had thought a bit harder.

The door of the neighbour's house slammed. She reached out and set her cup down carefully on the nearest table.

'Thanks a lot,' she said. 'I'll see you around. But I better go now. I want to talk to Cullen.'

Cullen looked like a kid from a Coke ad. Baggy pants, baseball cap and runners as big as an astronaut's boots. Thick black hair, spiky at the crown and falling forward in a fringe. Hazel eyes. Smooth tanned skin.

Oh wow. He couldn't be more different from Marco and Tran. Like something from another planet. The kid practically glows. Amazing what clean clothes and regular showers and meals can do for a guy.

By the time Blake caught up with him, he was slouched against someone's fence, tossing stones across the street. 'Hi,' she said. 'You're Cullen, right?' The boy took a step backwards and she added quickly, 'My name's Blake. I've just been talking to Mrs Wilson.'

His eyes cleared. 'Mrs W? She's all right, for a mouldy oldie.'

'Yeah, I was pretty impressed. She seems to know everything that goes on around here. Like, she reckons she's awake all night, so she even checks on everyone who goes in and out of the factory. Is that really true?'

'Hey, she wouldn't lie to you,' Cullen said. 'Fact is, she sees a lot more than most people. I can prove it, too. A year ago I had this serious toothache, okay? Couldn't sleep. Couldn't read. Sat up and stared out of my bedroom window all night. Next day I was complaining to Mrs W about how the gate had banged three times and she goes, "No, Cullen. Four times." So I must've dozed off, after all, but Mrs W didn't miss a thing.'

'All right, you've convinced me. She's not just showing off.'

'No way known.'

She was turning to go when she noticed that Cullen was fidgeting uncomfortably. He hitched at his baggy pants. Smoothed his glossy hair. Glanced down at his runners and then glanced up at her again. Then he said, 'Listen, you wouldn't happen to be staying in the old factory, would you?'

'Yeah. Why?'

'Because it's not a good place to be. Some spooky things've been going on around there. You've heard the stories, right?'

'I know the factory's supposed to be haunted. But that's all I know.'

Cullen punched his fist into his cupped hand. 'So you *haven't* heard the stories. Bummer. Maybe I shouldn't tell you, then. I don't want to scare you.'

'I don't scare easily,' Blake said in a level voice. 'Come on, Cullen. Tell.'

'Okay,' he said. 'But I warn you, it's not nice. Not the sort of bedtime story that you tell little kids - unless you want them to lie awake all night.'

He pushed his hands into his pockets and gazed across at the factory. For a moment his eyes clouded, clear hazel turning dark and shadowy. Then he blinked and began.

'About a year ago the cops found a man in the factory. An old derro, who'd sneaked in to sleep there. He was lying near the door with his arms stretched out, like he'd been trying to drag himself to safety. But it wasn't his lucky day. There was a trail of blood behind him and a pool of blood underneath him. Someone had beaten him up, so badly that he died before he could call for help.'

The sunlight felt warm on Blake's back but she shivered, all the same. 'You're right,' she said. 'Not nice. Who killed him?'

'The cops never found out for sure. He'd been attacked by at least three people,

though. And a lot of kids were using Atlas as a holiday house around that time. So the cops figured that the old man had probably been murdered by a gang of street kids.'

He stopped and waited. Stared hard at Blake, who shrugged.

'Look, it's a sad story,' she said. 'A horrible story too. But it's just a story, Cullen. I don't see why it makes you think that the factory's haunted.'

'Fair enough,' the boy agreed. 'I'm glad you're not scared. It's just that - well, like Mrs W said, kids keep vanishing from the factory. There has to be some explanation ... and some people reckon it's the old man's ghost. They reckon he's still hanging around, to get his revenge on any street kids he finds.'

He went on watching her for a few seconds longer. Then he tossed his cap in the air, caught it and smiled across at Blake.

'But hey,' he said, 'I don't believe in ghosts, any more than you do. You've got a point, Blake. It's just a story. I'm sure you'll be fine. See you later - and good luck.'

He turned away and strode off down the street. Blake rubbed her hands together, to warm them.

Thanks a lot, Cullen, you've been a real help. I'm supposed to be investigating a theft and some disappearances right now.

I need a clear head, not a head stuffed full of ghost stories.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Blake closed her eyes. Saw a murdered man in a pool of blood. Gazed at the picture in her mind until it blurred and dissolved.

The facts, Blake. Concentrate on the facts.

She opened her eyes and spun around. Cullen had almost reached the corner. 'Wait a minute,' she shouted and he glanced over his shoulder.

'What do you want now?'

'Those missing kids,' Blake called. 'Do you think they found some way of getting out through the back of the factory?'

'Who knows?' he yelled back. 'Take a look for yourself,' and he waved and swung around the corner.

That means no. But I'll check the back of the factory, just the same. Later, though. I've got some shopping to do right now.

She strolled along the main road till she came to a tiny park. Dry grass, a birdbath coated with green slime and two wrinkled elm trees. Blake ducked behind one of the trees and pulled off her runner. Slid a finger under the sole and eased out the money she'd hidden there.

For the next hour she wandered round the shopping centre. Then she headed back to the factory, swinging half a dozen plastic bags. As she opened the door, the afternoon sunlight rippled across the floor. *Like a pool of blood.* She forced herself to step over it and went to unpack her shopping.

She was settling down on the couch when a long screech shuddered through the air.

Blake leapt to her feet, dropped into a karate stance. And laughed. *The gate, of course. That's Marco and Tran - or is it?*

She crouched beside the couch and waited until she heard voices. The rumble of a deep voice. The soft patter of a lighter voice. *Yeah, it's Marco and Tran, all right. But better safe than sorry.*

She stood up and hurried over to meet them. The two boys were looking definitely pleased with themselves.

'We done a good job,' Marco reported. 'We talked to *everyone*.'

'Well, maybe not everyone,' Tran said. 'But we talked to lots of kids. We missed a few, though, because Frankie and his mates showed up.'

'Who's Frankie?' Blake asked and Marco scowled.

'An animal. He's a major league bully. His dad owns this electronics shop in the mall, sound systems and computers and that, so Frankie reckons he's really something.'

'He bosses everyone,' Tran added. 'But he hates us street kids most of all. And he was in a seriously bad mood today. He's had flu for a fortnight, so he was real keen to get back on the streets and start pushing us around again.'

Marco flexed his big hands. 'I could take him, y'know. I would've flattened him, if you hadn't dragged me away.'

'Yeah, and then his mates would've flattened you. We weren't there for a fight, remember. We were supposed to be working for Blake.'

Blake grinned. 'Dead right. So did you have any luck?'

She automatically looked at Tran but, to her surprise, he turned to Marco. 'The big guy'll fill you in on all of that,' he said. 'He remembers things much better than I can. Got a memory like an elephant. Probably because he looks like an elephant. Right, Marco?'

'Ah, shut your face,' Marco rumbled. 'You think you can get away with anything, 'cause you're too little for me to bash. Hang on a tick. Blake. I just gotta think for a few seconds.'

'No problem. Take your time.'

He squinted at the distance, rubbing his shadow moustache. 'Okay, I got it,' he said finally. 'We talked to Bocca but he never seen Elissa's sleeping bag. Wolfman never seen Elissa's sleeping bag. Little Tony never seen Elissa's sleeping bag. Dill never—'

'Hold it,' Blake interrupted. 'This could take all week. Do you think you could summarise, Marco?'

'Dunno,' he said, looking worried, but Tran nodded.

'I can do that. We asked around but no-one knew anything about our stash or the sleeping bag. They all wanted to tell us about the kids who'd gone missing, though.'

'Yeah, right,' Marco agreed. 'We got all the details. Scuz and Jacko disappeared a year ago. Big Suze disappeared in June. Gothic disappeared in— hey, can you do that summarise deal again, Tran?'

'Sure, I can. Basically, ten kids've vanished over the past year and no-one's ever seen them again. Same story every time, except for Big Suze. Wolfman reckons he ran into her in Queensland last month. Tell Blake about it, big guy.'

Marco squinted into the distance again. 'Well, Wolfman goes, "Like, I'm in Surfers, blobbing round on the beach, and all of a sudden there's Big Suze." Tran goes, "Did you talk to her?" and Wolfman goes, "No, I yelled and waved but she took off." So Bocca goes, "How'd you know it was Big Suze?" and Wolfman goes, "Hey, man, it was her. No-one else in the world looks like Big Suze." Tran goes, "Are you sure?" and Wolfman goes, "Sure, I'm sure" but Bocca gives him this greasy look and goes, "Yeah, yeah. Like, what were you on?" and Wolfman looks like he's going to punch Bocca's head in.' He paused to take a long, deep breath and added, 'Then Frankie turned up.'

'Wow,' Blake said. 'You're like a human tape recorder. Thanks, Marco.'

'Did I help?' the big guy asked and she hesitated.

'Yes and no. If Wolfman really saw Big Suze, that changes things - but from what you were saying, it sounds like Bocca thinks Wolfman was just stoned or something. I wish I knew whether we could trust Wolfman. And I wish Wolfman had actually spoken to Big Suze. But you found out as much as you possibly could, Marco. You did well.'

Marco's cheeks went a shade darker, as though he was trying to blush. 'How about you, Blake?' he said quickly. 'Did you find out lots of stuff?'

'Well, I talked to Mrs Wilson across the road and she told me something interesting. The missing street kids seem to have disappeared at night - everyone says they went off to sleep in the factory and then vanished. Only, no-one can get in here at night without going through the gate. And no-one can go through the gate without being spotted by Mrs Wilson.'

Tran frowned to himself as he worked it out. 'But that's impossible,' he said.

'It's certainly pretty strange,' Blake agreed. 'With Mrs Wilson on guard, the factory might as well be locked and bolted. So we've got ten kids who've apparently disappeared from a locked room.'

'Like a mystery on the tube,' Marco nodded. 'I seen something like that once. Turned out that this monkey'd been trained to climb down the chimney with a key and -'

'Big deal,' Tran cut in. 'There's no monkeys here.'

'Apart from you,' Marco said.

He was still chuckling at his own joke when Tran jumped onto his back, wrapping his arms around his neck. Marco growled and shook himself but the smaller boy clung on tightly. He lurched across the factory, trying to trap Tran's leg against one of the concrete blocks, but Tran jerked sideways and the big guy lost his balance. They toppled over and collapsed together on the floor, laughing uncontrollably.

Then, seconds later, they were both sitting bolt upright, heads swivelling, eyes wide with alarm.

'Typical,' Elissa said from the shadows. 'Everything always goes to pieces when I'm not around.'

No question about it. That Elissa is one tough kid. Marco and Tran are busting themselves to prove that they've been working hard all day.

'And I did good,' Marco boasted. 'I remembered all this stuff Wolfman told us, word for word, and Blake said it could be real important. She says that - what was it, Tran?'

'She reckons the factory's like a locked room at night, on account of the fence being so high and Mrs Wilson watching the gate.'

'Well, I suspect it's a locked room but I'm not completely sure,' Blake pointed out. 'I need to see the back wall from the outside first.'

'Okay, let's go,' said Marco, leaping up.

But Elissa stuck her hands on her hips and stood there, blocking the door. 'Sorry,' she said. 'We got more important things to do. Like scrounging for our dinner, for example. In case you've forgotten, we've lost our stash. So there's nothing to eat - and nothing to cook with, either.'

Tran blinked. 'Oh, right. I *did* forget.'

'Me too,' Elissa admitted. 'I wasn't hungry, because Blake brought us that super deluxe breakfast, so I didn't even think about eating till this afternoon. I scammed some vegies from the back of the stalls at the market on my way home ... but that's when I remembered our cooking gear had been stolen.'

'I could always do a home delivery run for the pizza parlour,' Marco suggested. 'We usually get a couple of bodgie pizzas out of that.'

Elissa shook her head. 'Nope. We already made a decision, remember. No home delivery runs.'

'But I'm a good driver.'

'Except for one small detail - like, you haven't got a licence. We don't need any more trouble right now. Looks as though we'll be checking out the bins behind the restaurants again.'

They met each other's eyes for a brief second and then stared down at the floor. No-one was laughing now. Elissa looked angry. Marco looked hungry. Tran looked resigned.

It's an even harder life than I thought. You have to stay one step ahead all the time. Hunting for food. Watching out for danger. You can't take anything for granted, not even simple stuff like food and shelter.

Blake cleared her throat. 'As a matter of fact, I did some shopping today. Left the stuff in the tea room, under the sink. Plus I bought a hammer and some masonite and

made a false back for the cupboard, so you can hide your stash there from now on.'

Straight away Marco and Tran bolted over to the small room. A thump and a scrape and then Marco called out, 'Hey, a camping stove! What a little beauty.'

'And there's plates and knives and forks as well,' Tran added. 'They're all new and they all match. Seriously weird. Come and see, Liss.'

Elissa hadn't moved. She was still standing by the door, arms folded, scowling at Blake. 'You shouldn't've done that,' she said. 'We can look after ourselves, y'know. You already paid for our breakfast. That's enough.'

'It's not a problem,' Blake told her. 'I've got money.'

'You think that's not a problem? Fact is, you wouldn't worry me half as much if you were broke. But when you throw money around like this, I can't help wondering what you're doing here. I mean, why would anyone stay in a broken-down old factory when they could get a room in a hotel or something?'

Her jaw jutted. Her foot started to tap. *She's suspicious again - and she'll know whether I'm telling the truth.*

Blake took a deep breath. 'I can't stay in a hotel. They always get a good look at you when you sign in. People can track you down way too easily.'

The girl studied her for a moment and then nodded thoughtfully. 'Oh,' she said. 'Oh, I see. Someone's after you, right?'

Marco and Tran came crowding out of the tea room. 'You in trouble with the pork, Blake?' said Marco. 'Don't worry, you'll be fine with us. If the jacks come around, I'll hang onto them while you get away.'

'Is it the cops?' Tran asked, watching her closely. 'Or is it someone else?'

Blake stayed silent. *The only thing you can do when you've got nothing to say. I don't want to lie ... and I can't tell them the truth.* Marco frowned at her, puzzled.

'I don't get it. Who the heck would be chasing you, if it isn't the cops?'

'I can't explain,' she said in a low voice and Elissa walked over to stand beside her, shoulder to shoulder.

'Stop hassling her,' she said. 'We all got our secrets. This is part of Blake's secret, okay? Now, come on - I thought we were supposed to be having a look at the factory wall.'

CHAPTER NINE

The gate squealed. They waved to Mrs Wilson and walked along the chain link fence until they came to the corner. Waded through waist-high weeds. Slipped and slithered down a steep slope. Struggled with a wall of scratchy bushes and then found themselves on the edge of the river.

The water was golden brown, like creamed honey. As thick as creamed honey too, but you could tell that it wouldn't taste as good. There was a smell like old socks in the air. Rings of pale scum across the mud. A tattered shirt drowning among the reeds. It was a city river, dragging its load of sludge and garbage and chemical waste down to the sea.

Blake turned back to look at the factory. A hundred overlapping sheets of corrugated iron, rusted into patterns of orange and red. The long, high wall towered over them, shutting out the sun. *Like a castle on top of a tall cliff. Not.*

'The wall's totally blank,' said Elissa. 'No windows or doors. Nothing but that weird-looking bit of tin, sticking out near the bottom - like a pipe, only flat underneath. What do you reckon it is?'

'An air vent, maybe,' Blake guessed. 'When the machines were working, they would've needed to get air into the factory somehow.'

'Yeah, I suppose so. Funny, there's too much air in the factory now - that's why I wanted a sleeping bag. Okay, what next? We ought to start searching for clues.'

'I found a boot,' Marco said, picking it up.

'And I found a path,' said Tran.

'The path sounds more like a clue,' Blake told them. 'After all, if Wolfman really saw Big Suze in Surfers Paradise, she must've got away from here somehow. Along the path, for example.'

'The boot could've belonged to her too,' Marco said, flourishing it. 'See? It's the right size for Big Suze, no problem.'

'Ah, forget your stupid boot,' Elissa snapped. 'We want to explore the path.'

Actually, it wasn't much of a path. More like a narrow track, following the twists and turns of the river bank. Sometimes it ran into a row of thorny bushes and veered sideways. Sometimes it got lost among clumps of weeds. And sometimes it was just a line of deep footprints, churning up the mud.

One thing's for sure. You wouldn't find this track on any map. It wasn't made by the council - it was made by people walking up and down the bank. A lot of people, over a lot of years. Derros or fishermen or kids mucking around. It's a private path. A secret path.

'Well?' demanded Elissa. 'I can tell you're thinking, Blake. What have you figured out?'

'I'm not sure. The street kids might've escaped by this path but there's no way of proving it. And I still can't see how they would've got out of the factory - or how the thief got in. I'd like to take a closer look at the back wall, though.'

Elissa shrugged. 'You're on your own then. I can't see the point of poking around in another lot of weeds. Have fun. But you better be quick. I reckon there's a storm coming up.'

She and Tran headed back to the road but Marco decided to stay with Blake. They ploughed through the bushes and weeds, the big guy going ahead to hold back the spiky branches. Then they scrambled up the slope and edged along the base of the wall.

Blake paused every now and then to push at the sheets of tin. They rattled and creaked but none of them moved very far. *Rats. I was hoping to find a part of the wall that would swing open. Like the piece of tin on the floor, covering the place where the kids hid their stash.*

When she reached the air vent, she stopped and tilted her head back, peering up into the big metal pipe. *Rats again. Not even a glimmer of light. Just another sheet of tin, blocking the gap. They must've closed off the air vent when they shut down the factory.*

'Okay, I give up,' she said. 'Let's go.'

They slid most of the way down the slope, faster and faster, until they skidded to a halt at the edge of the mud. Blake looked across the river and saw heavy clouds stacked on the horizon, iron grey and thunder blue, with lurid streaks of light in between.

She sighed.

'Never mind,' said Marco. 'If there's anything to find, you'll find it.'

Yeah, sure. But what if there isn't anything to find?

The factory smelt of soy sauce and sesame oil. Tran was singing quietly in the tea room and Elissa was sprawled on her stomach in a ring of light, flicking the pages of a book.

'You took your time,' she said. 'I've written a whole essay on the Eureka Stockade.'

Blake raised one eyebrow. 'So you really do go to school?'

'Nah, I'm just pretending, like Tran with his imaginary friend. Or Wolfman, thinking he's a wolf every time there's a full moon.'

'She's not kidding,' Marco told Blake. 'He goes and howls outside the motel. Gives the guests a mega shock.'

Blake glanced sideways and caught Elissa grinning at her. 'Sorry,' she said. 'I was a bit surprised. Not by Wolfman - by you. I didn't know street kids went to school.'

'It's not easy. But my school's got a special program for street kids. That's one of the reasons why I want to stick around, if I can.' She sat up, smooth as a gymnast, and clasped her knees. 'Oh, Blake, I hope you can figure out what's going on. I'd hate to have to leave this place.'

She lifted her face to the last of the sunlight. Eyes bright with longing. Profile outlined in gold. A mass of tangled hair falling down her back.

Wish I was an artist. I'd like to paint a picture of Elissa right now, with her whole life story showing in her eyes and the way she's sitting. A kid who's lost a lot, without losing her dreams. She doesn't look smooth and airbrushed, like Cullen. But she's beautiful, just the same.

That reminded her of something. 'Elissa,' she said, 'does a guy called Cullen go to your school?'

'Cullen McDermott? He's one strange dude. Looks like a soapie star and acts like a nerd. Heaps of the girls are interested in him but he nicks off home every lunchtime to play with his computer. Me, I'd stay out of the house as much as possible, if I was him. His dad's been unemployed ever since Atlas folded and he's pretty mean to Cullen.'

Oh yeah? That's interesting.

'Listen, if his dad's unemployed, how can Cullen afford to have a computer?'

'He can't. I mean, it's not his. Cullen's coaching this guy Frankie in maths, so Frankie's dad lent him a second-hand computer from his shop. It's funny, y'know. I reckon Frankie's dad would like to have a son like Cullen. And Cullen's dad gets on real well with Frankie, 'cause they're both bullies.'

Rats. Thought I was onto something there. I've been watching out for someone who's got more money than they ought to have. But it looks like I'll have to cross Cullen off my list of suspects. Too bad.

Blake was pacing restlessly around the factory when Tran called, 'Dinner.' Elissa carried the oil lamps into the tea room and they sat around the table, eating stir-fried vegetables. Marco finished first. He rinsed his plate in a bucket by the sink and stood there rubbing his thumb around the rim.

'These plates are ace,' he said. 'They're gonna look just great in our flat.'

'That reminds me,' said Elissa. 'We never really thanked you for the plates - or the stove - or the wok and the saucepan. So ... thanks, Blake.'

Blake shrugged. 'What's this about your flat?' she asked, to change the subject.

'We're going to live in a flat one day,' Tran told her. 'The three of us together. Just as soon as we save enough money to cover the bond.'

'We got furniture already,' Marco added. 'That lounge suite is ours. Someone threw it out, so I carried the chairs back here and Tran and Liss helped with the couch. We could scam heaps more stuff from the tip, if we had a place of our own. And we will, too. We'll get it together. Some day.'

Elissa tugged at the knots in her hair and sighed. 'Yeah,' she said. 'Some day.'

Blake was dreaming again. Running through the rooms of a huge, empty house. Searching down long, empty streets. Running and searching, while drums rolled and violins played loud, spooky chords.

That's odd. I don't usually have background music in my dreams.

She opened her eyes. There weren't any violin players in the factory but the drums were still rolling. *Or maybe a group of tap dancers is practising on the roof.* She yawned and sat up, listened for a moment and grinned. *Oh, right. Of course. It's thunder.*

'Blake!' An urgent whisper. 'Are you awake?'

'Yeah,' she hissed back. 'Who's that?'

'It's me. Tran. I don't like storms. How about we go and make a cup of tea or something?'

Blake nodded and then remembered that Tran couldn't see her. Before she could say anything, the couch creaked.

'You don't need to whisper,' Elissa snapped. 'I'm awake too. And so's Marco. I don't see how anyone could sleep with that wind blowing.'

Blake wriggled out of her sleeping bag and went to perch on the arm of the couch, where Elissa was leaning against Marco. Tran scuttled over and wedged himself between them. They huddled together, listening to the storm.

It was a wild night, for sure. Thunder, crashing and echoing. Sudden flares of lightning that filled the room with an eerie white light and disturbed the shadows. And, worst of all, the wind. It howled around the factory. Rattled the roof. Grabbed all the loose sheets of tin and banged them together.

Blake shivered, as though an ice-cold finger was tickling her ribs. She was telling herself not to be stupid when Elissa gasped.

'Hey,' she said, 'can you hear something?'

'Certainly can,' Blake told her. 'Thunder, gale force winds, the factory falling apart. There's more noise than a heavy metal band.'

'No, not that. Something else.'

She listened. The thunder rumbled. The wind hurled itself at the walls. And then, for a few seconds, there was silence. Only for a few seconds, though. In the silence, Blake heard another sound. The sound of heavy breathing, followed by the sound of a muffled groan.

Elissa gulped and Marco started swearing softly. 'This is freaky,' he said. 'Reminds me of - no, I don't want to think about it. Where on earth's that noise coming from?'

Blake frowned. 'I don't know, not yet. I'd need to hear it again, before I could tell.'

She had to shout, because the wind was on the rampage again, whining and shaking the walls. Tin clashed against tin. The wooden posts creaked. She strained forward, listening carefully.

What's the matter with us? No-one's groaning - it's just thunder in the distance. And the heavy breathing was probably just the wind. There's nothing to be scared about. Nothing but the storm, at any rate.

No, wait a second. That's not all. Somebody cried out just then, didn't they? Like they were hurt ... maybe dying. And that slow, rasping noise sounds like someone gasping for breath.

Or does it? Perhaps I'm only imagining things. The storm's too loud. I still can't really be sure.

She stood up and edged around the couch. 'No!' Tran said. 'Don't!'

'It's all right, I won't go far,' Blake assured him.

She felt her way along the concrete block. Waited for the next flash of lightning and walked out into the middle of the floor. Stood there in the darkness until the wind dropped again. Heard a low moan and hoarse, uneven gasps.

Then the lightning blazed. Blake spun around and raced back to the couch. Marco pulled her onto the cushion beside him and Elissa grabbed her hand.

'Well?' she asked. 'Did you see anybody - or anything?'

'No,' said Blake. 'There's no-one here except us. But I heard someone groaning, all the same. It sounded like they were over on the far side of the factory, near the door.'

Marco let out a strangled yelp and she swung towards him.

'Okay,' she said. 'I know you don't want to talk about this but I have to ask. What did those noises remind you of?'

'The story Cullen told us, when he brought the pies from Mrs Wilson. He said -'

'Yeah, he told me as well.' *And I don't feel like hearing all the gruesome details again, not just now.* 'He reckons the cops found a dead guy in the factory, right?'

'Right,' Marco mumbled. 'But there was more than that. Cullen said the old guy must've taken a long time to die. He would've been lying there for ages, moaning and groaning. Over near the door.'

CHAPTER TEN

Everyone was in a bad mood next morning. Tran snapped at Elissa. She threw her shoe at him. Marco stretched out on the couch and refused to move. And Blake limped around, rubbing her aching knees.

That's what happens when four people try to sleep on one couch, because they're too scared to go back to their usual places.

'I don't believe in ghosts,' Elissa grumbled as she gulped down a cup of tea. 'I won't believe in ghosts. This is all your fault, Tran. You started it by pretending to see that old man.'

'I wasn't pretending, Liss. I really did see him, honest. But he wasn't there last night.'

'Then who was puffing and panting over by the door?' asked Marco. 'Don't tell me we've got two ghosts.'

'We haven't got one ghost, let alone two,' Elissa growled. 'It's impossible. Can't happen.'

Tran stopped and stared at her. 'Why are you so dead set against the idea of ghosts?' he asked after a while.

'Because if I thought there was such a thing as ghosts, I'd have to get out of here, real fast. Think about it, Tran. Blake's proved that those missing kids didn't just walk out through the front gate. And there's no back way. So they just disappeared. Vanished into thin air, like ghosts do. If I start believing in ghosts, I'll start to believe we're going to

vanish next.'

'No way,' Tran protested. 'My ghost isn't like that. He -'

But Elissa pushed past him and grabbed Blake's wrist. 'Oh no,' she wailed, checking her watch. 'Is that the time? I'm late for school. This is the worst day of my entire life!'

She stormed out of the factory. Seconds later the gate squealed at top volume. Tran turned towards Blake, his eyes dark with misery.

'Liss has got it all wrong,' he said. 'The old man won't hurt anyone. He's a friendly ghost. He just watches us and gives me this really kind smile.'

'That's great, Tran. I'm glad you think he's a nice ghost. Just don't talk to Elissa about him any more, okay? She doesn't seem to like ghost stories.'

Oh wow. Now I'm beginning to sound like I take ghosts seriously. I'd better watch myself. Although, mind you, it is kind of interesting that Tran's ghost and Cullen's ghost are so different. Tran's ghost is kind. Cullen's ghost is scary. I wonder whether -

No, I don't. I'm not going to wonder about any of it. I'm like Elissa.

I don't believe in ghosts.

Tran headed off with the bucket to fetch some water from the tap outside and Blake wandered over to the couch. 'What's the matter with everyone today?' Marco asked, lifting his head from his arms. 'I never seen Liss and Tran have a fight before.'

'I reckon we're all a bit upset because we don't know what to do next. I am, for sure. And Tran and Elissa got into an argument about the old man's ghost.'

'Fair enough,' Marco sighed. 'I'm sick of people telling stories about old guys who've died. You'd think this place was knee deep in dead old men.'

Blake gazed at him, eyes widening. 'You're right, Marco,' she said. 'You've definitely got a point. I've heard enough about dead old men too. It's time we went looking for some live old men.'

The doorstep was dark with overlapping stains, like tide marks. *What sort of stains? Don't know - and I don't want to know either.* In one corner there was a bottle, wrapped in a grubby paper bag. In the other corner there was an old man.

'You're a nice little boy,' he slurred, clutching Blake's arm. 'Jus' like my little grandson Johnny. Only, come to think of it, Johnny'd be twenny years old by now. Haven' seen him for years an' years. An' years.'

Tears trickled from his eyes and dripped down weather-beaten cheeks. He wiped them away with his sleeve. *Or sleeves. I reckon he's wearing at least four layers of clothing. But he's been wearing them for so long that they're all matted together.*

'You like kids, do you?' Blake said. 'Ever visit the kids in the Atlas factory?'

'Atlas?' he repeated. 'My ol' mate Bill used to work for Atlas, years an' years ago.'

Those were the days. People used to look out for each other back then. They'd give an ol' man a cuppa tea and a quid, no worries.'

'So you know where Atlas is? Do you ever go and sleep there?'

The old man hoisted himself up and reached for his bottle. 'I might. And then again, I might not. None of your business, sonny. I wouldn't tell you if you gave me a pound. But you prob'ly don't even know what a pound is, do you? Two dollars to you, son. Well, more like five dollars, the way prices are today.'

He tugged on Blake's arm and hauled her closer. A waft of sweet and sour breath and a smell like compost in the summer sun. She gagged and blocked her nose.

'He wants you to give him some money,' Marco whispered and she scowled.

'No way. He'll only spend it on drink.'

The big guy shrugged. 'So? He's been a boozier all his life. You can't stop an alky drinking, y'know.'

She hesitated. And the old man grunted and pushed her away.

'Kids today,' he spat. 'You're all the same. Mean as sin. Wouldn't give an ol' man the money for a drink if he was dyin' of thirst in front of you. Off with you. Get off. Go 'way.'

His milky eyes rolled in their sockets. His skinny arms flailed. Another gust of rotting compost. Blake jumped up and backed across the footpath.

'Calm down,' she said. 'Here's some money.'

A brown hand, twisted like a tree root, pounced on the five dollar note. But the old man went on shouting at them until they scuttled around the corner. Blake collapsed against a wall and filled her lungs with fresh air.

'Wow. I needed that. I had to breathe through my mouth the entire time I was talking to him. That guy is ripe.'

'Hey, Mick's not so bad,' Tran said. 'He's better than some of the derros hanging around here. Like Born Again Sam, who wants to tell you how everyone's going to burn in hell except him. Or Old Harry, who tries to feel you up.'

'Thanks for telling me,' Blake groaned. 'I can hardly wait to meet them.'

Marco rubbed at the stubble on his lip. 'Do you really have to talk to all the old guys on the street? You're not gonna like it, Blake. Maybe we could do it for you, if you told us what you want to know.'

She thought for a moment. 'All right, I suppose I ought to explain. It's about Tran's ghost. I was wondering whether one of the old derros could've been sleeping in the factory and creeping out early in the morning. Tran might've seen him and mistaken him for a ghost.'

Tran sighed. 'Oh, Blake! You should've told me. You've been wasting your time. I know all the old guys who live on the streets around this area. Trust me, if I'd seen one of them at Atlas, I would've recognised him.'

Rats. That was a good theory. I don't want to let go of it.

'Are you sure? I mean, it's pretty dark in the factory at night and -'

'You want details?' Tran said. 'Okay, think about old Mick. His face is really brown and creased, from being out in the open all the time. The other old guys are the same. But the ghost - well, he's old but you can tell he's had a better life than Mick and the rest. They've got lines all over their faces. The ghost just has smile lines round his eyes and lines from thinking on his forehead.'

'Hey, I never realised ghosts looked like that,' Marco said. 'I thought they were just - y'know, white and blurry. Like someone with a sheet over his head.'

Tran shrugged. 'Dunno. I've only ever seen one ghost. He looks the same as anyone else, except you can tell he's not real.'

'How can you -?' Blake began, before she noticed that Tran and Marco were staring over her shoulder.

'Watch out,' Marco hissed. 'It's the cops. I'm out of here. Come on, Blake.'

Two long strides took him back around the corner, followed by the faster patter of Tran's feet. Blake stayed where she was. Watched Constable Maloney coming towards her.

'G'day, Blake,' he said. 'I see you're still hanging round with Marco and his mob. You could do a lot worse, y'know. They're good kids. That Elissa could really make something of herself, if things go right for her.'

'Yeah,' Blake said. 'If. But there's a lot of things that could go wrong. Tell me, constable, would you be prepared to do something to help them?'

The cop pushed his hat back and scratched his sandy hair. 'You're a strange one, Blake,' he said. 'You don't talk like most of the kids around here and you don't think like them either. I'm not sure what you're up to but you've got me interested. What do you want me to do?'

'Nothing much,' she said with her best smile. 'I just need some information.'

Half an hour later she came out of the cop shop and looked around, frowning. *I thought Marco and Tran would've waited for me but they've obviously cleared off. They must be more scared of the cops than I realised. Truth is, Constable Maloney was right. I don't think like a street kid, not yet.*

Still, in a way, I'm glad the guys didn't stick around. If they were here, I'd probably tell them what I just found out. And I'd like to keep it to myself for a bit longer.

She turned the corner and waved to old Mick. He flourished his bottle at her cheerfully but she kept walking. *Sorry, mate, I don't need to talk to you any more. I'm on the trail of another old man now.*

The wind had blown the storm clouds away and the sky was blue and clear. Blake

strolled along the main road, watching seagulls wheel through the air above the river. She stopped outside a small house. Knocked at the door. Smiled at Mrs Wilson.

'Hi,' she said. 'I came back to ask you something. The other day, you told me that the owner of Atlas sold the factory because he was getting old. Is he still alive? And if he is, do you know where he lives?'

Mrs Wilson leaned on her stick and wrinkled her forehead. 'It was a long time ago,' she said finally. 'Still, I think I remember someone telling me that Mr Gonfalone went to live with his son's family.'

'Would you have the address?'

'I'm afraid not. But why don't you come in and have a cup of tea? I'll show you some photos of Mr Gonfalone and you can tell me why you're so interested in him.'

Blake shook her head. 'Sorry, Mrs Wilson, not right now. I've got too much to do. But I'll come back later on and let you know what I found out.'

She turned away. And nearly walked into someone's outstretched hand.

'Well, Frankie,' said a voice from behind her, 'is that the kid who's been pestering Mrs Wilson?'

Blake looked at the hand. *Like a bunch of raw sausages, with ginger hairs sprouting out of them.* She looked up, higher and higher, until she was staring into Frankie's eyes. Two round, blue marbles, glassy and cold. He was even taller than Marco, and wider too.

But it's flab, not muscle. Marco could easily beat him in a fight.

She dodged around him but Frankie grabbed the collar of her shirt. 'Not so fast,' he said. 'We gotta have a little chat. It's not nice, y'know, bothering old ladies. I better teach you some manners.'

He started to twist her collar. Blake hooked one foot around his leg and jerked hard. Frankie staggered and let go.

'Here,' he bellowed, 'what do you think you're doing?'

Blake ducked past him. Stopped short, as the next door gate swung open. A man stepped out and barred her way. He had blond hair and hazel eyes, like Cullen. But his hair was faded and his eyes were dull and angry.

'You're one of those bloody street kids, aren't you?' he said. 'I know your sort. Hanging around nicking stuff from the market and wrecking the old factory. Let me give you a friendly warning, mate. We don't want kids like you in this neighbourhood and we got our own way of getting rid of you. Right, Frankie?'

'Right you are, Mr McDermott,' Frankie agreed. Then he noticed Blake circling around Cullen's father and shouted, 'Hey, kid, stand still while we're talking to you.'

He lunged forward, and planted himself in front of her. Blake spun sideways but Mr McDermott moved with her. He crouched down, like a goalkeeper watching the ball. Behind them, Frankie started laughing.

Oh, right. I think I know the rules of this game. They're not going to touch me. They'll just keep on blocking me till I try to push past. Then they can rough me up and claim that I started it. Smart thinking, in a twisted sort of way.

It's time I did some smart thinking too.

She whirled around and Frankie flung his arm out. Blake stared at him for a moment, then glanced back at Cullen's father. She sighed. Bowed her head and shuffled her feet. Looked defeated. Waited till they started to close in on her.

And then hurled herself at the gap between the two of them.

But Mr McDermott sidestepped and blocked her again. 'Not good enough,' he said with a grin. 'I used to play on the local football team. Believe me, I know all the tricks.'

Blake bit her lip. *Rats, that didn't work. What now? Marco and Tran are probably back at the factory, so I could always yell for help, but then I'd land Marco in trouble too.*

She tugged at her shirt and smoothed her hair. 'I'm afraid you're making a mistake,' she said in a head prefect voice. 'For some reason, you seem to think I'm a street kid but as a matter of fact, I've been interviewing Mrs Wilson for an oral history project at school. My father's the principal and he's terribly interested in the history of Atlas.'

Both Frankie and Mr McDermott took a step backwards. 'What's the matter with you, Frankie?' Mr McDermott growled. 'I thought you said you'd seen this kid around.'

'Not me. I've been sick for the last two weeks. Cullen was the one who met her - but he described her pretty well. I reckon she's the one.'

Mr McDermott's eyebrows hooked together in a scowl. 'Yeah, come to think of it, anyone can put on a posh accent. Let's risk it.'

They swivelled around in unison, shoulders set, hands stretching out.

But Blake was already half way down the road.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

That name. What was it? Wish I'd written it down - but then, I didn't know I'd have to fight off a pair of hoons before I got to a phone box.

Rats, rats, rats. What is that name? It reminded me of someone else I'd met recently. Mr McDermott? No. Frankie? No. Marco, Elissa, Tran? No. Constable Maloney?

Yes! Got it. Maloney - Gonfalone.

The owner of the factory is called Mr Gonfalone.

Blake flicked through the pages of the phone book. Tried a few different ways of spelling the name. Discovered with relief that there was only one Gonfalone in the book. Wrote the address on the back of her hand and went looking for a newsagent.

She walked around the shelves until she found a street directory. She was leafing through the maps when she glanced up and saw the shopkeeper watching her.

'Are you planning to buy anything, young lady?' he asked and she shrugged.

'Dunno. Right now, I'm just looking round. That's what shops are for, isn't it?'

The shopkeeper glared. 'No need to be cheeky. I'm sick of you street kids. You come in here and wander round like you own the place, bothering my regular customers and leaving dirty fingerprints on the magazines. If you're not going to pay for that street directory, you'd better put it back straight away.'

Blake ran her finger quickly down the map. *There's the street. And there's a railway*

station, half a block away. As she started to write the details on her other hand, the shopkeeper snatched the directory from her and slammed it onto the shelf.

'Hop it,' he said. 'I'm not running a free information service here. Out you go, quick smart.'

She strolled out of the shop, as slowly as possible. But while she waited for the green light at the nearest crossing, she realised her hands were shaking.

That guy hated me because he thought I was a street kid. Okay, my clothes are pretty filthy by now and I suppose I smell a bit. All the same, I'm still human, aren't I?

Does this sort of thing happen to Elissa and Marco and Tran? They've never talked about it.

But maybe you get used to it after a while.

She trudged to the railway station and bought a ticket. The guy behind the counter told her how to change trains in the city and she found herself thanking him three times.

Oh wow. Now I feel grateful if anybody's kind to me. This is crazy.

Blake sat in a back corner of the train and watched the factories rush past. Long silver hangars, red brick buildings with shot towers, rusty tin sheds. As the glass skyscrapers of the city lifted up on the horizon, she fingered her grubby shirt and frowned.

The Gonfalone family might be like that newsagent guy - and I don't want them to slam the door in my face. Better clean myself up before I go to see them.

The city station was big and old and bustling. Blake prowled around until she spotted a bunch of street kids, lounging on the steps. She went over and sat beside them.

'Whadda you want?' a girl with dreadlocks asked straight away.

'A shower,' she said.

The girl tugged at the silver ring in her eyebrow. 'Yeah, thought you were a newie,' she nodded. 'Everyone knows the best showers are in the Maitland Building. The sixth floor, down the end of the corridor. There's a lot of dentists in that building. For some reason, they're dead keen on showers.'

'Thanks a lot,' Blake said, standing up.

'Not a problem. Us kids gotta help each other. No-one else will.'

Just before the Maitland Building Blake found a fancy clothes shop. The minute she walked in, the elegant assistant came hurrying over and stood two steps behind her while she looked through a rack of shirts. She grinned to herself and worked her way along the rack, checking the price tags. Pulled a note out of her runner and handed it over.

The assistant's tiny nose wrinkled and she sniffed loudly. But she took the money, all the same. *I suppose I didn't really need to buy the most expensive shirt in the shop. But maybe it'll make her think twice about the next scruffy kid who comes in here.*

Five minutes later Blake was standing in a green tiled cubicle, twisting and turning

under a jet of hot water. She soaped herself twice. Washed her hair. Scrubbed her fingernails. Then she slicked her hair back and pulled on her jeans and the blue silk shirt.

Oh wow, that's better. It's nice to be clean again. I'd never noticed before how good it feels.

The train tunnelled into the suburbs. Trees like giant green umbrellas, blocks of flats with balconies and picture windows, rows of tea shops and book shops and antique shops. As the train travelled on, the houses got bigger. *Big as factories.* By the time Blake was strolling up a tree-lined street, the houses around her seemed like palaces, compared to Mrs Williams's tiny cottage.

She stopped outside a huge white house with a patio and a sun deck, a swimming pool and a green lawn the size of a park. A tall, dark-haired woman in a designer tracksuit drifted across the lawn, snipping a rose from the bushes every now and then. Blake hurried after her, feeling small and scruffy, despite her new shirt.

'Excuse me,' she called. 'Does Mr Gonfalone live here?'

The woman turned. 'As a matter of fact, there are two Mr Gonfalones living here,' she said with a designer smile. 'My husband and my husband's father. Which of them are you looking for?'

'Your husband's father, I guess. The one who used to own the old Atlas factory. Can I talk to him?'

A faint frown line appeared between Mrs Gonfalone's eyebrows. 'I'm not sure about that,' she said, running a hand across her forehead to smooth away the line. 'My father-in-law is -'

'Please. I really need to speak to him about Atlas. I'm doing an oral history project at school and—'

Mrs Gonfalone shrugged. 'Oh well. Come and see for yourself.'

She glided up the steps, leaving a trail of rose scent on the air. Blake jogged along behind her.

Great. I'm glad I was able to talk her around. I've got a good feeling about this. With any luck, I'll solve the entire mystery in the next few minutes.

She followed Mrs Gonfalone across the marble floor of the entrance hall. Up a broad, curving staircase. Along a corridor and into a big room. White curtains billowed in the breeze. Small chairs with high gilt backs squatted on the thick carpet. And beside the window there was an enormous bed.

Blake padded across the carpet and gazed down at the bed. An old man was lying there, his face brown and wrinkled against the white pillows. His breath was slow and

rasping and his eyes were shut.

He looked as though he hadn't opened his eyes for weeks.

'I was positive I'd worked it all out,' Blake sighed. 'Everything fitted together perfectly. Mr Gonfalone sold the factory and went to live with his son, right? He'd had a busy life but all of a sudden he had nothing to do. So I thought he might be coming back to Atlas, to look at the place where he'd been happy. Wrong, wrong, wrong. The minute I saw him, I could tell he hadn't been anywhere for a long time.'

'Are you sure?' Elissa asked. 'I mean, old people sometimes go wandering round at night. Like my grandad, for example. He had Alzheimer's and he kept sneaking out of the old folks' home, trying to find the place where he and my nanna used to live.'

Blake shook her head. 'Not Mr Gonfalone. His son's house is on the opposite side of the city, an hour away by train. He couldn't possibly wander this far. Besides, his daughter-in-law said he can hardly sit up in bed and I believe her. She was really nice to me. Made me coffee and told me everything she knew about the factory, even though she didn't know a whole lot.'

She slumped back in the armchair and fixed Marco and Tran with a brooding stare. The two boys had been to the laundromat and now they were folding a pile of clothes and stowing them in a ziplock bag. *Their clothes cupboard, I suppose. Makes sense.*

'So what are you going to do next?' Tran asked, flicking the creases out of a t-shirt.

'Dunno,' she groaned. 'I seem to have run out of bright ideas.'

'Hey, you'll think of something,' Marco told her and she pulled the corners of her mouth down.

'Thanks, Marco. Wish I was that confident. I'll do my best - but don't count on it. I mean, I was convinced that the thief and the missing street kids were connected somehow and yet I haven't managed to prove it. I can't even explain the ghost.'

'Maybe you don't need to explain him,' Tran said. 'Maybe he's just an ordinary ghost. I don't see why everyone's so worried about him. After all, the ghost didn't steal our stash or make those kids disappear.'

Elissa looked up from her homework. 'Oh yeah? Trust me. if I saw a ghost I wouldn't hang around. I'd disappear, real fast.'

'I thought you didn't believe in ghosts,' Tran teased.

'Exactly. Which is why I'd be out of here like a shot if I saw one.'

'Most people feel the same way,' Blake told him. 'They're scared. You're the only person I know who'd actually try and talk to a ghost. That's why -'

She stopped and stared into the shadows. Marco waved his big hand in front of her eyes.

'Blake? Hey, mate, come back from outer space. What were you gonna say?'

Her eyes focussed on him again. 'Oh, nothing much. It's just that - well, I thought someone might be pretending to be a ghost, in order to scare kids away from the factory. But I've only come across two people with a grudge against street kids - Frankie and Cullen's father. And Mrs Williams hasn't mentioned seeing either of them prowling round Atlas at night.'

Elissa slammed her book shut. 'I wish you'd stop talking like that, Blake. You're starting to freak me right out.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, if you're right, then there's only one possible answer. The factory *is* haunted.'

'No,' said Blake. 'No, it can't be.' But her voice was flat and she was gazing into the shadows again. Marco zipped up the clothes bag. He sat down on the couch opposite her and waited till he caught her eye.

'What's the matter, Blake?' he asked. 'You've been on a real downer, ever since you got back from the Gonfalones. I reckon there's something you're not saying.'

'Maybe there is. But it's not important.'

'In that case, it won't hurt to tell us,' Elissa pointed out and Blake scowled at her.

'All right then, if you insist. It was something Mrs Gonfalone said. She didn't know much about the factory - old Mr Gonfalone ran it on his own for the last fifteen years, because his son had set up another business. But she did remember the name of the big company that bought Atlas. They're called Interco, short for International Consolidation.'

Tran blinked. 'Never heard of them. Have I missed something?'

Blake's fists clenched until her knuckles were almost pushing through the skin. 'No,' she said in a level voice. 'You haven't heard of them before. I told you already, it's not important.'

'Then why are you so stressed?' Elissa asked. 'I've never seen you this angry, not even when you were talking about how Frankie and Mr McDermott tried to push you around. It's like this is personal or something.'

She straightened out her hands, one finger at a time. 'That's right,' she said finally. 'It's personal.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

The night was still and silent. The shadows had taken over the factory. Marco was a dark mound on the couch. Elissa and Tran breathed steadily and evenly in the armchairs.

But Blake was sitting up, with her sleeping bag tucked around her shoulders. One hand held the black notebook open and in the other hand she had a small silver torch, the size of a pen. She ran its thin beam of light across the pages, reading words that she already knew by heart. In the faint, reflected light, her face looked grim and determined.

I'm wasting time, hanging around the factory. I've hidden long enough to throw Greg and Thumper off the track. It's time I went on with my search. Dozens of names and places, listed in my notebook. It'll take ages to check them all out. I should be thinking about where to go next.

I shouldn't be sitting here thinking about Interco.

She shut the notebook and slumped forward, resting her forehead on her knees. *Get real, Blake. It's just a coincidence. Interco is a big company. They must own a hundred factories around Australia. So I shouldn't be surprised that they happen to own this one. It doesn't mean a thing.*

Still, it makes a difference, all the same. I'd half-decided to give up - but not now. I have to find out whether Interco had anything to do with those missing kids.

Interco ... and the man who runs it.

The darkness behind her eyes was full of pictures. Faces that changed from kind to angry. Voices that changed from living to cold. Memories, like a film playing inside her head. Blake heaved a sigh from the bottom of her lungs. A few seconds later she sighed again.

And there was a third sigh, as deep and heartfelt as the other two. *Except, that wasn't me. I only sighed twice.* Her head jerked up and her eyes searched the shadows. *Nothing there. Relax, kid. It was probably just Marco snoring.*

She shoved the notebook into her pack and wriggled into the sleeping bag. Settled her head on the pack. Closed her eyes. And jumped, as though a cold finger was tapping her on the shoulder to get her attention. Another sigh bounced off the walls, followed by a soft, quavering moan.

Blake shot up. She struggled with the zip of the sleeping bag, grabbed her torch and flashed it around the factory. But the beam was too narrow and weak. It couldn't reach as far as the patch of darkness near the door.

All right then, I'll have to go over there. Quickly, before I get nervous.

She found her runners and pulled them on. Stretched down to tie the laces. Knocked the tin mug beside her pack and sent it clattering across the floor.

Too late. Looks like I'm nervous already.

As Blake fumbled around for the mug, Elissa stirred and sat up in the armchair. 'What was that?' she asked sleepily.

'Just me,' Blake whispered. 'I spilt my mug of water, that's all. I'm going over to the tea room for a refill.'

'Okay. G'night.'

The springs squeaked as she settled back into the chair. Blake waited a few seconds, to give her time to fall asleep again. She was tiptoeing past when another groan echoed through the factory, much louder than before. A hand clamped around her wrist.

'Wait a minute,' said Elissa. 'That's not you. It's the same noise we heard last night, during the storm. It's the ghost!'

Her voice rose sharply. On either side of them Marco and Tran sat up, rubbing their eyes and blinking at the night.

'The ghost?' Tran repeated sleepily. 'What do you mean, Liss? I can't see him.'

'Maybe you can't,' said Marco. 'But I can hear him, for sure. Listen.'

Elissa's fingers gripped Blake like a handcuff. She stood there, pinned to the spot, and heard the sound of ragged breathing. Low, agonised gasps that started slow and then became faster and more desperate, until they were whistling round the factory like a storm wind.

'Scary,' Tran announced. 'We gotta get out of here.'

'Like, how?' said Marco. 'I'm not going anywhere near the door. That's where the noise is coming from. And that's where the cops found the old guy, lying with his head in a pool of -'

'Stop it! ' screamed Elissa. 'Stop it, stop it, stop it.'

She let go of Blake and hurtled onto the couch, with Tran close behind. Blake hesitated and then joined them. Marco's big arm wrapped around her and held tight. They clung to each other and felt safe for a moment.

Then the groaning began again. A few muffled cries of pain, sounding almost surprised at first. The kind of sound you make when you cut yourself by accident, as if you can't really believe that you've been hurt. And after that, a steady, hopeless whimpering that went on and on and on, like an animal caught in a trap.

'This is terrible,' Blake said, jumping up. 'We gotta do something to help.'

Marco grabbed her windcheater and hauled her back. 'Oh yeah? Who do you think you're gonna help? No-one's there, Blake. No-one human, at any rate.'

The whimpering sound kept growing louder. It rose into a howl and the howl rose into a shriek. A high, piercing wail that filled the whole factory and battered at their eardrums. *Marco was right. That's louder than an ordinary human scream.*

Elissa was shaking. Tran was muttering to himself in Vietnamese. The four of them huddled together as the scream climbed the walls and shook the roof.

Do something, Blake. We can't just sit here, waiting for - for what? Don't know. Can't think properly. Not while that hideous noise keeps drilling through my skull.

She stuffed her fingers into her ears. Then she scrambled onto the back of the couch and looked around, propping herself against Marco for balance. The shadows seemed thicker near the door. Blake stared for a while and gradually the darkness sorted itself into patterns.

That's the tea room, right? I can see a glimmer of light, reflected in the windows. And something else, as well. I can see... Did I really see the door of the tea room starting to swing open?

She hoisted herself higher to get a better look. At the same moment Elissa screamed. Marco leapt to his feet, leaving Blake with nothing to lean on. She wobbled, tipped over and somersaulted to the floor.

By the time she picked herself up, the three street kids were standing shoulder to shoulder, gazing at the back wall. Elissa's arm swung up and pointed.

'There!' she squeaked. 'Look at that.'

Blake turned and looked. An eerie light, blue-white and cold, was seeping into the factory. Just a trickle to begin with but then it spread into a glowing rectangle. *Like a door.*

Like the door in the alien space ship, at the end of Close Encounters of the Third Kind.

Tran said something in Vietnamese, then waited for an answer. 'Sorry, mate, I don't understand slope talk,' Marco growled and the smaller boy looked embarrassed.

'Oh wow,' he said shakily. 'I'm so scared that I forgot where I was. I just wanted to ask Blake what we ought to do now.'

'Simple,' she said. 'We -'

But before she could finish the sentence, the screams died away and the panting started up again. Breathless gasps that rasped and croaked and gurgled, then ran together and became words.

'Come, children. Come here. Come to me.'

They whirled around. Over by the door of the factory, one of the shadows was starting to move. It shuffled across the concrete floor and paused in a pool of light that shone in from the high windows. Baggy coat. Battered felt hat. Face shadowed. Arms stretching out blindly.

'The ghost of the old man,' Marco whispered.

For a moment they all stood there, staring. Then Elissa yelped and ran. Her footsteps thudded on concrete and rattled over tin, heading for the rectangle of light. Marco pelted after her but Tran hesitated, glancing back at Blake.

Blake thought fast. *Faster than I've ever thought in my life.* 'Quick, Tran,' she yelled. 'Catch them,' and she tensed her muscles and went speeding through the factory. Hurdling the gutter. Dodging the concrete blocks. Her feet moving so swiftly that they barely skimmed the ground.

But Elissa was running even faster. *She'll get there first. She's going to be swallowed up by that eerie light.* Blake groaned. She gulped for air and spat it out again in a shout.

'Stop!'

For half a second Elissa hesitated. Only half a second - but it was enough to throw her off balance. One foot landed more heavily than the other. Her ankle twisted. Her arms flapped wildly. Her knee gave way. And, as she stumbled, Blake pounced.

She clutched Elissa's shoulders and wrestled her to a standstill. 'Marco!' she panted. 'We gotta stop Marco too.' The wild stare faded from Elissa's eyes and Blake nodded with relief.

Good guess. Elissa was panicking, all right - but she's snapped out of it, for Marco's sake.

When they swung around, Marco was only a few metres away from the eerie light. But Tran was in front of him, dancing to and fro. *Smart kid. He knows he isn't strong enough to hold Marco, so he's blocking the big guy instead.* Towing Elissa behind her, Blake raced over to grab Marco's hand.

'Okay,' she said. 'Follow me.'

She led the street kids across the factory, talking the whole time. 'That's right. Don't

be scared. Just keep moving. We'll be cool. You're doing fine.'

As they reached the spot where the old man had been standing, Marco flinched and backed away but she tugged at his hand and pulled him on. Then Elissa froze in front of the door and Tran and Blake had to take her by the arms and walk her through. At the last minute Blake glanced back over her shoulder.

Thought so. No sign of that weird light. And no sign of the ghost either, of course.

They staggered across the yard. Threw themselves at the gate. Winced as its hinges screamed. And then, finally, they were out in the street. Tran collapsed in the gutter like a puppet with its strings cut. Marco slouched against the fence, gasping even louder than the ghost. And Elissa stood in the middle of the footpath with tears rolling down her face.

'It's all right,' Blake kept repeating, over and over. 'It's all right. It's all right. We're safe now.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The sky was spattered with stars and the street lamps made the darkness glow. Light, instead of shadows. Room to move, after being trapped in a corner of the factory. No more harsh breathing and ghostly groans, just the distant purr of the traffic and the whisper of the wind.

Oh yeah, and a voice from somewhere, calling our names.

'Blake! Elissa! Tran! Marco!'

Blake whirled around. Couldn't see anyone anywhere. Felt her heart start to beat faster again.

No. Please. Don't tell me the ghost's outside with us now.

Then a light blinked in one of the houses over the road-off and on, off and on. She could see a shadowy outline at the window. The shadow of someone small and bent, leaning on a stick.

'Mrs Wilson!' gasped Elissa.

She tore across the street, with Marco close behind. Blake helped Tran to his feet and followed. By the time they got to the house, Mrs Wilson had passed the key through the window and Elissa was unlocking the door. They crowded into the tiny front room, all talking at once.

'I saw you burst out of the factory as if the devil was on your tail,' said Mrs Wilson. 'That's why I opened the window and called to you. Whatever happened?'

'The ghost,' Marco gulped. 'The ghost. It was the ghost.'

'Not my ghost, though,' Tran added quickly. 'Another kind of ghost. The scary kind.'

Elissa wiped her hand across her eyes. 'I don't believe in ghosts,' she said. 'But I've seen one, all the same. I don't know what to think - and I don't know what to do.'

'You mustn't even try to think until you've had a nice hot cup of tea,' Mrs Wilson told her. 'Tea with plenty of sugar, that's the best thing for shock - and I'd say you've all had a dreadful shock tonight. Blake, my arthritis is playing up again. Would you mind putting the kettle on for me?'

Blake nodded and turned and bumped into Marco. The big guy lurched backwards, trying to get out of her way. His foot kicked a little table and his elbow knocked one of the framed photos on the china cabinet.

'Oops,' he muttered. 'Sorry, Mrs Wilson.'

While Elissa steadied the table, Tran dived for the photo and caught it, just in time. He started to polish the glass on his sleeve, rubbing away his fingermarks. Then his eyes widened and his whole body went still.

'Hey,' he said. 'That's my ghost.'

The photo showed a stocky, grey-haired man, posed in the doorway of the tea room. Big round glasses. A bushy moustache, as carefully groomed as a prize-winning terrier.

'Oh no,' Elissa wailed. 'It's Mr Wilson! His ghost's still guarding the factory, scaring off trespassers.'

'Nonsense,' Mrs Wilson snapped. 'That's not a very nice thing to say. The old factory meant a lot to Mr Wilson but he was a kind man and he loved children. He'd never do anything like that to you and the other kiddies.'

Her cheeks were bright pink and her white curls were quivering with indignation. The four kids glanced sideways at each other.

She obviously believes what she's saying - but Elissa and Tran and Marco don't look convinced. I know what they're thinking. They're thinking about a dead night watchman, prowling through the factory on his ghostly rounds ...

Mrs Wilson settled back into her chair. 'Well, well, young Tran,' she said more calmly, fanning herself with a magazine. 'That was quite a bombshell. Now I need a cup of tea, just as much as you do. And a slice of cake to go with it too. You like my sponge cake, don't you?'

'We've never tried it.' Tran said, still staring at the photo. 'Only your pies. But they were ace.'

'No, I know you've tasted the sponge cake,' Mrs Wilson insisted. 'Cullen took some over to the factory, just the day before yesterday.'

'Yeah, yeah,' said Marco. 'Sure. We must've forgot.'

He rolled his eyes at the others and grinned. *He thinks Mrs Wilson is really the one who forgets things, because she's getting old. But I wonder ...*

Blake was jolted out of her thoughts by Elissa, who suddenly pushed forward to

stand in front of Mrs Wilson.

'Listen,' she said, 'You been real nice to us. But you weren't in that factory tonight and you didn't see what we saw. Fact is, I could drink a hundred cups of sweet tea and it wouldn't change how I feel. I'm never, ever going back into that factory, even though it means we'll be out on the streets again and I'll have to leave school and Marco'll have to move away from his auntie and -'

Mrs Wilson reached up to pat her hand. 'Now, now,' she murmured. 'There's no need to be scared.'

Elissa's knees folded. She collapsed onto the floor, burying her head in Mrs Wilson's lap. While the old woman stroked her tangled hair, Blake took the photo from Tran and studied it closely.

Interesting. I can't help noticing that Mrs Wilson didn't say, 'There's no ghost in the factory.' She just said, 'There's no need to be scared.'

She put the photo back on the china cabinet and turned to face the others. 'Okay,' she said, 'I've made up my mind. I'm going back to the factory. Now.'

Elissa looked up at her with huge, frightened eyes. Marco ducked his head and shuffled his big feet. And Tran said, 'Sorry, Blake, I couldn't walk into that place again. Not tonight, at any rate.'

Blake smiled at him. 'Fair enough,' she said. 'You've probably got more sense than I have. See you soon,' and she pulled her cap over her moonlight blonde hair and strolled out of the house, whistling the seven dwarfs' song from *Snow White*.

Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go ...

The minute she opened the factory door, Blake heard more gasps and moans. She ignored them and headed straight towards the back wall, aiming for the spot where they'd seen the eerie light. The factory was dark now, so she felt her way along the wall, pushing hard against every sheet of tin.

Until, all of a sudden, one of the metal sheets rippled and swung away from her hand.

Blake pitched forwards. For a moment her feet kicked at the empty air. Then she was flat on her back, plummeting down a slippery slope.

Like the water slide at a fun fair. Except this isn't fun.

She hit stony ground, rolled, tumbled and landed on her feet like a cat. A swift glance around her - *shadowy bushes, the glint of light on water* - and then she swivelled back to gaze up at the factory.

Okay, I get it. That pipe sticking out of the wall isn't an air vent, after all. It must've been a goods chute, back in the old days. I bet the workers used to slide the crates of

rivets down there, so they could be packed into boats and taken along the river to the docks.

She was still studying the chute when somebody grabbed her arm.

'Jesus, it really happened,' a voice hissed. 'The ghost tried to kill you. But don't worry, I'll help you get away.'

Blake thrust her elbow down hard and twisted free. "Well, well,' she said. 'So that's how you did it, Cullen.' As the boy stared at her, she added, 'Come on, we better get back inside. Your mate Frankie'll be wondering what's going on.'

In the moonlight Cullen's handsome face looked as white as - *hey, he's as white as a ghost!* He opened his mouth and shut it again. Blinked several times. Turned away and led her along a hidden track through the thorniest bushes, until they came to a rusty ladder buried in the weeds.

They wrestled the ladder up the slope and steadied it against the wall. Cullen climbed the metal rungs and reached into the chute. He tugged and heaved. The wall shook and rattled. *Some sort of pulley system, I suppose, to open the chute from outside.*

As the boy hoisted himself into the chute, Blake felt a twinge of alarm. *Maybe I shouldn't have let him go first. What if he tries to run away?* But when she shinned up the ladder, Cullen was still there, waiting for her. He stretched out his hand and hauled her over the edge of the chute, then helped her to her feet and brushed the dust off her windcheater.

Mrs Williams was right. He's a good boy. But good boys sometimes do bad things.

She peered into the shadows, letting her eyes get used to the dark. 'Frankie!' she shouted. 'I know you're there. You might as well come out now.'

Silence. Not a sound, not a movement. Blake checked the door and the corners and the stairs leading up to the platform. But as far as she could see, there was no-one around. *He must've nicked off when I fell down the chute. Oh well, it doesn't matter. I know where to find him.*

Beside her, Cullen cleared his throat and spoke for the first time since she'd broken his hold. 'Listen, Blake, you caught me red-handed,' he said. 'But I don't see why you think Frankie's involved.'

She shrugged. 'Well, you obviously needed two people to pull off your nasty little plan. One inside the factory, to scare the street kids into heading away from the door and towards the chute. And one waiting on the river bank to send them packing. I guessed Frankie was part of the scheme, because the hauntings stopped while he had flu. Besides, his dad owns an electronics shop, which'd be useful for ghostly special effects.'

Cullen's hazel eyes flashed briefly and then he looked down at the floor again. 'So how did you guess about me?'

'Because you made up that story about the old man who was murdered. I talked to Constable Maloney and he said there'd never been any murders here. That started me thinking. I mean, a story about a dead night watchman would've been just as scary. But you couldn't use it, because you like Mrs Wilson and you didn't want to bad-mouth her husband. Right?'

'Right,' he mumbled. 'All the same, I don't see why you were so sure. I could've got a kick out of telling scary stories.'

'As a matter of fact, I wasn't sure,' Blake admitted. 'Not until Mrs Wilson told us she'd sent you over with some cake - on the day the kids' stash was stolen. I'd already found the cake, hidden on the upstairs platform. So I figured you must've walked into an empty factory and decided to look for some other way of hassling the kids. After all, they'd been here for a week already but you hadn't been able to do your ghost number on them, because Frankie was sick. And, of course, Mrs Wilson didn't suspect a thing, because she thought you were just delivering her cake.'

She glanced at Cullen, to see whether he was going to argue back. But the boy had slumped against the wall, looking as though he was about to collapse.

'Oh, what's the point?' he groaned. 'You know everything, anyway. I reckon you can read my mind or something. I might as well tell you the whole story.'

Read his mind? I should be so lucky. Still, if that's what he thinks, I'll let him believe it.

'Go on,' she said encouragingly and Cullen sighed and began.

'I can't remember the first time me and Frankie talked about the plan. But my computer's in my bedroom, which looks out on the factory, and we sit there while I'm teaching him maths, so we always knew when a new bunch of street kids was moving into the factory. The whole thing started as a sort of fantasy and then we thought, "Hey, let's do it". So we rigged up this sound system, with a generator and a mike outside and a speaker above the factory door.'

Oh, right. That's why the groans sounded so loud, because they were amplified. And I actually saw their new wiring when I searched the factory. Should've worked it all out way back then.

'Anyhow, we'd wait till the middle of the night,' Cullen went on. 'Frankie'd climb through the chute and hide. Upstairs at first and then, after that kid called Big Suze booby-trapped the step, down in the tea room. I had to clean it pretty thoroughly first, because Frankie gets bad asthma. In the meantime I'd be sitting on the river bank, gasping and groaning into the mike, and after a while I'd go and haul on the rope that lifts up a section of the wall. The moon would shine in through the chute, so when Frankie did his ghost act, the kids automatically headed for the light, to get away from him.'

Just like Elissa and Marco did. Blake scowled across at Cullen but the boy didn't

notice. He was lost in his story, hazel eyes glowing, mouth twitching into a smile.

'Then,' he said, still smiling, 'when they fell down the chute. I'd scare them a bit more and send them off to catch the next train interstate. It worked every time. Until you came along.'

His smile gave one last twitch and then faded. His hazel eyes went dull. *This guy is weird, all right. Seriously twisted. I've got a couple more questions - but I need to get away from him for a few minutes first.*

She prowled over to the tea room, with some vague idea of checking Cullen's story. As she opened the door, the shadows rustled and light gleamed on a pair of startled eyes. For half a second Blake thought she'd come face to face with Tran's ghost.

Then Frankie jumped her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Okay, I admit it, Blake thought. I was slack. I wanted to talk to Cullen, so I let myself believe that Frankie had nicked off. And now, unless I'm incredibly lucky, I'm going to be beaten to a pulp by a Neanderthal.

She made a dash for the door but Frankie was faster than he looked. He got there first and blocked her. Arms wide. Legs astride like a Sumo wrestler. Hands twitching open and shut, beckoning her towards him.

'Think you're smart,' he snarled. 'Well, I'll fix you.'

Blake swung away. Circled round a concrete block and headed for the platform between the rafters. Stopped in her tracks as she spotted a dark figure halfway up the steps.

Blocked again. Oh well, I don't care. It wouldn't be smart to get trapped on the platform, anyway.

Reversing sharply, she pelted across the factory. As she dodged another concrete block, her foot hit a patch of machine oil and sent her into a skid. For a moment she panicked but then, instead of fighting the skid, she went with it. Hurling forward. Faster than the speed of light. Heading for the square of moonlight that marked the chute.

She could hear the thud of Frankie's footsteps, somewhere behind her. Ahead of her, Cullen stared in alarm and backed away till he was standing in front of the chute.

Rats. Now he's blocking me, by accident. I could fight him, easy enough, but that'd give Frankie time to catch up. Better keep going.

She hit the wall with a clang, bounced off it and went staggering towards the corner. The concrete floor was cracked and uneven. Blake tripped and fell to her knees, jumped up and kept running. She sprang onto the nearest armchair, leapt across to the second chair, pushed off and landed on the galvanised iron sheet that had covered the kids' hiding place.

Good. I haven't done too well, running on concrete. Maybe I'll do better now I'm on the metal section of the floor.

She thundered across the iron sheets, grinning at the noise. And then, all of a sudden, she was falling again. She flung out her hands to break her fall and thrust down hard, trying to heave herself to her feet.

Like push-ups at the gym. There's only one small difference. I don't seem to be able to move.

As she twisted round, she felt a stab of pain in her left ankle. Blake peered down to check the damage but she couldn't see her foot. *Double rats. The iron's so rusty that it's rotting. Looks like my shoe has gone right through the floor.*

When she tugged at her ankle, sharp flakes of metal scraped at her skin. She tugged again but the hole had closed around her runner like a trap. Frankie was pounding towards her, shouting, 'Yes! Got you now!' Blake shuddered. With a last desperate heave, she wrenched her foot free and hurled herself at the side wall.

She gripped the cross bar, swung her foot up, winced and made a grab for the second wooden beam. A frenzied couple of seconds, while she hauled and scabbled and clung, and then she was perched on the cross bar, just out of Frankie's reach.

Lucky these old beams are fairly wide. Otherwise I'd be history.

She found some nail holes in the tin wall and hooked her fingers into them. Hung on and gazed down at Frankie's gridiron shoulders and scarlet face.

'Cullen, come over here and cover me,' he puffed. 'I gotta find a stick or something, so I can knock her off that beam. I'm gonna teach this little snoop a lesson she won't forget.'

'No,' said Cullen.

Blake let out a small, surprised noise and Frankie whirled around, head bent like a bull getting ready to charge.

'What's the matter with you?' he demanded. Cullen stared at him in silence and he shrugged and growled, 'Ah, never mind, forget it. I'll deal with you later, after I've fixed the chick.'

He swung back his heavy boot and started kicking the wall. The tin panels rattled, the wooden beam shook and Blake clung tighter. She wedged her left foot against the wall and swung out until she could meet Frankie's eyes.

'Just tell me one thing,' she gasped. 'Why did you do it? I have to know.'

Frankie thumped the wooden post that held the beams in place. The cross bar jolted. Pain jabbed at Blake's ankle. Her leg folded and she lost her grip. Crashed to the floor, landing at Frankie's feet.

He swung at her and missed. 'Because I don't like slopes,' he said, pulling his fist back again. 'Or smart-arse chicks.' Another punch. 'Or crazies.' Punching again. 'Or street kids,' as his fist whistled past her ear. 'Or *you*.'

Blake rolled and dodged and scrambled to her feet, letting the punches get a bit closer every time. She edged away till she felt the wooden post behind her back. Frankie swung for the fifth time and, at the last possible second, she ducked aside. His fist smashed straight into the post.

As he roared with pain and anger, Blake darted over to Cullen. 'Your turn now,' she said breathlessly. 'I want to ask you the same question I asked Frankie. Why the hell did you do it?'

But before Cullen could answer, Frankie came lumbering towards them. Blake skipped out of his way and then realised that she needn't have bothered. This time Frankie was after Cullen, not her. He seized the boy in a wrestler's hold and rammed his head into the wall.

'I'll show you, Cullen McDermott,' he wheezed. 'You think you're smart, don't you? You reckon you can just stand back and watch, while I do all the dirty work. Big mistake, mate. A very big mistake.'

His huge arm locked tight around Cullen's neck. The boy rolled his eyes towards Blake, in a frantic signal for help. Blake took a step forward. Then she stopped and folded her arms.

'Why, Cullen?' she repeated. 'Tell me why.'

'I hate street kids too,' he gasped. 'They're losers. I'm not like that.'

Frankie threw him against the wall and punched him in the mouth. As Cullen groaned and sagged, Blake stared at him for a long moment.

I could take Frankie now. But forget it. Let Cullen fight his own battles. He doesn't deserve to be helped.

As she turned away in disgust, she noticed a shadow across the doorway. Her heart tried to skip a beat but she was too tired to feel frightened any more. *Oh yeah, who is it this time? More ghosts? More thugs? The cops? Mick the derro? Mrs Wilson or Mr McDermott?*

No, none of the above. It's Elissa and Marco and Tran. Interesting. I thought they were never going to set foot in here again.

The three street kids glanced around, checking out the scene. Then they charged across the factory, heading straight for Frankie and Cullen. Elissa kicked Frankie's shins. Tran yelled, 'Watch out! Behind you!' And as Frankie loosened his grip on Cullen and glanced over his shoulder, Marco hit him on the chin and knocked him flying.

'See?' Tran said. 'I told you there was someone behind you.'

Frankie glowered and struggled up. He was starting to reach for Tran when he spotted Marco, reaching for him. He spun around and bolted, with the big guy close behind. A few seconds later there was a loud crash and clatter from outside.

Marco strolled back into the factory, chuckling. 'Funny guy, that Frankie,' he commented. 'He was heading for the gate and then, for some reason, he swerved and threw himself into that stack of old scrap metal. Half of it fell on top of him. He's gonna need a tetanus injection tomorrow, for sure.'

'But Frankie hates needles,' Cullen said and Marco smiled at him.

'Well then, that'll learn him not to bash kids who're smaller than him, right?'

Cullen nodded and tried an uneven grin. Elissa found a grubby hanky and passed it to him, saying, 'Here, you got blood on your lip.' Beside her, Blake sighed and shook her head.

'I don't know why you're being so nice to him,' she said. 'This is the guy who miked the factory and made ghost noises while Frankie was monsterring you. I asked him why he did it and he said it was because he hates street kids.'

She glared at Cullen and he gazed back blankly. His shirt was torn, his forehead was lumpy with bruises and there was a streak of rust down one cheek. He didn't look like a kid from a Coke ad any longer. *More like a street kid, really.*

'Okay, you asked him once,' Tran said. 'Try asking him again and see what he says this time.' But Blake pressed her lips together and refused to say anything. Tran shrugged. 'All right then, I will. Cullen, why did you set us up like that?'

Cullen went on staring blankly, as though he hadn't heard a word. When he finally spoke, his voice sounded tinny and hollow, like a robot.

'My dad says I'm lazy, like a street kid. He yells at me whenever I'm working on the computer. He reckons he's gonna throw me out onto the street, where I belong. Every time he sees you kids hanging round the factory, he starts in on me again. So I had to get rid of you. You gotta believe it.'

He crumpled and covered his face with his hands. Elissa patted his shoulder. 'Relax,' she said. 'I believe you. Trust me, Cullen, we've been there. We understand - and Blake'll understand too, once she thinks about it.'

She glanced sideways, to catch Blake's eye. But Blake wasn't looking. She was peering into the shadows, frowning to herself. Feeling the touch of that icy hand that always seemed to warn her when there was danger around.

Hold on a minute. Everything's been going too fast. I've missed something important.

Something to do with Frankie - and a door - and some steps. Yes! That's it. When I was trying to get away from Frankie, he blocked me at the door ... and then I thought he blocked me on the steps to the platform as well. But that's not possible. No way could he have got there ahead of me.

So someone else must be hiding in the factory as well. Someone like Greg or Thumper, for example.

And they're still here.

She was still wondering how Greg and Thumper could've found her so quickly when she heard footsteps, running down the stairs. Blake crossed her fingers - *hope he trips on the broken step* - but the intruder jumped it and darted past the concrete blocks, placing himself between her and the chute.

'Hello, Blake,' said a familiar voice. 'That's what you're calling yourself these days, isn't it?'

A shaft of light from the chute touched the intruder's face. Blake groaned.

Oh no. I finally solve the mystery and prove that Interco had nothing to do with those missing kids - and what happens? Another person from my past turns up to hassle me. It's not fair. Why can't they all leave me alone?

'It's you,' she said flatly. 'What are you doing here?'

'Looking for you, of course,' the voice said, sounding amused. 'But what are you doing?'

'None of your business,' she snapped and the dark figure said, 'No, Blake. That's not true and you know it. You owe me some explanations. I want to talk to you - and don't even think about making a dash for the door. I've been up on the platform, with a good view out the window. So I can tell you that your friend Frankie's still lurking in the street, waiting for a chance to get his own back. Sorry, but you can't escape this time.'

Blake stood there, numb and silent. She could feel Tran and Elissa and Marco watching her but, for once, she couldn't think of a thing to say.

It's over. I can't get away. He's going to drag me back home - if home's the right word for it.

She hung her head in despair. Waited for a hand to fall on her shoulder. Waited even longer, realised that no-one had moved and glanced up again.

The factory was echoing with silence. *The kind of silence you get just before a big storm.* Cullen and the street kids and the newcomer were all staring at the opposite wall. Their eyes were bulging out like big glass marbles and their mouths hung open.

They look pretty funny. What on earth's the matter with them?

Then she turned around and her jaw dropped too. The door of the tea room was swinging open and an old man was shuffling out. He made his way across the factory floor, stepping over the gutter and avoiding the concrete blocks without looking, as though he knew every millimetre of the place by heart.

'Frankie?' Cullen gulped. 'No. No, you're not Frankie, are you?'

The old man took no notice. He glided between them and raised his hand till it was level with the newcomer's chest. Just before his fingers touched, the newcomer backed away.

'Now!' shouted Elissa.

She gave Blake a shove that sent her staggering towards the chute. One minute she was teetering on the edge of the factory floor, glancing back over her shoulder at Marco and Tran. And the old man. *The old man who came out of nowhere to save me.*

Next minute she was rolling down the slope to the river bank.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She hit the slope in a spray of small stones. Slid twenty metres on the seat of her jeans and sat up, gasping. Seconds later, Elissa tumbled down beside her. Blake held out a hand and helped her to her feet.

'I brought your pack and sleeping bag,' Elissa said. 'Marco and Tran are hanging onto that guy so he can't come straight after you. And the old man - well, he sort of disappeared.'

They stood side by side on the river bank, watching moonlight shiver across the water. Blake finally said, 'Who was the old guy? Not Frankie in disguise, for sure. But it could've been that old derro Mick. Or ...'

'Or maybe Mr Wilson *is* still looking after the factory,' Elissa finished. 'Guarding us, not trying to hurt us, just like Mrs Wilson said. Maybe that's why Frankie ran into that heap of scrap metal - because the ghost was standing in his way.'

They stared at each other, trying to make sense of what they'd just seen. After a while Blake said, 'Hey, I haven't thanked you for coming back to the factory. It was pretty brave, considering you were so scared.'

Elissa shrugged. 'No big deal. We owed you.' She stuffed the sleeping bag into the pack and passed it to Blake. 'Here, you better get a move on. That guy in the factory - he's the person who's after you, right?'

'One of them, at any rate. I'm looking for someone and running from someone else. Or a couple of different someones, by the look of things.'

She turned to go. Then stopped to fish around in her pack.

'Liss, I nearly forgot,' she said, holding out a wad of notes. 'I want you to have this, to pay the bond on a flat for you and the guys. And say goodbye to Tran and Marco for me, okay?'

Elissa stashed the notes in her pocket. 'Thanks,' she said. "The big guy's gonna miss you, y'know. He likes you a lot. I'm almost jealous - except that I'm gonna miss you too.'

When she looked up, Blake was frowning at her. 'Funny, I thought you were going to argue about taking the money,' she said. 'I mean, you were really mad at me when I bought the plates and stuff. What changed, Liss?'

'You called me Liss,' the girl answered. 'You never did that before.'

The moon drew random squiggles across the river. A breeze sighed and started to ruffle the weeds, while the two girls stood and stared at each other, searching for words. Then, behind them, the chute rattled.

'Time to go,' said Elissa. 'Here comes your friend. I'll lead him off in the opposite direction, while you get away. Good luck, Blake.'

She grabbed Blake's cap and jammed it over her tangled curls. Watched while Blake disappeared into the shadows of the bushes. Waited until the stranger came tumbling down the slope and then spun around and went running along the path by the river, grinning as she ran.

Blake scrambled up the slope and pushed through the bushes. She stepped out onto Mowbray Street, feeling lighter than she'd felt for days.

I'm glad I got rid of the money. Liss and the guys can use it, for sure, and it was weighing me down. There's enough cash sewn into my coat to last me till I get a job somewhere. Down the coast, maybe. That'd suit my plans.

She squinted at the horizon, checking for the lights of the cafe. Elissa had told her that the interstate truckies stopped there and Blake had remembered it, because she liked to have a few escape routes lined up. As she swung her pack onto her shoulder, she could see the highway stretching out ahead of her, dark and endless.

Leading into the future.

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