

THE BLAKE MYSTERIES

6

With  
the  
Lot

JENNY PAUSACKER

**THE BLAKE MYSTERIES: 6**

**WITH THE LOT**

**JENNY PAUSACKER**

With thanks to Jackson for the building site and to Helen, Inez and Nancy for listening.

## CHAPTER ONE

Horns blaring. Cars swerving from one lane to the next. People dodging between the cars. Too many cars and too many people.

When Blake spotted a motorbike-sized parking space, she pulled over straight away. She leaned back on the studded leather seat of her Honda Rebel, looking around at shop fronts and billboards and office towers. Rubbing her itchy eyes. Taking shallow breaths of air that tasted like petrol.

*Yeah, I'm back in the city, all right. The biggest city in Australia, as a matter of fact. Don't need a guide book to tell me that.*

A truck rumbled into the building site across the road. A bus stopped in front of her with a screech of brakes. An old guy on the corner yelled, 'Get your *Globe* here,' and waved a bunch of newspapers. Blake winced.

*Hard to believe I ate breakfast on a river bank this morning. No one else in sight and the loudest noise was when some birds started arguing in the gum trees.*

She'd been travelling round the countryside for the last month. A stopover in Gladesdale, to help a friend of a friend. Across to Mudgeebung, where she'd finally found her Great-aunt Dell. And then, on her way down to the big city, one of the Honda's pistons had cracked and she'd had to hang about for three days, waiting for a new piston to be sent from the next town.

It was the first holiday she'd had in ages. Even after the Honda was fixed, Blake had stayed on for another week. Walking round the hills. Sitting by the river. Lying on her

bed in the motel and reading science fiction paperbacks from the second-hand shop.

*But now I'm broke. Only twenty dollars in my pocket. Stacks of money in my bank account, of course - except that I can't get at it, because my father's private detectives seem to know when I use my ATM. card. I need a job.*

*Fast.*

She glanced up and down the street. Realised that she was staring at an enormous green circle on the roof of a shop nearby. O for O'Burgers, the hamburger chain. Blake grinned.

*A fast food place, hey? Maybe I can get a fast job there.*

She jumped down from the bike and strolled towards the green O. Inside, the shop looked exactly like every O'Burgers she'd ever seen. Dozens of small green tables. Double-dozens of green plastic chairs. A line of green Os painted on the wall, with four-leaf clovers in between. And kids in green uniforms, smiling across the counter.

Blake stood in line and practised smiling. By the time she got to the head of the queue, she was able to flash a big happy O'Burgers smile at the girl behind the counter. A tall, thin, freckle-faced girl, with bright orange hair tucked under her bright green cap and a name tag that said, 'Hi, I'm Kimberly'.

'G'day, Kimberly,' Blake said. 'I'll have a Big One with the lot, please. Hey, and can you tell me whether there's any jobs going at present?'

Kimberly swung away and grabbed a burger from the rack behind her. 'Yeah, one of the kids just left,' she said over her shoulder, while she reached for a tray. 'You might have a chance.'

She shovelled chips into a green carton and filled a green cup with Shamrock Fizz. Slid the tray towards Blake and added in a whisper, 'They don't pay much, though.'

'Doesn't matter,' Blake told her. 'I'm desperate. Who should I talk to?'

'The manager,' Kimberly said, punching the cash register. 'You'll have to show him a reference - oh, and your birth certificate as well, to prove you're under eighteen.'

Blake's smile wobbled and collapsed. 'Rats,' she muttered. 'Not possible. Oh well, thanks anyway, Kim.'

She handed over her last twenty dollars, collected the change and headed for a table near the window. Propped her elbows on a paper mat covered with four-leaf clovers and gazed out into the busy street.

*Too bad. I could fake a reference easy enough but the birth certificate's the killer. For one thing, my name's not really Blake. And I'm actually over eighteen.*

She unwrapped her Big One and took a bite. The bread tasted like cotton wool and the meat tasted like compressed sawdust. Still, she was too broke to be fussy, so she forced herself to swallow and chew while she planned her next move.

It wasn't easy. Her thoughts kept going round in circles. Money. A job. A place to stay. Which came first? She couldn't rent a room without money - and she wouldn't have

any money till she found a job - but no one would give her a job if she looked as though she'd been sleeping on the streets.

*I've really stuffed up this time. Why the hell did I spend ten whole days lazing by the river, while my money ran out?*

Blake frowned at her half-eaten burger. For the past six months she'd been searching for her mother, all round Australia. Now Great-aunt Dell had given her the address of her mother's best friend, a guy called Kenny Malone. He lived four blocks away. She could go there right this minute. He'd probably lend her some money and let her sleep on his couch - and tell her where her mother was, as well.

*Only one problem. I've got used to searching for my mother. Don't know whether I can cope with actually finding her.*

She sighed and stuffed a couple of chips into her mouth. Looked up to see Kimberly standing in front of her. 'Listen,' the girl said in a low voice, 'are you serious about wanting a job?'

She nodded hard and Kimberly smiled at her. An ordinary smile, not a big happy O'Burger smile. 'All right then,' she said, 'here's the story. You're my cousin who's just come down from the country. Your name's Catherine Mason and you'll bring your birth certificate in tomorrow. Can you remember all of that?'

Blake pushed the burger away and leapt to her feet. 'Sure,' she said. 'Let's go and see the manager.'

\*\*\*

Blake sat at one of the green tables outside O'Burgers, drinking her second Shamrock Fizz. *Another dollar gone but hey, who cares? I've got a new job - and Catherine Mason's birth certificate - and a room in the bungalow behind Kim's house, where her cousin was going to stay. It's lucky for me that Catherine didn't like the city and decided to go back home.*

She leaned back and studied the building site across the road. A high wire fence. Three tall cranes, even taller than the office towers. Yellow earth movers, parked beside mounds of yellow clay. And teams of men in yellow hard-hats, shouting and whistling and joking as they bustled around.

'Okay, Catherine, are you ready now?' a voice called.

She swung round and blinked at a tall girl in jeans and a baggy purple jumper. Friendly green eyes, wide mouth and wild frizzy orange hair. Blake laughed.

'Sorry, Kim, I didn't recognise you without your uniform. And I didn't recognise me, either.'

Kim giggled. 'I thought I better start calling you Catherine straight away, so I didn't make a mistake at work. Besides, I never got around to asking what your real name is.'

'It's Blake - but I don't mind borrowing your cousin's name. Not Catherine, though. Could I be Cat instead?'

'Why not?' Kim agreed. 'Cat suits you. Come to think of it, you look a bit like a cat. One of those little sandy cats who can go anywhere, without anybody noticing them.'

'But *you* noticed me,' Blake pointed out, as they headed for the Honda. 'You decided to help me too. Why?'

Kim shrugged. 'Mum reckons that if you help other people, then people'll help you when you need it. Plus my brother's a real pain at the moment and I was looking forward to having another girl around the house. So when you turned up on the exact day that Catherine went home, it seemed like - y'know, a sign or something.'

Blake knelt down to tug at the straps of the crash helmets. *Oh wow, this is all happening way too fast. Wonder how it'll feel, living with a family again. I've been going it alone for ages, ever since I walked out on my own family to go looking for my mother.*

She passed one of the helmets to Kim and they scrambled onto the bike. Blake revved the engine and set off up the road, with Kim yelling directions over her shoulder. As they turned onto the freeway, she noticed a street sign saying Acacia Grove.

*Hey, that's where Mum's friend Kenny Malone lives. I can drop in tomorrow, after work.*

*Or the next day, if I'm too busy tomorrow.*

They sped along the freeway for a while and then veered off into a maze of side streets. Stopped in front of a small grey house with a slate roof and a wobbly picket fence. The air smelt salty and there was a bright flash of water between the trees at the end of the street.

'Mum bought this place five years ago, after her and Dad split up,' Kim said. 'It's practically falling down but she fell in love with it, 'cause you can see the harbour through the bathroom window.'

She flung the door open and darted down the corridor, calling, 'Mum, I've got a surprise.' Blake followed slowly. As she edged into the tiny lounge room, she tripped on a heavy work boot. Someone yelped.

Blake backed away and saw a tall, thin, freckle-faced guy in overalls and a red baseball cap, sprawled on the couch. A tall, thin, freckle-faced woman was bending over him, clutching a roll of bandages and three tubes of cream. *Kim's brother and mother, for sure. The three of them are almost identical, except that her mother's hair has faded a bit and her brother's hair is black, instead of orange.*

'Hi,' said the woman. 'I'm Lin Mason and this is Ty, short for Tyler. Sorry I can't shake hands but I'm doing a repair job.'

'Another accident?' Kim groaned. 'You're so clumsy, Ty. What've you done this time?'

The tall guy hauled himself to his feet. 'Lay off, Kim,' he snarled. 'It's none of your

business. Just leave me alone, can't you?'

He stormed out, trailing a streamer of bandage. Kim and her mother stared at each other for a moment and then Kim muttered, 'Typical. He didn't even hang around long enough to say hi. Mum, this is Cat Blake, my new friend from work. She's looking for a place, so I told her she could have the bungalow, now Catherine won't be needing it. Is that okay?'

She winked at Blake and Blake grinned back. *Cat Blake. Yeah, I like it.*

When she turned round, Lin Mason's green eyes were flicking across her, taking in every detail. Blake stuck her chin out and waited, fingers crossed behind her back.

'Yes, of course,' Lin said, five seconds later. 'We'd love to have you here. Kim'll show you the room straight away. You need a rest, after such a hard day.'

Blake stared. *Huh? How did she know I've had a hard day? I suppose she must've seen it in my face or something - but people can't usually tell what I'm thinking.*

She mumbled, 'Thanks, Mrs Mason' and Lin Mason said, 'Please, call me Lin.' Then Kim whirled her out through the kitchen door and over to the bungalow. A little fibro shack, jammed up against the back fence. One room with a flowery carpet, a huge old wardrobe and a comfortable new bed. And two suitcases standing next to the door.

Kim opened one of the suitcases and rummaged through it till she found a folder. 'There,' she said. 'Your birth certificate, Cat. You can flash it at the manager tomorrow and then I'll put it back, before we send the cases up to Catherine's place.'

She thumped the case shut and sat back on her heels, scowling at the floor. 'What's the matter?' Blake asked. 'Are you missing your cousin?'

'Nah, it's Ty,' Kim said. 'Fact is, I'm worried about him. You probably won't believe it but two months ago he was a really friendly, cheerful sort of guy. Then he turned into the brother from hell, practically overnight. There's something wrong, Cat, but we can't work out what it is.'

'Maybe it's just, like, teenage stuff,' Blake suggested but Kim shook her head.

'No way. Ty's nineteen now and he's never been like this before, so it can't be his hormones or whatever. Mum thought it was girlfriend trouble at first but he hasn't gone out with anyone for yonks. He works with a bunch of guys all day and then he comes home and shuts himself in his room.'

'So is he having hassles at his job?'

'Don't think so - and I see him all the time, because he works at the building site across the road from O'Burgers. It's a mystery and I don't know how to solve it.'

Her shoulders slumped and her wide mouth drooped. Blake turned away, to hide a smile. *Yes! This is excellent. I hate owing people - and I owe Kim and Lin heaps. But they've got a mystery on their hands and I'm good at mysteries.*

*So I'll find out what's happening to Ty and then I'll fix it. That can be my way of saying thanks.*

## CHAPTER TWO

Blake stood at the window of O'Burgers, watching the long beam of a crane swing across the sky. *The building site where Ty works. I'll go over there after work and take a closer look.*

She picked up a stack of trays and tipped the burger wrappings into the bin. Went hurrying to the back of the shop, so fast that she almost bumped into the manager.

'You're keen,' he said with a grin. 'Listen, things are pretty quiet right now. Why don't you get Kim to teach you how to wrap the burgers?'

Blake nodded. *Good idea. I'm sick of serving customers. I've only been here for three hours and my cheeks are sore from smiling.*

She scuttled over to the bench, where Kim was spreading out sheets of green and white paper. Watched for a minute or two and then joined in. 'So tell me some more about Ty,' she said as they tucked paper round the burgers. 'You reckoned he went strange about two months ago. Did anything special happen then?'

Kim thought for a moment. 'Well, that was when he got his first job. But he was really rapt about it, so that can't be the answer.'

'What does he do, exactly? I mean, I know he works on the building site but it looks like a pretty enormous place.'

'Sure is,' Kim agreed, glancing at the window. 'There's over fifty guys working on the site. Ty isn't actually employed by HiCorp, the company that got the contract for the building. He's an apprentice plumber, in this small firm called Macallen & Son that was

hired by HiCorp to do all the plumbing. It was a really big deal for the firm - that's why Macca was able to take Ty on. And if they do a good job, they'll probably get heaps more work from HiCorp in future.'

Blake frowned. 'See what you mean. It sounds fine so far. Are you sure you can't think of any problems?'

Kim's hands slowed and her green eyes clouded. 'Oh yeah, we've had a problem lately. Well, not just a problem. More like a total disaster. My cousin Cory - Catherine's twin brother - was working on the HiCorp building too, as a builders' labourer. Ty really looked up to him - as a matter of fact, he was the one who talked Ty into becoming a plumber. Cory was a great guy. Warm and funny and interested in everything that was going on. He was the best.'

*Was? Oh, I get it. Kim said it was a total disaster.*

'What happened?' she asked quietly and the girl took a deep breath.

'He died,' she said in a rush. Three weeks ago. Fell off the scaffolding and broke his back.'

'An accident? Or -?'

'No, that was the worst part,' Kim said, with a sigh that rustled the green and white papers. 'It was all his own fault. Geoff Russell, the project manager, told Cory to check the joints on the scaffolding - but he didn't do it. When they checked later, they found this loose joint on the corner that Cory must've fallen from. Ty couldn't believe it at first. He kept saying Cory was always real careful about safety standards and that. The guy made one tiny little mistake, Cat, and it killed him.'

She hunched over the bench, wrapping burgers as though it was the most important thing in the world. *Trying not to cry. I better go easy on the questions.* They worked in silence for a while and then Blake carted a load of hamburgers over to the rack. She stacked them slowly, thinking about what Kim had told her.

*Cory was Ty's hero. The older brother he never had. Probably even more important after his dad went away. Then all of a sudden he loses Cory as well, plus he finds out that his hero made mistakes.*

*Hey, no wonder he feels terrible. Mystery solved. That didn't take long.*

Back at the bench, Kim was starting on the next tray of burgers. Blake reached for the nearest bun and said casually, 'I guess Ty was pretty cut up about Cory. Was that when things began to change?'

Kim's mouth twisted into a smile. 'Hey, we're not stupid, y'know,' she told Blake. 'We thought of that already. But Ty was acting weird for at least six weeks before Cory died. Besides, Mum and Ty had a couple of long talks about Cory and she reckons he's, like, sad but not totally wrecked.'

Blake tugged at the green and white wrapper. A corner tore off and she swore under her breath. *Okay, the mystery isn't solved, after all. Lin Mason knows about people. If*

*she reckons Ty isn't freaking out because his hero's dead, then I believe her.*

*But in that case, why is he freaking out?*

She was planning her next question when the manager called, 'Cat! Over here. There's a queue a mile long.' As Blake darted across to the counter, half a dozen people peeled off to start a new line. All of them wearing overalls and work boots. A bunch of young guys from the building site. Including Ty.

*Good. I'll be able to check him out for myself. Maybe I'll notice something that Lin and Kim have missed.*

But she didn't get a chance to study Ty straight away, because there were four guys ahead of him and they all kept her busy. The first guy was little and wiry, with hair like black wool and thick black eyebrows that joined up above his nose. He glanced at her name tag and started to make a strange yowling noise.

'Huh?' Blake said, startled. 'What's your problem?'

He grinned. 'Your name's Cat, right? So I was giving my order in cat language.'

The guy behind him rolled his eyes. 'Cut it out, Theo,' he rumbled. 'I'm starving. He'll have a Big One with the lot, miss, and I'll have two of them as well.'

He wrapped a big arm around Theo and heaved him out of the way. Blake looked up at him. A tower of solid muscle with a tiny head balanced on top. Chunky jaw, round blue eyes and a Number One haircut, just pale stubble across his scalp. The same age as Theo, late teens or early twenties, but at least twice the size.

Theo poked his head around the big guy's elbow. 'Cat, meet Brick,' he said. 'We call him Brick, because he's thick as. You'll be seeing a lot of him, on account of he needs to eat every ten minutes, to keep his strength up.'

Blake groaned. *Terrific. A joker. Just what I need.* She swung away and snatched up burgers and chips and drinks. Slammed them onto trays and shunted the trays across the counter.

'Hey, wait a minute,' said Theo. 'Luke wants one of those as well. Don't you, Luke?' Another guy peered round Brick's left elbow. Fair hair, brown skin, straight nose and even white teeth. Like a model in a toothpaste ad, except for the worried look in his brown eyes.

'Yeah, sure,' he said and Theo chuckled.

'Yeah, sure,' he mimicked. 'That's all Luke ever says. Go on, ask him whether he wants you to dunk his Big One in his Shamrock Fizz. I bet you he'll say, "Yeah, sure".'

Blake scowled at him. 'This is a fast food shop, mate. We don't take bets here.'

She grabbed another tray and loaded it up. Checked to see whether Ty was next in line. But as she slid the tray over to Luke, the other guys cleared out of the way to let a long lean guy move forward. He was a few years older than the rest of them. Not as big as Brick or as lively as Theo or as handsome as Luke but you couldn't help noticing him, all the same.

*He's the boss of this lot, for sure. A natural leader.*

'O'Burger Special, please,' he murmured and she went dashing off again. By the time she got back, the guys were counting out their money.

'Thank you,' Blake said, remembering to smile. 'Have a nice day and come back soon.'

'Look at that,' Theo grumbled as he pocketed his change. 'She smiled at Arran but she didn't smile at us. It's not fair.'

'Yeah, sure,' Luke mumbled as they jostled away. Ty took a step forward and blinked in surprise.

'Oh,' he said. 'It's you. I didn't know you were working here.'

'Well, it's not exactly a secret,' Blake snapped. 'Don't you ever talk to your mother or your sister?' A second later she wondered whether she'd been too heavy. But it worked. Ty glared at her and said, 'Hey, Mum and Kim and me get on real well, okay? It's just that I -' He stopped and frowned and added, 'Anyway, it's none of your business.'

'No, it's not,' Blake admitted. 'I'm supposed to be conning you into ordering extra chips, not chatting about your family.'

To her relief, Ty started to laugh. 'Hey, don't bother. I know the O'Burgers menu off by heart. Just give me a Big One, Cat, no chips or nothing.'

Blake nodded and turned away. *Interesting. Ty looks totally different when he laughs. I thought he was a complete dropkick but now I reckon I could get to like him, almost as much as I like Kim and Lin.*

She bounced back with the burger, ready to go on talking. But Ty's face had changed again. He was shuffling his feet and looking as though he couldn't wait to get away.

*Probably because a huge hand just dropped onto his shoulder, like a ton of bricks. And because Theo's buzzing around again, gearing up for his next joke.*

Sure enough, Theo poked Ty in the ribs and chortled, 'Look, guys. Ty's got a girlfriend. You better watch out, mate. She turns into Catwoman after dark.'

Brick's forehead creased while he thought about it. 'Catwoman,' he repeated. 'Good one, Theo. That's right, she's got steel claws and all. Hasn't she, Luke?'

'Yeah, sure,' Luke agreed from the background and they nudged each other and grinned. Blake lost her temper.

'Get real,' she spat. 'I'm not Ty's girlfriend. I'm just renting a room in his mum's house.'

Theo looked hurt. 'Geez, can't you take a joke?' he whined and Blake opened her eyes wide.

'Oh, was that a joke? I thought jokes were meant to be funny.'

She'd gone too far this time. Theo clenched his fists. Brick let go of Ty and leaned across the counter. Luke backed away, looking more worried than ever. And long, lean

Arran came striding over, pushing between Brick and Blake.

'Calm down,' he told her. 'They're just joshing you. Having a bit of fun, that's all. Don't let it get to you, Cat.'

The other guys relaxed straight away. Blake glanced up at Ty and saw that he was smiling. 'Arran's right,' he said. 'These guys are my mates. They carry on like that all the time. You better get used to it, if you're planning to keep working here.'

Blake sighed. 'Fair enough. But be careful, Theo. If you crack too many jokes, I'll scratch you with my steel claws.'

The four guys laughed so loudly that their trays rattled. Then they surged off, taking Ty with them. *Looks like I said the right thing - which is lucky, because I'm not good at jokes. Mind you, Ty wasn't laughing either. I might've been spitting like a cat but he looked sick as a dog.*

She turned to serve the next customer but her mind went on working overtime. For a moment there, she had been sure she'd guessed why Ty was so unhappy. *I thought his mates were bullying him or something - but I was wrong. They're not bullies, they're just jokers. And besides, Arran keeps them in line.*

*So Ty's not being bullied. He's not having girlfriend trouble. He's not mad at Lin or Kim. And he's not zoning out because his cousin's dead.*

*I'm great at working out what's not wrong with him. But I still don't have a clue about why he's so miserable.*

## CHAPTER THREE

Blake shrugged off her green and white uniform. 'Want a lift?' she asked and Kim hesitated.

'I was going to check out the Retro Grrl sale. Why don't you come along?'

'No money,' she explained. 'But I'd like to take a look around. Let's meet up at the car park in an hour.'

Kim sped off to the shops and Blake wandered across the road to the building site. Peered through the wire fence and muttered, 'Wow, what a mess.' At first sight, the place looked as though a bomb had hit it. Gaping holes in the earth. Giant pipes lying around in heaps. Long slabs of concrete fitted with rows of window frames. A flight of concrete stairs, plonked down on the yellow clay. Steel rods sticking out of the earth and walkways of metal scaffolding that seemed to be going nowhere.

But after she'd stood and stared for a while, Blake started to make sense of the chaos. There was a high, grey wall rising up behind the scaffolding. *The first few floors, I suppose.* The steel rods were arranged in neat rows. *Pillars for the front foyer, maybe.* And the walkways led up to the next floor, which hadn't been built yet.

*I'm looking at the skeleton of a building. The bare bones.*

She edged further down the fence, until she reached the main gate. There was a tin hut, just inside the gate, with a watchman sitting there and a HiCorp sign on the door. Signs on the wall as well. 'Security Guards Patrol This Area.' 'Foot Protection Must Be Worn.' 'Head Protection Must Be Worn.' 'Hearing Protection Must Be Worn.'

*Sounds kind of dangerous. Although I guess I knew that already, from hearing about*

*Cory's accident.*

She looked up at the scaffolding again. Pictured a body plummeting down through the air. Tumbling and twisting as it fell. Landing on the hard clay with a sickening crash.

Blake gulped and turned her head. Found herself staring straight at two men, who were standing close by. One of the men was short and stocky, with grey coveralls stretched across his barrel chest and grey hair bushing out from his hard-hat. The other man was taller and thinner and sleeker. A silver pen in his pocket, a smell of expensive aftershave and a silk tie showing in the gap of his coveralls.

*They look pretty different. Except that they're both red in the face and they're both arguing like mad.*

'It's not good enough, Geoff,' the first man shouted. 'I need to know this isn't going to happen again.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' Geoff groaned, tugging at the knot of his tie. 'What more do you want, Vince? I've arranged for a safety audit, I'm drawing up a new safety plan and then I'll -'

'And then you'll forget about it quick smart, as soon as the bosses order you to speed up,' Vince roared. 'Same as you forgot about the old safety plan. A young bloke's dead, Geoff. I don't want to see any more of my workers dying, just so HiCorp can finish their bloody building on time.'

Geoff glanced around quickly. 'No need to tell the whole world,' he said, lowering his voice. 'We're on the same side, y'know, mate. You may be the union's Health and Safety Officer but I'm the project manager for this whole building - and HiCorp doesn't want a run of accidents, any more than you do. Seriously, though, it's not a major problem. I'm sorry about Cory Mason but he brought it on himself. I told him to check that scaffolding, Vince, I promise you.'

'That's not what I've heard,' Vince growled and the other man raised his eyebrows.

'Oh, really? Why don't you ask the workers? I'm sure they'll back me up.'

'Are you, now? We'll see about that.'

As Vince went storming off, Geoff smiled and adjusted his tie. Blake was planning to take a closer look at the site. But instead she found herself stumbling forward, as though an invisible hand had given her a sudden shove. She shivered.

*Oh-oh. The icy hand, my own personal danger signal. Plus I just realised, up in Mudgeebung, that it warns me when I ought to be paying attention too.*

*Looks like I better keep an eye on Vince.*

She drifted along behind the stocky little man till he parked himself on the corner. Watched him check the faces of all the guys who were pouring out from the site after work. Jumped as he cupped his hands round his mouth and bellowed, 'Hey, Danny! Over here, mate.'

A young guy came strolling through the crowd. No need to push or shove, because

everyone got out of his way fast. He was a giant, at least a head taller than anyone else on the street. Muscles like thick rope, clear grey eyes and yellow hair down to his shoulders.

*Funny, he reminds me of someone. Oh yeah, I know who it is. The hero on the cover of one of the books in that fantasy series my friend Nathan's crazy about.*

As she grinned to herself, Vince said, 'Danny, we need to have a talk. You were Cory Mason's best mate, right? Would you happen to know whether Geoff Russell told him to check the scaffolding, on the day he got killed?'

Danny looked down at Vince. 'Yeah, he did. But then he must've changed his mind, because Benno came charging over with a message for Cory. Something along the lines of "Put it off till tomorrow, 'cause you'll be needed for the concrete pour." Although, as it turned out, we just stood around for an hour, waiting for the trucks to arrive.'

Vince started to dance on the spot. 'You little ripper,' he yodelled, thumping Danny on the elbow. *Because he can't reach Danny's shoulder.* 'We've got HiCorp over a barrel now. Will you come along with me and say that to Geoff Russell's face?'

Danny shook back his yellow hair and stared off into the distance, looking more like a hero than ever. 'Sorry, Vince,' he said. 'I'm not going to dob on Geoff Russell. It's more than my job's worth.'

'Ah, Danny, mate, don't do this to me,' Vince groaned. 'They can't fire you for telling the truth.'

'Can't they?' Danny asked. 'I reckon they can do a lot worse than that. Look what happened to Cory.' And he turned and strode away, with the crowd parting in front of him.

Blake hesitated. Watching Vince scowl and crack his knuckles with a noise like gunshot. Watching Danny disappear down the street. *Danny said some interesting stuff just then. I'd like to follow up on it. But Vince looks like he's dying for a chance to tell someone why he's so mad at HiCorp. It might be smarter to talk to him first.*

Then the icy hand shoved her again and she went pelting after Danny. At first she thought she'd lost him but half a block later she spotted a yellow head bobbing above the crowd. He veered across the footpath and ducked through a door. Blake veered too, tripped over a small white dog, apologised to a woman pushing a pram and finally heaved the door open.

The minute she stepped inside, she hit a wall of sound. Men laughing. Men yelling, 'Your shout, mate.' Men telling long complicated stories at the top of their lungs.

*Oops. This must be the pub where the guys from the site go after work. Lucky it's so crowded - otherwise I might get thrown out on the spot. Whenever I'm wearing jeans and a t-shirt, like today, people tend to think I'm about twelve years old.*

She climbed onto a chair and scanned the room. Saw a yellow head bending down to duck through a second door. Blake dodged under elbows, squeezed through gaps

and hurdled over work boots. Popped out into a yard at the back of the pub, with a trellis and a grapevine and a dozen white tables.

Danny was sitting at one of the tables, next to another guy in coveralls. Flat face, round blue eyes, snub nose, pink cheeks. At first Blake thought he looked like a giant baby and then she thought he looked middle-aged but once she got closer, she decided he was the same age as Danny.

'Hi,' the baby-faced guy said, flapping his hand. 'Who are you?'

*Damn. I was hoping I'd have more time to make up a story. I better just tell the truth. Or part of it, at any rate.*

'I'm, um, Cat Blake,' she said, looking at Danny. 'I'm staying at Lin Mason's house and I heard you talking about Cory. It sounded like you thought there was something suss about his accident.'

Danny frowned into his beer. 'I wouldn't go telling that story to the Masons, if I was you. They've had a hard enough time coping with Cory's death. There's no point in stirring things up again.'

'Why not?' Blake demanded. 'Wouldn't they feel a whole lot better if they knew it wasn't Cory's fault?'

Danny lifted his head and fixed his grey eyes on Blake. 'Yeah, but ... it *was* his fault, in a way. He was nosing around and asking too many questions. Just like you. I reckon you better piss off quick, before you get us both into trouble.'

He went on staring at her till she backed away. As she swerved to miss a table, she heard the baby-faced guy say, 'Why's that girl going, Danny? Didn't she like me?'

'Yeah, she liked you all right, Benno,' Danny said gently. 'She just remembered that she had other things to do.'

*Rats and more rats. That was Benno, the guy who gave the message to Cory. I wouldn't have minded asking him a few questions - although Danny probably wouldn't have let me.*

Still, she'd found out a lot in the past hour. For example, she was almost sure that Cory's death wasn't an accident. What if someone wanted to stop him asking questions about HiCorp? And what if Cory had talked to his cousin and Ty knew everything that Cory knew?

*Hmm. That'd explain why Ty's acting weird, all right. He could be scared that the same thing'll happen to him.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

By the time Blake got back to the car park behind O'Burgers, Kim was already waiting beside the Honda. They pulled on their jackets and helmets and headed off through the peak-hour traffic. Cars were lined up bumper to bumper at the entrance to the freeway and Blake had to sit under the Acacia Grove street sign for five long minutes.

*Rats, I can't go and see Kenny Malone tonight, not with Kim on the back of the hike. Tomorrow. I swear I'll get around to it tomorrow.*

They zoomed down the freeway and found a parking space right in front of the Masons' house. When they walked into the main room, Ty spun around guiltily. There was a wet sponge in his hand and a large wet blotch on the table cloth. A pinkish-red stain. Blake glanced at his hands and saw blood oozing out of three deep cuts on the palms.

'Not again,' Kim muttered and then snapped her mouth shut. Lin Mason appeared in the doorway, her eyes darting from Kim's face to Ty's hands.

'Oh, Ty,' she sighed. 'What have you done to yourself this time?'

Ty ducked his head and mumbled, 'Nothing. A few scratches from when I was shifting some pipes, that's all.'

'Well, we'll soon fix that,' his mother said, trying to sound cheerful. 'The first aid kit's still on the table from last night.'

She reached for some cotton wool and began to swab at the wounds. As she bent over Ty's palm, her green eyes narrowed. 'Wait a minute,' she said. 'These aren't just scratches. They look more like glass cuts to me.'

Ty jerked his hand away. 'Gee, thanks,' he snapped. 'Are you calling me a liar now?'

So you don't believe me - so see if I care.'

He marched out of the room. Two seconds later Blake heard a door slam shut. When she looked round, Lin Mason's eyes were bright with tears.

'I don't know what to do,' she said helplessly. 'Ty's changed so much in the last couple of months. Would you believe, I even searched his room to see whether he was on drugs. Didn't find a thing - but now I almost wish I had. At least then we'd know what the problem was.'

Kim hurried over to tuck her arm round her mother's shoulders. Blake watched them out of the corner of her eye. *This is serious. Real serious. Gotta solve the mystery soon.*

A bell jangled, somewhere down the corridor, and Lin jumped. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and headed for the door. 'That'll be Shandra,' she said over her shoulder. 'She phoned half an hour ago and asked if she could drop around.'

'Who's Shandra?' Blake asked and Kim said, 'She was Cory's girlfriend. Cory lived with us for a while after he moved down from the country, so she comes over sometimes when she needs to talk about him.'

'Oh, right. I'll clear out to the bungalow and leave you alone.'

She turned to go but Kim grabbed the back of her jacket. 'No, don't,' she whispered. 'Mum's pretty churned up about Ty already and she misses Cory as well. It'd be good to have someone else around.'

As Blake nodded, a tiny blonde girl hurtled through the door and flung herself on Kim. 'Oh, Kimmy,' she wailed. 'I just picked up the photos from my last holiday with Cory and it made me miserable all over again. Just look at him!'

Her shoulder bag dropped to the floor with a thump. Shandra crouched down and scabbled through it. Pulled out a folder of photos and passed one to Blake and one to Kim.

Blake stared down at the glossy photograph. Cory Mason stared back at her. A chunky guy, shaped like a teddy bear. Big ears, floppy brown hair and a huge happy smile. His arm wrapped protectively around a tiny girl with bleach-blonde hair sticking out in all directions and spiky black eyelashes.

A finger stabbed at the photo. 'See, that's the one where he's smiling,' Shandra said. 'In the other one, he looks so sad. Do you think he knew what was going to happen? No, of course not - although there was that other accident.'

'What other accident??' Blake asked and Shandra twisted towards her, with a puzzled frown on her small pointed face.

'The accident with the rivet, remember. Cory was helping to shift the pipes for the foundations when a rivet gun went off by mistake and pinned his sleeve to the concrete. Then a forklift nearly ran into him, because he couldn't get away.'

Blake tried to picture it. *An accident, hey? The sort of accident someone could organise real easily.*

'Was Cory a clumsy sort of guy?' she asked, just to make sure. Shandra let out an indignant squeak.

'Cory? Clumsy? How can you say that?'

Kim looked up from the photo. Her eyes were still misty but she was grinning at the same time. 'Hey, Cat never even met Cory,' she pointed out. 'She only moved in here yesterday.'

Shandra blinked. 'Oh yeah. Sorry, Cat. I could see you were a friend of Kimmy's, so I figured you knew the whole story. You must think I'm a total dork.'

'No, I don't,' Blake said. 'I just think you're having a tough time. Do you want to tell me a bit more about Cory?'

Shandra bounced over and perched on the arm of her chair. 'Cory was ace,' she said straight away. 'The kindest, nicest guy. He loved his job and he was really good at it. Okay, he was only a builders' labourer but he was studying engineering at night school, because he wanted to get into designing buildings and stuff. We used to go round looking at old buildings on the weekend and he'd show me how they were, like, totally careful about having strong walls and foundations and that, not like these days.'

As she paused for breath, Blake couldn't help smiling. *Shandra's so full-on. A real live-wire. I bet she never thought twice about buildings, before she started going out with Cory - but now she's an instant expert.*

When she looked up, Kim was smiling too. 'Pretty different from Tommo, hey?' she said. 'That wouldn't have been his idea of a fun weekend.'

'Dead right,' Shandra agreed. She swivelled back to Blake and added, 'Kimmy's talking about Rick Thompson, my boyfriend before Cory, who went to the same school as us. A really wild crazy guy, into dance parties and drag car racing and anything that'd give him a buzz. Rick was ropeable when I dumped him for Cory. Kept coming round and making scenes, till I told him I'd call the cops if he did it again.'

Blake leaned back and studied her thoughtfully. *Interesting. I'd like to find out more about this Rick guy.*

But before she had time to think up a question, Shandra spread out the photos again. 'Rick just didn't get it,' she said sadly. 'The thing is, I could talk to Cory. He looked after me. Well, he looked after everybody, really. Like Benno, this guy at the building site who's a bit slow and talks like a little kid - but he's a good worker, as long as people tell him exactly what to do. Cory took him on and made sure the other guys didn't tease him and all. He was great like that. Oh wow, I miss him so much!'

She bent forward and fished around in her bag. Blake thought she was searching for a tissue but instead she brought out a small black tape recorder, with earphones trailing off it.

'That's Cory's Walkman,' she said, showing it to Blake. 'He used to take it everywhere. I gave it to him for his twenty-first, so his mum gave it back to me as, like, a

souvenir. But there's no tape inside. It must've dropped out when he fell.'

She sighed deeply, as though that was the worst part of the whole tragedy. Blake felt an icy finger tickle the back of her neck. *Huh? What's it warning me about? The Walkman? I don't think so. Maybe I need to know more about Rick.*

'Does Rick work for HiCorp too?' she asked, before Shandra could change the subject again.

Shandra opened her panda eyes wide. 'Ricky? No way. That wouldn't exactly fit in with his drag car racing. He's a motor mechanic, Cat.'

She looked as though she was about to ask why Blake was so interested in Rick. But luckily, just then Lin Mason came in, carrying a tray of cups and cakes. They started talking about Cory again and Blake listened and nodded, while she sorted through the things Shandra had told her.

*Rick was an ace suspect, till I found out that he doesn't work on the site. Can't see how he could've shot Cory with a rivet gun, in full view of all the other workers.*

*Pity about that.*

By the time she'd figured this out, Shandra was jumping to her feet and saying goodbye. She hugged Lin and Kim and then, to Blake's surprise, darted over and kissed her on the cheek.

'Thanks for asking about Cory,' she said. 'It felt good, describing him to someone who didn't know him. I'll see you round, okay?'

After she'd gone, Lin and Kim collapsed on the couch. 'I'm exhausted,' Kim groaned. 'Shandra always tires me out.'

'Well, there's pitta bread pizza in the oven and a disaster movie on TV,' Lin told her. 'So you don't need to move for the rest of the night.'

They balanced plates on their knees and watched people saving each other from an earthquake. Halfway through the movie, Ty drifted in and sprawled on the carpet, propping himself against Lin's knees. Kim was half-asleep already with her head on her mother's shoulder.

Blake studied them for a while and then tiptoed out to the bungalow, closing the back door quietly behind her.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Blake lay on her bed, reading *The Time of the Dragon*, the third book in *The Time of the Phoenix* series. Da'r il Ai'ia, the elf swordswoman and master thief, had just met TeGaan, the yellow-haired giant whose picture was on the cover - the one who looked like Danny.

*Hope they aren't going to pair up for too long. I like it best when Da'r il Ai'ia's on her own.*

She shut the book and switched off the bedside light. Turned it on again, reached over to her pack and tugged out a battered black notebook. Almost a hundred pages, covered with her small neat handwriting. Every word her mother had ever said to her. Every new fact that she'd found out since then. She read through the book each night before she went to sleep, just in case it sparked off some new idea.

*Except that tonight I almost forgot, for the first time ever. Why? Because I'm freaked about talking to Kenny Malone? Or because somehow, all of a sudden, the notebook's not enough any more?*

She got up and switched on the main light. Went over to the big old wardrobe and studied herself in its long mirror. Small sturdy body, short spiky white-blonde hair, eyes the colour of the sea in a storm. Blake frowned hard, trying to look through her own face and see her mother's face.

*Mum's eyes are brown and she's always a bit tanned, even in the middle of winter. She's taller than me too. More restless. Hands always fidgeting with something, face always changing, from sad to happy and back again.*

Blake's eyes blurred. She couldn't see her reflection any more. Instead, she saw her mother, Maureen Delaney. The stranger who'd cornered her outside school one afternoon, dragged her into the park across the street and told her who she was. They'd left town next day and spent three years on the run together. Fifteen moves to fifteen new towns. Working for peanuts, living in caravan parks.

Then, just when they seemed to have settled down - *five months in the same city, sharing a house with some friends* - Blake woke up one morning and saw that her mother's bed was empty. Seconds later someone knocked on the door. When she ran downstairs to open it, her father was standing there.

*She phoned Dad, telling him where to find me, and then took off. Walked out on me for the second time in a row. Just like she walked out on me after I was born, when she gave me up for adoption.*

For years after that, Blake had refused to even think about Maureen Delaney. She almost managed to forget that she had two mothers. 'Mother' was the name for the woman who'd nursed her and looked after her and brought her up. And Maureen hadn't done any of that.

But then, all of a sudden, she'd decided she had to track Maureen down. She still wasn't sure whether she wanted to shout at her or beg Maureen to let her stay this time. She just knew she had to see her first mother again, before she could get on with her life.

To start with, she'd sneaked off to the state library, trying to trace Maureen through the Register of Voters - or the interstate phone books - or the Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages. But she couldn't find her mum's name anywhere.

*Hey, even that mad hacker Spider bottomed out, when he went hunting for Maureen Delaney on the net. No wonder I didn't have any luck.*

So in the end Blake had stuffed some things into her backpack and run away, to search for her mother. It had been a long journey. Back to all those caravan parks and then on to the city where she and Maureen had lived for a while. Six wasted months, checking out all Maureen's friends, until her father's private detectives caught up with her and she had to go on the run again.

Still, that wasn't all bad. Once she was on the move, Blake realised that she'd started at the wrong end. She headed back to Sunnyport, the seaside town where Maureen had grown up. Asked around, discovered that the Delaney parents were dead and finally ran across a wacky old artist called Daffy Clarke, who'd known Maureen.

Daffy told her that Maureen had been sent off to live with her aunt in Mudgeebung when she was fifteen. As a punishment, because the Delaneys thought Maureen had let a little kid get killed in a bushfire. *Their mistake. I proved it wasn't true.* So Blake went to Mudgeebung and talked to her Great-aunt Dell - and found out that Maureen had been adopted too, same as her.

*Well, not quite the same as me. My parents always told me I was special but the Delaneys reckoned Maureen had bad blood. It sounds like they never really trusted her. Like they were watching her the whole time, waiting for her to do something wrong. And the minute they thought she had done something wrong, they sent her away.*

That could explain why Maureen wasn't real confident about being a mum. If you never felt as if you were really loved, it'd be hard to love a kid of your own. *I think I'm starting to understand why it took her thirteen years to come back for me.*

*Although I still don't understand why she left me again.*

Blake gazed into the mirror for a few more seconds. Swung away and turned the light out. Scrambled into bed, pulled the doona over her head and fell asleep straight away.

She dreamed that she was leaning against her mother's shoulder and watching a show on TV. A show where a small stocky girl with eyes like a stormy sea was running from someone through a huge empty house and searching for someone down long empty streets.

*Running. Searching. Running and searching.*

*The story of my life.*

\*\*\*

She woke early next morning and jumped straight out of bed. Went over to the house and found a note on the kitchen table, saying, 'Cat - we've all gone off to work. Help yourself to breakfast and we'll see you later. Love - Lin. PS Kim says you're broke, so here's fifty dollars to last you till you get paid.'

Blake folded the note carefully and tucked it into her wallet. Showered, ate a bowl of muesli and headed out to the Honda.

*I'm on the afternoon shift this time but I might as well get going. After thinking about all that stuff last night, I feel like I'm ready to meet Kenny Malone. Probably ought to phone him first - except that Great-aunt Dell wasn't too keen to talk about Maureen and neither was Daffy Clarke. So it might be simpler just to arrive on Kenny's doorstep, without giving him a chance to say no.*

She sailed down the freeway and turned off into Acacia Grove. Checked the piece of paper that Great-aunt Dell had given her. Climbed the steps to a block of flats, rang a doorbell and waited, heart beating fast.

At first she thought Kenny must've gone to work even earlier than the Masons. But after a few minutes the door opened and a guy peered out, rubbing his eyes and trying not to yawn. He was in his mid-thirties, thin and long-legged, with thick wavy black hair. Brown eyes with an opal shine, like oil on dark water, and skin the colour of the river that Blake had been watching two days ago.

*So Kenny Malone's Aboriginal? That's a surprise. His brother Brian looked white - well, rosy pink, at any rate. And there weren't any other Aboriginal people in Mudgeebung either, come to think of it.*

'Kenny Malone?' she said with a question in her voice and the guy smiled. 'Nah, I'm Shane Barker. Kenny's away - but come in anyhow and have a cuppa. My brain doesn't start working, till I've had at least two cups of tea.'

He prowled off to the kitchen, graceful as a big cat. Blake wandered over to look at the photos on the wall. A dozen black and white shots, clustered round one large photo. A dancer alone on the stage, arms high, body tilted back, legs at an impossible angle.

*It's Shane. So he's a dancer. That explains the way he moves.*

She checked the rest of the photos. Shane bending over a woman partner. Shane posed against a tangle of ropes like a giant spider web. Shane forming a human knot with four other dancers. And more photos that showed a group of Aboriginal men, bodies painted with patterns of white ochre, gathered together in a very different sort of dance.

*Makes sense. He probably put those photos there to remind him of the sort of dances his people used to do.*

Then the icy fingers nipped her sharply and she looked closer. 'Hey, that's you as well,' she blurted as Shane walked in, carrying a pot of tea. 'You're in all those photos.'

He laughed. 'Yeah, I am. I always wanted to be a dancer, right from when I was a little tacker. Moved down to the city, soon as I could, and that's how I met Kenny - he designs stage sets for a living and paints whenever he gets the chance. Anyhow, I joined a modern dance company and it was great for a while but there was always something missing. Then I went back home, heard about this Aboriginal dance group in the Territory and - well, you can guess the rest.'

Blake glanced at the pictures again. 'Which sort of dancing do you like best?' she asked. A second later she decided it was a stupid question but Shane was already answering.

'Both, of course. That's the way it works for my mob right now. We're always moving between two worlds. Sometimes it's twice as hard, sometimes it's twice as good. Still, in the last two hundred years we've figured out how to be magistrates - and opera singers - and politicians - and sports stars - and there was even an Aboriginal bloke on the stock exchange. Not bad going, eh?'

'Way faster than my mob,' Blake agreed.

She stared down into the cup of tea that Shane had poured for her. *Two worlds. Yeah, I've been living in two worlds as well. Maureen's world of caravan parks and life on the road, meeting all kinds of people, learning how to be tough and street-smart. And my father's world, a world of posh schools and holidays in Europe and big beautiful houses overlooking the harbour. Twice as hard as if I was just living in one world, that's*

*for sure.*

*But I don't know whether I'd say it was twice as good.*

She looked up to find Shane watching her. 'Sorry,' she mumbled. 'I sort of drifted off. I'm supposed to be asking you about Kenny.'

'Take your time,' he told her. 'There's no hurry. Kenny's been up in Queensland, designing a set for one of the theatre companies, and he decided to go across and do some painting in the Territory while he was there. He rings me when he can but he's not always near a phone. So you mightn't be able to get in touch with him for a while. Is it important?'

*Yes, it is! Very important.*

'No, it's fine,' she said. 'I can wait.'

She took a sip of the tea and almost choked. *Boy, that's strong. Nearly as strong as the Greek coffee my mother makes. My other mother, I mean. Maureen likes tea, same as Shane.*

After she'd gulped down the rest of the tea, Blake scrambled to her feet. 'Could you let Kenny know I dropped by, next time he calls?' she asked. 'I'll leave you my phone number, so he can contact me there.'

'And your name as well,' Shane suggested, reaching for a pen. 'Kenny'll want to know why you're looking for him.'

She blushed. 'Oh yeah, of course. I'm Blake - but that won't mean much to him. Just say I'm Maureen Delaney's daughter.'

She started to tell him the Masons' phone and then noticed that his hand wasn't moving. He was gripping the pen tightly and staring at her, with a strange expression in his opal-dark eyes.

'Maureen Delaney,' he repeated in a flat voice. 'Right. Give me that number again.' He scribbled it on a note pad, looked at it and added, 'Yeah, I'm sure Kenny'll ring you, as soon as he can.'

Next minute Blake was out on the landing, clattering down the stairs. *What happened? Shane was so friendly, to start off with, but then he changed all of a sudden. Am I being paranoid - or did he change when I said I was Maureen Delaney's daughter?*

*Oh, Mum, you really have a big effect on people, don't you? Wish I knew why. Maybe Kenny Malone'll tell me when he phones.*

*If he phones.*

## CHAPTER SIX

Blake rode into the car park at O'Burgers two hours before her shift was supposed to start. She wandered round the city streets for a while. Found a bookshop and bought *The Time of the Unicorn* with the money Lin had lent her. *The fourth book in the series. Nathan told me it'd just come out.*

She strolled back to work and changed into her uniform. Grabbed a Big One from the rack and sat near the window, eating her burger and trying to finish *The Time of the Dragon*. Da'r il Ai'ia and the yellow-haired giant TeGaan were climbing some icy mountains, in search of the dragon's lair, but Blake found it hard to concentrate on their adventures.

*They're heroes, so I know everything's going to be fine in the end. If only my life was that simple. Nathan kept telling me I was like Da'r il Ai'ia but she can steal the rings off a man's fingers - fight twenty trolls at once - talk to the birds and find out everything that's going on in the Kingdom of the Phoenix.*

*Me, I can't even figure out what's happening to Ty or pass a message to Kenny Malone without stuffing up.*

And Danny was just as bad. He might look like TeGaan but underneath that long yellow hair he was a total coward. Too scared to tell Geoff Russell the truth, even though he was supposed to be Cory's best mate. *Some hero.*

She let the book drop. Glanced up and saw Geoff Russell at the next table, talking to a man with a face like an eagle. Big beaky nose, alert yellow eyes, hair ruffled up like golden-brown feathers. He was wearing a baggy black jacket, a pine green shirt and a tie patterned with dozens of tiny compasses. Beside him, the project manager was

tugging at his own tie and looking hassled.

*That's right, Kim said the HiCorp lot use O'Burgers as their second office.*

Blake reached for her book again and propped it in front of her, so she could listen to the two men, while she pretended to read. 'Simon, be reasonable,' Geoff was pleading. 'I don't like asking you to make more changes at this stage. But we got the contract by saying we'd do the job quicker and better than the other guys - and we're running behind time already. So, if HiCorp asks me to add another floor, I need to say "Can do", not "Can't do".'

Simon gave him a killer stare. *Like an eagle eying off a nice fat rabbit.* 'You don't need to teach me how to do my job,' he said in a loud harsh voice. 'I'm the architect, Geoff. This is my building. My vision. I planned everything very carefully, right down to the last detail.'

'Mate, you *can't* plan everything in this business,' the project manager snapped. 'This isn't just some dream in your head. There's a million other people involved, which means there's a million things that can go wrong - and most of them do.'

'That's your problem, not mine,' the architect told him.

Geoff's cheeks puffed out in a sigh. 'No, Simon. It's your problem too. Vaughan and Associates are one of the best new firms in town and I was really pleased when HiCorp chose you to design the building. But if you want to go on working with us, you'll have to learn to do things our way. You've changed the plans once already. Why can't you change them again?'

'Because the plans were perfect in the first place,' Simon rasped and the project manager shrugged.

'So? We're not living in a perfect world.' He leaned across the table and looked the other man in the eye. 'I've got one question for you, Simon. Can you handle it?'

'Of course,' Simon said coldly. 'I'll get the new plans to you by the end of the week. That ought to give you time to concentrate on your own problems. Cory Mason, for example. Such a bright young bloke - just a builder's labourer but he actually wanted to look at the designs and understand what he was doing. His death was a tragedy. A dreadful waste of talent.'

Geoff Russell tugged at his tie and undid the top button of his shirt. 'Yeah, yeah,' he said. 'That's all under control. I'm sorry about Cory too but -'

And then, just when things were getting interesting, Kim tapped Blake on the shoulder. 'Listen, can you start work five minutes early?' she whispered. 'We're flat out, serving customers, and someone has to take a box of burgers over to the site.'

Blake stood up and followed Kim over to the counter. *Rats. I wanted to hear what Geoff was going to say about Cory - and about the safety standards on the site.* She sighed and heaved up the box of burgers and drinks. Carried it across the road and reported to the man on the gate.

'Will I take the stuff in to the guys?' she asked, hoping to get a closer look at the site along the way.

The watchman snorted. 'You kids! Don't you know how to read? Take a look at those signs on the wall. This place is dangerous. I'm not allowed to let anyone in, unless they're wearing a hard-hat and the works. And you're not.'

Blake shrugged and swung away. Paused by the gate, staring back at the tower of scaffolding. The building was three storeys high by now. Concrete walls, complete with windows, lifted by the cranes and slotted into place.

*Amazing, yesterday this looked like a disaster area. But today I can really believe it's going to turn into an office block.*

As she turned to go, she saw Brick lumbering towards the box of burgers, as though he'd been drawn to it by ESP. Ty dodged ahead of him with a cheeky grin and whisked up two Big Ones.

'Hey, they're mine,' Brick roared.

He snatched Ty's baseball cap off his head and tossed it to Theo. Ty headed straight for the little guy, who backed off and hurled the cap to Luke. 'Throw it in the rubbish,' he called and Luke yelled, 'Yeah, sure.'

But as he checked around for a bin, Ty swooped down on him, stuffing the burgers in the pockets of his coveralls as he ran. Brick bellowed with fury and charged. Grabbed Ty by the arm and spun him away from Luke. Ty went limp. He slumped against Brick, biting his lip, while the big guy searched his pockets and pulled out the burgers.

'You squashed them, Mason,' he mourned, giving Ty a shake. 'That does it. Trash the cap, Lukey.'

'Yeah, sure,' Luke repeated.

He stared down at the cap, drew his arm back and bowled it across to Theo. Before she had time to think, Blake was hurtling forward. She skidded across the clay, knocked Theo sideways and fielded the cap. Waved it above her head in triumph and then strolled over to Ty.

'Here you go,' she said. 'Score one for our side.'

Then a heavy hand dropped onto her shoulder. The four plumbers disappeared straight away, taking their burgers with them. Blake looked round at a middle-aged guy with a huge bushy moustache and Macallen & Son embroidered on his coveralls.

*Oh-oh. This has to be Macca, Ty's boss. The bloke who runs the plumbing firm.*

'What do you think you're doing?' Macca grumbled. This isn't a fun park, y'know. You could get hurt.'

Blake stuck her chin out. 'I wasn't planning to go for a ride on a forklift. I was just rescuing Ty's cap from those hoons.'

Macca twisted the end of his moustache and studied her thoughtfully. 'Oh yeah, I've heard about you. You're the sheila from O'Burgers who's staying at Ty's house. The one

with no sense of humour.'

'I don't think bullying's funny, if that's what you mean,' Blake flashed back and he sighed.

'A word of advice, kiddo. Don't butt in where you're not wanted. My lads aren't bullies. They're working at a tough job, so they muck around a bit to let off steam. It's always been like that. When I was an apprentice, they used to send me off to buy striped paint or a left-handed hammer - and then laugh themselves silly. But there's no harm in it, so hold your horses next time, okay?'

His big hand spun Blake around and sent her stumbling back to the gates. *Damn. I got it wrong again. Don't usually make the same mistake twice - but I was mad, because Ty looked like Brick had hurt him. Still, Macca and Arran both reckon the guys are just joking. I suppose they ought to know.*

As she hurried back to O'Burgers, she kept remembering Ty's face, twisting in pain when Brick grabbed his arm. But she didn't have much time to think about it, because the late shift at O'Burgers was just as busy as the early shift. Builders and office staff dropping in for a Big One after work. The people from the flats buying Specials for their dinner. Derros slumped over a cup of coffee. Couples who'd got hungry after the theatre. Kids with a dozen piercings gearing up for a dance party.

Blake smiled the O'Burgers smile at all of them, till she was convinced she'd still be smiling in her sleep. By the time she staggered out to the Honda, the car park was dark and spooky. *Better stick my little torch in the pocket of my jacket, so I can use it next time.*

She started the bike and cruised through the empty streets. Tiptoed into the house. Found a slice of meat loaf on the table, nuked it in the microwave and took it out to the bungalow. She was heading over to the door with her empty plate when Ty barged in.

'Thanks for making a fool of me in front of my mates,' he scowled. 'You're as bad as Mum and Kim. I don't need a pack of sheilas fussing over me. The guys were just teasing, 'cause I'm the new kid on the block. I gotta prove I can take it, right?'

'Sorry,' Blake said. 'I wasn't thinking, Ty. I promise I won't do it again.'

She patted his arm and he winced. 'Yeah, well, make sure you don't,' he muttered and then he turned and hurried out. Blake leaned against the door frame, staring at the spot where he'd been standing.

*I just patted his arm real lightly but he looked the same as when Brick grabbed him. Bet there's another cut or a bum on that arm, underneath his t-shirt.*

What if someone was hurting Ty on purpose? Threatening him. Making sure he was too scared to pass on the stuff Cory told him. If that was true, then Cory must've found out something really important.

Now he was dead, just because he started asking questions, and Ty was in major league trouble.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Blake's brain was buzzing so hard that she woke up an hour before the alarm. She ate breakfast, cleaned the bathroom for Lin and sat out in the sun, reading *The Time of the Dragon*. But half an hour later Da'r il Ai'ia and TeGaan had tricked the dragon and escaped with the Phoenix Stone. Blake dumped the paperback on the Masons' bookshelf and headed for O'Burgers.

*I'll be early again - but maybe I'll get a chance to eavesdrop on some more conversations.*

She settled herself at a table in the middle of the room. Turned the pages of *The Time of the Unicorn*, while she listened to the guys from the site, chatting all around her. Dirty jokes. Plans for the weekend. Stories about their girlfriends or their kids. *Not a whole lot of use. I might as well have stayed home.*

Then a voice said, 'There's that girl again.'

Blake glanced up and saw Benno steering between the tables, with Danny close behind him. 'You can sit here, if you like,' she said and Benno looked hopefully at the yellow-haired giant.

'Why not?' Danny agreed. 'As long as you're not planning to ask any more questions.'

'Just one,' Blake said, before he could stop her. 'I've got a question for Benno. The message about the scaffolding that you passed on to Cory - who gave it to you?'

Benno's flat face went blank. His mouth opened and shut like a goldfish and his round eyes bulged with alarm. *Rats. Another mistake. Shandra said Benno was a hit*

*slow. I shouldn't have tried to hurry him.*

'Forget it, Benno,' she said. 'Doesn't matter. Why don't you tell me about HiCorp instead? I'm dealing with you guys all day, so I ought to know a bit about what you're doing.'

Danny looked relieved. 'Okay, what do you want to know?'

'Everything,' Blake said with a sweep of her hand. 'What's HiCorp? Who really runs the show? How do all those other firms fit in?'

Danny frowned and rubbed his forehead. 'I'll do you a diagram,' he decided. He whisked the green and white placemat off his tray, turned it over and drew a circle at the top. 'Okay, that's the HiCorp board. A bunch of rich guys who know more about money than buildings. The chairman of the board's a bloke called Ray Highett. Highett - HiCorp. Get it?'

'Very cute. What next?'

He drew a line, running down to another circle. 'Next is Geoff Russell, the project manager. The board tells Geoff what they want and he has to make the rest of us do it. Then, under Geoff, there's the construction engineer who handles the practical problems - like, "Will the water flow properly?" "Are the pillars strong enough to support the next floor?" and so on. That's the sort of job Cory wanted to do, after he'd finished studying.'

His broad chest heaved in a sigh and Benno sighed with him. 'Cory was my friend,' he told Blake. 'But now Danny's my friend, because we were both friends with Cory.'

Blake bit her lip. *So Danny took Benno on after Cory died. Maybe he's not as bad as I thought. At least he's a good mate, even if he's not a hero like TeGaan.*

She tried to smile at Danny but he was busy drawing more circles across the page, linking them to the construction engineer. 'These are all the small independent firms that work on the building. The plumbers, the concreters, the electricians, the scaffolders and the riggers who handle the cranes. And last of all there's the guys like Benno and me, the builders' labourers who do all the had yakka - digging and shifting stuff and helping with the concrete pours and so on.'

He drew a row of circles across the bottom of the mat, gave one of them a smiley face and wrote 'Benno' underneath it. Benno giggled. 'Me,' he announced proudly. 'I'm a good worker. Cory said so.'

'Yeah, you look like you'd be a good worker,' Blake agreed. 'And it's a tough job, isn't it? I heard there's a lot of problems with safety on the site.'

'You're not wrong,' Danny said. 'Geoff Russell keeps cutting corners all the time. Like, the scaffolding ought to be checked once a week but he tells us to check it every fortnight - that sort of thing. Cory practically threw a fit when he found out Geoff'd ordered this cheap cement for the foundations. He reckoned the whole building could fall down in ten years' time.'

*Yeah, Cory would've hated that. From what Shandra said, he liked buildings that were made to last forever.*

She looked at Danny's diagram again, tracing the line between the board and the project manager with her fingertip. 'Wouldn't the board get mad if they knew what Geoff Russell was doing? I mean, it won't look too good for HiCorp if the building *does* fall down.'

Danny snorted. 'In ten years time? Big deal. No one'd give a stuff. Except guys like Cory, of course. He was always rabbiting on about the good old days but I told him, "Mate, it's not like that now." HiCorp's desperate for contracts, so they'll promise to build fast and cheap. And us workers are desperate to hang onto our jobs, so we'll put up with lousy conditions.'

'Cory wasn't the only one who cared,' Blake said, remembering. 'Simon Vaughan, the architect, reckons it's important to do things properly.'

'Yeah, he's a fussy coot, old Simon. Him and Cory used to natter away all the time, complaining about everything. Mind you, even Simon can't turn the clock back.' He picked up his pen and added another circle, between the board and the project manager but over to one side. 'See what I mean? Simon's up near the top but he's on the outside, so he can't give orders to anyone. He has to take orders from Geoff and the board, same as the rest of us.'

He started to screw the placemat into a ball but Blake lifted it out of his hand. Folded it and slid it into her pocket. 'That was ace, Danny,' she said. 'Real clear and simple.'

'Make a good kindergarten teacher, would I?' he said with a grin. 'Reckon I'll stick to labouring, but. Which reminds me, we better be getting back. You ready, Benno?'

Benno hesitated, pushing his last three chips into a triangle. 'She's a nice lady, Danny,' he said. 'Can I tell her now?'

'Tell her what?' Danny asked with an impatient shake of his long hair. 'Hurry up or we'll be late.'

Benno stuffed the chips into his mouth and swallowed fast. 'That man who gave me the message,' he mumbled. 'He said it was the project manager.' Then he burped, looked embarrassed and scuttled off, while Blake and Danny swapped friendly smiles.

'One last thing,' she said. 'I still don't know what you're building.'

His smile got wider. 'Funny you should ask. It's a government contract. An office block for the Ministry of Safety Standards.'

He laughed out loud and turned to follow Benno. Blake was laughing too, until she glanced at her watch. *Oops, my shift started five minutes ago. I need to get a move on.*

But while she took people's orders and fetched their burgers, she went on thinking about Danny's diagram. Geoff Russell seemed to make most of the important decisions. So if Cory could prove that something was wrong, Geoff Russell would basically be responsible for it.

Geoff Russell, the guy who was working so hard to convince everyone that the accident was Cory's fault.

Blake pushed an O'Family box across the counter and nodded to herself. It was all starting to make sense. First Geoff Russell asked Cory to check the scaffolding. Then he cancelled that, by getting Benno to pass on a message. Benno, who was a bit slow. Which meant that, even if Benno told people what had happened, Geoff could just say he'd got it wrong.

*Oh wow. Looks like Geoff was deliberately trying to frame Cory. But why? Because he actually rigged the accident himself, to shut Cory up for good? If that's true, Ty could be in even more danger than I realised.*

*And so could I.*

She froze, staring out of the window at the site. Jumped as a tall thin man rapped his umbrella on the counter. 'Are you deaf, miss?' he snapped. 'I've told you three times, I want a Special, no chips.'

Blake flashed him an O'Burgers smile and headed for the racks. *Forget about Geoff Russell. Right now I'm in more danger from that guy's umbrella.*

All the same, her brain kept on ticking away. Trying to work out how she could prove that Geoff set Cory up. Wishing that Cory had told somebody what he'd found out. He obviously hadn't told Shandra - and if he'd told Ty or Danny, they weren't about to tell anyone else.

*But maybe -*

She shoved an O'Burger Special at the tall thin man. Muttered 'Hang on a sec' to the next customer and raced for the back of the shop. Kim was in the cloakroom, changing out of her uniform.

'Listen,' Blake gasped, 'can you leave me Shandra's phone number? I'll explain later, okay? No time now.'

She skidded across to the counter and served the customer. Smiled and handed out burgers till it was time for her break. Headed straight for the phone, dialled Shandra's number and waited, tapping her foot.

'It's Cat Blake,' she burst out, as soon as the girl answered. 'I need to ask you something. This may sound a bit weird but - did Cory keep a diary?'

'No way,' Shandra told her. 'Cory was dyslexic - y'know, he got the words and letters muddled up when he tried to read or write. I used to help with his assignments and read his engineering text books out to him. He could write essays and that but it was, like, really hard work. So he never wrote anything down if he could make a tape instead.'

The ghost of a cold finger tickled the back of her neck. *Oh yeah, the Walkman. The icy hand tried to warn me about the Walkman before, only I thought it was reminding me to ask about Rick, Shandra's ex.*

'You gave Cory a Walkman because you had one too, right?' she asked.

Shandra sighed. 'Yeah, we swapped tapes all the time. If we weren't going to see each other that day, Cory'd talk into the tape and then give it to me later on, like a love letter. That's why it bugged me that the tape dropped out of his Walkman when he fell. I wanted to know if he'd left me a last message or something.'

*Me too. This is better than I hoped. Cory did keep a sort of diary, except that it was on tape. Mind you, it's worse than I hoped as well, because the last tape's obviously gone for good. A little tiny Walkman tape on a huge messy building site. No chance of finding it now.*

'Cat?' Shandra said. 'Cat, you're trying to find out what really happened, aren't you?'

Blake cleared her throat. 'Um, what makes you think that?'

She laughed. 'Relax. I'm not going to freak out on you. I knew there was something weird about the accident, right from the start. I mean, Cory was dead set reliable. If that guy told him to check the scaffolding, he would've gone and checked it straight away. Still, people always say that sort of stuff about their boyfriends, don't they? I figured there was no point saying anything to anyone, unless I had some proof.'

'And have you found any proof?' Blake asked hopefully.

'Well, I kept every single tape Cory made for me and I've been listening to them at night, ever since he got killed. There's nothing much about the building site, though, mostly just stuff about me and him. So I decided to go and check Cory's flat, to see whether I could find any more tapes - like, with notes that he'd made for himself. Except that when I got round there, the window was smashed and Cory's tapes were gone. All of them, even his music tapes and the tapes he used for studying.'

Blake whistled softly. *Yes! I've just been guessing so far but now I'm sure I'm on the right track. Cory really was playing detective. Collecting facts about the building site. Trying to nail the bad guys.*

*Only the bad guys got to him first.*

They talked for a while longer and then Blake had to go. It was early in the evening and the shop was fairly quiet, so she spent the next hour wrapping burgers and planning her next move.

After she finished work, she headed out to the car park, flashing her thin silver torch at the shadows. She cruised home, still making plans, and found a note from Kim on the table.

'Hi, Cat. This guy phoned. Shane Barker - nice voice. He reckons you can ring him any time before twelve. A night owl, right? Couldn't be a vampire, not with that voice.' And then a little heart and Kim's name, with a smiley face over the 'i'.

Blake grinned and checked her watch. *Five to eleven. Hope Shane really means it.* When she found the phone and dialled, Shane answered straight away. 'Kenny?' he asked and she said, 'No, just me. Blake.'

'Oh, right. Listen, a couple of guys came here today, looking for you. A Mr Fender

and a Mr Rabbitt. They reckoned they'd just been up in Mudgeebung and they had a message for you or something.'

Blake's stomach lurched. *Mr Fender and Mr Rabbitt. Also known as Greg and Thumper, my father's private detectives. Blast. They must've figured out that Mum's aunt still lives in Mudgeebung. It's lucky they didn't turn up while I was actually there.*

'Did you give them my number?' she said and Shane chuckled.

'I'm not a dobber, Blake. I got *their* phone number and promised to call if you got in touch. Sounds like you're not too keen to see them, but. How about I ring back and tell you've gone up north?'

'That'd be ace,' she said with relief. 'And you're still waiting to hear from Kenny, right?'

'Hasn't phoned yet,' Shane agreed. 'But I'll tell him all about you, soon as he does.'

He passed on Greg and Thumper's number and rang off. When Blake dialled, a singsong voice said, 'Southern Cross Motor Lodge, can I help you?? She hung up and reached for the phone book. Checked the address and saw that the Southern Cross Motor Lodge was on the opposite side of the city from O'Burgers.

*Good. I ought to be safe from Greg and Thumper - which is lucky, because I don't want to quit my job just yet. I reckon I'm getting closer to the guy who killed Cory.*

*And I don't intend to let my dad's hired hoons stop me.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Next morning Blake got up early and had breakfast with the Masons. Read the local paper and made a phone call. Showered, splashed on some of Lin's perfume and raided Kim's make-up. Then she ironed her black dress, added a pair of big gold earrings and studied the effect in the mirror.

*Not bad. With a notepad and pen, I could pass as a keen young reporter.*

She rode into the city, dodging through the morning traffic jams. More cars than usual in the O'Burgers car park but she was able to jam her bike into the corner next to the lane. She scuttled back along the lane, ducked into O'Burgers and dumped her leather jacket in the cloakroom behind the kitchen. *Because I'm aiming for a girl reporter image today, not a bikie image.*

A quick wave to Kim and then Blake went hurrying off down the hill. She counted the numbers on the buildings and swerved into the foyer of a huge office block. Marble floors. A jungle of indoor plants. A fountain spitting and gurgling in the middle.

And Greg and Thumper, stepping out of the lift.

*No way. Not possible. I'm seeing things.*

All the same, she skidded across the marble and squeezed between two bushy trees. Peered through the leaves and watched the two men stroll over to the big glass doors. A small wiry man, like a jockey, with a lined face and sandy hair creeping back from his forehead. And a guy the size of a tank, dressed in a green singlet and track pants with a speed stripe.

*Yep, that's Greg and Thumper. But what the hell are they doing here?*

It was a good question but Blake didn't know how to answer it. She hid behind the

plants, waiting till the detectives disappeared out into the street. Waited a bit longer, in case they were planning to sneak back and pounce on her. Decided that it was just a coincidence, after all, and made a dash for the lift.

She checked the board, found HiCorp's name and hit the button for the eighth floor. A minute later she was walking into the HiCorp waiting room. A grey-haired receptionist, wearing a grey suit and steel-grey glasses with gold knobs like antennas, sat bolt upright behind a bare grey desk.

*Style city. Looks like HiCorp must be doing okay.*

'I'm here to see Ray Highett,' she said and the receptionist whipped out a grey leather appointment book.

'Catherine Casey from the *Western Gazette*?'

*Yeah, that's the name I picked out of the local paper. Easy to remember, because it sounds like my name. Well, like Kim's cousin's name, at any rate.*

'I'm sorry,' the receptionist was murmuring. 'You'll have to wait for ten minutes.'

Blake nodded and settled into a squishy grey leather chair. Somebody was already sitting opposite her. A man with ruffled golden brown hair and a nose like an eagle's beak. *Simon Vaughan, the architect. He's probably come to complain about having to change his precious plans. Hope he doesn't recognise me.*

But Simon just stared straight through her and then sighed and shifted in his chair. Blake swallowed a smile. No need to worry. She'd been wearing an O'Burgers uniform last time she saw Simon, so he probably hadn't even bothered to look at her. In which case, she could risk starting a conversation.

As she watched, Simon sighed again and reached for a glossy magazine. Blake stuck her hand out at the same time and their knuckles bumped.

'Sorry,' she gasped and then she did a double-take. 'Hey, I know your face. Where was it? Oh yeah, a photo in one of the architecture magazines. You're Simon Vaughan, right?'

Simon looked pleased. 'Well, well. You must've seen that shot where I was accepting last year's Design Award, just after I started Vaughan and Associates. Are you an architecture student yourself?'

'No, just a journalist. I'm doing a story on HiCorp. What's it like, working for them, Mr Vaughan?'

His yellow eyes glinted, like an eagle getting ready to swoop on its prey. 'Not always easy, I'm afraid. Architects are under enormous pressure from all sides these days. Cost-cutting by project managers. Problems with the unions. Last minute changes by employers. I'll give you an example. Let's say that the company you're working for orders you to add another storey. Ideally, that means the foundations ought to be deeper. But if the workers have already dug the foundations and the concrete's been poured, then you have to make the building lighter instead - which involves lowering the

ceilings, using thinner joists and, in short, changing every detail of your original plans.'

'Is that hard?'

'Hard? It's like designing the building all over again - in three days, instead of three months. That's a huge responsibility. Did you realise that if a building this size shifts by so much as half a centimetre, most of the lights and phones will go out, the pipes will crack, the windows will break, cables will snap, the floors will be electrified and the air-conditioning systems will go kaput?'

She blinked. *Amazing. Simon said all of that in one breath. He's really on a roll. Practising what he's going to say to Mr Highett, I reckon. Wonder how I can steer him round to talking about Cory.*

'This cost-cutting you mentioned before,' she began. 'Does it cause any problems with safety on the site?'

The architect shrugged. 'Luckily, that's not my business. Although a worker on the latest HiCorp project was killed in an accident a few weeks back. A pleasant young bloke - but the project manager assures me the accident was his own fault.'

'So you knew this bloke?? she persisted.

'Oh, we'd chatted a couple of times. Quite a bright lad, for a builders' labourer. I think he enjoyed the chance to talk to someone intelligent, for a change, after hanging round with half-wits all day.'

Blake's fists were clenching, so she hastily tucked her hands behind her. *Patronising creep.*

She was still trying to uncurl her fists when the receptionist said, 'Mr Vaughan? Mr Highett can see you now.'

The architect leapt up and stormed into Ray Highett's office. Five minutes later he stormed out again, looking like an eagle that had dive-bombed a rabbit and missed. Blake grinned to herself.

*Poor old Simon. Something tells me he's going to have to make those changes to his plans, after all.*

She followed the receptionist into the next office. No more fancy decor, just an old wooden desk stacked with wire trays and spiked memos and mountains of paper. And a man with the face of a garden gnome, peering over the top of the paper. He didn't seem to be much taller than a garden gnome either. Blake wanted to laugh - until his chilly blue eyes flicked across her, summing her up in ten seconds flat.

'Thought you said I had an appointment with Catherine Casey,' he grunted, frowning at the receptionist. 'I know Cathy. Had dinner with her parents just the other week. This isn't her.'

*Damn. Better change my story fast.*

'Sorry,' she smiled. 'I can't have said my name clearly. I'm Catherine Mason and I -'  
*Quick, Blake. Think of another newspaper, not the Western Gazette. I've got a friend*

*who's a reporter but she works interstate, which isn't much help. Although I do know one other reporter ...*

I'm a journalism student,' she said in a rush. 'Doing work experience with Martin Fahey from the *Globe*.'

'Martin Fahey?' Ray Highett repeated, looking faintly alarmed. 'I'm always very happy to cooperate with Martin. What does he want you to ask me?'

Blake relaxed. It looked as though she'd picked the right name. Come to think of it, Martin Fahey was famous for his hard-hitting stories on police corruption and casino management and politicians who cheated on their travel allowances. Mr Highett was probably scared that Martin was going after the building industry next.

'Martin noticed there'd been an accident on one of HiCorp's building sites,' she said, making it up as she went along. 'He sent me over to check on your safety standards.'

Ray Highett cheered up instantly. 'Safety standards? You've come to the right person, Catherine. I happen to be the head of the Safety Standards Committee for the whole building industry.'

He hitched himself higher in his chair and began to make a speech. Blue eyes fixed on Blake, hands waving, words rolling out as easily as if he'd said them a hundred times before. He recited all the rules and regulations, in between telling her how incredibly responsible and caring HiCorp was. Blake listened and nodded and pretended to take notes.

When he finally ran out of words, she said, 'Sounds excellent. But what happens when you've got a major deadline? Do you go for speed or safety then?'

The chairman beamed at her. 'Both, Catherine. I believe it's possible to work quickly *and* safely. Still, that's not really my area. If you want to know about the day-to-day decisions, you should talk to Geoff Russell, our project manager. And please, give my regards to Martin when you see him.'

The interview was obviously over. Blake scrambled to her feet and headed out into the corridor, thinking things over. *I can cross Ray Highett off my list. No way was he involved with Cory's accident. He's the chairman. He can sit behind his desk making speeches about safety - and then turn round and tell Geoff to hurry things up, which means it's Geoff's problem if anything goes wrong.*

Whichever way she looked at it, Geoff Russell was right there in the middle. He had a lot of power. But he had a lot to lose as well.

Back in the waiting room, Blake paused at the grey desk. 'Listen, can I just check a couple of facts?' she asked, doing her girl reporter act. 'I need to make sure I've got Mr Highett's name right. And he's the chairman of HiCorp, isn't he? The top guy, huh?'

The grey receptionist spelt Highett for her. Then she hesitated for a second and added, 'He's the chairman, of course. But HiCorp's one of the Interco group of companies, so I suppose the chairman of Interco would be, ah, the "top guy".'

She scribbled the name down and hurried outside. Leaned against the wall, as breathless as though she'd run a marathon. *Interco. The big multinational company that my father heads up. That could explain what Greg and Thumper were doing here. They work for Dad but they do a bit of work for Interco as well.*

*I don't need to worry too much. But, according to Shane, they know I'm here in the city, so I still need to be careful.*

Blake pressed the button of the lift and then backed away. It wouldn't be smart to get trapped in a lift with Greg and Thumper. She looked around for the door to the stairs and rattled down eight flights. Eased the heavy door open, glanced round and stepped out into the foyer.

As she edged between two jungle plants, she went on thinking about her interview with Ray Highett. He'd really opened up after she mentioned Martin's name. She probably should've said she was Martin's assistant, right from the start.

Then her memory kicked in, reminding her of the last time she'd seen Martin Fahey. Up in Mudgeebung three weeks ago, when the reporter had decided he couldn't write a story about the mysterious sabotage - so he was going to investigate Blake instead, because she was a mystery too.

*Oops. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea. If Martin finds out who my father is, he'll have a real ripper of a story - and Greg and Thumper'll be able to track me down within minutes.*

*Still, I had to say something. And I called myself Catherine Mason, not Cat Blake. No way could Martin guess it was me.*

*No way known.*

She heaved a sigh of relief and dodged round the fountain. Headed towards the doors. Tensed as she heard the sound of footsteps, through the sound of falling water.

As she started to turn, a hand gripped her tightly above the elbow and she gasped out loud.

## CHAPTER NINE

Blake looked up into Simon Vaughan's eagle face. A moulting eagle now. Half of his golden brown hair was still standing up in a crest but half of it was flat and wilting.

'Ah, there's something I forgot to mention when I was talking to you before,' he began. 'You know how I said that some architects were letting their standards slip? Well, I just wanted to make it clear that I'm not like that. I'm building the cities of the future, buildings that will stand the test of time.'

'Hey, cool,' Blake nodded. 'That'll make an excellent quote for my article.'

Simon hesitated, shifting from one foot to the other. 'Good luck with it, then. And just remember, Vaughan and Associates is a firm with vision. A firm that never compromises.'

*Yeah, right. I know what's going on here. Simon's not trying to convince me - he's trying to convince himself. He told Ray Highett he'd change the plans and now he's getting worried. Although he doesn't need to worry about me.*

*Hey, I'm not even a real reporter.*

The architect swung away and pushed through the heavy glass doors. Blake followed more slowly. Her knees were still shaky, from the rush of panic when Simon had grabbed her.

*It could've been Greg and Thumper. Time to do something about changing the way I look.*

She wandered down the street till she found an optometrist's shop. Tried on fifteen pairs of glasses and chose a pair with narrow oval dark frames. They changed the shape of her face, making her forehead look wider and her chin more pointy. Then she

bought a cheap black scarf with the change, winding it round her head to cover her hair.

She checked her reflection in a shop window and set off up the hill to O'Burgers. As she passed the building site, Blake noticed a blob of green in among the grey coveralls. A big hefty guy, wearing a green singlet, track pants and a hard-hat.

Thumper, with Greg strolling along behind him.

*So they are doing some work for Interco. It's just tough luck that they happen to be checking out HiCorp's latest building project.*

She scuttled into O'Burgers. Asked one of the other girls if she could borrow her make-up bag. Scrubbed off Kim's pale eye-shadow and lipstick and used Maria's make-up to give herself dark eyebrows, a smudge of black across her eyelids and a slash of red across her mouth. Splashed water on her hair and slicked it back under her O'Burgers cap.

*Perfect. Now I look like an Italian girl with bleached hair, instead of looking like an ultra-blonde skip.*

She put on her glasses again. Examined her reflection and decided she ought to fool Thumper, if he came in for some of his favourite fast food. After all, he'd only seen her face to face for half a minute, that time at the market, even though he and Greg had been chasing after her for months.

*Okay, here goes.*

Blake headed over to the counter and started work. 'Hi, how can I help you?' Smile. 'Would you like chips with that?' Smile. 'Thank you. Have a nice day and come back soon.' The biggest smile of the lot. She was used to the routine by now. Could've done it in her sleep. So she'd got up to 'Would you like chips with that?' before she realised she was smiling at Thumper.

*Blast. I should've been watching more carefully. If I'd spotted Thumper in the queue, I could've swapped with Kim or Maria.*

Still, the icy hand hadn't bothered to warn her, so maybe she'd done the right thing. After all, Thumper might've noticed her changing places but he didn't seem to have recognised Cat the O'Burgers chick. Blake turned her back for a moment. Swung round and gave him a Big One and an O'Burgers smile.

Sagged with relief as he rumbled, 'Thanks, miss,' and ambled off.

All the same, she kept an eye on him while he sat at a table with Greg, munching his burger. He finished it in three bites, stretched, scratched his chest and lumbered out of the shop. Greg was still folding his newspaper, so Thumper paused at the corner of the laneway; hopping on one foot as he dug a stone out of the sole of his runner. Then, all of a sudden, he jerked sharply and lost his balance.

'Greg!' he bellowed, arms flailing. 'Come here, mate.'

The smaller man scooted out and steadied him. 'Geez, Thumper,' he complained. 'Can't you even stand up by yourself? I'm not your blooming babysitter, y'know.'

The door swung shut, so Blake couldn't hear Thumper's answer. But she could see him peering down the laneway. Clenching his fists, bending his knees and jiggling up and down, as if he was riding a motorbike.

*Oh no. The Honda. It's right at the edge of the car park. And Greg and Thumper have just been up in Mudgeebung, which means someone could've told them I ride a Honda Rebel. They might even know the number plates.*

*What the hell am I going to do now?*

She smiled and served more burgers. Watched and waited, heart banging against her ribs. Greg and Thumper disappeared down the lane. When they came back, Thumper folded his arms and propped himself against the wall facing the corner. And Greg pushed the door open and walked into the shop.

He ran his eye along the counter and stopped in front of Kim. 'Excuse me, dear,' he said, 'has a new girl started work here in the last week or so? Little and blonde, looks a bit like Jodie Foster and goes by the name of Blake.'

Kim gulped. 'The only new kid's my cousin, Catherine Mason,' she stammered.

'Your cousin, eh?' Greg said regretfully. 'Nah, she can't be the one I'm looking for. What about that Honda out in your car park, then? Do you know who owns it?'

Kim's eyes darted sideways. Blake mouthed 'Help' and held her breath. Heard Kim say, 'Oh, none of us ride a bike. The car park's supposed to be for O'Burgers staff but other people sneak in sometimes. The Honda probably belongs to one of the guys from the building site.'

Blake let her breath out in a sigh of relief. *Good one, Kim. You're a genius.* She smiled at an old woman. Slammed a Mini One onto a tray. Turned back to the counter, just in time to see Greg walking out of the shop. As he joined Thumper on the corner, Kim came speeding over to Blake.

'What was that about?' she whispered.

Blake thought fast. *No more lies. Kim's my friend. I owe her the truth.* She pushed a wisp of hair under her cap and said, 'Kim, I'm in trouble. I ran away from home. That's why I'm broke - and why I needed this job so badly. Those two guys are private detectives. They're trying to catch me and drag me back home.'

Kim's green eyes sparkled. 'Private detectives?' she breathed. 'Unreal. I tricked them, didn't I? Except ... they're still hanging round outside.'

Blake glanced out the window. Saw Greg and Thumper leaning against the wall, side by side. Relaxed and comfortable, as though they were settling down for a long wait.

'Rats,' she groaned. 'I bet they're planning to stick around till someone comes to collect the bike. I really don't want to lose the Honda - but I can't go near it while Greg and Thumper are there.'

Kim frowned, scrunching her freckles together. Then her forehead smoothed out and she said, 'Not a problem. We'll just make my story come true. I'll phone Ty on Macca's

mobile and tell him to pick up the Honda after work. If those guys hassle him, he can say he bought the bike off you, because you were going -'

'Up north,' Blake cut in. *That'll fit with Shane's story.* 'Kim, you're a double-genius. Let's see if it works.'

Kim rang her brother in her break and scuttled back to report that Ty had been dying for a chance to ride the Honda. After that, it was just a matter of waiting till Ty finished work. There was one scary moment, when Greg came back in and strode straight up to her - but it turned out that he just wanted to order a cup of coffee.

Blake smiled and said, 'Have a nice day.' Watched him settle at a table and pull an envelope out of his pocket. She hesitated for a second, then grabbed a cloth and went to wipe the table behind him, standing on tiptoe and peering over his shoulder.

Greg was gazing down at a photo. A young girl in a long white dress, fair hair swept into a knot of curls, party lights glinting in the bushes behind her. *Looks like Jodie Foster in Maverick when she wore those dorky low-cut evening gowns. But it's me, at the dance my parents threw after my brother finished school. This is ace. No way could Greg and Thumper recognise me from that stupid shot.*

She danced away and started wiping the next table. Noticed the guys from Macallen & Son, drinking Shamrock Fizzes and passing a bunch of Polaroid photos around, while they elbowed each other and sniggered. *Weird. Is this Family Snapshot Week or what?*

She edged closer, to get a look at the pictures, but Arran nudged Theo and he hid them under the table. Blake scowled. *Dirty Photo Week, maybe. See if I care.*

As she marched on, Theo whipped the photos out and the four guys were laughing like maniacs again when Ty walked in. He glanced at his mates, shrugged and headed for the counter. Bought a Big One from Kim and pocketed the change and the keys to the Honda. Turned and strode out to the car park.

Thumper signalled frantically and ducked down the lane. Greg leapt up and raced out. Blake wiped tables like a robot, counting to a hundred and then starting again. Heard the familiar roar of the Honda. Saw the two men trudge back to the corner, heads bent, shoulders slumped. They shuffled past the window and disappeared.

*Yes! We did it. Goodbye, Greg and Thumper.*

*Hope you have a nice trip up north.*

## CHAPTER TEN

Blake caught the bus home at the end of her shift. When she arrived at the Masons' house, the Honda was parked outside. She stood beside it for a moment, stroking the black leather seat, tracing the long-tailed silver star on the petrol tank.

*Hi, bike. I'm glad I didn't have to abandon you in the O'Burgers car park. But I better take the bus to work from now on, just in case.*

She gave the Honda Rebel a last pat and let herself into the house. As she padded down the hall, a door opened. Ty's arm reached out and pulled her into his room. Blake glanced around. Clothes all over the floor, dusty Lego models on the book shelf and Rabies posters plastered across the walls. The bed was rumpled but he was still wearing his baseball cap and overalls.

'Thanks for bringing my bike home,' she said. 'You did a good job.'

'Yeah, yeah,' he said impatiently. 'Listen, Cat, you've been fussing around ever since you moved in, trying to help me or something. Well, now you can.'

'Like how?'

'Watch and I'll show you.'

He lifted his hand and tugged at the peak of his cap. It didn't move. 'Huh?' Blake said. 'Is that meant to be some kind of conjuring trick? You're supposed to pull rabbits out of your hat, y'know - not pretend your cap's stuck onto your head.'

'My cap *is* stuck onto my head,' he snapped. 'Someone poured super-glue into it, when I left it on the bench at work. I can't get it off.'

She blinked. 'Well, your mum knows a lot about first aid. She can probably give you some stuff that'll melt the glue.'

'You don't get it, do you?' Ty growled. 'I don't want Mum to find out. She'd just freak - or worse, go charging off to Macca and complain that somebody was nasty to her little boy. That's why I've been waiting till you got home. Okay, you fuss a bit but at least you're not my mum or my sister. And besides, you owe me, for rescuing your bike.'

Blake sighed. 'Okay, what do you want me to do?'

'You'll have to snip the cap off. Give me a Number One haircut. It's the only way. I got Kim's hairdressing scissors here.'

Blake gulped. *I've never cut anyone's hair before. Wish I knew how to melt glue - but I don't.* She spread an old newspaper across the floor. Sat Ty down and ran a finger round the rim of his cap. Found a gap, slid the scissors in, steadied herself against his shoulder and snipped. Ty flinched and she backed away.

'Sorry. Did I snip your head, instead of your hair?'

'Nah, I'm fine,' he muttered. 'Keep going.'

Blake poked her finger into the gap and widened it. But this time she made sure she didn't lean on Ty. *He's doing it again. Jumping whenever anyone touches him. I reckon he must have bruises all over his body, as well as cuts on his palm and burns on his hands.*

*I don't know what's happening to him but it's got to stop.*

She sliced his cap away. Stared down at spikes of black hair, stiff with glue. Started to cut them off, close to the scalp. As she worked, Ty gradually began to relax, until he was slumped in the chair with his eyes half-closed.

'You've had a tough time, haven't you?' she said softly. 'A run of bad luck - unless it's more than bad luck. Is someone after you, Ty? Does it have anything to do with Cory?'

'Cory used to watch out for me,' he mumbled. 'It's worse since ...'

Blake held her breath. *Go on, finish that sentence.* But instead Ty ducked away from the scissors and swung towards her.

'Hey, quit that,' he spat. 'It's got nothing to do with you. I can look after myself, y'know. I'm not saying that anybody's hassling me - but if they are, I can handle it, okay?'

*Fool, you pushed him too hard. This was your best chance to get Ty to spill his guts and you blew it.*

'Fair enough,' she said sadly. 'Come on, mate. Turn round and let me finish this haircut.'

\*\*\*

Blake was convinced she'd lie awake for hours, thinking. But a day of dodging Greg and Thumper must've tired her out. She fell asleep straight away and dreamed about

running and searching and running. Woke before the alarm again and wandered over to the Masons' kitchen, where Lin and Kim were admiring Ty's hair.

'Way cool,' Kim said, stroking the black fur. 'Wish you'd let me cut it, but. I would've left a couple of long strands, just here on the crown. Although Cat did a great job,' she added quickly, as she noticed Blake coming in.

Blake grinned. 'It's okay. I know I'm not the world's most creative hair stylist. As a matter of fact, I was going to ask you to help me put some colour in my hair, when you've got time.'

'How about now? It's my day off - and I'd love to get my hands on your hair.'

They sat out in the sun, while Kim painted tabby stripes of black and brown and ginger across Blake's fair hair. 'A cat theme, because of your name,' she explained. They're just vegetable dyes, which means they wash out real easy. And I'm putting a black stripe at the front, so you'll look like you've got black hair once your cap's on. This is supposed to be a disguise, right?'

She nodded. 'Yeah, there's a chance that Greg and Thumper could still be around. Plus this other guy might be looking for me. A reporter called Martin Fahey.'

'Oh, right. Cory used to rave about him. Said he was one of the few people who weren't afraid to tell the truth.' Kim massaged another streak of dye into Blake's hair. Tilted her head forward and added casually, 'You're trying to find out what happened to Cory, aren't you?'

'Uh-huh,' Blake murmured sleepily. Then her eyes snapped open as she realised what she'd said. *Rats. I just fell for one of my own tricks. Kim got me all relaxed and then slipped in a hard question, same as I did with Ty.*

'How did you know that?' she demanded and Kim giggled.

'I didn't,' she said. 'You just told me. But I couldn't help wondering why you asked for Shandra's phone number. Oh, Cat, this is ace. Mum and Ty'd be rapt to find out that the accident wasn't Cory's fault. And if anyone can do it, you can.'

*Yeah, right. Where did Kim get that idea? I haven't done too well so far. Still, at least I've got Greg and Thumper out of the way. I'll be able to concentrate properly on Ty and Cory now.*

After Kim had finished, Blake dried her hair and put on her new glasses. The narrow frames looked like cat's eyes under the tabby stripes. She mewed at her reflection and went off to wait at the bus stop. Watched the people going past and noticed that most of them turned back to take a second look.

*Perfect. They're looking at my hair, not my face. This is the best disguise ever. Catwoman on the prowl.*

She bounced onto the bus, feeling pleased with herself. When she spotted Arran and Luke near the back, she walked straight up to them, testing her disguise to the max. The two plumbers glanced at her briefly and then went on talking. Blake slid into the

seat behind them with a satisfied thump.

*If I can fool them, I can fool anybody.*

She leaned against the window, looking out at the concrete ramps round the freeway. 'We're gonna be so late,' Luke was whining in front of her. 'It's your fault, Arran. That bike of yours is a rust-bucket. It's broken down at least twenty times this year.'

'Hey, Tommo'll fix it,' Arran told him. 'He's magic with anything on wheels. A top guy. I'm lucky to have him living next door. He helps me with the bike and I help him in return.'

'Yeah, sure. I remember how you helped him.' Luke pulled back his thumb and pointed two fingers at Arran, like a gun. 'Just remember to tell him you need the bike for tomorrow. I hate riding on the bus.'

Arran jostled him. 'So buy a bike of your own, mate.'

'Yeah, sure. Like I can afford a motorbike on the money your dad pays me.'

'Well, at least you got a job,' Arran pointed out. 'That's more than most of the guys from our school can say. If I was you, I'd be grateful, instead of whinging non-stop.'

'But you're *not* me,' Luke muttered. 'You're the boss's son. I mean, Macca isn't likely to sack you all of a sudden, is he?'

Arran shrugged. 'Listen, it's not all roses, being the boss's kid. I have to put up with Dad worrying about whether we can work as fast as Geoff Russell wants - or whether HiCorp's going to hire us again for their next project. He may look like he's in control when he's on the job but once he gets home, he goes to pieces.'

Then his shoulders wriggled. *As though he feels like he's said too much.* He pushed back his wing of black hair and added, 'By the way, did you remember to bring those photos?'

'Yeah, sure,' Luke said. 'But I don't like carrying them around. Can't one of the other guys take them for a bit?'

'No way. Brick'd leave them in his overalls for his mum to find when she was doing the laundry. And Theo'd show them to everyone he knows, for a laugh.'

'A laugh? Theo's got a pretty weird sense of humour.'

'You reckon?' Arran said. 'Don't you think they're funny? Don't you? Don't you?'

He crowded Luke into the corner, prodding him with his elbow till the other kid mumbled, 'Yeah, sure.' Blake rolled her eyes.

*Guys. I can't understand the way they carry on. I suppose it's their idea of a joke. At least, that's what everyone keeps trying to tell me.*

She rubbed a tickle at the back of her head, hoping she wasn't allergic to Kim's hair dye. Watched the city flash past-tall narrow terrace houses squashed together in rows, shops, movie theatres, office blocks, the building site. Stood up and followed Arran and Luke off the bus. A long lean dark guy and an almost-handsome fair guy, pushing and

shoving and swapping friendly insults.

They raced for the building site, trying to trip each other while they ran. Blake sniffed and turned to cross the road. As she swung away, the itch at the back of her neck tickled even harder. *Wait a minute. That's not Kim's hair dye. It's the icy hand - and it's been trying to get me to notice something.*

*Don't tell me those two maniacs actually said something useful, for once.*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

As she walked into O'Burgers, Blake realised she'd forgotten to eat breakfast. The bus had got her there twenty minutes early, so she helped herself to a Big One and carried it over to her favourite table near the window.

*Mm, smells good. I better watch myself. I'm actually starting to like this stuff.*

While she ate her burger, she tried to work out why the icy hand wanted her to think about Luke and Arran. What had they said? A guy called Tommo was fixing Arran's motorbike. Arran was Macca's son. He and Luke were both worried about losing their jobs. And Luke was bothered by the polaroid photos that Theo had been flashing around yesterday.

*So? If there's a clue in there, I don't get it.*

She leaned back and watched the other kids working. Noticed a man at the next table. A short stocky man with a barrel chest and bushy grey hair. *I've seen him before. What's his name? Not Tommo, by any chance?* Then icy fingers tweaked her again and a memory slotted into place.

*Oh, right. It's Vince, the union guy. The one who was arguing with Geoff Russell about Cory.*

Blake frowned. Took another bite of her burger and chewed it slowly. She'd almost forgotten that Vince had been checking out Cory's accident too. Maybe he knew some things she didn't know - and vice versa. It might be a good idea to compare notes.

She stood up and headed for the counter. Paused by Vince's table, pretending to see him for the first time. 'Oh, hi. You're the union's Health and Safety Officer, aren't you?' she asked. 'Have you found out anything more about Cory Mason's accident?'

Vince looked startled. 'You knew Cory? Or are you just plain nosy?'

'I'm friends with Kim and Ty, Cory's cousins,' Blake told him. *Better not say I'm Catherine Mason, not this time. Someone might've told Vince that Cory's sister went back to the country.*

'Oh yeah, I know Ty Mason. If he's a mate of yours, I can see why you'd be interested. Funny you should ask me about it right now. As a matter of fact, I'm meeting a bloke who reckons he's got some information for me. And here he comes.'

Blake glanced out the window. Saw Martin Fahey, looking just the same as he'd looked in Mudgeebung. Rumpled dark suit. Dark amused eyes. A sweep of dark hair and dark stubble around his jaw, as if he hadn't shaved for a day or two.

*Oh no. Crisis time. How did he find me this fast?*

'Sorry - gotta rush - my shift's starting,' she babbled, backing away from Vince. Then she turned and ran, just as Martin pushed through the door.

She hurtled into the cloakroom. Dragged on her uniform and jammed her cap onto her head. Raided Maria's make-up bag and pencilled in dark eyebrows and a scarlet mouth. And collapsed against the wash basin, heart banging like a heavy metal back beat.

Her shift wasn't really due to start for another ten minutes, so she perched on the bench and took long slow breaths, till she calmed down a bit. After that, she found she was starting to think more clearly.

*Wait a minute. Maybe I didn't need to panic. Even if Martin suspects I'm in town, I can't see why that'd make him dash off to see Vince. Actually, from the way Vince was talking, it sounded like Martin was coming here to give him some information about Cory.*

And Kim had said that Cory always raved about Martin's articles in the *Globe*, because he reckoned Martin was the only one who told the truth. Blake had kept wondering why Cory hadn't told anybody what he'd found out. But what if he'd decided to go straight to his hero, Martin Fahey?

She took a few more deep breaths and went through the whole thing again. It sounded pretty convincing. In which case, Martin was sitting in O'Burgers right this minute, giving Vince the full story.

*Oh wow. I have to be there. I need to know.*

She lifted her head and frowned at the mirror. On the bus Arran and Luke had looked straight through her. So Martin might look straight through her too, especially since he'd be focussing on Vince. It was a fifty-fifty chance - but she was prepared to risk it.

Blake straightened her shoulders and marched out into the kitchen. Grabbed a cloth, ducked round the counter and began to wipe tables. Moving closer and closer to the table where Vince and Martin were sitting. Keeping her head bent and her face turned

away from them.

*One more table and I'll be able to hear them properly.*

The next table was a real mess. A pyramid of O'Family burger boxes, with drawings in tomato sauce all around them. Blake stacked the cartons slowly, swirled her cloth through the sauce and listened hard.

'Cory Mason phoned you, right?' Vince was growling. 'What did he tell you? And why did you take this long to get in touch?'

'I've been up in Mudgeebung, doing a story on their new MP,' Martin explained. 'So I wasn't there when Cory rang. I called him as soon as I got back but he never answered the phone and in the end I forgot about it.'

'Of course he didn't answer,' Vince snapped. 'He was dead, wasn't he?'

'Yes, I know that now but I didn't know it then. I get a lot of strange phone calls, Vince. People who have a fight with their boss and decide to blow all the office secrets - and then cool down and change their minds. I thought Cory must've changed his mind too.'

'Fair enough,' Vince admitted. 'Still, it's a shame, because it means we've only got the message Cory left. What did it say?'

Martin sighed. 'Nothing much. Just that he had an important story for me, about some safety problems with the new Ministry of Safety Standards building. I was hoping you'd be able to tell me the rest.'

'No, mate. Looks like Cory didn't trust me as much as he trusted you. Vince hesitated for a moment and added, 'One more thing, before we move on to that other business I want to talk about. How come you suddenly got interested in Cory again, a few weeks later?'

'Because I got another phone call yesterday from Ray Highett, the chairman of HiCorp. He wanted to check on this young woman who'd come to interview him, claiming that she was doing work experience with me. A young woman called Catherine Mason.'

Blake wiped the last dribble of tomato sauce off *the table*. Dumped the burger boxes in the nearest bin and sidled away. *I've done it now. Gone too far. I've used too many names and disguises and it's catching up with me at last. Okay, Martin isn't looking for someone called Blake - but he is looking for Catherine Mason. It's not hard to guess what's going to happen next.*

Martin would ask Vince if he knew who Catherine Mason was. Vince would say something like, 'I could ask Ty Mason, who works on the site' - and that'd remind him that he'd just been talking to one of Ty's friends. So he'd start to look around for her.

Blake was getting ready to panic again, when she bumped into Maria. The other girl staggered and almost dropped the carton she was carrying. A load of drinks and burgers, with Macallen & Son scrawled in texta on the side.

'Hey, let me take that,' Blake said, steadying the carton. 'I'll run it over to the site for you. It'll give me a chance to say hi to Kim's brother.'

Maria grinned. 'Got a crush on him, have you? Fair enough, he's pretty cute.'

*Is he? I hadn't noticed.*

She snatched the carton from Maria and went scooting over to the door. Dodged between the cars, jumped as a horn blared at her and rocketed through the gate to the building site. The watchman's tin hut was empty and there was a note taped to the door. It said, 'Back in five minutes - Tommo.'

*Tommo? The guy who fixed Arran's bike? Nah, I don't think so. I got the impression that Tommo the Bike Fixer was much the same age as Arran - and Tommo the Watchman has to be at least sixty years old.*

She swung away to look for someone she could leave the burgers with. Or at least she tried to swing away. But icy fingers were gripping her neck, so hard that she couldn't turn her head. She stood there, shuffling her feet and staring straight ahead. At the phone on the bench.

Blake's eyes widened. *Okay, I think I'm getting there. The icy hand's been swiping me every time I think of Tommo. It's trying to tell me that Tommo's important. And now it's telling me I can find out who Tommo is by phoning someone.*

She thought for a moment. Glanced over her shoulder to make sure the watchman wasn't on his way back. Picked up the phone and dialled. Spoke to Shandra's gran, wrote down her work number and dialled again. Asked a five-word question and got a twenty-word answer.

*Typical Shandra. She never settles for one word if she can use a lot of them. But I got the word I needed.*

Blake looked around and found a spare hard-hat. She jammed it on her head, picked up the carton and hurried out onto the site. Circling round hills of clay and rubble. Ducking past rubbish skips on wheels. Pausing to watch two builders' labourers on a metal platform, heaving at a lever that made the platform rise up, like a lift.

And then stopping again as the door of another tin hut swung open and Brick lumbered out, with Luke drifting along behind him.

The big guy whisked the carton out of her hands. *Amazing. He's got burger radar.* As he stomped back to the hut, Blake veered off towards Luke, backing him into a corner between the hut and a pile of rubble.

'G'day, Luke,' she said. 'Remember me? I'm a friend of the Masons and I've got a question I want to ask you. That time when Cory Mason got shot with a rivet gun - it was Arran who did it, right?'

She crossed her fingers behind her back and waited. Watched Luke's mouth drop open in surprise. And let out a yell of triumph when he croaked, 'Yeah, sure.'

## CHAPTER TWELVE

'How did you know?' Luke asked. 'We made sure Ty wasn't around, on account of Cory being his cousin and all. And Brick and Theo and I never told anyone.'

Blake raised one eyebrow. 'That's what you think. I was sitting behind you on the bus today. Saw you pointing your finger like a gun, when Arran talked about helping his mate Tommo. But it took me a while to figure out who Tommo was.'

She flashed back to her conversation with Shandra. Blake asking, 'What was your exboyfriend's name?' Shandra saying, 'Rick Thompson - but he's also known as Ricky, Rickster, Dickybird, Tommo, that wild Thompson boy and The Maniac.'

'The Maniac had it in for Cory, because he thought Cory had stolen his girlfriend, right?' she said. 'So Arran reckoned he could help Tommo by playing a nasty trick on Cory. What happened next, Luke? Did you guys decide to play another trick - and kill Cory, by mistake?'

'No way,' Luke gasped. 'Arran thought Tommo'd be pleased but he just got mad and told Arran to butt out. Okay, the rivet gun was us but we didn't mess with the scaffolding. I swear we didn't.'

Blake stared into his frightened blue eyes, trying to work out whether he was telling the truth. But before she could make up her mind, a cold shiver ran down her spine. *The icy hand again - and this time it's a danger warning, for sure.*

She spun around, just as a voice drawled, 'You shouldn't swear in front of girls, Lukey-boy. Matter of fact, you shouldn't be talking to this chick at all. Don't take any notice of him, miss. He runs off at the mouth sometimes, 'cause he wants to make himself sound important.'

Blake looked up at Arran. The long lean guy was standing in front of her, so close that their toes were touching. Behind him, Theo was jiggling with excitement and Brick was rubbing his huge hands together. As Luke moaned and ran for the hut, the others fanned out, blocking her way.

*Hmm. I made a mistake, backing Luke into a corner. Now I'm cornered as well.*

'Actually, I thought Luke's story sounded pretty interesting,' she said steadily. 'He reckons you used a rivet gun on Cory Mason - and then loosened that scaffolding, to make him fall.'

Arran laughed. 'Get real. Luke never said that. The stuff about the rivet gun, sure. But he didn't tell you we mucked around with the scaffolding, because it isn't true.'

'Mate, cool it,' Brick muttered. 'Don't tell her nothing about the gun. This chick doesn't play by the rules. She'll dob us in to Macca, soon as look at us.'

'Relax,' sighed Arran. 'No one's going to be interested in some minor accident that Cory might've had, not now. Besides, this kid won't be talking to anybody, once we've given her a friendly warning.'

He closed in on Blake. She took a step backwards, remembering to watch his eyes. *The second rule of karate. Sensei always said, 'Their eyes'll tell you what they're planning to do next.'*

Arran's eyes told her that he was planning to grab her arm. So she took another backwards step, getting ready to swing round in a sidekick, crack his kneecap and run. But her heel landed on a hard lump of clay. Her ankle twisted and she lurched sideways.

*Rats. I got a problem here. Can't watch the ground if I'm watching Arran's eyes. Fact is, karate works best when you're fighting on a flat surface - and there aren't many flat surfaces on a building site.*

While she was thinking this through, Arran reached for her arm. Blake went scrambling up the heap of rubble but he caught hold of her leg and pulled hard. She arched and swivelled in mid-air. Flung herself onto his back and knocked him flying. He crashed to the ground with Blake on top of him.

*Ha! First round to me.*

Then two huge hands fastened onto her shoulders, tight as metal clamps. Brick lifted her off Arran's back and hoisted her into the air. She dangled from his hand, legs kicking helplessly, while the big guy grinned at her. The grin annoyed Blake. She hooked an elbow over his arm. Hoisted herself up, as if she was exercising on the bars at the gym. And bit his wrist.

Brick howled and dropped her. As she staggered and fought for balance, Theo came running over. *The little joker. Good. He's more my size.* Blake checked his eyes and spun into a sidekick - but her foot slipped on a patch of wet clay.

*Idiot, you forgot to watch the ground again.*

Theo gave her a shove and she went tumbling forward. That wasn't a problem, though. Sensei had made sure his karate class knew how to fall. Blake landed lightly, rolled into a somersault and sat up, ready to dash for the gates.

Found herself staring straight at a pair of muddy work boots.

*Whose boots? That's the million dollar question. Hope they're Macca's work boots. Right at this minute, I'd be rapt if he wanted to throw me off the site again.*

But the boots belonged to Arran. He must've circled around and come up behind her. Now he was standing over her, with his clay-stripped face twisting into a scowl. He pulled his foot back and aimed the toe of his boot at her, preparing to kick.

And Ty shoved between them.

'Leave her alone,' he snapped, bending down and hauling Blake to her feet. 'What's your problem, Arran? She hasn't done anything to you.'

Blake groaned. *Bad move, Ty. This is no time for talk. Watch your back, mate.*

She whirled round and swung a punch at Theo. Brick reached across their heads, grabbed Ty's t-shirt and tried to choke him. They all scuffled together for a minute or two. Stumbling and tripping each other. Slipping and sliding. Pushing and shoving and tugging at handfuls of hair.

In the end Brick managed to wrap his big arm around Blake, pinning her to his chest. Beside her, Theo was clutching Ty, just above the elbow. *He's littler than Ty - but he happens to have hit the exact spot where Ty's been burnt or bruised or whatever. Poor Ty looks like he's in agony.*

Arran strolled over and looked them up and down. 'Hey, Ty, why don't we take your girlfriend on a tour of the site?' he murmured. 'You can show her what happens to people who screw up. Like, falling into a bin of broken glass - or being branded by the soldering irons - or getting caught on the end of a forklift and turned into a human punching bag.'

Blake turned her head away. *He's trying to scare us but I'm not going to listen. When she glanced at Ty, his face was even whiter than before. Oh, damn. Theo's really hurting him. Gotta do something fast.*

She checked round desperately. Focused on the gate. Shouted 'Vince' at the top of her lungs. Brick whipped his arm away. Theo let go of Ty. And Vince came marching across the site, scowling at all of them.

'What's going on?' he snapped. 'That girl's not supposed to be on the site.'

'Exactly,' Arran agreed with a big friendly smile. 'We were just walking her out, to make sure nothing happened to her.'

Vince's eyes ran a check on them, noting their muddy clothes. 'Yeah, right,' he growled. 'Don't bother. I'll see her to the gate myself.'

Blake pushed past Arran. Looked back and mouthed 'Thanks' to Ty. Grinned as she heard Brick moaning, 'Geez, now my burgers'll be cold.' Then she followed Vince across

the site till they came to the gates, where the union guy paused to frown down at her.

'I'm not going to ask what that was all about,' he said. 'But if there's anything you ought to be telling me, this is your chance.'

Blake hesitated for a moment and then made up her mind. 'Yeah, I reckon we need to talk. Not here, though. Could you come over to O'Burgers after work?'

Vince shrugged. 'Why not? I seem to be spending a lot of time in O'Burgers lately. See you there - and stay out of the site from now on.'

She nodded and darted through a gap in the traffic. *Don't worry, I won't come back here in a hurry. Too embarrassing. I had to be rescued twice, first by Ty and then by Vince. Not my best fight ever.*

*But, like they say, you can't win them all.*

\*\*\*

Back at O'Burgers Blake told the manager a story about slipping into a puddle on the site and then scuttled off to change into a clean uniform. Then she smiled and served burgers for the next four hours, which gave her plenty of time to think about everything she'd found out.

*Arran's mob arranged Cory's first accident, for sure. What about the second accident, though? Okay, Luke says they didn't fix the scaffolding, only Luke looks as if he'd say anything to stay out of trouble. But Arran just laughed - and that laugh was pretty convincing.*

*I reckon Arran's telling the truth. In which case, someone else arranged Cory's second accident.*

Blake sighed. It would've been nice to solve the whole mystery in one afternoon. Still, at least she'd solved part of it and maybe Vince would give her some new ideas. She watched the clock. Handed out thirty more burgers. Saw a bunch of guys in dusty overalls surge into the shop and started watching out for Vince.

Ten minutes later the short stocky man came bustling in. He bought a cup of coffee from Blake and she added another cup for herself. As she carried the tray over to the window table, she realised her hands were shaking.

*Oh wow. I'm really hyped. This could be my big breakthrough.*

She gave him an O'Burgers smile but he didn't seem to be impressed. 'Well?' he said. 'You've got something on your mind, haven't you? That's why you've been poking around the site - and listening to my little chat with that reporter. Come on, spit it out.'

Blake swallowed her smile. *Hey, he knows too much. Plus he's going way too fast.* She took a deep breath and started talking.

Explaining why she was sure Cory's death wasn't an accident. Reminding him that Martin Fahey had proved Cory was investigating something. Telling him how Arran had

shot Cory with the rivet gun. And finally adding up all her reasons for believing that Geoff Russell, the project manager, was the guy who killed Cory.

When she'd finished, she sat back and waited to see how Vince would react. He stared at her for a couple of seconds, then threw his head back and started to laugh.

'It's a great story,' he gasped. 'Good as anything on the telly. But there's two things wrong with it. First off, at the time Cory fell, Geoff Russell wasn't swinging on the scaffolding like Tarzan. I asked around, soon as I heard. The men told me he was right in the middle of the site, where everyone could see him, taking the HiCorp chairman on a guided tour.'

Blake felt as though a giant fist had socked her in the stomach. 'So - so Geoff Russell's got an alibi?' she stammered. 'Still, you must've suspected him, right? Otherwise you wouldn't've asked around. Listen, what if Geoff ordered somebody else to fix the scaffolding for him? One of those guys who are worried about losing their jobs, for example.'

'Not possible,' Vince said firmly. 'For starters, you couldn't just creep up there, loosen the joist and then cross your fingers and hope Cory'd happen to lean on that exact spot. If someone rigged the accident, he had to give Cory a shove to make him fall. My workers are just ordinary blokes, not hired killers. No way could Geoff Russell get them to do a thing like that.'

'So, okay, maybe Geoff found a hired killer somewhere else.'

Vince chuckled. 'That's cop show talk again. Trust me, a posh bloke like Geoff wouldn't know a hired killer if he fell over one. And besides, we don't let strangers go wandering round our site.'

'I got in today, while the watchman wasn't there,' Blake pointed out.

'Yeah, and you were spotted pretty quick, weren't you? Face it, kid. If Cory was pushed, he was pushed by someone who works on the site. That kid Arran sounds like your best bet so far. But you don't seem to think he did it - and I don't know who else it could be.'

*Me either. I was so sure it was Geoff Russell that I never really bothered to think about anyone else. What now?*

She tilted her cup and watched the brown sludge slosh from side to side. Looked up at Vince and muttered, 'You said there were two problems with my idea.'

'That's right,' he nodded. 'The second problem is, you're acting like you think I want to help you prove that Cory was murdered. But I don't.'

Blake gasped. *Another hit below the belt.* She hung onto the edge of the table, blinking at Vince. He still looked the same. Just a middle-aged guy in muddy coveralls. Not a monster.

'What are you saying?' she whispered. 'You mean you'd help HiCorp cover up a murder?'

That made Vince laugh again. 'Nah, I wouldn't help the HiCorp bosses if their pants were on fire. I'm not too keen on all this talk about murder, though. Fact is, as far as I'm concerned, Cory's accident couldn't've happened at a better time. Don't get me wrong, I'm sorry the lad's dead. But I can use his death to save other workers' lives.'

'How?' Blake asked and he beamed at her.

'Well, Martin Fahey's going to write a big article, using that idea of Cory's. Might even make the front page of the *Globe*. He reckons people aren't usually all that interested in safety standards on building sites - but because it's an office block for the Ministry of Safety Standards, they'll have a laugh and then take notice. And once the newspaper people've got their eye on us, Geoff Russell'll have to listen when I tell him to stick to the rules.'

He crumpled the styrofoam cup in his hand. Stood up and leaned over Blake. 'So, you see, it's better for everyone if Cory Mason's death was an accident,' he said. 'If I was you, I'd stop poking around from now on. Otherwise you might land yourself in serious trouble.'

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Blake sat at the table with her head in her hands. *Ten minutes ago I was really high and now I'm right down in the pits. I just wasted five days, because I forgot to check whether Geoff Russell had an alibi. Talk about stupid! I can't even remember why I suspected him in the first place.*

*Oh yeah. Got it. That message Geoff gave Benno, telling Cory not to bother about checking the scaffolding. It can't have been important, though. Nowhere near as important as I thought.*

*So, basically, I don't know any more than when I started. Face it, Blake. This is one mystery you're not going to solve.*

She tried to tell herself that it didn't matter. After all, the Masons hadn't asked her to look into Cory's death. It was all her own idea. She was the only one who'd be disappointed if she didn't get anywhere.

But it didn't help. Blake kept seeing Ty's face, turning white as Theo gripped his arm. The look of trust in Kim's eyes as she said, 'If anyone can do it, you can.' *Ty's still in danger. And I still want to help the Masons.*

*So I have to think of something.*

She pressed her palms against her forehead, as if she could squeeze a new idea out of her brain. Tried to remember all the guys from the site that she'd met in the last few days. Arran, Luke, Theo and Brick. Macca. The watchman. Ray Highett. Danny and Benno. Simon Vaughan. Geoff Russell. It was hard to see why any of them would've wanted to loosen the joist and push Cory off the scaffolding.

Maybe Vince was right. Maybe it was an accident, after all.

Blake clutched her forehead tighter. Heard an echo at the back of her skull. The echo of a name. *Vince. Vince. Vince.* Vince said Cory's death couldn't've happened at a better time. It'd all worked out really well for him - but maybe it worked so well because he planned it that way.

*I'm pretty sure Vince doesn't have an alibi. If he'd been out in the middle of the site, he wouldn't have needed to ask the other workers where Geoff was, when Cory fell.*

What if he heard Geoff give that message to Benno and got mad, because Geoff was up to his old tricks again - having the scaffolding checked once a fortnight, when it ought to be checked every week? Vince could've decided to loosen one of the joists, to show how dangerous it was and get Geoff into trouble.

Blake gulped. She could see pictures in the darkness behind her eyes, like a video screening inside her head. Vince up on the scaffolding, testing the loose joist. Vince frowning to himself and wondering how he could make sure there really would be an accident. Vince glancing down and calling to a guy who was going past.

*Maybe he even picked Cory on purpose, because he was such a popular guy that everyone'd be really upset.*

She shuddered and tried to open her eyes. But the video in her brain kept on rolling. Vince and Cory, side by side on the scaffolding. Vince bumping against Cory - or pointing to something on the ground, so that Cory would rest his weight on the loose joist when he looked down. Cory falling. A look of shock on Vince's face, when he realised Cory was dead. Followed by a sigh and a shrug, as he decided the whole thing was worth it.

One guy dying, so a dozen other workers could live. Vince must've been furious when Geoff Russell started telling everyone that the accident was Cory's own fault. But then Martin turned up and Vince talked him into writing a story for the *Globe*.

*Oh wow. This is so freaky. It all fits together perfectly.*

The video in her head was playing again. Showing Cory falling. Falling. Falling. Blake winced and forced her eyes open. Blinked to clear the mists away. And squeaked with surprise as she saw someone on the opposite side of the table. A tall guy with a hero's face and yellow hair down to his shoulders.

'Hi, Danny,' she said. 'How long have you been sitting there?'

He grinned. 'About four minutes. Ever since Vince left.'

*Four minutes? I did all that thinking in four minutes?* Blake rubbed her eyes. 'Why?' she demanded. 'Were you waiting to give me another warning, same as Vince just did?'

'Yeah, I heard that,' Danny informed her. 'Heard most of the stuff you were saying, as a matter of fact. You're a persistent little devil, aren't you? You just won't give up. Truth is, it made me feel a bit ashamed of myself - you doing more for my mate Cory than I've ever done. So, if you want to ask any questions, I'll answer them this time.'

Blake cheered up straight away. 'You will? That's ace, because I've got dozens of questions.'

\*\*\*

It was good to have someone else to discuss things with. Blake could feel her mind beginning to spark again. She started to go through the whole story with Danny. Asking him if he'd seen Vince anywhere, around the time when Cory fell. (He hadn't.) Wondering whether he knew what Cory was planning to tell Martin Fahey. (He didn't.) Trying to get him to remember what Benno had said about the man who gave him the message. (He couldn't.)

They frowned at each other for a few seconds and then Blake snapped her fingers. 'Yes! Got it. Benno's exact words were, "He said it was the project manager." Listen, I think we could be onto something. What if "he" and "the project manager" were two different people?'

'Huh?' Danny said and she grinned at him.

'Okay, I'll take it more slowly. What if some other guy – let's call him Mr X—came up to Benno and said, "The project manager wants you to give Cory a message"? So, when I ask Benno about it, he goes, "He - in other words, Mr X - said it was the project manager." See what I mean?'

'Yeah, I see. You could be right, too. But where does that leave us?'

'I'm not sure,' Blake admitted. 'I'd need to talk to Benno first, to see if it's true.'

'Well, I'm meeting him at the pub in ten minutes time,' Danny told her. 'Want to come along?'

Blake hesitated. 'I'm supposed to be working. But hey, I can fix that.'

She stood up, clutched the back of her chair and groaned. Hobbled over to the counter and looked round for the manager. Headed towards him, limping even harder, and said, 'Listen, I think I sprained a muscle when I slipped on the site. Mind if I take the rest of the evening off?'

Three minutes later she joined Danny on the corner, wearing her leather jacket and jeans. She limped past the O'Burgers window, in case the manager was watching, and then they started to run. Danny's legs were longer but Blake was lighter and speedier. They touched the door at the same time and shouldered into the pub.

Everyone was there. Vince and Macca drinking together. Brick working his way through a giantsized packet of chips, while Arran and Theo talked Luke into buying the next round. Geoff Russell and the architect, with a bottle of champagne and a brand new set of plans in front of them. And Benno at a table by himself, with his coat over the other chair, saving it for Danny.

'I'll talk to him on my own first,' Danny said in Blake's ear. 'It'll be quicker. I know the

way Benno's mind works.'

Blake nodded and ducked out into the garden behind the pub. She tugged *The Time of the Unicorn* out of her pocket and went on reading. Da'r il Ai'ia and the yellow-haired giant TeGaan had crossed a burning desert, found the wizard's castle and got lost in his maze. They were being hunted by the wizard, who'd built the maze and knew it backwards, when Danny came out to collect Blake.

'You were right,' he said as she snapped the book shut. 'It was Mr X who gave Benno the message, not Geoff Russell. Looks like Mr X wanted to make sure Cory wouldn't come along while he was loosening the joist. He's our man, all right. Only one problem. Benno can't tell me who Mr X is. He just keeps saying, "He told me to forget him, so I did".'

Blake sighed. *Of course. Shandra said Benno was a good worker, as long as people gave him nice clear orders. Too bad that Mr X was cluey enough to order Benno to forget.*

She followed Danny into the pub, pulled up another chair and sat down beside Benno. He looked at her mournfully and said, 'Poor Cory.'

'Yeah, right,' she agreed. 'So that was the last time you saw him, when you gave him the message?'

'Oh, no. I seen him again.'

Danny swung around sharply. 'You what? Benno, you never told me that?'

'You never asked,' Benno said, looking hurt.

Blake nodded. *Your mistake, Danny. Thought you said you knew how Benno's mind worked.* 'Tell us now,' she said gently. 'What happened? Where did you see Cory?'

'With the man. Up high. On the ...'

'The scaffolding?'

'Scaffolding,' he repeated. 'Yes.'

It took them half an hour and three lemonades to coax the full story out of Benno. In the end Danny said, 'Okay, let's see if I got it straight. Cory wandered off, while everyone was waiting for the concrete pour, and you decided to tag along behind him. The man - Mr X - was waiting for Cory on the scaffolding. He and Cory shouted at each other and Cory waved his Walkman around. Then the man grabbed the Walkman and shoved Cory and - and Cory fell.'

'Bad man,' Benno agreed. 'Poor Cory.' He turned to Blake and added, 'Say what the man did next.'

Blake grinned. *Benno's enjoying this. He likes having his story played back to him.*

'The man took out the tape and threw the Walkman over the rail,' she went on. 'He climbed down the scaffolding and swung across to the first floor of the building, where you were. So you hid round the corner and heard him drop the tape into a big hole. Thanks, Benno. That was terrific. Can I buy you another lemonade?'

Benno's flat face crumpled. 'No more drinks,' he begged, clutching his belt. 'I need to go to the boys' room.'

As he scuttled off to the toilet, Blake and Danny slumped down in their chairs. They stared at each other in silence for a moment and then Danny said, 'Boy, oh boy. Geoff Russell's private eyes have been prowling round the site for the last few days - but we just found out more than them in half an hour flat. So it's true. Mr X shafted Cory. Do you reckon Benno'll tell us who he is, if I push a bit harder? I'd kind of like to know the name of the man who killed my mate.'

'Nah, don't push Benno,' Blake said. 'You'll only make him miserable. Besides, there's another way we can identify Mr X.'

'Like what?'

'Like Cory's tape. Shandra said Cory used to talk into the tape recorder all the time. And he must've said something about Mr X. That's why Mr X dropped the tape down the big hole. The lift shaft, right?'

Danny nodded. 'Mr X isn't stupid. The lift shaft's a good hiding place, because the lifts are installed by a special crew. Even if they found the tape, they wouldn't know nothing about Cory and his Walkman.'

'Have the lifts been put in yet?' Blake asked.

'No way. Not till the whole building's finished. So the tape's probably still there - but listen, don't you go snooping around and looking for it. I'll check first thing in the morning, soon as the site's open.'

Blake yawned and reached for her jacket. 'Trust me, Danny, I'm too tired to go snooping. Gotta head home and flake. Give me a call tomorrow, if you find anything. And thanks.'

She said goodbye to Benno on her way out. Dodged to avoid Arran's mob and then dodged again, when she saw Martin Fahey chatting with Vince and Macca. Struggled through the crowd and popped out into the street.

It was getting dark by now. Blake hurried up the hill towards the bus stop and paused on the corner of the lane beside the building site. She checked over her shoulder, to make sure no one was following her.

And ducked into the lane.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The wire fence was easy to climb. Blake went up it like a monkey, hoisted herself over the barbed wire and shinned down the other side. As she hit the ground, the icy hand tapped her on the shoulder.

*Yeah, right. I know this is dangerous. But I'm way too curious. Can't possibly wait till tomorrow.*

She dodged behind a stack of concrete pipes and looked around. The sign near the gate said there was a security patrol at night. Still, the security guys would basically be on the watch for thieves who were trying to steal the equipment or whatever. It shouldn't be too hard to avoid them.

Blake stepped out into the open and made her way across the site. Swerving past mounds of clay. Hiding behind rubbish skips. Peering round the corners of the tin huts where the workers stored their gear. Ten minutes later she was darting across to the concrete wall of the ground floor. She felt her way along the wall till she found the doorway. Took a deep breath and walked in.

It was dark inside. Very dark. Blake shuddered and then remembered her pocket torch, still stashed in her jacket. She switched it on and flashed it around. But the thin beam of light only stretched half a metre ahead, so she shuffled forward, one step at a time, till she came to a concrete box with an opening at the front.

*The lift shaft. Here goes.*

Blake swung the torch beam down and saw a deep hole, littered with rubble. She dropped into the shaft and began to search. Starting at the right-hand corner and working across to the left. Turning over lumps of clay and kicking through drifts of cement dust. Jumping as the torch light glinted on a rusty beer can.

And ignoring the icy finger, still prodding at her ribs.

Then, just when she was deciding that Mr X must've come back to collect the tape, she found it under a rotting plane leaf. She wiped it and stuffed it into her pocket. Tucked the torch between her teeth, hooked her hands over the edge of the hole and heaved herself out. As she straightened up, a hand closed round her wrist and a man's voice said, 'Thanks. I'll have that tape now.'

She gasped and dropped the torch. Bent to pick it up. Jerked at the man's hand and sent him flying. And ran. A frantic dash out into the open air, followed by a swift glance across slippery clay and hills of rubble.

*No way. Whoever he is, he knows the building site. I can't out-run him there.*

Another look around and then she was scrambling onto the metal platform she'd spotted yesterday. Hauling at the lever. Hoping she'd seen enough to get it right. *If this works, I'll be able to swing across to the scaffolding. I can hide on the walkways and wait till the security patrol turns up.*

She gritted her teeth and pumped the lever. The counterweight shifted and the metal platform started to move. Blake grunted and heaved. Counted the struts of the scaffolding as the platform rose upwards. Decided she was high enough to stop for a second and see what Mr X was doing.

She peered down at the ground. No one there. But as she turned back, she noticed a splotch of white at the edge of the platform, like a pale fungus. She looked closer and the splotch turned into a pair of hands, gripping the metal. Mr X's hands.

Blake gulped. *I could stamp on his fingers. Then he'd fall - and maybe break his back, like Cory. No, can't do that. I'll have to try something else.*

She strained frantically at the lever. The platform went on rising, till she could see the walkway round the first floor. Blake stretched her arm out, caught hold of the iron rail and jackknifed over it. And ran again, without looking back.

The metal planks of the walkway clattered noisily as she pelted along. It didn't feel safe. The minute she spotted an open window, she dived straight through. Darkness, twenty times blacker than before. Blake thrust her hand into her pocket and pulled out the torch. She shone it across concrete walls and corridors. Checked a couple of doorways. Gasped as the thin beam was swallowed up by the black hole of the lift shaft.

*Better stay away from there.*

Then footsteps thudded on the walkway. Blake switched the torch off and groped through the darkness, trying to come up with a plan. *No lifts, of course, but maybe they've put the stairs in. Yes, come to think of it, I'm sure they have. I saw a block of*

*stairs out the front of the building, back on my first day at O'Burgers. They're not there now, which means the workers must've installed them.*

The stairs in an office block were usually at the side, not down the middle. So Blake turned and crept along the corridor, one hand brushing against the wall to guide her. She edged round a corner. Got trapped in a dead end. Backed out, heart beating fast, and tiptoed on.

Finally her foot nudged out into empty space. Blake held her breath and pointed her toe downwards. Smiled in the darkness as her runner bumped into a concrete step. Then jerked her foot back, as a set of icy fingers dug deep into her shoulders.

*A double-strength danger alert. I better pay attention this time.*

She thumbed the switch on the torch and aimed its narrow beam down the stairs. A shadowy figure was waiting for her on the third step. Blake flicked the switch and went darting off. Through the maze of corridors. Back the way she'd come. Heading for the open window and the walkway.

But as she sidled over to the window, she saw a smudge of shadow in one corner. The shape of a man's head, outlined against the night sky. *Blast. Mr X got here first and he's hiding out on the walkway. I feel like Da'r il Ai'ia running through the wizard's castle, with the wizard one step ahead all the time, because he built the maze and knew every twist and turn.*

*If only I'd managed to finish The Time of the Unicorn this afternoon. Then I'd know how Da'r il Ai'ia escaped.*

Still, it wasn't hard to work out what she ought to do next. Blake dropped to her knees and crawled past the window. Padded down to the other end of the building. Flattened herself against the wall and peered out through the last window in the row. No shadowy figure on the walkway. Mr X seemed to have vanished.

*Damn. He's come back inside to look for me. In which case, I better get out of here fast.*

She pushed at the pane of glass. The windows hadn't been sealed yet, so with a bit of juggling Blake was able to lift the glass out of the frame. She leaned forward and reached for the rail of the scaffolding, reminding herself not to look down. As she swung out, her foot caught on the window sill and for three scary seconds she hung over the steep drop. Then she wrenched and tugged and crashed onto the metal planks.

The noise echoed out across the building site. Blake swore and leapt to her feet. Only one way to go. The walkway ended right behind her, with a rail between her and the drop. So she turned and took a step forward. Felt the icy hand grab her and shake her. Shook even harder as the metal planks shuddered under her runners.

And the wizard swung himself out from beneath the walkway, hurdling the rail and landing lightly in front of her.

*No, not the wizard. The man who's been chasing me. Although, as matter of fact, he*

is like *Da'r il Ai'ia's wizard, in a way.*

'Well, well,' he said. 'What a coincidence. This is the place where Cory fell.'

\*\*\*

Blake backed against the rail, staring at Simon Vaughan. The architect's yellow eyes were bright and pitiless. *An eagle preparing for the kill.* She dug her fingernails into her palms and forced herself to smile.

'Tell me about Cory,' she said.

Simon's eyes softened. 'A nice young man. Genuinely interested in my plans. He used to spend his weekends looking at old buildings and then we'd discuss them together. Like a teacher with a very bright student at first - but by the end he seemed almost like an equal. Sharing his dreams with me. Asking all kinds of questions. Too many questions, perhaps.'

'Too many questions?' Blake repeated softly and the architect nodded.

'You know I had to add an extra floor to the office block, don't you? But Geoff Russell had already made me change the plans once before, to cut the cost of the building. Cory asked about the changes and I lent him the new plans, because I thought we were friends. Then he came back next day and accused me of copping out and designing a building that could fall down in ten year's time. It was ridiculous, really. Cory wasn't even an architect, for heaven's sake. Just an ordinary builders' labourer.'

'Maybe. But he was right, wasn't he?'

Simon bent his arm to hide his face, like an eagle with a broken wing. 'Yes, Cory was right,' he whispered. 'Worse still, he said that, if I wouldn't stand up to Geoff Russell, he'd tell the whole story to some reporter. He didn't understand. I believe in good design, just as much as he did, but I only started Vaughan and Associates a year ago and I need the HiCorp contract. So I asked Cory to meet me here, to give us a chance to talk properly. I warned him that I'd deny everything - and that's when he told me he'd taped our conversations.'

'Right,' Blake breathed. 'What happened then?'

Simon gazed out across the site. 'I was upset,' he said. 'I felt as though he'd betrayed me. I grabbed his Walkman and - well, I suppose Cory must've stumbled. He bumped into the rail, where I'd been fiddling with the joist while I was waiting for him. And next minute he was falling.'

Blake sighed. *So it was an accident, after all.* Then she checked her memory, frowned at Simon and said, 'Hang on a second. You're talking as though you just happened to be playing around with the joist - but that's not true. You'd already given a fake message to Benno, telling Cory not to test the scaffolding. So you must've been planning to kill Cory all along.'

The minute she'd said it, she realised she'd made a mistake. Simon swung on her, hands hooked like claws. 'No!' he screamed. 'No. It was an accident. He just fell. Like you.'

He slammed her against the rail. Blake yelped and shut her eyes. It took her half a second to realise she wasn't falling. *Because Simon didn't have time to loosen the joist tonight.* But then the architect reached down to grab her ankles and tug. Throwing her off balance. Tipping her backwards.

As her head dangled over the drop, she heard a voice somewhere in the distance, through the rushing sound in her ears. 'Hold on, Mr Vaughan,' it said. 'That's not a real smart idea.'

Simon's hands clutched her tighter and then let go. She clung to the rail and heaved herself back to safety.

And collapsed onto the metal planks of the walkway, staring up at the yellow-haired giant TeGaan.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Blake leaned down to rub her bruised ankles. Looked up and said, 'Thanks for rescuing me, Danny. Thanks to all of you, in fact.'

Four guys beamed back at her. Martin Fahey, Danny, Benno and Vince, sitting in a circle round a cafe table and looking very pleased with themselves.

*Well, they've got a right to be pleased. Danny figured I'd gone off to raid the site. Vince joined in, because he'd seen Simon dash out after me, and Martin came along for the ride. And they all wrestled Simon off the scaffolding and handed him over to the cops.*

*What a night. I'm never going near another building site, as long as I live. I end up being rescued by some guy, every time.*

Danny punched her on the arm. 'You're all right, kid. I thought you were a bloody nuisance, first time I met you, but now I reckon you're a real hero.'

*You too, Danny. As a matter of fact, you're more of a hero than TeGaan. He's brave all the time, which is easy. But you taught yourself how to be brave.*

Vince helped himself to another slice of pizza. 'Yeah, you done good,' he told Blake. 'Then again, we all did pretty well out of this. After tonight, Martin reckons I'll be a major media star - for at least fifteen minutes. HiCorp'll definitely have to listen to me now.'

'And I've got two great stories for the *Globe*,' Martin went on. 'The story Vince gave me, plus the inside story on the murder of Cory Mason. I can tell you, I was pretty surprised when I found out that Catherine Mason was really my old friend Blake - but hey, it was a piece of luck for me. You drive a hard bargain, Blake. But I promise I'll stop trying to find out who you are, In return for that copy of Cory's tape.'

*Excellent. I don't need to have Martin chasing me round the country, as well as Greg and Thumper.*

The reporter grinned at her and turned to the next guy in the circle. "What about you, Benno?" he asked. 'How do you feel?'

Benno puffed his chest out and said, 'I saved the nice lady.' He thought for a moment, round eyes blinking fast, and added, 'But Mr Vaughan was sad.'

'Don't you believe it,' Danny cut in. 'That guy was bad, not sad. He deserves to be put away forever, after what he did to Cory. That's what I got out of this whole thing. Revenge.'

There was silence for a minute or two. *Because we're all thinking about Simon - and Cory.* Blake propped her chin on her hands and stared into the distance, seeing a chunky guy shaped like a teddy bear, with big ears, floppy brown hair and a huge happy smile.

*I never even met you, Cory Mason. But I miss you, just the same.*

All of a sudden her jaw cracked open in a yawn. Her elbow slipped and Vince caught her as she lurched sideways. 'You're falling asleep on your feet,' he said. 'Come on, I'll drive you home.'

\*\*\*

Blake padded down the corridor and opened the door to the lounge room. Light dazzled her and she blinked hard. 'Cat!' Kim squeaked, racing over and hugging her. 'We thought those private detectives must've kidnapped you. Ty dropped into O'Burgers, to see if you were okay, and they said you'd gone. Are you all right? What happened?'

Blake sank into the nearest chair. 'It's a long story,' she began and then she told the Masons everything she'd found out. By the time she'd finished, Ty was blowing his nose hard, Lin was sniffing and Kim's freckled face was streaked with tears.

'Oh, Cat,' she sobbed. 'Thanks. No one can bring Cory back - but at least now we know it *wasn't* his fault.'

'Yeah, I'm proud of you, Cat,' Lin told her. 'But most of all. I'm glad you didn't get hurt. You took a big risk tonight, y'know. I couldn't stand losing two of my family like that.'

Blake wriggled in the chair. *Her family? Lin thinks I'm part of her family?* She turned her head away and glanced at Ty, to see whether he was looking relieved about Simon. But before she could check his face, he jumped up and strode out of the room.

Blake leapt to her feet and followed. 'Well?' she said, scurrying after him. 'How do you feel? Will you be safe now?'

'Huh?' he grunted. 'Safe? What are you on about? Listen, I've been stuck in the

lounge room all night, trying to calm Mum and Lin down. Right now I really need a shower.'

He pushed past her and slammed the bathroom door. Blake slumped against the wall, frowning to herself. *Ty ought to be pleased that Simon can't hassle him any more. But he didn't even seem to know what I was talking about. And, come to think of it, Simon never mentioned Ty at all.*

*Oh wow. What if I got it all wrong? Maybe it's not over yet.*

She stood there, listening to the rush of the water while she tried to think. After a while, she realised Ty had turned off the shower. Blake hesitated. Took a step forward. Flung the bathroom door open.

And let out a yell of shock.

Ty was whisking the towel round his waist - but that left his back and chest bare. His skin looked like something out of a horror movie. Old burns and new burns. Purple and yellow bruises. White scars and fresh cuts, oozing watery liquid.

As she stood and stared, Kim and Lin came running up. 'Who did this to you?' Lin demanded and Blake added, 'Was it Simon Vaughan?'

'That wuss?' said Ty. 'No way. If you must know, it was Arran and Theo and Brick. Luke too, although he mostly just watches. But he gets a kick out of it, because it used to happen to him before I came along.'

Kim blinked. 'Arran? But he's so cool. I never would've guessed that he was a bully.'

'Well, he is,' Lin said grimly, gazing at her son's back. 'You can report them for this, y'know.'

Ty pulled his t-shirt on, wincing as the cloth touched his skin. 'You don't get it, do you?' he snarled. 'You're women. You don't understand the way guys work. Arran and the others aren't bullies. All this stuff - it's just, like, a joke.'

'Yeah, right,' Blake said. 'It didn't look real funny to me.'

'So? That's because you're a chick - and this is a guy thing. They've all been through it themselves. They reckon it toughens you up, turns you into a real man. I have to prove I can take it, if I want to fit in.' Lin groaned softly and he swung towards her, saying, 'It's important, Mum. Don't try to report them or nothing. I'll just swear it isn't true.'

\*\*\*

Blake sprawled on her bed, with *The Time of the Unicorn* propped on the pillows. Da'r il Ai'ia had let herself get caught by the wizard, in order to talk him into helping her catch the unicorn. It seemed like a smart move - but Blake couldn't concentrate properly. She kept seeing the scars and bruises on Ty's back and hearing him say, 'It's just a joke.'

*Some joke. They branded him with a soldering iron. Set him on fire twice. Hung him off a fork-lift and punched him. Nailed him to a piece of chipboard and threw him in a bin of broken glass. And Ty spent an hour trying to convince us that it was normal.*

*Normal? I don't think so. Okay, Macca said that in his day they used to send the new apprentices out for striped paint or left-handed hammers. But this is a long way on from that.*

She turned out the light and lay on her back in the darkness, wondering how she could help Ty now. Drop a hint to Macca? *No, Arran's his son, so chances are that he'd believe Arran, ahead of Ty.* Tell Vince? *No, Ty would deny the whole thing.* Yell at Arran and Brick and Theo? *Dream on. Like they'd listen to me.*

*There's nothing I can do. Fact is, I've failed.*

Blake rolled over and buried her head in the pillow. Told herself to stop thinking about it and then instantly started thinking again. She went through the whole thing three more times and every time she had to admit she'd failed. Finally she fell asleep and dreamt about running and searching.

Running away from an all-powerful wizard.

Searching for a beautiful elusive unicorn.

When she woke next morning, she wasn't sure where she was. She sat up in bed and looked around the bungalow. Remembered the Masons. Ty's back, covered with sores. Lin and Kim, trying to stop themselves from yelling at him or crying.

*Lin said I was family. I have to help them. But how?*

She trudged over to the kitchen and made a cup of coffee. Slouched against the bench, staring out at the grey sky. When the phone shrilled, she looked at it blankly for a while before she picked it up.

'Blake?' said Shane's voice. 'Is that you? I've been trying to get hold of you all morning. Kenny rang me and said he'll be near a phone, off and on, for the rest of the day. If you can stick around, he'll ring you later on. Will that be okay?'

'Sure,' Blake said automatically and the Aboriginal guy hung up. She stood there, frowning at the receiver.

*Kenny Malone. My mother's old friend from Mudqueebung. Why did he have to call today, when I wanted to concentrate on Ty's problems?*

She sat beside the phone for the next hour and a half. Trying to think about Kenny and thinking about Ty instead. Trying to think about Ty but thinking about Kenny. By the time the phone rang, Blake was breathless and jittery. She snatched it up and gasped, 'Kenny? Blake here.'

The line crackled and buzzed. '... long way away,' Kenny was saying. 'We may have a bit of trouble with ...' More crackles. 'So let's get down to business. Shane reckons you're Maureen Delaney's daughter.'

'Yeah. Yeah, that's right. Do you know where she is?'

A hiss of static and then Kenny said, '... need to find out how you feel about Maureen first. She's had enough trouble in her life, Blake. Don't blame her too much. You probably think she sold you - but it wasn't like that, not really. She ...' and the line started to fizz and sputter again.

'Sold me?' Blake shouted. 'Sold me? *Sold me?* What the hell do you mean?'

A long silence, while she clutched the receiver till her hand ached. She wasn't sure whether Kenny had even heard her. Just as she was about to give up, he muttered, 'Oh, God. You didn't know. Listen, we can't talk about this over the phone. I'll be back in a few days. Come to the flat and we can discuss it, face to ...'

Another burst of hisses and crackles. Then the sound of the dial tone, drilling into Blake's ear. She let go of the phone and sank down onto the floor. Hugged her knees to her chest and rocked to and fro.

*Sold me. Maureen didn't just give me up for adoption - she sold me. My other parents didn't just adopt me - they bought me. Kenny thought I knew all along but I didn't. I believe him, though.*

*I hate it. But I believe him.*

After a while Blake scrambled to her feet and went in to the bathroom, moving slowly and carefully, like an old woman. She stood under the shower, letting the water massage her tense muscles. Watching the black and brown hair dye swirl away down the plug hole.

*Oops. There goes my disguise. Not that it matters. I've got more important things to worry about.*

Back in the bungalow, Blake stepped into her jeans and found a clean t-shirt in her backpack. As she pulled it on, she caught sight of her watch and groaned. She was running late - and she couldn't afford to miss another half day of work, not when she still owed Lin fifty dollars.

*I'll have to take the Honda. Shouldn't be a problem, though. Martin Fahey's off my case now and Greg and Thumper have obviously headed north.*

She was turning to go when the icy hand gripped her arm and wrenched her back. Blake looked down at her open pack, with the black notebook sticking out of the top. *You want me to take my notebook to work? Fine, I'll take it. Doesn't make much sense to me but then nothing makes sense right now.*

She swung herself onto the Honda Rebel and sped off along the freeway. Rode down the hill to O'Burgers, with a voice chanting 'Sold sold sold' at the back of her brain. As she slowed at the corner of the lane that led to the car park, she glanced towards the building site.

Saw Greg chatting to Vince. Thumper squinting across the road at the Honda.

*Oh no. I'm a fool. I should've known. Danny told me that Geoff Russell's detectives had been hanging around for the last few days, checking out Cory's accident. But I*

*forgot.*

*Or did I? Maybe I wanted to get caught.*

It would've been easy enough to rev the Honda and take off. But Blake sat on the bike and waited, while Thumper tugged Greg's arm, barged through the traffic and then loomed over her.

'Hi, Thumper,' she said. 'Nice to meet you, after all this time. Don't worry, I'll go quietly - if you do something for me first.'

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Arran tilted a tin of paint solvent and watched it trickle across the floor. He looked at Brick and Theo, grinning behind him. Luke, guarding the door of the tin hut. Ty, backed into the far corner.

'Wonder what'll happen if I light this,' he murmured, pulling out a box of matches. 'Want to find out, Ty?'

Then Luke yelped and went flying across the room and cannoned into him. Arran staggered and dropped the matches. Spun round and snapped, 'Oh, it's you. What are you doing in here? You're not welcome. Rack off and ask some more stupid questions about Cory, okay?'

Thumper chuckled and patted him on the head. 'Calm down, mate. I just wanted to have a friendly chat, about this kid you been torturing.'

Arran lifted his shoulders in a shrug, sliding the matches back into his pocket. 'Torturing? Us? No way. You can't prove it.'

'Yes, we can,' Blake said, ducking under Thumper's arm. 'Go on. That's Luke, over there.' Thumper nodded to her, swung Luke off his feet and shook him hard. The polaroid photos fell out of his overalls and scattered across the floor. Blake scooped them up and glanced at them. Gagged and passed them on to Greg.

'That's our proof,' she spat. 'Photos of what you did to Ty. Proof that you're just a pack of bullies, after all.'

'No, Cat,' Ty called urgently. 'Stop it! They're not bullying me. Honest.'

Thumper beamed at him. 'Aren't they? Let's check it out. They reckon all bullies are cowards at heart, don't they?' He glanced down at Luke, who was cowering in a corner. 'Well, this one's a coward, all right. But what about the rest?'

'Oh, I'm a coward too,' Theo said, eyes fixed on Thumper's football-size biceps. 'I'm famous for it. Been a coward all my life. Listen, I admit we might've gone a bit too far with Ty. He copped it more than I did, when I joined Macallen's. It's just that - well, things are getting tougher all the time, so we needed to toughen him up.'

Thumper sighed and swatted him away. At the same moment Brick let out a yell and rushed at him, fists flailing. Thumper grinned. Aimed a rabbit punch at the back of Brick's neck. Steadied him and did a few more things to him. By the time he'd finished, Brick was down on his knees, whimpering and hugging Thumper's ankles.

'Another coward,' he commented. 'One more to go.'

As he turned towards Arran, the long lean guy flattened himself against the wall. 'No,' he whispered. 'Please. No.'

Thumper's nose twitched. He flexed his arm and started to reach for Arran but Greg said sharply, 'Thumper, that's enough.' Then he glanced across at Ty and added, 'Well, mate, what do you reckon? Still want to defend these blokes? Or are you ready to report them now?'

Ty looked around at the other four plumbers. Straightened his shoulders, looked across at Blake and said, 'Okay, I get the point. They made me feel like I was weak - but they're only tough when they're four against one. If that's what real men are like, then forget it. Let's go.'

Thumper nudged the door with his elbow and it burst open. As he shunted the four guys out, he peered down at Blake and rumbled, 'Thanks, mate. I don't like bullies. Never have. It was kind of nice to do something for that kid. Made me feel good inside, if you know what I mean.'

Blake wasn't sure what to say but luckily Thumper didn't wait for an answer. He marched the guys across the site and herded them off down the hill to the police station. Greg and Ty in the lead. Arran, Brick, Luke and Theo shuffling along together. Thumper striding proudly behind them, with Blake at his heels.

As they turned the corner, she stopped, spun round and raced back up the hill. *Sorry, Thumper. I lied. I wasn't really planning to go quietly. Just needed a bit of help from you, that's all.*

The Honda was waiting outside O'Burgers, with a parking ticket on the windshield. Blake ripped it up and vaulted onto the bike. Noticed Kim at the door of the burger shop, watching wide-eyed.

'Collect my pay and give it to your mum,' she called. 'I'm out of here - but I'll send a postcard, soon as I can.'

She shoved her key in the ignition and glanced down the street. No sign of Greg and Thumper. They still hadn't realised that she'd gone. *I'm back where I started. No money, no job and nowhere to stay, plus I just heard some more bad news about my mum.*

*On the other hand, I've got my bike - and my notebook - and, like Thumper said, I feel good inside. Could be worse. I reckon I'll survive.*

She zipped up her leather jacket and turned the key. Revved the bike, waved to Kim and set off down the hill. Letting the Honda carry her away into the city. Letting the road take her where she needed to go.

Copyright © 1998, 2016 by Jenny Pausacker.

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Jenny Pausacker asserts her moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

Ebook produced in Australia.