

THE BLAKE MYSTERIES

7

Down
and
Out

JENNY PAUSACKER

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This one is for Lauris, a real-life fairy godmother, with thanks.

CHAPTER ONE

Blake was in a shopping mall, somewhere out in the suburbs. Dress shops and chemists, music stores and doughnut bars - three tiers of them, stretching up to a huge arched skylight. Glass balconies, enormous ferns and escalators as steep as waterfalls. Fluorescent light. Fake air. The tinkle of musak. She couldn't quite remember how she'd got there.

I went to Kenny Malone's flat, didn't I? To see whether he was back from his trip up north. To see whether he was ready to tell me how I can find my mother. But there was no one home - and I tripped on the stairs - or fainted, maybe. So I got on the Honda and went looking for food and ran out of petrol.

And ended up here.

She leaned back against a marble stand, packed with ferns. Dipped her hand into the fountain beside her and splashed water across her face. Stared longingly at the bubble jets of the fountain, wishing she could strip off and jump in and wash herself clean.

I feel sticky and gritty and smelly. It's been a while since I had to live on the streets. I'm not used to it.

Blake had been sleeping rough for the last two nights. Curled up under a bench in the grandstand beside a sports oval, with her motorbike parked close by. She'd eaten a hamburger and a serve of chips on the first day. A packet of Crispy Tomato Salsa Surprises on the second day. And now she was trying to decide what she ought to buy today.

Coffee or doughnuts. Doughnuts or coffee.

It was a hard decision. She only had three dollars left and she'd been planning to save her money, so she could keep on ringing Kenny Malone's number till Kenny came back. But her head was spinning and her stomach felt like one of those black holes in outer space. She wasn't even hungry any more. She'd gone past that. She just knew she had to eat.

I mean, what if I fainted again and got carted off to hospital? What if those two private detectives tracked me down and dragged me back to my father?

I'd never find my mother then.

She stood up, swaying slightly. Held onto the marble stand for a moment and then stumbled over to the doughnut bar. Pointed to a plastic tray of doughnuts - six for a dollar, because it was the end of the day. Dropped her dollar onto the counter and clung to the metal rail, breathing the smell of coffee.

The girl behind the counter glanced from side to side. 'Here,' she hissed, passing Blake the doughnuts and a styrofoam cup. 'I seen you sitting there for the last half hour, trying to make up your mind. Quick, take the stuff and split, while the boss is still out the back.'

She slid the dollar across the counter. Blake whispered 'Thanks' and sped off. Around the fountain, past the escalators and over to a bench near the music store. She ripped the clingwrap off the tray and stuffed a doughnut into her mouth.

Oh wow. That was nice of her. Six doughnuts and a cup of coffee. I'm way more excited than when my father gave me that trust fund for my eighteenth birthday.

You know you're really down and out, when six doughnuts seem more important than a trust fund.

She levered the lid off the cup and took a gulp of hot milky coffee. Felt a sudden surge of energy, as the caffeine and the sugar hit her bloodstream, powering up her brain cells.

Okay, Blake, better think fast, before you zone out again. Time to come up with a plan.

She started by counting her resources. Three dollars. Six - no, five - doughnuts and half a cup of coffee. Her pocket torch. A copy of *The Time of the Unicorn*, the fourth book in the science fiction series that her geek friend Nathan was mad about. Her Honda, waiting outside in the car park. And the battered black notebook where she'd written down every word her mother had ever said to her and every fact she'd found out since then.

I can sell the paperback, once I've finished it. Might score a dollar or two. And I suppose I could always sell the bike and my leather jacket - but I won't, not until things get worse than this. There has to be something else I can do.

Blake twisted round and peered across the mall. Stared at the automatic teller on the opposite wall. She had a card in her wallet. If she walked over and pushed it into the

slot, she could take hundreds of dollars out of her account. Or thousands, if she wanted thousands.

There was just one small problem. Every time she used the card, Greg and Thumper, her dad's private detectives, seemed to find out about it - as if they were working with a hacker who had a trace on her account. So she couldn't risk it. Not now, when she was stuck here in the city, waiting for Kenny.

She sighed and picked up the next doughnut, chewing more slowly this time. Started to think about places where she might be able to stay. She could ask Shane, Kenny's flatmate, if he'd let her sleep on the couch till Kenny came back - except that Greg and Thumper had already been to the flat looking for her. She could go back to the bungalow behind her friend Kim Mason's house - except that Greg and Thumper had met Kim's brother, Ty Mason, so they could easily turn up there as well.

Then again, she knew plenty of other people around the place. After travelling round the country for nine months, Blake was back in the big city where she'd grown up. So she could drop in on her old school friends - or the kids from her karate class— - or the kids she went to kindergarten with.

Except that she didn't trust any of them. Not even Sensei, her karate teacher. They all knew her family. They'd all met her parents. Okay, some of them would probably hide her but some of them would definitely think she ought to go home.

And I can't tell which is which, so it's safer to stay away from everyone.

Blake groaned and reached for another doughnut. Then groaned again when her fingers brushed across an empty tray. *Rats. Must've gobbled the last four doughnuts while I was thinking.* She swallowed the rest of her coffee and pulled *The Time of the Unicorn* out of her pocket. Sat cross-legged on the bench, trying to finish the book.

Da'r il Ai'ia, elf swordswoman and master thief, was setting off across the Plain of the Phoenix, following the mysterious beautiful unicorn. It was an annoying sort of ending when there wouldn't be another Da'r il Ai'ia book for a while. But Blake couldn't concentrate on it properly, because her mind kept wandering off.

Da'r il Ai'ia's following the unicorn and I'm following my mother. Maureen Delaney, the woman who gave me up for adoption when I was born - and then came back for me thirteen years later.

They'd gone on the run together for two years, moving from town to town, until Maureen disappeared for the second time. Walking out one day, after telling Blake's father where she was. Blake had refused to even think about Maureen for years and then, all of a sudden, she knew she had to see her again. It'd been a long hard quest but at last she was getting there.

I'll find Mum soon. I hope. If I can make it through the next few days.

Thinking about her mother made her nervous. She frowned down at the paperback. Saw black spots dancing in front of her eyes. Blake blinked and shut the book and

shifted around on the bench. Her stomach was churning and gurgling. Too many doughnuts, eaten too fast, after starving for too long.

Wanna throw up. Can't, though. It'd be a waste. Who knows when I'll get a chance to eat again?

She leapt up and started pacing round the mall, to take her mind off her stomach. Walked straight into a crowd that had gathered outside the music shop. A million eleven-year-old girls, all wearing the same t-shirt and waving the same CD and screaming, 'Dog! Dog! Dog!' Blake backed off.

Huh? Where did they appear from? I must be more spaced out than I realised. Otherwise I would've noticed them before.

She rubbed her eyes and focused on the nearest t-shirt. Saw a picture of a giant Rottweiler, foaming at the mouth. A girl in black leather behind it, pulling on its leash. An angelfaced boy, posed so it looked as though his head was in the dog's mouth. And spiky Gothic letters underneath.

Can't read them properly. I'll have to ask someone. Blake sidled up to one of the girls, tapped her on the shoulder and said, 'Okay, what's going on? And who's Dog?'

'Dog?' she squealed. 'You don't know who The Dog is? Where've you been?'

'I've been travelling around,' Blake said. 'Can I have a look at your CD?'

The girl hesitated and then handed it over. The same picture as the picture on the t-shirt. 'That's Dancer, with The Dog in front of her,' she said. 'They're here to do publicity for their new CD. It's called *Hydrophobia*. Cool title, hey?'

'Um, yeah. What does it mean?'

'Dunno. But it sounds cool.'

Blake grinned. 'Fair enough. And who's the guy with the pretty face?'

The girl stared at her and started to giggle. 'That's Dog, you idiot. Him and Dancer, they're the two singers in Rabies. The dog's - well, just a dog.'

Blake thrust the CD at her and swung away. *Big deal. So I don't know all the hottest new bands - so who cares? I think I've got it figured out, anyway. Rabies is the name of the group. Dog and Dancer are the kids in the group. There's a dog on the cover because rabies is a mad-dog disease.*

And guess what? I don't feel sick any more. That's one good thing about Rabies. They made me forget about my stomach for a bit.

The crowd had shifted around while she was talking to the girl. All the kids were streaming towards the entrance of the mall. Pushing and shoving. Standing on tiptoe and yelling at the top of their lungs.

'Dog, don't go!'

'I'm over here. Dog!'

'Dog, I love you!'

'Dancer, Dancer! I want to be like you.'

Blake stood on tiptoe too. Peered across a sea of heads and saw four enormous guys in brown uniforms, elbowing through the mob. Bodyguards, hustling Dog and Dancer out of the mall. She turned and tried to head the other way. Got caught in a knot of screaming girls. Wriggled free and ducked towards a gap in the crowd.

Then a bunch of kids came clattering down the escalator, aiming for Dog and Dancer. A plump boy cannoned into Blake, knocking her sideways. Two girls steadied her and dragged her along with them. There were kids all around her, jostling and shouting and pushing her on. Packed together so close that it was hard to breathe.

Blake panicked. When she spotted another gap, she put her head down and charged. A guy snapped, 'Hey, quit shoving' and shoved her between the shoulder blades. She went stumbling forward. Past two girls with dog collars round their necks, between a pair of solid elbows and - *hey, that's a relief* - into an empty space.

Suddenly the crowd went silent. Blake looked up at a tall girl in a soft black leather shirt and tight black leather pants. Spiky blonde hair, flecked with three shades of red. A ring in her eyebrow, a ring on her cheekbone and a diamond stud just below her bottom lip. Round brown eyes, like an expensive china doll.

It's Dancer. But ... I recognise those eyes.

As she stared, one of the bodyguards grabbed her. Blake jerked free and swung around, dropping into a karate stance. And behind her, Dancer gasped, 'Hey, I know you. You're A -'

Ouch. She's going to say my real name, in front of all these people. Gotta do something.

She whirled back and clapped her hand over Dancer's mouth. 'No, Emma,' she said. 'I've changed my name too. I'm Blake now.'

The minute she touched Dancer, three of the bodyguards fell on her. Pinning her arms. Wrenching her head back. Swinging her off her feet. While the crowd murmured and muttered, Dancer poked the nearest bodyguard in the ribs.

'Put her down,' she commanded. 'She's a mate of mine. We used to go to school together but we haven't seen each other in ages.' She grabbed Blake's hand and added, 'This is so great. Come back to the hotel with us, okay?'

Blake straightened her leather jacket. Glared at the guards and then glared at Dancer. *A mate of yours? I don't think so. I remember Emma Blackall from school, all right. A complete airhead, one of the worst.*

She was getting ready to storm off when her stomach gurgled again. Blake paused and took a second look at the leather girl.

Hmm. On the other hand, Emma's a superstar called Dancer now. If I stick around, I might even score another cup of coffee.

CHAPTER TWO

The hotel room was packed. People wall to wall, arguing or strumming guitars or talking into mobile phones. Blake's head was spinning again. She slumped in a corner, trying to sort everyone out.

The four bodyguards leaning by the door, arms folded across their chests. Three skinny guys with long hair and some amazing tats, rabbiting on about amps and mikes and hiring a van. A fat guy with a Buddha smile, a guy in a fringed cowboy shirt and a guy with black hair pulled back in a ponytail, who kept stopping people and saying, 'So when we gonna practise?'

And another guy, right in the middle of the chaos. A guy with smooth tanned skin and neat brown hair. A small cautious smile that showed off neat capped teeth. Crisp white shirt, tucked neatly into designer jeans. He was the neatest quietest guy in the room but he was the guy that everyone kept turning to, calling out, 'Andy, what do you reckon? Andy, can you fix that? Andy, will tomorrow at three be okay?'

Uh-huh. Something tells me Andy's the manager for Rabies.

Dancer was the only girl in the whole crowd, apart from Blake. It didn't seem to bother her, though. She was on the move all the time. Answering questions, giving orders, bossing people around.

Interesting. Emma Blackall was the giggly flirty type. Couldn't look at a guy without standing on one foot and twisting her curls round her finger - although we didn't see too many guys at Cabrena Ladies College.

But Dancer seems pretty relaxed and confident, the complete opposite to Emma. A major improvement.

While she watched, a kid dressed in the hotel uniform came sidling in. Dancer nodded and pointed and he carried a tray over to Blake. Salad, fruit, a smoked salmon sandwich and a cappuccino. Blake swallowed hard, caught Dancer's eye and gave her a thumbs-up sign.

For the next fifteen minutes she didn't think about anything except the food in front of her. When she finally looked up, the room was almost empty. The only people left were Dancer and Andy, propped against the wall, talking quietly.

'So, Em, we've got the big gig on Friday,' Andy was saying. 'The concert hall's booked out, the show'll be broadcast live on nationwide TV and your CD's selling like crazy. Only one question. Is The Dog going to be okay?'

Dancer patted his arm. 'Relax, Andy. Dog's fine. The guy lives to play music. He won't let us down.'

Andy gave her a small smile. 'Maybe. But Dog was pretty freaked by those photos. He's been hiding in his room for days. The bodyguards practically had to drag him out to the mall this afternoon. I'd feel a lot happier if you -'

'Yeah, yeah,' Dancer cut in. 'I'll go and talk to Dog. I want to introduce Blake to him, anyway. Which reminds me, could you book another room for her? She'll be sticking around for a while.'

She swooped down on Blake and hustled her out into the corridor. 'Wait a minute,' Blake protested. 'I don't need a room, Dancer. I -'

Dancer's ring glinted as she raised her eyebrow. 'Oh yeah? You mean you like living on the streets?'

'Well, not exactly but - hang on, how did you figure that out?'

'Hey, it's not hard to guess, if you know the signs. I haven't been a street kid myself but I've met a lot of them in the last few years.'

'You?' Blake said in surprise and Dancer laughed.

'I reckon we've both changed heaps since Cabrena. Although you were the coolest, even then. Totally confident. You didn't take any garbage from anyone. Remember the time you told Ms Lacey you wouldn't be a prefect, because the prefect system was way unjust? She couldn't believe it. None of the kids'd ever said no to her before.'

Blake blushed. *Actually, I don't remember much about Cabrena. I was in a daze most of the time. Still trying to forget I ever met Maureen. It's weird that Emma - I mean, Dancer - thought I looked confident.*

'So who were all those guys?' she asked, to change the subject.

'Oh, just the Rabies team,' Dancer said with a wave of her hand. 'The roadies who look after the equipment. The session musicians - Dog and I *are* Rabies but we hire other musos when we need them, for gigs and that. Plus Andy Haines, of course. He and I used to play together, before I linked up with The Dog, and now he manages Rabies. None of them really count, though. You still haven't met the most important guy

of all.'

She stopped at the door and knocked. A long knock and two short knocks. *The letter D in Morse code.* They waited for a minute or two and then the door opened, just a crack.

'Dancer?' a voice whispered. 'You're on your own, right? Andy Haines isn't standing behind you, waiting to push in too?'

'Well, I've got someone with me,' Dancer whispered back. 'Not Andy, though. Her name's Blake and -'

The door flew open. 'Blake!' said The Dog. 'That's incredible! Come on in.'

Dancer strolled past him but Blake stood and stared. *Huh? He sounded really excited, like he knows me from somewhere. But I've never seen him in my entire life.*

Dog was half a head taller than her. *In other words, not real tall.* Slim and slight, with a face like an angel out of an old painting. Sky-blue eyes, thin straight nose and pale skin that looked as though the sun had never touched it. White-blond hair clipped close to his head, except for a jagged spray at the back, dyed red and rippling when he moved, like flames.

He was dressed in black from head to foot, the same as Dancer. Not brand new leather, though. An old cotton shirt, worn smooth as silk, and frayed jeans that fitted like a snake's skin. *Yep, I definitely haven't seen him before. You wouldn't forget a guy like that in a hurry.*

She edged past him into the hotel room. It was bigger than the room they'd come from but it looked smaller, because there was so much stuff in it. An electric keyboard and three guitars in one corner. Posters of stars and planets all over the walls. A giant TV and towers of videos stacked beside it. *Star Wars* videos, *Star Trek* videos, *Dr Who* videos, *Lost in Space* videos and more.

So Dog's a science fiction fan, hey? Looks like he must cart boxes of his favourite old TV series around with him, wherever he goes. But I guess you can do that sort of thing when you're a famous rock star.

Dancer was already lolling in front of the TV. 'Dog, meet Blake,' she called. 'We went to the same school - well, she was a few years ahead of me but I always really admired her. She's the kid that the bodyguards grabbed in the mall today, remember. A strange way to meet up again, hey?'

Dog nodded, making his flame-coloured hair bob and dance. 'A coincidence,' he said seriously. 'I like coincidences. That's how Dancer and me met too. I was busking in the city and she happened to walk past. She listened for a while and then she joined in.'

'I asked him back to my place and we went on playing together all night,' Dancer added. 'And we've never really stopped since.'

The Dog turned around and looked directly at Blake. 'Dancer saved me,' he said, as if it was really important to make her understand. 'I was down and out. Going nowhere

fast. Living on the streets since I was twelve. She turned my life around. Took me to concerts, taught me about the music industry and gave me all of this.'

He waved his hand at the room, smiling like an angel. Dancer sat up straighter on the couch. 'Well, you saved me too,' she said. 'I was the original poor little rich girl. Like, I had everything. Lessons from the best musos in the business, a Fender guitar, my own sports car - and a dad who used to bash me every time he got drunk. I thought I had to take it, because he loved me. Then I met you, Dog.'

She leapt up and threw her arms around The Dog. They stood there, hugging each other. Blond and flame heads pressed close together. Black leather arms around black denim waist. *They look like one person, not two separate people. Famous super-stars but they've had it tough. Much tougher than me. It's time I stopped feeling sorry for myself.*

The Dog grinned at her over Dancer's shoulder. 'We love each other,' he explained, 'but we're not, like, in love. Thing is, we were brother and sister in a past life. And now we're together again.'

Oh yeah? I don't believe in all that past life stuff. One life is enough for me. Still, these kids have given me sandwiches and coffee and a room of my own, so I'm not about to argue with them.

She smiled politely and settled herself on the couch. Dog and Dancer dropped down next to her, one on either side. 'Well, that's us,' Dog said, fixing her with his sky-blue eyes. 'What about you?'

Blake started to say. 'Oh, I'm not that interesting.' And found herself blurting out, 'I'm searching for my mother. Not the mother you saw at our school speech nights, Dancer - she adopted me when I was a baby. Now I'm trying to find my first mother, the one who gave birth to me and then gave me away.'

She'd never told anyone so much about herself before. *Not even Spider, the crazy hacker who helped me search for Maureen on the Net. Not even Nathan who's adopted, same as me.* She wasn't planning to say any more than that. But Dog kept watching her with his angel smile - and Dancer kept watching from her china doll eyes - and somehow she ended up telling them the whole story.

'So I talked to Mum's old friend Kenny on the phone, just for a few minutes,' she said finally. 'It was a bad line and I couldn't hear him properly but I think he said that Mum - that Maureen sold me to my parents. *Sold* me. Traded her kid for money. I still can't quite take it in. It's driving me mad, waiting to find out if it's really true.'

Dog and Dancer went on watching her for a few more seconds. Then, at exactly the same moment, they leaned over and hugged her. Normally, Blake hated being hugged but she managed to sit still.

It'd be rude to pull away. Besides, these kids seem to like me - and I kind of like them too. Maybe I can buy a black shirt and put a red streak in my hair and we can

pretend we're triplets.

Or not.

There was a blast of music from the TV. Trumpets blaring out some kind of theme tune. Dog jumped to his feet and turned the sound down. 'That settles it,' he said to Dancer. 'She's the one. Fact is, I knew it the minute she came in. What do you reckon? Will I tell her everything?'

'Yeah, why not? I bet she'd be ace.'

'Ace at *what*?' Blake snapped. 'Why am I the one? And how could you possibly know all about me, before I'd even said hi?'

The Dog beamed. 'Relax, Blake. I don't know anything about you, apart from what you just told us. Plus one other thing. I know you were sent here to help us.'

Sent here? Oh no, this guy's seriously crazy.

'No one sent me to the hotel,' she said. 'I just bumped into Dancer in the mall, by accident. A coincidence, right?'

'Exactly!' Dog crowed. 'A coincidence - and, like I said, I believe in coincidences. Take a look at the video I was watching when you came in.'

He pointed at the TV. The titles for the next episode were just starting to roll. A planet. A computer graphic of a man screaming. A spaceman firing a space gun. A spaceship speeding towards the camera and then away. A red circle crossed by a blue arrow and circled by gold letters.

The letters read BLAKE'S 7.

CHAPTER THREE

Blake started to laugh. *Blake's 7. Another of Dog's old TV series. I think I remember seeing it once, when I was really little.*

She watched another spaceship zoom across the galaxy, looking like a plastic toy out of a cornflakes packet. Then a close-up of the control room - wobbly cardboard sets, full of actors wearing tights and silver shirts and too much make-up. Guns like long-life light globes. A super-computer that was a plastic box with fairy lights in it.

The special effects are lousy. How can Dog watch this trash? And how can he possibly make some major decision, just because I've got the same name as the hero?

'Hey, I'm not a famous space outlaw or whatever,' she said. 'I'm just -'

But The Dog wasn't listening. He was over on the far side of the room, talking into the phone. 'Yeah, Andy,' he sighed. 'The photos. That's what I said. Bring them here now.'

He slammed the phone down. Somehow Blake could tell that Andy was still arguing away at the other end of the line. But a few minutes later the manager knocked at the door and came in, carrying a big envelope.

'Are you sure this is a good idea, Dog?' he said straight away. 'I mean, you only met this kid fifteen minutes ago. These photos are hot. Hotter than hot. If she goes racing off to sell the story to some reporter, Rabies'll be in big trouble.'

'Blake wouldn't do that,' Dog said. 'She's on our side. Her and Dancer go way back.'

The manager glanced across at Blake. 'Listen, kid, I've got nothing against you. But frankly, I can't see how you're going to solve all Dog's problems, just because you went to school with Dancer.'

Blake grinned. *That's okay. I can't see it either.*

'Well, your hired heavies didn't solve my problems, did they? Dog said, scowling at Andy. 'You've had a bunch of private detectives out there for the last two weeks and they haven't found a thing. Forget it, mate. Call them off. Let me do it my way.'

They faced each other, legs braced, chins jutting forward. *Like two dogs spoiling for a fight.* Then, to Blake's surprise, Andy shrugged and said, 'Okay, you're the boss.' He flicked his wrist and the envelope went spinning across the room like a frisbee. At the last minute Dog lifted his hand and picked it out of the air.

'Thanks, Andy,' he said. 'You can go now.'

The manager hesitated, opened his mouth, shut it and turned away. *Interesting. I thought Andy ran the show, while Dog hid in his room and wrote songs. But it looks like The Dog calls the shots.*

As the door closed, Dog ripped the envelope open and shook it. Three photos fell out and fluttered onto the table.

'All right,' he told her, 'this is the deal. I'm being blackmailed - and I want you to stop it.'

Blake turned the photos over, one by one. The first photo showed a guy sitting in a cafe. *Or a pool hall - I reckon that's the corner of a pool table behind him.* He was incredibly skinny, almost like a stick figure. A mop of yellow hair and slightly pointed ears, set flat against his skull. Dressed in a green shirt and a baggy lemon-yellow suit, with a ziplock bag of white powder on the table in front of him.

She frowned and looked at the second photo. Same place. Same guy. The ziplock bag had disappeared and Dog was sitting at the table, chatting with the skinny guy.

'Next photo,' Dog said tensely and Blake picked it up. The same again, except that this time Dog was handing the guy a bundle of money. She ran her eyes across all three photos. Focussed on the ziplock bag and gasped.

Oh. I think I get it. Better make sure, though.

'Okay, Dog,' she said. 'Tell me about it.'

Dog gazed out of the hotel window at the sky, looking more like an angel than ever. 'I knew that guy, back when I was living on the streets. He was a street kid too but he's gone up in the world since then - or down, maybe. His name was Pixie.'

'Because of his ears?' Blake asked.

Dog laughed. 'Nah, because he was the dreamy type - like, he was always away with the pixies. Anyway, a few months ago I went back to the old neighbourhood to meet some of the kids who helped me when I was down and out. I've had better luck than most of them and I guess I wanted to share it around. But maybe you can't share

luck. Maybe everyone has to make their own good luck.'

He sighed and studied the heavy grey clouds hanging over the city skyline. Dancer nudged him. 'Chill, Dog,' she said. 'Forget about good luck and bad luck. Just tell Blake what happened.'

Dog's eyes shifted away from the clouds and settled on Blake. 'Right. Well, I didn't actually go to the Majestic Pool Hall to meet Pixie. It was a coincidence. He was sitting at the table when I walked in. We had a bit of a rave and he started telling me how he was broke and desperate. So -'

'So Dog felt guilty and gave him some money,' Dancer cut in. 'Big mistake. Pixie may've been the dreamy type but he was a great con artist as well. Turns out he wasn't broke at all. As a matter of fact, he was a dealer.'

She tapped the photo with the ziplock bag. Blake groaned. 'Oh no. A drug dealer. That's heroin, is it?'

'Yep,' Dancer said sadly. 'And when you put those three photos together, it looks like Dog went there to score. Now you know why Andy was stressing. The kids really look up to us - especially Dog, because he's only sixteen, not much older than most of the fans. If the gossip magazines got hold of those photos, Rabies'd be history.'

Blake glanced at the photos again and then glanced at Dog. Waited to see what he would say.

The Dog smiled at the clouds. 'Nah, I never was a junkie,' he murmured. 'Sure, heaps of street kids use drugs to help them cope but I had other ways of coping. The music pulled me through - and then I met Dancer. Still, I knew a lot of junkies in the old days, like Pixie, for example. Poor Pixie. First a user, then a dealer. What a life.'

'Poor Pixie?' Dancer snapped. 'I can't believe you still fell sorry for him, after all this.'

'Why not? You can't blame Pixie for everything. He didn't take the photos.'

'Who did?' Blake asked and The Dog shrugged.

'Hard to tell. Three of my old mates were there - Mick and Nico and Lenny, plus Lenny's big brother Donnie. Donnie had this fancy camera and we were all fooling round with it. Meeting up again was kind of awkward. We didn't know what to say, so we kept taking snaps of each other. In the end we relaxed and chatted for a while, till Donnie got up to go. And that's when we realised that someone had nicked the camera.'

'Then, about a month later, the first photo arrived,' Dancer went on. 'Dog recognised Pixie, of course, but he thought it was just a joke or whatever. The second photo got us a bit more worried and by the third photo we were totally freaked. Because the third photo came with a letter, telling us to hand over a hundred thousand dollars in return for the negatives.'

'And you can't pay?' Blake asked, glancing round the hotel room.

Dancer sighed. 'We don't have that sort of money, Blake. We make a lot but we pay a lot of people's salaries too. It'd finish us, just like we'd be finished if those photos were

published. A no-win situation.'

'So what do you want me to do?'

'Prove that Dog *isn't* a junkie, of course!'

'But that's easy, isn't it? You just need to get hold of Pixie and make him sign a statement, saying he wasn't selling drugs to Dog.'

She turned to ask Dog where they could find Pixie. He was over by the window again, eyes lifted to the sky. 'It's not real easy to get hold of Pixie these days,' he said without looking round. 'He's dead. An overdose. Nineteen years old.'

Silence. Blake could feel the photos pulling at her, like a magnet. She looked down at Pixie's narrow face and swallowed hard. 'Okay,' she said. 'Scrap that idea. I've got a better one, anyway. Go to the cops and show them the note. They can catch the blackmailer when he rocks up to collect the money.'

Dancer shook her head. 'We're not keen on bringing the cops in. Cops talk to reporters - and if one single cop dropped a hint about this, we'd be done for. Besides, the blackmailer hasn't told us how to pay him yet. It's like he wants to make us sweat for a while. Like he's enjoying himself.'

'And that's the biggest problem of the lot,' Dog said in a low voice. 'The blackmailer hates me. I can feel it. Even if we pay him, he can just make a copy of the negatives and then start all over again. I'll never be safe till I know who he is - and why he's doing this. Well, Blake? Will you help me find him?'

Blake hesitated. *Drugs and blackmail. It'll be hard. Maybe dangerous. Then again, I hate it when bad things happen to kids. Kids like Dog - or Pixie.*

So I can't just walk away.

'Yeah,' she said. 'Sure. I'll help you. But I'd like to ask one more question first.'

'Ask away,' The Dog said and Blake grinned.

'Okay then, it's about the title of your new CD. *Hydrophobia*. What the heck does that mean?'

CHAPTER FOUR

Blake was still chuckling next morning as she sat in the Majestic Pool Hall, at the table where Pixie had been sitting in the photos. *Hydrophobia, meaning 'fear of water'. One of the main symptoms of rabies. Dog's idea, of course. That guy has a lot more general knowledge than your average street kid. I'd like to find out more about him.*

Well, I suppose I will find out more, after I track down his three mates.

She leaned back and looked around. The pool hall wasn't exactly majestic. More like a dump, in fact. Splintery wooden panelling halfway up the wall and smoke-stained paint after that. *I think the paint used to be yellow but it's hard to tell.* Faded brown lino on the floor, peeling away in patches. Two pool tables, a row of kitchen chairs and a long counter.

Behind the counter there was a spotty mirror, divided by three glass shelves. A bunch of black and white photos on the top shelf - a middle-aged woman in a big white apron and four dark-haired teenagers. Cups and glasses underneath. And a man, polishing the coffee machine with a grubby tea towel. He had a thick black moustache, heavy black eyebrows, glossy black eyes and black stubble across his jaws.

Casimir Slavko, the owner of the Majestic Pool Hall. I saw his name written above the door, when I walked in.

Blake went over to the counter and asked for a second cup of coffee. As Casimir Slavko jerked the lever on the machine, she said casually, 'Seen Mick or Nico or Lenny lately?'

Casimir snorted. 'Boys! Ha! Don't ask me about boys. I'm busy man, miss. No time to know the name of every boy who come in here.'

Rats. I was hoping Casimir could give me some answers. Now I'll have to hang around and find someone else.

She nodded and pulled out a fifty dollar note. Casimir scowled at it. 'You don't got nothing smaller?' he demanded and she shook her head.

Hey, I'm lucky to have this. Dancer gave it to me before I left. I think fifty dollars is her idea of pocket money

'Sorry,' she said and handed it over. Casimir sighed loudly and began to rummage in the cash register. Muttering and complaining. Tipping out scraps of paper and rubber bands and a packet of orange balloons. Blake decided she'd better say something friendly, before he got really mad.

'I like your photos,' she tried. 'Who are they?'

Instantly Casimir's face changed. His black eyes turned soft and dreamy and his black moustache lifted in a smile. 'My family,' he breathed. 'One mother, two brother, one sister. Old like me now but I don't see them for many, many years. They stay in Bosnia, I come here to make money. Ha! Big joke. No money, just lots of trouble.'

He reached for the photo of his mother and started polishing the frame with the tea towel. 'Do you ever think of going back?' Blake asked.

'I think, all the time. But I don't go. Big war in Bosnia. They don't write, I don't write. Maybe dead. Better if I don't know.'

He turned his back and carefully settled the photo on the shelf. Spun round, slammed Blake's coffee cup onto a saucer and counted out her change, a dollar at a time. His eyes glinted like shiny black stones and his moustache twitched angrily.

Oh wow. It's like he's two different people, a sad one and a mad one. But neither of them are much help. Time to move on.

She carried her coffee over to the pool table. Pushed a few coins into the slot, racked up the balls and started playing against herself. On her seventh shot, the black ball went skidding into the pocket. As she swore under her breath, somebody laughed behind her.

'Game over,' he said. 'You're not very good at this, are you?'

Blake turned and saw a guy slouched at the next table, reading yesterday's paper. Ragged yellow hair. Lean lined weatherbeaten face. Amazingly bright blue eyes. He was wearing a long baggy overcoat and an even longer red and yellow scarf, like Dr Who from the s.f. videos in Dog's hotel room.

'Hey, I haven't played pool for years,' she protested. 'I've forgotten how. But my mum taught me and she used to win money in pubs and that. I reckon I'll get the hang of it, once I practise a bit.'

'Want to play a few games with me?' the guy asked. Blake shrugged and said, 'Why not?' While she fed more money into the slot, the guy tossed a coin.

'I go first,' he announced. 'By the way, my name's Peter Piper, like in the tongue-

twister. You know - "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. Where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?" '

Blake laughed. 'Cool tag. I'm just called Blake. That's way more ordinary.'

'Oh, I don't know about that,' said Peter Piper. 'There's lots of famous Blakes. Admiral Blake, who fought with Nelson in the battle of Trafalgar. William Blake, the poet. Roj Blake from *Blake's 7*.'

He swung away and reached for a pool cue. Blake shivered suddenly, as though an icy hand had just clutched the back of her neck. *Blake's 7 again. Another coincidence. That icy hand always warns me when there's something I'm supposed to notice.*

Interesting. Looks like I need to keep an eye on Peter Piper.

Peter aimed his cue and sent the triangle of balls spinning across the green cloth. They moved round the table, lining up shots. While they played, half a dozen kids drifted in and out of the pool hall. Buying bottles of soft drink from Casimir. Blowing up the orange balloons. Tugging at Peter's sleeve and pulling him aside, to whisper in his ear and give him brown paper parcels or heavy cartons.

After the third kid dumped a parcel on him, Peter muttered 'Excuse me for a minute' and carried them out to a room behind the shop. 'Sorry about that,' he said when he came back. 'I'm a sort of unofficial youth worker round this area. No one actually pays me for it but hey, I like kids. So I listen to their problems and store their gear for them, that kind of thing.'

'Casimir lets you stash stuff out the back?' Blake asked in surprise. 'That's nice of him. He didn't sound as if he was too keen on those boys.'

'He's not,' Peter agreed. 'But I live here, in Cazza's grotty little storeroom. It suits him, because I look after the place when he's not around. And it suits me, because kids drop into the Majestic Pool Hall all the time. An unofficial youth centre for an unofficial youth worker.'

Blake nodded and leaned forward, squinting along a zig-zag line of balls. She hit the white ball with her cue and it zoomed across the table, breaking up a cluster. But one of Peter's balls rolled in front of the pocket and blocked her next shot.

He laughed. 'You're making it too easy for me. I could pot that ball without even trying - but I think I'll leave it there for the moment, because it means you can't get past me.'

He checked out the other end of the table, frowned and tilted his cue at an impossible angle. Said, 'So, Blake, what brings you here? Do you need an unofficial youth worker, to help with a problem of yours?'

Blake watched Peter's second-last ball drop into the pocket. *Smart guy. He thinks he can trick me into answering him, while I'm worrying about the game. But I've seen that trick before - and I can play it too.*

She wrinkled her forehead and chewed her bottom lip. 'A problem?' she repeated,

bending over the table. 'Yeah. How did you guess?'

Her cue tapped the white ball. It sped forward and struck one of her balls, just off-centre. The ball spun to the right, bounced off the side and then rolled into the pocket, nudging Peter's ball out of the way. As he stared in disbelief, Blake said quickly, 'I'm looking for three guys - Mick and Nico and Lenny. Do you know them?'

'Sure, I know them,' Peter Piper said without thinking. Then his eyebrows shot up and his bright blue eyes flicked towards her. 'Well, well. You're a better player than I thought. Tell you what. I'll answer your question if you can win this game, okay?'

Blake glanced at the green cloth. Saw Peter's last ball, still fairly close to the pocket, with the black ball lying beside it. *Rats. That's a cinch. He's bound to win.*

Unless I can psych him out.

Her shoulders drooped. 'Fair enough,' she sighed. 'Although I don't see how you can lose. You could sink that ball with your eyes shut.'

Peter grinned. 'Not quite. But almost.'

He flourished his cue and swung it casually. Groaned as the white ball slammed the black ball into the pocket.

'Game over,' he said. 'Well done, Blake. You deserve any the answers I can give you.'

They ordered more coffee from Casimir Slavko and settled down at the table. Peter slid his hand under the newspaper and pulled out a wooden recorder. Blew into it and played a fast lilting tune. Blake listened and then sang along.

*Tom, Tom the piper's son
Learned to play when he was young
But the only tune that he could play
Was 'Over the hills and far away'.*

'Nice voice,' Peter told her. 'I was a piper's son, you know. Well, my father used to play the flute in a symphony orchestra, at any rate. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps - but I'm a leader, not a follower.'

'So you became king of the kids instead. Tell me about the kids I'm trying to find.'

Peter played three notes on his recorder, going down the scale. 'Nico. Mick. Lenny. Mick Costello was a real tough guy but they reckon he went to pieces when his girlfriend threw him out. Don't know where he is now and the same goes for Nico. As a matter of fact, Nico doesn't even like being called Nico any more, so you'll have to figure out his new name. Don't worry, though - you'll see it all over the place.'

'Huh? What do you mean?' she asked and Peter chuckled.

'You don't expect me to tell you everything, do you? That wouldn't be much fun for a clever kid like you. I reckon you'll need a nice little puzzle to solve while you're tracking

Lenny down.'

'Good. So you *do* know where Lenny is?'

'Not exactly. But I can give you his big brother's address. Come to think of it. I've even got his business card in my wallet. Here it is. "Donald Harding - lawn-mowing, pruning and weeding." He works in other people's gardens these days. Must make a nice change from breaking into other people's houses.'

Blake gulped. 'Lenny's brother is a burglar? He steals things?'

Like cameras, for example. No, wait a minute, the camera belonged to him - and I can't see why he'd steal his own camera.

'Nah, Donnie doesn't do burgs any more,' Peter was saying. 'He went straight after his kid was born - although I'm not so sure about Lenny.' He clasped his hands behind his head and smiled across at her. 'Now, Blake, I've answered your question, so it's time for you to answer one of mine. Who sent you here? Was it The Dog?'

Blake stared down at the table. Realised she'd made a mistake and looked up, trying to turn her face into a mask. But Peter Piper was twirling the end of his scarf and laughing at her.

'Too late, Blake. I can read you like a book. So it was The Dog. Relax, kid, you haven't given away any secrets. It wasn't hard to guess, when you were asking about three of Dog's old mates.'

He picked up the recorder and played the first line of 'Tom, Tom the piper's son'. Added, 'Besides, I know Dog pretty well. As a matter of fact, I was the one who taught him how to play the guitar. Say hello to him from me, next time you see him. And tell him that, if he ever needs any help, Peter Piper's always here.'

CHAPTER FIVE

Blake sat in the front room of a weatherboard cottage, listening to Donnie Harding and thinking about Peter Piper. *A strange guy. But he gave me a lot of information, so I reckon he meant it when he said he wanted to help The Dog. Wonder why Dog didn't tell me about him in the first place.*

She jumped as Donnie's wife waved a plate of biscuits under her nose. Bit into a chocolate chip cookie and focused on Donnie. He was a tall solid guy, wearing a tank top that showed off his lawnmowing muscles and a baseball cap with 'Mower Man' on the front. His wife perched beside him on the edge of the couch, fiddling with her brown curls and watching him closely.

'Mate, I been full-on into burgs since I was eleven,' he said with a wave of his cookie. 'Started by knocking over the local milk bar and before long I was doing rips four or five times a week. Never really planned it. Just used to wait till I was in the mood and then I'd go out and head straight for some house I'd spotted while I was wandering around. People make it real easy, y'know. They leave their curtains open, so you can see if they're homeland they have window locks you can pop with a touch of a screwdriver. Plus they all hide their valuables in the same places. The freezer. The loo tank. Behind the socks and jocks in the top drawer. It's a breeze, mate.'

He smiled dreamily. His wife smiled back at him and rested her hand on his arm. Clenched her fingers and pinched him hard. Donnie yelped and cleared his throat.

'Of course, I don't do none of that now, not since Tracy had the baby,' he said. 'Wouldn't want to get nicked and miss a year of me kid's life, would I? These days I can work in some yuppie's garden with high walls and rear access and I don't even think

about getting into the house. Okay, it could be a nice little earner but me, I'd rather do an honest day's work.'

His eyes went dreamy again. Blake took another bite of the cookie, to stop herself from grinning. *Donnie's gone straight but he still misses the burgers. I bet it'd be a buzz, breaking into people's house.*

She caught Tracy's eye and blushed, as if Donnie's wife could tell what she was thinking. 'It's good that your business is going so well,' she said hastily. 'Does Lenny ever work for you? And do you know where he's living now?'

'Lenny's living with us,' Tracy said. 'We took him in, to give him a chance to get himself together. He keeps pinching stuff, trying to copy Donnie. Only he's dead hopeless at it, so he always gets caught.'

'Ah, come on, Trace,' Donnie protested. 'Lenny's not hopeless.'

'Oh yeah? How about the time he gave your mum those rosebushes for Mother's Day? Next minute that old lady from up the road comes knocking at the door. Turns out that she looked through her front window, realised her new roses were missing and followed the trail of potting mix right down the street to your place. That's Lenny for you. Such a lousy thief that a little old lady with triple-strength glasses can nab him.'

'Okay, Lenny's made a few mistakes,' Donnie admitted. 'But he -'

'Yeah, and his biggest mistake's listening to all your stories about the great burgers you used to pull,' Tracy cut in. 'He's gotta clean up his act - and he can start by telling this lady whatever she wants to know. I'll go and get him for you.'

She jumped up and bustled out of the room. Came back two minutes later with a sleepy baby draped over her shoulder and a worried look in her eyes. 'Lenny's not in his room,' she said. 'He must've gone to the shops or something.'

Donnie slapped his forehead. 'The shops!' he groaned. 'Oh hell. He was rabbiting on yesterday about how easy it'd be to knock over the local shops. I told him not to be a fool but -'

'But he *is* a fool,' Tracy sighed. 'Well, he's done it now. They'll put him away this time, for sure.'

'Not if I get there first and stop him,' Donnie said, scrambling to his feet. But Tracy backed around fast and blocked the door.

'And get mixed up in it too?' she spat. 'No way.'

Donnie ducked and dodged, trying to get past her. Tracy stood her ground. The baby woke up and started to cry. And Blake said, 'Hey, I'll go and find Lenny. Just point me in the direction of the shops, okay?'

The first shop in the row was a hot bread shop. Twenty different kinds of bread, from

wholemeal loaves to croissants. A glass counter packed with doughnuts and muffins and roast pork buns. A Vietnamese man sweeping the floor and a Vietnamese woman standing by the phone. They spun round when Blake came in, checked her quickly and relaxed.

'What you want?' the man said, smiling. 'A nice bun? Made here in the shop. Very good today.'

'Yeah, sure,' Blake said. She paid for the bun and added, 'Listen, have you seen this kid around?'

She passed him a photo that Tracy had given her. The man glanced at it and called the woman over. They talked together in Vietnamese and then the man said, 'A boy like this come into our shop, maybe twenty minutes ago. He say, "Give me your money" and pull out a gun. But it get stuck in his pocket.'

'So Hung lock up the money,' the woman went on, pointing to the cash register. 'He take key and we go out into kitchen, shut door. Boy can't come in, can't get money. Next time we look, he gone.'

Blake grinned. That sounded like Lenny Harding, all right. *It's lucky the gun got stuck. Otherwise Lenny might've shot himself in the foot.*

'Did you call the police?' she asked and the shop owners looked at each other.

'Too much trouble,' Hung told her. 'If he come back, we ring. If not -'

'Nah, he won't come back,' Blake promised. 'His brother'll make sure of that.'

She hurried out into the street. There were three more shops - and Lenny still had his gun. She'd thought it was kind of funny when the gun snagged in his pocket. But it wouldn't be so funny if he managed to get the gun out.

The next shop had five sequin-studded cardigans in the window. 'Francesca's Fashions' in loopy gold letters across the glass, with 'Si Parlato Italiano' on a card underneath. Blake pushed the door open and looked around.

A plump middle-aged woman was tidying a display of lace-edged hankies. Rings flashing from six of her fingers, a sweep of henna hair and a fancy cardigan like the ones in the window. So busy that she didn't even bother to turn her head.

Phew. Lenny must've decided to give Francesca's Fashions a miss. Still, I better ask Francesca, just to make sure.

When the woman glanced up, Blake held out the photo. 'Have you seen -?' she began and Francesca burst out laughing.

'Him? He marched in fifteen minutes ago and said, "Give me your money". So I said, "No. Go away".'

'And?'

Francesca straightened one of her rings and stared at Blake in surprise. 'And he went away,' she said, as if it ought to be totally obvious. 'Now, would you like to look at anything? Most of my clothes are for older ladies but I've got some beautiful vests over

here. Straight from Italy. A real bargain.'

'Urn, they look great,' Blake said, edging away. 'But maybe some other time.'

Outside in the street she leaned against the wall for a few seconds, to get her breath back. *Oh wow, that Francesca's pretty cool. A kid tries to hold her up and she doesn't even bat an eyelid. A tough lady. If she told me to go away, I'd go for sure. Just like Lenny did.*

She pushed herself away from the wall and sped on to the third shop. A milk bar with a stand of chip packets in the window and 'S & L Eleftheriou' painted over the door. As she walked in, an old woman dressed in black glared at her and said, 'You want to buy something? Or you want to take our money?'

'I'll have a copy of the *Globe*, please,' Blake said meekly and Mrs Eleftheriou smiled. A sudden sunny smile that wiped the frown lines from her wrinkled face.

'I give you a shock, eh?' she said. 'You don't know why I ask if you want our money? Well, I tell you. Ten minutes ago, a stupid boy comes in and says, "Give me your money". I say to him, "Why? We work hard for our money. Stavros is getting up every morning at five o'clock and going to the market, to get nice fresh fruit for our customers. I am standing here all day, back hurting, feet hurting. We work hard, very hard, but you - you don't work at all. You just come into our nice shop and want to take our money." I say to him, "You're a bad boy. That's not nice".'

'And what did the boy say?' Blake asked.

Someone chuckled from the shadows. She peered over the counter and saw an old man on a chair near the back door, reading a Greek newspaper. *Mr Eleftheriou, I guess.*

'The boy say, "Sorry",' he told her. 'He say, "Sorry, sorry, very sorry.'" Then he runs away. Loula tells me to ring the police but I say, "No, they want us to write everything down, waste of time. And that boy's so stupid. He's not a problem for us. He's a problem for himself."

He chuckled again and Blake and Mrs Eleftheriou joined in. *He's right. Lenny's tried to knock over three shops and he's failed every time. If I was him, I'd give up and go home. But Lenny's stupid, so I bet he's moved on to shop number four.*

She tucked the *Globe* under her arm and went racing out. The last shop in the row was a fish and chip shop. Blake hurtled in, skidded and stopped. Lifted her foot and saw a twenty cent piece stuck to her sole. And more money, scattered right across the floor.

'What happened?' she gasped.

A thin worried man wiped his hands on his long apron and sighed. 'This kid comes barging in, see?' he said. 'He waves a gun at me and goes, "Give me your money." I'm not about to argue with him, so I open the cash register and pull out the drawer. Then I - well, I hit him with it.'

The empty drawer was still lying in a corner. Next to a young guy who was moaning and clutching his head. Lenny Harding looked like a bad photocopy of his brother

Donnie. Taller but skinnier. Nowhere near as many muscles. A round baby face and sad brown eyes, like a dog that had been kicked once too often.

He rubbed the back of his head and reached for the gun on the floor beside him. Blake pounced. She grabbed the gun and whisked it away. Weighed it in her hand and began to laugh.

'Plastic,' she said in relief. 'It's just plastic.'

'Yeah, I wondered about that,' said the fish and chip man. 'Somehow he didn't seem the sort to have a real gun. All the same, I shouldn't've hit him. I promised, my wife that, if anything like this ever happened, I'd hand the money over pronto. But - oh, I dunno. This bloke was such an idiot. I couldn't stop myself.'

He sighed again and looked even more worried. 'Listen,' Blake said, 'can we do a deal? Will you let Lenny go, if he promises he won't do this again?'

The fish and chip man cheered up straight away. 'Sure,' he beamed. 'Just get him out of my shop, before he brings the roof down or something.'

Blake made Lenny pick up all the money and put it back in the drawer. Then she marched him over to a run-down playground on the other side of the street. They sat on the swings, beside a brick wall covered with graffiti. Spiky black tags, a square of blue sky and white clouds with BELIEVE written across it and six fat red and blue letters, carefully outlined and shaded.

She stared at the red and blue letters for a while, trying to work out what they spelt. 'Rabies,' she said finally.

The swing clanked as Lenny turned towards her. 'You're a Rabies fan? Me too. I'm a mate of The Dog's, y'know. Went to school with him and all. He's the best. I mean, two years ago he was on the street and now he's, like, famous. I even seen him on TV. Unreal, hey?'

'You saw him at the Majestic Pool Hall too, didn't you?' asked Blake. 'A month or so ago, right?'

Lenny shrugged. 'Could be. I don't exactly remember,' he muttered. *As though The Dog on TV was way more interesting than the real Dog.*

'Everyone was taking photos that day, with Donnie's camera,' she prompted. 'But then somebody nicked it. Was it you, Lenny? Have you got the camera?'

'I wish,' he grumbled, kicking the tan bark. 'That was an ace camera. If I was any good, I would've scored it for myself. But the fact is, it's like Trace says - stealing doesn't pay. Either I don't score a thing or I'm not allowed to keep it. Life sucks, mate. It really sucks.'

Blake frowned. *This guy is beyond hopeless. He's actually feeling sorry for himself,*

because he didn't get to steal a camera from his own brother.

'Okay, so you don't have the camera,' she snapped. 'One more question. Are you blackmailing Dog?'

Lenny's jaw dropped and hung open for twenty seconds. 'Me?' he spluttered. 'Me, do a thing like that to The Dog? No way. I told you, Dog's my mate. He stayed at our place for weeks after his dad booted him out, till my mum told him he had to go. After that he was a street kid for a while but hey, he did all right for himself. He's smart, The Dog. Way smarter than me. I never get to score anything, and if I do, I'm not allowed to keep it.'

Oh, great. There he goes again. I could end up getting really annoyed at Lenny, if I had to listen to him for long. Still, I reckon he's telling the truth when he says he wouldn't hurt Dog. Fact is, he's not clever enough to fake it.

She jumped off the swing and herded Lenny back to his brother's place. Lenny kept on whinging all the way, switching between 'I never get to score anything,' and 'That guy said he shouldn't've hit me.' Blake waited outside the house, to make sure he went in. Waved to Donnie and Tracy and the baby and then climbed onto the Honda.

Hope they manage to talk some sense into Lenny this time. He'd have to be better at gardening than he is at stealing. Still, at least I can cross him off the list and concentrate on Mick and Nico. If I can find them.

Maybe I need to get The Dog to give me a few more clues.

CHAPTER SIX

Blake knocked at the door of Dog's hotel room. A long knock and two short knocks. No answer. She turned to knock at Dancer's door, on the opposite side of the corridor, but Andy Haines stepped in front of her.

'They're not here,' he said and Blake shrugged.

'Okay then, are you going to tell me where they are?'

'No,' said the manager. 'Frankly, I don't think this is doing them any good. You're just a kid. How can you possibly find Dog's friends, when a bunch of trained private detectives couldn't do it?'

She grinned. 'Actually, I'm older than I look. Although it can be useful to look young. Sometimes people'll say things to a kid that they wouldn't say to a grown-up.'

'Nice theory. Dog and Dancer might even believe it - but you haven't convinced me. I reckon you're just a free-loader, Blake. In it for the money. You know Dog's got these weird ideas about coincidence and stuff, so you're taking advantage of it.'

Blake looked him up and down. *Nice guy. Real friendly and all.* 'Okay, you don't trust me,' she said. 'That's fair enough, when you haven't seen any results. But what are you doing about the blackmailer, Andy? How do you intend to stop him?'

'I don't,' the manager said and Blake's eyebrows shot up.

'Terrific. So you're just going to stand back and let the blackmailer destroy Rabies?'

She turned to go but Andy swung his arm out and barred her way. 'Hang on. I'm the manager for Rabies, remember. I don't want to see the band destroyed, any more than Dog or Dancer do. I just don't think we've got a hope of catching the blackmailer, that's all. So I'd rather spend my time on the reporters and their bosses. Getting friendly with

them. Taking them out to dinner. Maybe a present or two. Making sure that, even if they get hold of those photos, they'll never print them.

Blake nodded. *Hmm. That could work.* After her time in Mudgeebung, she knew that reporters didn't always write about everything they found out. Even hard-hitting investigative reporters like Martin Fahey sometimes agreed to keep things secret, in order to help other people.

The Dog doesn't need that kind of help, though. Not if he's telling the truth.

'Do you believe Dog's story?' she demanded. 'Or do you think he really is a junkie?'

Andy spread his hands. 'Does it matter? Dog's a great musician and a truly great songwriter. As long as he goes on performing well. I don't care what he does in his spare time.'

He spun around and marched off. Blake sighed and headed back to her room. She checked her phone messages and heard Dancer's voice saying, 'We're practising in one of the conference rooms downstairs. You can come and listen, if you like. Or we'll have dinner in Dog's room later on.'

Blake hesitated. Part of her wanted to rock up to the practice, to show Andy that he couldn't keep her out. But another part of her felt totally exhausted. The second part won. She dragged an armchair over to the window and collapsed into it, gazing out at the view.

It's nice to get a chance to relax. You can't ever relax while you're living on the streets, not really. Even when you try to sleep, you have to stay alert. Watching out for the cops - or a bunch of hoons - or someone who wants to steal your stash.

For the next hour she slumped in the chair and stared out across the city. Letting her mind float free. Trying to work out how she could track down Mick and Nico. Thinking about Kenny Malone and wondering what he was going to tell her about her mother. She'd just decided to ring Kenny's flat again when she heard a knock at the door. It was Dancer.

'Yo, Blake,' she said. 'Ready to eat? Let's go.'

She grabbed Blake's hand and pulled her along the corridor. The Dog was waiting in his room. The table was loaded with food and trumpets were blasting from the TV. Dancer strode over and turned the TV off.

'Give us a break,' she said. 'I've watched those videos a thousand times. Don't you want to know what Blake's found out?'

'Not particularly,' Dog yawned. 'I trust her, so I know she's on the right track. Besides, you may've seen the videos a thousand times but Blake hasn't seen them yet.'

Dancer sniffed. 'You're hopeless. Come on, Blake. Tell.'

She piled a plate with food and passed it across. Blake nibbled at prawns and salad and bits of cheese, while she explained how she'd followed Lenny from shop to shop. It was a funny story, much funnier than it had seemed at the time. By the end of it, Dancer

was rolling round on the couch, clutching her ribs, and even The Dog was smiling faintly.

'That's Lenny. If there was one lump of dog poo on a mile-wide footpath, he'd step in it,' he said. 'Okay, now can we watch *Blake's 7*?'

Blake frowned. 'Not yet. I want you to tell me a bit more about Mick and Nico first.'

'What's to tell?' Dog asked, opening his sky-blue eyes wide. 'I haven't seen them for two months. Don't even know where they're living now. You're doing a great job, Blake. You don't need any help from me.'

He jumped up and raced for the TV. Blake scowled at his back. *What's the matter with him? It's like he's trying to make it hard for me. He must know all sorts of stuff. Mick and Nico's families and friends, their hobbies, the places where they used to hang out.*

I gotta get him talking - but he doesn't want to talk about Mick and Nico. So I'll try something else.

'I met another old mate of yours today,' she said. 'A guy named Peter Piper who claims he's an unofficial youth worker. He reckons he taught you how to play the guitar.'

Dog's hand froze, halfway to the button. 'Peter Piper? Yeah, he was pretty important to me, once upon a time. Bought me my first guitar. Listened to my first songs. Found me a room in a squat that even had enough power to run a TV. He laughed and added, 'An unofficial youth worker, hey? Not a bad description, in a way.'

He thumped the button on the TV. Seconds later trumpets were blasting again and the *Blake's 7* logo was flashing up on the screen. Dancer groaned and said, 'I'm out of here,' but Blake settled herself on the couch.

I still need to con Dog into talking. So I'll watch his tacky s.f. show, if that's what it takes.

They watched three *Blake's 7* videos in a row. For the first hour Blake kept worrying about whether the actors would knock over the cardboard sets. But after that, she started to get into it. If you forgot about the sets and the seventies costumes, it was a good story. A little bunch of space outlaws, trying to fight the Federation.

It'd be like trying to fight Interco, the big multinational company that my dad heads up. Pretty heroic, when you come to think about it.

'See?' Dog said as he got up to change the tape. 'Like I told you, coincidences are important. You turned up while I was watching *Blake's 7*. So I knew it'd mean something to you, same as it does to me.'

'What does it mean to you?' Blake asked and he sighed.

'When I was living in the squat, I watched TV all the time. Old s.f. shows mostly, because I liked the idea of escaping into another world. I used to dream that Blake would teleport down to my room and rescue me.'

Blake groaned softly. *Oh, great. So that's why Dog's convinced I'm going to solve all his problems.*

'I'm not like Roj Blake in the series,' she warned him. 'He's a real hero. I'm more like his sidekick Avon - the one who wears black leather and makes cynical comments and keeps saying, "I told you so".'

'Hey, Avon turns into a hero too, in spite of himself. Blake disappears halfway through and Avon spends the rest of the series searching for Blake and fighting the Federation.'

The icy hand squeezed Blake's shoulder and she shivered. *Searching for my mother, fighting my father and Interco. Blake's 7 is the story of my life.* Another squeeze from the icy hand. She shook her head, to clear it.

Oh wow, I'm in TV overload. That's not the story of my life. It's an old s.f. show. Time to go to bed.

She started to haul herself up from the couch but the trumpet theme song was already playing. *Okay then, one last episode.* This time Blake and Avon and the others were up against the Terra Nostra, who were selling a powerful drug called Shadow to the dreamheads in the Federation. They got caught - and escaped - and came back to blast the Terra Nostra. Dog relaxed against the cushions with a happy sigh.

'Blake's fantastic,' he said, smiling like an angel. 'He can even bust the drug dealers, which is more than the cops can do.'

'Well, it's probably easier on TV,' Blake commented. 'But why's it so hard for the cops?'

'Hey, there's a lot of people involved in the drug trade,' Dog explained. 'First, the big dealers who have these huge blocks of heroin, smuggled in from Thailand or somewhere. They split it up and put it in ziplock bags and sell it to smaller dealers, like Pixie. And the smaller dealers divide it and sell it to the kids - about a teaspoonful of heroin, wrapped in silver foil and tucked inside a balloon.'

'A balloon?' Blake said, startled. 'What for?'

'Thing is, the kids are selling on the streets. They hang around in pairs. One kid asks people whether they want to score and if they say yes, he nicks back to the other kid who's holding five or six balloons in his mouth. That way, if the jacks come along, the kid can just swallow the balloons. They'll go through his stomach and out the other end - and then he can start trying to sell the heroin again.'

'Yuck! So that's why the cops can't catch them - because they swallow the evidence.'

'Not exactly. The kids are pretty easy to catch and it's not too difficult to catch the smaller dealers. But the big guys are the real problem - and the big dealers are generally living in a nice house in some leafy suburb or running another business, as a cover. The jacks never lay eyes on them. And none of the smaller dealers'll talk, because they don't want to wake up dead.'

He picked up the remote and fast-forwarded to the start of the next episode.

Escaping into TV Land again. Blake tried a few more questions but The Dog just smiled or ignored her. In the end, she got up and tiptoed out of the room.

Face it. Unless there's a character called Mick or Nico in an episode of Blake's 7 or Doctor Who, I'm never going to get anything out of The Dog.

Blake crawled into bed and fell asleep straight away. She dreamed that she was wandering around bare rocky planets and space modules with sliding doors and flashing control panels. Searching for someone, escaping from someone else. Turning every now and then to fire off a blast from her laser gun.

When she woke, she was sitting bolt upright, with her arm pointed at the door. *Firing my laser gun again. Weird. I usually dream I'm running and searching - but this time I dreamt I was searching and fighting.*

She started to scramble out of bed. Stopped with her foot halfway to the floor. *Wait a minute. Is that what the icy hand was trying to tell me last night? I'm not just running away from my father. I'm fighting him as well, like Roj Blake fights the Federation.*

Blake checked back over the past nine months. Remembered how Interco had pushed the guys on the HiCorp building site into working dangerously fast - planned to build a casino in Mudgeebung - stopped Helena Hamilton from paying her workers a fair wage - and backed a computer consultancy that was ripping off unemployed kids.

And I tried to help the other side, every time. Didn't even notice what I was doing, till Dog made me watch those videos.

She frowned and stood up. Thinking about her father wasn't going to help her find Mick and Nico. It was time to get moving. Back to the Majestic Pool Hall, maybe, to see whether she could beat Peter Piper at pool again and score some more information.

Blake showered and dressed. Headed for the door, hesitated for half a minute and spun back. Grabbed the phone and punched out a number she knew off by heart. The phone rang three times and then somebody picked it up. She held her breath.

And let it out in a sigh as she recognised Kenny Malone's flatmate, Shane.

'Oh, it's you,' he said, as though he wished it wasn't. 'Um, sorry, Blake. Kenny's still not back. He, er, had a bit of trouble getting on a flight. Why don't you call again in, like, a couple of days?'

Blake put the phone down and stood there, staring at the city skyline. Shane had sounded flustered. Not like his usual self. If she'd had to make a guess, she would've said he was lying - and that he didn't enjoy it. Maybe Kenny *had* come home but he didn't want to see her.

Maybe he had some really bad news about her mother, so he was putting off the moment when he had to tell her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As Blake hurried down the corridor, one of the doors swung open. 'Excellent,' said Dancer. 'You're still here. I want to come along with you today.'

Blake frowned. *Hmm. Don't know about that. I work better on my own.*

'I can drive you round in my car,' Dancer told her. 'And I'm good at getting guys to talk about themselves. And -'

'Relax,' Blake cut in. 'It's fine. If you're that keen to be my personal assistant, the job's yours.'

When they arrived in the car park under the hotel, Dancer's car turned out to be a black BMW. Blake looked it up and down. 'We're going to a pretty rough area,' she warned. 'Are you sure you wouldn't rather take the Honda?'

'Hey, I'll risk it, Blake. I can always pretend I'm a big-time drug dealer.'

'Well, it's your call. Come on.'

Dancer was a flashy driver. They zipped through the city, cutting corners, running red lights and changing lanes every ten seconds. Blake gritted her teeth and hung onto the edge of her seat but the other drivers didn't seem to mind. They just stared at the black BMW - and at Dancer in her black leather.

She's got style. Too much style for a detective's assistant, maybe, but it could come in handy this morning.

Everyone in the Majestic Pool Hall stared at Dancer too. Two kids tripped over their pool cues, another kid's jaw dropped and Peter Piper leapt up and came hurrying over, bowing like a prince in a Disney cartoon.

'Welcome to the Majestic,' he said, taking Dancer's hand. 'What can we offer you? A

drink? A coffee? A toasted sandwich? Blake, why don't you go and ask Cazza to give us three of his cheese specials? Or, if he's not in the kitchen, you could start making the sandwiches yourself.'

Blake strolled over to the door. The kitchen was as grotty as the pool hall. Greasy stove, greasy benches, greasy marks down the fridge door. Blake couldn't see Casimir Slavko anywhere, so she looked around till she found a loaf of sliced bread. *Still in its plastic bag, so it ought to be okay. Now for the cheese.*

She peered into the fridge. Saw six cartons of milk, a sack of coffee beans and a big plastic-wrapped block with two strips of masking tape around it. Casimir was obviously due to start on a new block of cheese. She hesitated and then turned to get a knife.

Squeaked in surprise as Casimir loomed over her and slammed the fridge shut.

'Ha!' he said, tugging at his thick moustache. 'Thief! Nasty little thief.'

'Hey, I'm not interested in nicking your milk cartons,' Blake said, edging backwards. 'Peter sent me in to make some sandwiches, that's all.'

'Peter is trouble,' Casimir grumbled. 'You don't make sandwiches. I make.'

He flapped his hands at her and she scuttled for the door. *Fine. Like I care. I was just trying to stay out of the way while Dancer does a number on Peter.*

Back in the pool hall, Peter and Dancer were sitting at one of the tables, heads together, talking fast. Blake decided to play another game of pool. Realised that there were kids at both of the tables. Spotted Donnie Harding behind the counter, helping himself to a Coke, and wandered over to join him.

'Hey, it's you,' he said, looking pleased. 'Thanks for rescuing Lenny yesterday. Dunno what you said to him but he's dead keen to work for my mowing business now. Trace and me are real grateful. Any time you can use some help from us, you only gotta ask.'

He pulled the cash register open and dropped a dollar onto the scraps of paper and orange balloons. Blake studied him thoughtfully. 'As a matter of fact, you might be able to help. Lenny's old mates, Mick and Nico - do you know where they are now?'

'Wouldn't have a clue about Nico. Don't think anyone does. But Mick - well, we used to see a lot of him, till his girlfriend booted him out and he started picking fights with everyone. Got himself into some major league trouble and then disappeared. You could try that sheila from Legal Aid, Isobelle Sherwood. She might know what's happened to him.'

Blake nodded. 'Okay, I'll do that.'

She started to turn away but Donnie caught hold of her arm. 'And listen,' he whispered, 'if you're talking to Miss Sherwood, could you ask her what I ought to do about me lawn-mower? I needed a mower, to start up the business, so I nicked one from the Office of Corrections. But I'm doing all right now, so Trace reckons I ought to give it back. Without getting myself into any more trouble, of course.'

When they walked outside, two young kids were guarding Dancer's car. They scowled at Blake and Dancer, said, 'Geez, it's not the man in the black BMW, just two chicks' and scattered. Blake shrugged and scrambled into the car.

'So how did you go with Peter Piper?' she asked.

'Not too well,' Dancer sighed, starting the BMW. 'I kept asking about Mick and Nico but he kept changing the subject. Basically, he just wanted to get all the information I could give him about The Dog.'

Blake frowned and tapped her fingers on the armrest. *Interesting. Peter Piper wants to talk about Dog - but Dog doesn't seem too keen on talking about Peter Piper.*

'One more thing,' Dancer told her. 'As I was leaving, Peter gave me this twisty grin, like he was laughing at a joke I didn't get. Then he goes, "Tell Blake to come back later. I might've managed to remember something else".'

'Oh, terrific. He's playing games with me again. I wish -'

She sucked her breath in sharply as the BMW spun round in a sudden U-turn and slotted into a parking space. They stared out at a square brick box with graffiti scrawled down its side wall. More spiky tags and another spray-painted patch of blue sky with BELIEVE scrolling across the clouds.

'There,' Dancer said. 'That's the Magistrates' Court.'

They climbed the steps and walked into an oblong waiting room. Forty adults, ten kids, three babies and a Coke machine, all jammed in together. The air smelt of fear and worry and nappies that needed changing. Blake held her breath and backed towards the desk near the door.

'We're looking for Ms Sherwood,' she began and the clerk said, 'Outside. Who's next?'

Busy place. Looks like I only get one question. I just hope there aren't too many people outside.

There was no one on the steps. No one at the front of the court. Blake and Dancer drifted round the side of the building and saw a woman smoking a cigarette and studying the BELIEVE graffiti. She was round and comfortable, with a small red mouth and quick interested eyes. White shirt, black suit and a tumble of red curls, trying to escape from a ponytail.

She stubbed out her cigarette and lit another one. 'Yes, filthy habit,' she agreed, before Dancer could say anything. 'I only smoke on court days. Thirty clients today and they were all proper little toenails. I just defended a kid who got caught driving a getaway car down the middle of the road at two kilometres per hour, because he was used to automatic cars but he'd stolen one with gears. When he saw the cops, he

panicked, hauled at the gear stick - and reversed straight into a wall.'

She groaned and took another drag on her cigarette. Blake laughed. 'That sounds like Lenny Harding,' she commented.

'You know Lenny? Another toenail. I don't know why people think criminals are exciting and dangerous. They're about exciting as a wet sock and they aren't dangerous unless they get organised - and luckily, most of them couldn't organise their way out of a paper bag. I keep hearing rumours about this mysterious bloke who's running a gang of thieves but I'm not sure I believe in him. He's like the man in the black BMW.'

'Oh yeah, we've heard about him,' Blake said, remembering the kids who'd guarded Dancer's car. 'Who is he?'

The woman shrugged. 'He's supposed to be a dealer - but he's just a fantasy. He doesn't exist. The kids on the street want to believe that the big dealers are cool dudes with fast cars and lots of money. In fact, they're mostly pond scum, like the owner of the Majestic Pool Hall.'

Blake stared at her. *Casimir Slavko, one of the big dealers? I ought to be shocked - but I'm not. Why? Because of those balloons in his cash register and the package in his fridge. Not cheese, after all. A plastic-wrapped heat-sealed block of heroin.*

'Listen,' she burst out, 'what if I'd seen some heroin at the Majestic Pool Hall? Could the cops go and pick Casimir up?'

'Sorry,' the woman said sadly. 'Not if Casimir knows you saw it. He'll have shifted the stuff somewhere else by now.'

Blake growled like an angry dog and the woman patted her shoulder. Dancer gazed at them both. 'Amazing,' she said. 'You actually stopped talking for a few seconds. While I've got a chance, can I ask whether you're Isobelle Sherwood? And if you are, will you answer a couple of questions?'

The woman beamed at her. 'Call me Belle. And ask away.'

'Okay then,' Dancer said, 'we're looking for two mates of Lenny's called Mick Costello and Nico -'

Before she could finish the sentence, Belle Sherwood whipped out a mobile phone. She tapped in a number, asked half a dozen questions at her usual speed and turned to Blake and Dancer.

'You're in luck, if you can call it luck. The cops are about to arrest Mick Costello any minute now. He's been in a lot of trouble lately, so he'll be spending the night in the watch-house. If you want to talk to him, you'd better get there fast.'

She rattled off an address and turned to go. Swung back, ferreted in her wallet and flipped a card across to Blake. 'I haven't seen Nico for a while but this guy should be able to tell you how to find him,' she said. 'Anything else you need?'

'Oh yeah,' Blake said, remembering. 'Donnie Harding. He nicked a lawn mower from the Office of Corrections and he wants to give it back.'

Belle started to laugh. 'Another toenail,' she gasped. 'Tell him to give me a call and I'll fix it. Goodbye - and good luck.'

Blake and Dancer raced for the BMW. Dancer started the car and Blake reached for the street directory. As the BMW roared off down the road, she flicked through the street maps and thought about what Belle had told her.

Casimir Slavko's a dealer but no one's been able to nab him. Looks as though I've got another job on my hands now. I have to catch the blackmailer - and I have to stop Casimir from selling heroin to kids like Pixie.

Same as Roj Blake stopped the Terra Nostra from selling Shadow to the dreamheads.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The BMW screeched to a halt outside a wooden house with a high chain-link fence. Barbed wire looped along the top and a heavy lock on the gate. A huge black Rottweiler on the veranda and a guy in his early twenties, pacing up and down. Sandy and skinny and restless. Tight blue jeans, tight white t-shirt and a rifle in his hands.

Oh-oh. I can see why Belle said Mick Costello was trouble. Somehow I don't think this gun'll turn out to be plastic, like Lenny's gun.

As Blake and Dancer piled out of the car, a young cop came scuttling over. His face was pale and sweaty and his hands were trembling. 'You better get out of here,' he warned. 'It's not safe. The guy in that house reckons he'll shoot anyone who steps inside the gate. I'm just waiting for some back-up from the cop shop.'

'What set the guy off?' Blake asked.

The young cop was just beginning to answer when a woman pushed in front of him. Neat grey perm, neat navy coat, neat pursed mouth. She was clutching a navy handbag and shaking with rage.

'He's a maniac,' she shrilled. 'A dangerous maniac. Him and his dog. There it is! That's the lousy rotten mongrel that bit me. Rushed out when I was going past and attacked me.'

Her arm shot up and pointed at the veranda. Blake leaned forward to examine her wrist. 'Interesting,' she said. 'I can't see any teeth marks.'

The woman dropped her arm and pulled her sleeve down. 'This happens to be my best winter coat,' she snapped. 'Good thick wool. That monster wasn't able to bite right through it. But it tried, all the same - unless you think I'm lying.' She swung away and

hollered, 'Constable Whitten! Arrest this girl for calling me a liar.'

'I can't do that, Mrs Murdock,' the young cop muttered. 'It's not my job.'

'All right then, arrest the maniac,' she demanded, pointing at Mick.

The Rottweiler ducked its head and slunk behind a stack of old cartons. *As if it knows what she's been saying about it.* And Mick Costello swung his rifle up. 'You're not gonna take my dog,' he yelled. 'My girlfriend's gone. She took the baby. But you're not gonna take Darth Vader.'

'Darth Vader's the Rottweiler,' Constable Whitten whispered to Blake. 'A dangerous brute. You should've heard how it barked at me when I rattled the gate. I've got it on "rush, worry and bite" charges and I hope it'll be shot.'

Blake stood on tiptoe, trying to peer over the cartons, but she couldn't see Darth Vader properly. She thought about climbing the chain link fence and decided that Mick would freak. Another quick glance around the yard. No bushes, just a couch grass lawn with a paling fence on one side and a brick fence on the other side.

She nodded, made up her mind and moved closer to Dancer. 'What are we going to do?' Dancer hissed. 'The cops from the station'll be here soon - and Mick looks like he's revving himself up to fire that rifle. Once he does, we won't have a chance of talking to him.'

'Relax,' Blake whispered back. 'I've got an idea but I need to check it out first. Can you keep that cop busy, while I take a look around?'

Dancer grinned. 'Dead easy. I'll just play the fame card.' She drifted over to the constable and Mrs Murdock. Said, 'You're probably wondering why I'm here. Fact is, I came to see Mick. He's a mate of The Dog, from Rabies, and -'

'Rabies?' Mrs Murdock screeched. 'That nasty disease you get from mad dogs? Oh, good heavens, do you mean I'm going to get *rabies* because that dog bit me?'

She screwed her face into a tight knot. Opened her mouth, as if she was getting ready to scream. Constable Whitten rolled his eyes.

'Calm down, Mrs M,' he sighed. 'Rabies isn't a disease. It's a pop group. Top of the charts this week, as a matter of fact. I thought I knew you from somewhere, miss, only I couldn't believe my eyes. But you're Dancer, aren't you?'

Blake sidled past them, smiling to herself. *Excellent. Dancer's doing a great job. The cop can tell her how wonderful she is. Mrs Murdock can have a long argument about the difference between rabies and Rabies. And I can get a closer look at Darth Vader. If I'm right, that ought to fix everything.*

She jogged off down the street. Past the brick fence and a picket fence and a fence made of fat concrete pillars. The next house had a letterbox in the shape of a rocket, with two spacemen holding the numbers 7 and 2. Blake laughed and jogged on. Realised she'd jogged straight past a laneway, stopped and swung back.

She followed the lane till it met another lane, running between the back fences of two

rows of houses. Blake murmured, 'Just what I need,' to a passing cat. Then she turned the corner and went speeding along the second lane, counting as she ran.

Mick's house is number 62 and the house on the corner was 72. So if I count off five houses, I ought to end up at Mick's place.

The fourth house had a high brick wall and the fifth house had more barbed wire wound round the top of its corrugated iron fence. Blake stepped back and studied them. *Yep, that looks right. Mick and his next-door neighbor. Donnie Harding would love the neighbour's place. Those high brick walls are perfect for burgers.*

Not bad for me, either.

She rubbed her hands on her jeans. Stretched up and found a crack between the bricks. Then started to climb, remembering everything her friend Marty had taught her. Hang on with your left hand while you find a hold for your right foot. Lift your right arm and run your fingers across the brick till you come across another gap. Wedge your fingers into the gap, then pull your left foot up. And so on.

Left hand, right foot. Right hand, left foot. Three moves later, Blake was hauling herself onto the top of the wall. Swinging her leg over it and perching sidesaddle on the bricks. Gasping and losing her balance and almost falling, as a dog started to bark at her.

A low growl at first and then a flurry of yelps and snarls, like a whole pack of wolves all howling at once. Blake grabbed the bricks and steadied herself. Peered into Mick's backyard. Saw a rusty old car, a tumbledown shed and a lopsided clothes line - but no black Rottweiler. She frowned, turned her head and glanced down into the yard next door.

Found herself staring straight into the yellow eyes of a frantic Alsatian.

The dog made another wild leap at her. As its teeth grazed her runner. Blake jerked her foot up and looked around. The neighbours' back garden was just a tiny courtyard. Fancy brick paving, a cumquat tree and plants in terracotta pots. The Alsatian could leap right across it in two short bounds. *Poor thing. It doesn't get enough exercise. That's why it's going ape.*

'Cool it, dog,' she said. 'You don't really want to eat me. You're just lonely, right?'

She chatted to the dog for a few more minutes, till it calmed down. Then she scrambled to her feet, spreading her arms wide for balance. Took a careful step forward and went walking along the top of the fence, eyes fixed on the line of bricks. *Like a tightrope walker, only tightropes are way narrower than this. It's easy, really.*

As long as you don't look down.

The Alsatian had been trotting along, keeping pace with her, but now it stopped and whined softly. When Blake glanced sideways, she realised it was pawing at a side gate. In which case, she must be halfway along the wall by now. She called 'See you later' to the dog. Lowered herself slowly, sat on the brick fence and looked across into Mick's

front yard.

The Rottweiler was snoozing behind the pile of cartons. And Mick was standing at the end of the veranda, with his rifle aimed at her.

'G'day,' she called. 'The Dog sent me. Your old mate, Dog, remember. He told me you're really into dogs. Will you help me down, so I can come and meet Darth Vader?'

She stared into the black hole at the end of the rifle. Watched it shift and waver and sink, till it was pointing at the ground. 'I'm a bit busy right now,' Mick Costello muttered. 'But hey, any mate of The Dog's is a mate of mine.'

He left the rifle on the veranda and loped across to the wall. Blake pushed off and he caught her, swung her in a circle and set her down on the lawn. When she looked up, there was a ring of cops clustered around them, with Dancer and Mrs Murdock hovering in the background.

'Thank you, young lady,' boomed the fattest cop. 'You gave us just enough time to cut the bolt on the gate and get in. Mind you, it was a pretty dangerous thing to do. Don't make a habit of it, okay?'

Blake shrugged. 'Hey, it wasn't all that dangerous.'

'You reckon?' squeaked Constable Whitten, wiping his sweaty forehead. 'You could've been shot - or ripped to pieces by that mad dog. It was barking at you, same as it barked at me.'

'Barking?' Blake said. 'I don't think so. That was the dog next door.'

She jerked her thumb at the veranda, where the black dog was still twitching and snuffling in its dreams. The fat cop started to laugh but Mrs Murdock elbowed past him, shouting, 'All right, maybe the dog didn't bark - but it bit me. It definitely bit me.'

'Are you sure?' she asked and Mrs Murdock shivered with fury.

'Did you hear that? She's calling me a liar again. Yes, missy, the dog rushed straight at me and sank its teeth into my arm.'

Blake nodded. 'Okay then, let's test it out.' She strolled across to the veranda and said, 'Darth Vader, wake up. Go and say hello to the nice cops.'

The Rottweiler opened one eye, yawned and heaved itself to its feet. Lumbered down the steps and waddled across to the policemen, wheezing as it went.

'He's not rushing real fast,' the fat cop commented. 'I reckon he needs to go on the Big Man's Diet, like me.'

He knelt down and patted the Rottweiler, rubbing its jaw and ruffling the black fur between its ears. Then he laughed even louder and said, 'Come on, constable. Your turn now.'

'Me?' gulped the young cop. 'You want me to pat it? Is that an order?'

'Why not?' the fat cop chuckled. 'Trust me, you'll survive.'

Constable Whitten took a deep breath and crouched down beside Darth Vader. The dog butted its head against his hand and closed its mouth on his fingers. Dancer

groaned, Mrs Murdock screamed and the young cop gasped out loud.
'That tickles,' he giggled. 'The dog gummed me. It's got no teeth.'

CHAPTER NINE

An hour later Blake and Dancer were sitting in Mick's kitchen, drinking strong black tea with lots of sugar. 'Sorry about the milk,' Mick mumbled. 'I haven't been out of the house for days. It got so as I was starting to feel like Darth Vader was my only friend. I couldn't handle talking to anyone else.'

'You were lonely, like the dog next door,' Blake said briskly. She thought for a minute and added, 'Why don't you take it for walks, while its owners are at work? They obviously don't have time to walk it themselves, so I bet they'd pay you pretty well.'

Mick stared down into his tea. 'Yeah, I could do that,' he said after a while. 'Matter of fact, there's a lot of dogs round here that get left alone all day. I thought about nicking them and looking after them but I never thought about walking them for money. Thanks - and thanks again for saving Darth.'

'I still don't understand how you did it,' Dancer complained. 'I mean, Darth Vader looked pretty scary to me. Why were you so sure he was harmless?'

'Because of his name,' Blake explained. 'Darth Vader, like the bad guy in *Star Wars*. Okay, the new version of *Star Wars*, with all the extra scenes, came out last year but the film was actually made yonks ago. Darth Vader didn't act like a puppy, so I figured he could easily be a very old dog.'

'Fifteen years old,' Mick told her. 'I've had him since I was eight. He's my best mate, aren't you, Darthie?'

He leaned sideways and fondled Darth's ears. The Rottweiler gummed him and Dancer giggled. 'I'll never forget the look on that young cop's face, when he found out Darth didn't have any teeth,' she said. 'Or the look on Mrs Murdock's face, either.'

'She was ropable,' Mick agreed. 'Looked like she'd have a heart attack any second. Everyone in the street'll be rapt, 'cause she's always poking her nose into other people's business. You done good, Blake. Just wish I could do something for you.'

'Actually, you can,' she said. 'You can tell me whether you nicked Donnie Harding's camera from the Majestic Pool Hall.'

Mick shrugged. 'Why bother? I got no use for a fancy camera like that. I'm colour blind, see. A lot of blokes are. So I just take snaps with my old camera, in black and white. Want to have a look?'

He led them back down the hall and showed them a row of framed photos. Darth Vader, looking noble. Lenny and Donnie Harding, pretending to wrestle. A young woman smiling down at the baby in her arms.

'They're good,' Blake told him. 'You're right - you don't need a new camera. Listen, you wouldn't happen to have any shots of Lenny's friend Nico, would you?'

'Nah, sorry about that. Not sure if I ever met Nico. He went to school with Dog and Lenny, right? Me, I was in the same year as Donnie. I got to know The Dog 'cause he stayed with me and my girlfriend for a while, after Donnie and Lenny's mum chucked him out. He was a nice little kid, was Dog. No more trouble than Darth here.'

'So you wouldn't happen to be blackmailing Dog right now?' Dancer cut in, trying to take him by surprise. Mick blinked and stared sadly at the photo of the young woman with the baby.

'Why would I do a thing like that? I don't want money. I just want my girlfriend and my kid back again. Okay, I know it's not going to happen but I can't seem to get interested in anything else.' He thought for a moment and added, 'Except maybe this idea about walking other people's dogs. It's not bad, y'know. Not bad at all.'

Mick gave them both a photo of Darth Vader and thanked them all over again. When they got outside, Dancer said firmly, 'Time for lunch.' She drove the BMW through a maze of side streets and back to the hotel. Stopped in the foyer to phone The Dog's room.

'Answer me,' she muttered, tapping her black boot on the marble floor. 'Pick up that phone, Dog.'

'You're out of luck,' a voice said from behind them. 'Dog's having one of his off-the-planet days. He won't talk to anyone - not even you, Dancer.'

She swung around and glared at Andy Haines. 'Damn,' she said. 'We've got a big gig tomorrow. I wanted to run through some of our songs this afternoon.'

'Well, you know what The Dog's like,' Andy shrugged. 'He always shuts down for a while, just before a concert. If you're that desperate to practise, you could always play

with me.'

Dancer's china doll eyes opened wide. 'No offence, Andy, but that's not the same.'

'Why not? We used to play together all the time, remember. I'm just as good as him, y'know.'

'Nobody's as good as The Dog,' Dancer said flatly. 'And you don't even come close. You haven't picked up a guitar in months, Andy. You can't hear the music inside your head any more.'

The manager stared at her for a moment, running a hand across his neat brown hair. Then he turned and stormed off. Blake watched him push past a group of Japanese tourists and disappear into the lift.

'That was a bit heavy,' she murmured and Dancer looked surprised.

'Was it? I didn't mean to be rough on Andy. He's an excellent manager and all that. But he's not a real muso - and I can't pretend he is. Come on, let's get something to eat.'

As they walked into the hotel restaurant, heads turned and people started nudging each other and whispering. Dancer didn't seem to notice. She led the way to a table by the window, smiled at the waiter and said, 'Bring us something nice, okay?' He goggled, gasped, nodded hard, and went speeding off.

Bet he's gone to tell everyone in the kitchen how the famous Dancer actually spoke to him. I suppose you'd get used to that sort of thing after a while - but it creeps me right out.

'So what do you reckon, Blake?' Dancer asked. 'Do you believe Mick's story? I did. In which case, this Nico guy has to be the one who stole the camera.'

'Guess so. It's just a pity that he's the hardest one to find.'

'Hey, you'll get him in the end. You're good at this. Look at the way you figured out that stuff about Darth Vader. I couldn't've done that, not in a million years.'

The waiter came scurrying back with a huge plate of food. Asparagus sandwiches, tomato and bacon tarts, eggs with a sprinkle of black caviar on top. While Blake helped herself to a sandwich. Dancer gazed out of the window and said, 'Strange, isn't it? We've both run away from home, in a way. How long have you been on the road?'

She thought for a few seconds. 'Hmm. Almost nine months.'

'And have you talked to your family at all since you left?'

'What for?' Blake snapped. 'I wouldn't talk to my dad if he was the last person on earth.'

'Me either,' Dancer sighed. 'I can face five thousand screaming kids but I haven't worked out how to face my folks. Still, your dad's not the only person in your family, is he? How about your mum?'

'Which one?'

'Oh yeah, I forgot,' Dancer said, startled. 'I was thinking about the one I've met. The

mum that you lived with.'

'I'm not mad at her, like I'm mad at my dad,' Blake admitted. 'And I've seen my brother once, since I went on the run.'

'Dion? Cool dude. I always used to think he was the best. So you're not mad at him either?'

'Nah, he's okay,' she said. 'Now, tell me what it's like, being a big deal rock star.'

Dancer looked as though she would've liked to ask some more questions but she nodded and began to talk about Rabies. Meeting Dog. Their first hit. Touring from city to city, living in hotel rooms.

'It's a crazy sort of life but I love it. And I love working with The Dog. I'm good, Blake, but Dog's out of sight. I need him, to push me into playing better - and luckily he needs me too, to help him cope with the rest of the world. We're a team. I guess that's the secret of our success.'

She stood up suddenly and strode out of the restaurant. Blake scuttled along behind her, saying, 'I'm off to look for Nico now. Want to come along?'

Dancer blinked, as though she'd forgotten Blake was there. 'No, thanks. It was interesting but I've seen enough. Gotta get back to the music.' She paused and added, 'Y'know, when you said you were adopted, I almost envied you. I always wished I was adopted, because it'd mean that my dad wasn't actually my dad. But it isn't really any easier, is it? I guess I'll just have to sort out the family I've got.'

She drifted away and Blake headed for the lifts. *Dancer was thinking about her own problems, not mine. But she stirred me up, all the same. I've been dealing with strangers for the last nine months. It's kind of freaky, talking to someone who knows so much about me.*

She pushed Dancer and her family out of her mind. Walked into the lift and pressed the button for the tenth floor. As she stepped out into the corridor, she saw Andy Haines propped against the wall, staring into space. She hesitated and then went over to him.

'Are you all right?' she asked.

'Me?' Andy said dreamily. 'Couldn't be better. I'm listening to the music inside my head.'

'Oh yeah? That's nice,' Blake said politely and hurried on.

Nuts. Totally nuts. If this lot's any example, I reckon all musos are bonkers. The Dog, shut away with his videos. Dancer, zoning out because she hasn't touched a guitar for a few hours. And now Andy, listening to the music inside his head.

She ducked into her room and reached for the phone. Dialed Donnie Harding's number and asked Trace to tell him he could call Belle Sherwood about the lawn-mower. Put the phone down and stared at it for a while. Thought about ringing Kenny Malone's flat, picked the phone up and put it down again.

Searched through her pockets, found the card that Belle Sherwood had given her

and went out to find Dog's friend Nico.

CHAPTER TEN

The card said 'Caiden Munro - Radical Writer' in fat 3D letters, like the Rabies graffiti. An address underneath, four blocks away from the Majestic Pool Hall. Blake collected her Honda Rebel from the hotel car park. Rode through the city and over the bridge. Away from the hotels and office blocks, towards the factories and warehouses and streets of small wooden cottages.

As she cruised round a corner, she passed an old five-storey building. Broken windows, wooden bars across the door and a faded sign saying, 'Baxter's Brewery'. The red brick walls were covered with graffiti. Hearts and initials. The usual tags. A sentence in flowing white paint that seemed to say, 'Find deep time streetfish'.

And a familiar patch of blue sky with BELIEVE written across it.

BELIEVE. Must've seen that one half a dozen times now. It's starting to get to me. Making me wonder what I believe in. I reckon that dream of mine says it all. I believe in fighting back and I believe in searching.

So maybe I should forget about getting Kenny Malone to tell me where my mother is. Maybe I should just buy a few spray cans and go round the city, painting 'Where's Maureen?' on all the walls.

Blake grinned and slowed down. Parked the bike outside Caiden Munro's place and knocked on the door. When it swung open, she saw a lanky kid in a t-shirt with a picture of a spray can on it. Paint-stained jeans, bright green hair and a cheerful smile.

'Caiden?' she asked. 'Belle Sherwood reckoned you might be able to help me.'

The kid's smile got even wider. 'Belle Sherwood? She's tops. She, like, saved my

life.'

'Yeah? How?'

'Well, I was picked up by the jacks for train surfing. Riding on the roof and hanging over the edge, so I could write on the side. The magistrate gives me this big lecture about how I could kill myself that way and I go, "Hey, mate, I wouldn't be doing it if I had a job." Then next day Belle's in some groovy dress shop and the owner's arguing with this sign writer, 'cause she wants a sign that looks like graffiti and the guy reckons he can't do it. So Belle tells the dress shop lady about me - and now I got my own business.'

'It's a sign-painting business, then? Your card said you were a writer.'

'I am,' Caiden told her. 'That's the street word for, like, a graffiti artist. Want to see some of my stuff?'

She nodded and followed him into a big sunny room. A long work bench and a drawing board. Spray cans everywhere and photos tacked onto the walls. Shop signs, a mural in a playground, the front of a community centre, all spraypainted with bright swirling designs.

'So what do you want?' he asked. 'A sign or a mural or what?'

'Um, none of that,' Blake said. 'I'm actually trying to find a guy called Nico.'

Caiden stiffened. 'Nico? You mean Nico the writer?'

Blake started to say no and then stopped herself, just in time. *Wait a minute. Peter Piper said Nico didn't like being called Nico any more. He said I'd never find him unless I knew his new name - but he told me I'd see it everywhere.*

I reckon Nico is a writer. And I reckon I know his name too.

'Yeah, I'm looking for Believe,' she said and waited to see whether she'd got it right.

Caiden stuck his hands into his green hair and ruffled it into spikes. Tugged at the silver ring in his bottom lip and said, 'Believe doesn't like people knowing too much about him. But hey, if Belle Sherwood reckons I ought to tell you, then I will.'

'So tell,' Blake said and he swung away and picked up another photo. Blue sky, white clouds and the word BELIEVE.

'Believe was in court the same day as me,' he began. 'He'd been hitting the walls round here for months but the jacks could never catch him. Then one night they chased him off when he was only halfway through, so he came back next night to finish it. But the jacks had staked out the graffiti and they nabbed him the minute he rocked up.'

'Bummer,' Blake said and Caiden sighed.

'You're not wrong. Anyway, Believe's standing there in the court and Belle Sherwood goes, "Why did you do it?" He goes, "I want to make people think better of themselves. I want them to believe." The magistrate gets this weird look on his face, like he's gone all warm and runny inside, and says, "All right. I'll let you off on a bond" - but Believe just stares at him and says, "Does that mean I can't do it again?"'

'Oh wow,' Blake breathed. 'So the magistrate was trying to be nice but Believe wasn't interested?'

'Exactly right. The mag goes, "You won't be allowed to do any spray painting for a year" and Believe's, like, "Oh no, I can't promise that." Luckily, the magistrate's still sappy about him, so he just gets Believe to pay a fine instead. And that's how you'll be able to track him down.'

Blake frowned. *Huh? I think I missed something there.*

'What do you mean?' she asked and Caiden shrugged.

'It's simple. You just need to find a half-finished bit of BELIEVE graffiti. If you stick around, Believe'll turn up sooner or later to finish it.'

It was the middle of the afternoon and the Majestic Pool Hall was almost empty. Only Casimir Slavko polishing glasses and Peter Piper chatting to a young kid. Blake ordered two coffees and stood there, watching Casimir make them. She knew he was a big-time drug dealer now. But he still looked like the grumpy rundown owner of a grotty rundown pool hall.

He slammed the coffees onto the counter and grumbled when Blake gave him a twenty dollar note. *He wouldn't be happy unless I gave him exactly the right money - and even then he wouldn't be happy, because he'd have nothing to complain about.*

While she was picking up the coffees, the kid came pelting over and ducked round the counter. 'I need to stash these keys somewhere for half an hour,' he gasped. 'Mind if I leave them on the shelf here?'

He stood on tiptoe and pushed a bunch of keys behind the photo of Casimir's mother. As he dashed off, the photo toppled and started to fall. Casimir yelped and lunged and caught it. Wiped the silver frame on his sleeve and said tenderly, 'There, mama. You're all right. I don't let the naughty boy break your glass.'

He kissed the photo and put it back on the shelf. Blake frowned across at him. *Yeah, Casimir's got two sides, for sure. A bad side and a sad side. Maybe I can use that somehow.*

'Where does your family come from?' she asked and he shrugged.

'A little, little village with a long, long name. Too hard for Aussies to say.'

He made a spitting, gurgling sound and Blake grinned. 'You're right. That's way too hard for me. Can you spell it, please?'

Casimir wrote down the name on a paper napkin. Sighed deeply and began to tell her all about being a boy in the village. Running to school through the snow. Playing with his brothers and sister. Eating the piroshkis that his mother made for his birthday.

Then another kid drifted into the pool hall and asked for a Coke. Instantly Casimir

turned grumpy again. *Strange guy. While he was talking about the village, it was like I could see this little boy looking out of his eyes. He left Bosnia yonks ago but in a way he brought the little boy with him. Maybe that's why he hates other boys so much.*

She wandered off with her two coffees, a cappuccino for her and an espresso for Peter Piper. As she put them down on the table, Peter looked up and said, 'Well, well, it's Blake again. What can I do for you?'

'I've solved that puzzle,' she told him. 'I figured out Nico's new name - but I still need to find him. You know this area pretty well, don't you? Can you take me on a tour of the BELIEVE graffiti?'

Peter started to laugh. 'Good work, Blake. That was quick. Yep, I'll be happy to give you the guided tour, as soon as you're ready.'

While she drank her cappuccino, he played a quick jaunty tune on his recorder. *Mozart, I think. The bird-catcher's song from The Magic Flute.* He was still playing as they walked out of the Majestic Pool Hall and down the road. Half a dozen young guys crossed the street and came running after them, calling, 'Piper? Peter Piper? Got any jobs for us?'

'Not now,' Peter said sternly. 'Can't you see I'm helping a friend? Come back to the pool hall in two hours time. We can talk about jobs then.'

The tallest guy looked sideways at Blake and shuffled his feet. 'Sorry, Piper,' he muttered. 'We thought she was just one of your kids.'

'Well, she's a mate of one of my kids,' Peter explained. 'My greatest success of all. The -'

'Yeah, yeah,' the guys chorused. 'The Dog. We don't need to hear any more stories about him right now, okay? See you later.'

They took off straight away and Blake and Peter headed on along the street. For the next hour he led her around back lanes and past huge warehouses. Down rows of little shops. Through dusty parks and abandoned factories. Playing 'Over the hills and far away' on his recorder and pointing out Believe's graffiti.

By the end of the hour, Blake had read the word BELIEVE thirty times. Seen thirty spraypaint patches of blue sky and white clouds. *I'm getting to like this Nico guy more and more. Finding it hard to believe he could do all this great stuff and then turn round and blackmail Dog. I really, really want to talk to him.*

But I'll never get the chance, unless we can find some graffiti that he hasn't finished.

'Is that all?' she asked and the piper played a thoughtful trill on his recorder.

'Oh no,' he said. 'I've been saving the best for last. Here it is, just round the next corner.'

As they turned the corner, Blake glanced ahead. Saw the broken windows of Baxter's Brewery. The patch of blue sky on its red brick wall. And an enormous guy in a green singlet and green track pants, lumbering past the building.

Damn. Just my luck. That's Thumper. One of my dad's private detectives.

She flattened herself against the wall. Sidled along and dodged into the nearest doorway. Peter Piper waited on the footpath, playing 'Here we go round the mulberry bush' and watching her from pale amused eyes. As she peered out, the big guy swung back to see where the music was coming from. Blake stared at his face. Stared harder, relaxed and started to giggle with relief.

Phew. That guy looks like Thumper, for sure - but it's not Thumper. Just some other muscleman in his gym gear.

She stepped out of the doorway and smiled sheepishly at the piper. 'Um, sorry,' she mumbled. 'I thought I saw someone I recognised.'

Peter Piper didn't ask any questions. *The guy's way too cool for that.* He just continued on down the street and stopped by the brewery wall.

'This is a historic piece of graffiti,' he informed her. 'The first time Nico ever wrote BELIEVE on a wall, almost twelve months ago. The council should put a plexiglass shield over it, to preserve it - but they won't, of course. They think Nico's just a vandal, like the kids who smash up bus-shelters and phone booths. They don't realise he's actually an artist.'

Blake gazed at the square of blue sky. *Yeah, he's an artist, all right. That's beautiful. There's only one thing wrong with it.*

It's been here for a year, so I won't catch Believe by staking it out.

Peter poked her with his recorder, to get her attention. 'And here's a coincidence,' he said, leading her round the side of the brewery. 'Nico's first bit of graffiti's on the front wall - and his latest bit of graffiti is right there.'

'How do you know it's his latest?' Blake asked, and the piper smiled and pointed. She took a step backwards and studied the wall. A square of blue sky. Three white clouds. An empty cloud shape, where the red bricks showed through.

And nothing written across it. Nothing at all.

Okay, I get it. This has to be Believe's latest graffiti, because it isn't finished. Which means he'll probably come back to finish it tonight.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Blake grabbed Peter Piper's hand and shook it. 'That's brilliant,' she said. 'Just what I need. Good on you.'

The piper played two bars of 'Tom, Tom the piper's son'. Narrowed his pale blue eyes and said, 'Do you think The Dog'll be pleased?'

'Of course,' Blake told him. 'He'll be rapt, for sure.'

Peter bent his head and fiddled with his long red and yellow scarf. 'Well then,' he said finally, 'maybe you can do me a favour. Will you ask Dog to come and see me? Tell him - oh, just tell him I miss him.'

She hesitated. *Rats. I shouldn't've said that Dog would be rapt. I was just being polite - and now Peter's got the wrong idea. Fact is, from the way Dog was talking last night, I don't think he's all that keen on meeting Peter again. I better make some sort of excuse.*

'Um, Rabies has a big concert tomorrow - like, it'll be on TV and everything,' she said. 'Their manager's pretty strict. He'll probably want Dog to stay at the hotel and practise.'

Peter laughed. 'Andy Haines? That loser? The Dog wouldn't take any notice of *him*. Dog's a free spirit. He doesn't follow other people's rules. I taught him that, just like I sent him on his shaman's journey and taught him how to play guitar.'

'Okay,' Blake said, crossing her fingers behind her back. 'I'll give him your message, if you do something for me. Dancer reckons you've got some more information about Dog's mates. And I reckon it's time you told me what it is.'

Peter Piper yawned and stretched. He leaned back against Believe's graffiti and played the bird-catcher song from start to finish. As the last notes echoed off the wall of the brewery, he said, 'I know what you're doing here, Blake. I know about Pixie - and Donnie's camera - and the photos. So you can give Dog another message from me as well. Tell him I can solve all his problems - but I'll only talk to him, not anyone else.'

Blake stopped outside The Dog's door and knocked. A long knock and three short knocks, the Morse code for B. She waited for a full minute, shifting from one foot to the other. As she started to turn away, the door opened a fraction and Dog hissed, 'Come in. Quick.'

Blake ducked inside and looked around. Another science fiction video was playing on the TV. One of the *Star Wars* movies this time, because she could see Darth Vader's black helmet filling the screen. She grinned.

'Hey, that's a coincidence. I met a dog called Darth Vader today.'

'So you found Mick,' Dog nodded. 'And I'm watching *Star Wars* for the first time in months. Like you said, a coincidence. You better tell me about it.'

Blake settled into an armchair and started on the story. From Donnie Harding and his lawn mower to the moment when Darth Vader gummed Constable Whitten's hand. When she'd finished, Dog leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head.

'I'm glad Mick's not the blackmailer,' he said. 'He's a good guy, except that he has real problems with his temper. I guess that's why his girlfriend kicked him out - but hey, there could be a good side to it. Maybe it'll get him started on his shaman's journey.'

'Huh?' Blake said. 'His shaman's journey? What are you talking about?'

Dog gave her his angel smile. 'It's a really old idea, Blake. Comes from the time when people lived in tribes and believed in magic. A lot of tribes used to send their kids out into the desert - or the mountains - or the forest. The kids had to learn how to survive on their own. They had to cope with being lonely and hungry and scared. Until, in the end, some of them had this series of strange dreams that changed them into a shaman. A magic man - or magic woman, of course. It happened to me, while I was living on the streets. And it's happened to you too, hasn't it?'

Blake turned her head away and swallowed hard. *Oh boy. Dog has some crazy ideas but this is the craziest of the lot.*

'Are you serious?' she demanded, swinging back towards him. 'Do you really, honestly believe in magic?'

'I believe in things you can't see or touch or explain,' Dog said. 'Like coincidences, for example.'

Something clicked inside Blake's brain. Half a dozen different memories, bumping

together. *Coincidences, shamans' journeys - the piper keeps raving on about them too.*

'You got all that wacky stuff from Peter Piper, didn't you?' she guessed. 'I met him again this afternoon. He wants to see you, Dog. He reckons he knows who nicked the camera - but he'll only tell you face to face.'

The Dog's eyes went blank. 'No,' he said. 'No. No. No.'

'Hey, he's harmless, Dog. Just some fruit loop who likes to pretend he's an unofficial youth worker. He can't hurt you or anything. And if he's got the information we need, you might as well -'

Then she stopped, because The Dog wasn't listening. He sat there, tense and rigid. Hands clenched on his knees, eyes fixed on the TV, where Luke Skywalker was confronting Darth Vader in a dark forest. Blake shivered and stared down at his fists. For the first time she noticed the home-made tattoos across his knuckles.

LOVE on one hand, HATE on the other.

Oh, right. I keep thinking Dog's this sweet innocent geek guy, because of that angel smile and the way he watches s.f. videos all the time. But he survived on the street for years and he's got a pair of serious tats to prove it.

If he says he won't talk to Peter, I guess he means it.

Back in her room, Blake hauled out the phone book and found the number for Interco's head office. She dialled and waited. Pushed her chin down, to make her voice deeper and said, 'Hello, I'm calling from the Queensland office to inquire about two private detectives employed by Interco, Greg Fender and Thumper Rabbitt. We were expecting them to come up north and -'

'Yes, that's right,' her father's secretary cut in. 'They were planning to head north but as a matter of fact, they're still in the city. Working for the boss, on a personal matter. Shall I ask them to call you?'

'No, that's fine,' Blake said quickly. 'Thanks for your help.'

She slammed the phone down and stared at her shaking hands. *Damn. I was just checking to make sure Thumper wasn't prowling around the city - but he is. Mind you, I'm not shaking because of Greg and Thumper. I've tricked them before and I can trick them again.*

No, the real problem is Lorna.

It had felt strange, listening to her father's secretary. She'd known Lorna Milton since she was a little kid. Lorna used to let her play on her keyboard. She'd given Blake some of the best birthday presents she'd ever had.

Wish I could've said hi to her but it's not possible. Lorna would've gone rushing off to tell Dad and Dad would've gone rushing off to tell Greg and Thumper. And then I'd be

well and truly stuffed.

I'd never get to see Kenny Malone. Or find my mother.

Blake sighed and strode over to the window. Stared down at the city and tried to concentrate on the job she was supposed to be doing. It was a pity Dog was dead set against talking to Peter Piper - but in a way, it didn't really matter. After all, she knew how to catch Believe and he could tell her just as much as Peter could.

I can handle things on my own, without any help. From Peter Piper - or my father - or anyone else.

She made another phone call. Ordered sandwiches and a thermos of coffee from room service. Showered and changed into her warmest clothes. Stuffed the thermos and the food into her new backpack and headed down to the hotel car park.

Twenty minutes later she was speeding over the bridge and across to Baxter's Brewery. She parked the Honda half a block away and scouted around for somewhere to hide. There was a window right next to Believe's graffiti. *Yeah, that's an idea. I could sneak into the brewery and keep watch from inside.*

Blake padded round to the back of the building and found a door. But the corridor was full of shadows and strange rustling sounds. It was a relief when the icy hand gripped her shoulder and spun her away.

Too spooky. It'll be safer outside - and easier to grab Believe when he turns up. If he turns up.

In the end she squeezed into a narrow gap between the side fence and a rusty old machine. After that, she settled down to wait. She waited for the next four hours. Doing maths puzzles in her head. Drinking her coffee and eating her sandwiches. Trying to remember all the *Blake's 7* videos Dog had shown her. Watching a half-moon rise up over the roof, sliced neatly down the middle like a wedge of luminous cheese.

In four hours Blake saw a total of five people. Three of them disappeared round the side of the brewery and two of them went striding on down the road. Then, just after midnight, she heard more footsteps, heading up the road this time, instead of down.

A shiver ran along her spine, like a trickle of cold water. *The icy hand. A danger alert?* She crouched even lower. The footsteps got louder and a man went striding over to the brewery. A huge broad-shouldered guy in a green singlet and green track pants, shining a torch at the graffiti.

Blake's brain went into overdrive. *Thumper? No, not possible. How could he know I'm here? It's gotta be the guy I saw this morning, when I was with Peter Piper.*

But it wasn't. This man's head was smaller and he walked differently. In which case, he had to be Thumper, after all - although she still didn't understand why Thumper was so interested in the BELIEVE graffiti. He was pointing his torch straight at it. Flashing the beam across a dark figure crouched by the wall.

Hey, there's someone else near the graffiti. Thumper probably thinks it's me. This

could be my one chance to get away.

She slid out from behind the rusty machine and bolted. Racing down the side of the brewery, heading for the back fence. If she could circle round the block she ought to be able to sneak back to the Honda and get away, before Thumper had worked out what she was doing.

But the icy hand had a different idea. It kept dragging on her shoulder, jerking her sideways. Blake stumbled and almost fell. As she picked herself up, she spotted the dark figure, pelting round to the back of the building.

Wait a minute. I haven't been thinking clearly. A dark figure, next to the BELIEVE graffiti. That has to be Nico.

She hesitated for half a second, torn between escaping from Thumper and chasing Believe. Then the shadowy figure hauled a back window open and dived inside. Blake made up her mind. She went hurtling across, caught the window frame as it rattled down and jammed her knee into the gap. Glanced over her shoulder and saw the huge guy, plodding round the corner.

The light from the street lamp in the back lane shone straight onto his face. Crooked nose, bushy eyebrows and acne scars across his skin. *Huh? That's not the guy I saw this morning - and it's not Thumper either. I don't believe this. Three giants in green gym gear, wandering round this part of the city?*

What is it - Thumper Look-alike Week?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Blake shoved the window frame with her knee. As it slid up, she forced her body into the gap. Tumbled over the window sill and pitched forward onto a mouldy carpet. Sat up and looked around.

There was a thick white candle in a jar on the table. Its soft light flickered across walls painted with blue sky and white clouds. More sky and clouds on the ceiling. BELIEVE scrawled in gold letters around the walls and ceiling. BELIEVE, BELIEVE, BELIEVE all the way down the door.

Yes! I've found Believe's hidey-hole.

A small slight kid was pulling the window down and locking it. No glass in the frame, just a rectangle of masonite, painted with sky and clouds, which meant that the big guy wouldn't be able to see in. The kid turned round, lit a few more candles and blinked at Blake.

'Pleased to meet you,' he whispered. 'By the way, who are you?'

'Tm Blake,' she said. 'You don't know me but I'm a friend of The Dog. I've been looking for you - or at least, I think you're the one I've been looking for. You're Believe, aren't you?'

'Yeah, I'm Believe,' the boy said. 'For the rest of tonight, anyway. Tomorrow I'll probably turn into someone else.'

Blake stared at him. Believe had dark hair and olive skin and long bony hands. And a look in his eyes that she'd seen somewhere before. On crowded buses where people sat plugged into their Walkmans, listening to music that nobody else could hear.

'What are you on about?' she said crossly. 'How the hell can you turn into someone different tomorrow?'

Believe smiled vaguely. He walked over to a shelf of spray cans and pulled

out a map, hidden behind them. Spread it across the table and drew a ring on it with his finger.

'See?' he said. 'I've written BELIEVE in a circle right round this suburb. Now I'm back where I started, so it's time for something new. Not sure what I'll do next but I've been dreaming a lot lately. I bet I'll dream my new name pretty soon.'

Blake groaned. *Another weirdo. He sounds like Dog, raving about shamans' journeys.*

'Okay, Believe,' she said, 'do you remember the last time you saw Dog? A few months back at the Majestic Pool Hall.'

'Sure. If you say so.'

He wandered over to the shelf and started shaking the cans, to see which of them were full. Blake glared at his back. *This guy's unreal. He's not even curious about why I'm here. I'll have to try harder, if I want to get his attention.*

'Are you blackmailing The Dog?' she demanded.

'Oh no,' Believe murmured, without turning round. 'I couldn't do that. I don't believe in hurting people.'

'I see. Do you believe in stealing cameras?'

'I don't. But Lenny believes in stealing - or he did, back when I knew him.'

Blake rubbed her forehead. 'Wait a minute. So you reckon *Lenny* stole the camera? No way, mate. He told me, over and over, that it wasn't him. As a matter of fact, I can remember his exact words. "I never get to score anything and if I do, I'm not allowed to keep it."'

'Yeah, sounds like Lenny,' Believe agreed. 'That's the way his twisted mind works. He stole the camera, all right. He was just grumpy, because he had to hand it over.'

'What do you mean?'

He chuckled. 'Hey, don't tell me you think Lenny could plan a burg all on his own. He's been working for someone, of course. Someone with a few more brains who tells Lenny what to do and takes half of what he steals, in return for organising him.'

'Who?' Blake gasped but he shook his head.

'Sorry. I can't tell you that. I don't believe in dobbing.'

She scowled at the blue and white walls. *Oh, great. I thought I was getting somewhere at last. Lenny nicked his brother's camera and passed it on to this other guy, which means the other guy must've taken a look at the photos and decided to blackmail Dog. I could've solved the entire mystery in two more seconds.*

Except that Believe doesn't believe in dobbing.

'What do you believe in, then?' she snapped.

Believe hesitated and then came drifting back towards her. The light from the candles turned his skin gold but there were shadows in the hollows of his

cheeks. More shadows hiding his eyes.

'I believe in believing,' he said. 'My mum died when me and my brother were little, see, so my dad brought us up. He's a poet but he works as a night watchman, because he gets his best ideas at night. I reckon he's ace but my brother was ashamed of him. He wanted new rollerblades and computer games and groovy gear, like the other kids had. He couldn't see the point of words and ideas and poems. In the end he started shooting up, because he had nothing else to believe in. And he died of a heroin overdose two years ago.'

'That's sad,' Blake said quietly and he nodded.

'That's why I believe in believing. It's the only thing that works. I couldn't save my brother - but at least I've been trying to make other people believe.' He tucked two spray cans into his bumbag and added, 'Sorry, but I have to go now. Gotta get to work before the jacks come past on their rounds.'

Blake glanced at the gold letters flowing across the walls. Looked into the shadows hiding Believe's eyes. 'Not a problem,' she told him. 'I'll come along. I can act as a look-out, while you finish your last bit of graffiti.'

As Blake walked into her hotel room, the clock beside her bed flashed up 3:00. *Excellent. Exactly the right time for that phone call I wanted to make.* She checked the number on the phone pad and dialled. Talked for half an hour. Put the phone down and collapsed onto the bed with a sigh of relief.

Okay, that's settled Casimir Slavko. Now I need to think about what Believe told me.

She folded her arms behind her head and closed her eyes. Remembered watching Nico write BELIEVE across the brewery wall. While the spray can hissed, he'd chatted away about the months when Dog had lived with him and his family, after he left Mick Costello's place.

'Dad and Dog got a real kick out of raving on together,' he said, smiling. 'I bet he'd still be living with us, if my brother hadn't died. But after that Dog felt like he was in the way, so he moved on.'

He told me all sorts of stuff. I even got him to tell me his brother's name. I'd been wondering whether his brother would turn out to be Pixie. Wondering whether Believe could've been blackmailing The Dog for revenge. But I don't think he believes in revenge - and anyway Pixie wasn't his brother.

Just another of the kids who end up on heroin, because they've got nothing to believe in.

There was only one thing Nico had refused to tell her. Blake had asked three more times but he still wouldn't give her the name of the guy Lenny was stealing for. The guy who sounded exactly like the one Belle Sherwood had

been talking about. The mysterious bloke who was running a ring of thieves.

Oh well, too bad. I'll find the guy somehow. If Lenny won't tell me who he is, I'll get Donnie to make him tell.

She sat up and wriggled out of her jeans. Slid under the blankets and turned out the light. Lay there staring at the darkness and seeing the walls of Believe's room, all blue and white and gold. In a way, Believe was two different people. A boy called Nico, who lived at home with his dad, and a writer called Believe, who had a hidey-hole in a deserted brewery.

Kind of like Casimir Slavko, who has a sad side and a bad side. Or Dog and Dancer, who are like two halves of the one person. Or Maureen.

Yeah, my mum's two different people as well.

Memories started flashing through her brain. Three years on the run with her mother. Fifteen moves to fifteen new towns. All those nights in all those caravan parks. Reading, playing cards, making up stories about the people in the other vans and talking till late. Maureen's steady brown eyes and restless hands. Her face always changing, sometimes happy and sometimes down. Sometimes really loving, sometimes spending hours blaming herself for leaving Blake.

Then she left me again. That was hard to take, but not as hard as Kenny's story about how Maureen sold me. I bet it's true, though. My dad solves all his problems with money. I hate that - and I ought to hate Maureen as well.

And yet somehow I still believe in her, no matter what.

Blake shut her eyes and forced herself to go to sleep. Dreamed about running and searching. Woke with a jolt, scrambled out of bed and walked straight into the shower. Hurried down to the car park, scrambled onto the Honda and headed for the Majestic Pool Hall.

Gotta keep moving. I don't want to think about my family any more, not till I've talked to Kenny Malone.

The pool hall was shut and there was a sign taped to the door. As Blake read it, a slow satisfied smile began to spread across her face. By the time she'd finished, she was laughing out loud.

'What's the joke?' someone asked from behind her. 'Oh, I see. Casimir Slavko's closed the Majestic Pool Hall and taken off. One less drug dealer in this suburb, which is an extremely good idea. Did you have anything to do with this?'

Blake turned and saw Belle Sherwood, in a green windcheater painted with birds and flowers. 'Me?' she said in her most innocent voice. 'How could I do that?'

'I don't know,' Belle said. 'That's why I'm asking. It's okay if you don't want

to tell me - but thanks from everyone round here, all the same.'

Blake scowled down at her feet. *I suppose it's nice of Belle to say thanks but I can't handle that sort of stuff.* 'Hey, it won't really change anything,' she muttered. 'Sure, Casimir's gone but some other dealer'll take over soon.'

'Maybe. And maybe someone else'll get rid of the next dealer. I'm a lawyer but I don't think the law can fix everything. People have to help too. People like you.' She grinned and added, 'Okay, I can see you don't like being thanked. How about letting me buy you a cup of coffee instead?'

They drank Turkish coffee at a stall in the market, while Belle told Blake about some more of her court cases. She was a great talker. Blake felt as though she was looking through a window into the magistrate's court. She was still laughing at a story about a truckload of stolen doormats that kept turning up all round the area, when Belle leaned forward and said, 'Now, tell me about yourself.'

Blake opened her mouth to say, 'Sorry, I can't.' And found herself launching into the story of the last nine months. Running from her father. Searching for her mother. Waiting to hear what Kenny Malone was going to tell her.

When she'd finished, Belle Sherwood pressed her hands together and frowned down at her fingertips. 'I see,' she said. 'So you know who your mother is. But who's your father?'

She blinked. 'Funny, no one ever asked me that before. For some reason, I kept on thinking that the guy I grew up with was my father, even if the woman I grew up with wasn't my mother. But over the last couple of days I've been starting to wonder. I mean, Kenny Malone and Maureen ran away from Mudgeebung together. What if Kenny's my real father?'

All of a sudden she felt as though the breath had been squashed out of her lungs. She held onto the table and gasped for air. *Oh wow. I didn't even know I was thinking that, until I said it.*

She glanced up shyly, to ask Belle what she thought. But the lawyer was staring off into the distance and tugging at a strand of red hair. 'Blast,' she muttered. 'Here comes one of my little toenails - and he's heading straight for us.'

Seconds later Lenny Harding was looming over them, with a big smile on his round baby face. 'Geez, am I glad I spotted you, Miss Sherwood,' he said. 'Donnie told me I had to find you and say thanks about the mower. I didn't want to drop in at the magistrate's court, but. Not exactly my favourite place.'

'Well, hopefully you'll never need to go there again,' Belle said briskly. 'Now, if you don't mind, I'm talking to -'

'No, sorry,' Blake said, leaping to her feet. 'There's something I have to ask Lenny. See you later, okay?'

Lenny was already scuttling off, down an aisle of fruit and vegetable stalls.

She raced after him and backed him into a corner. 'I know you nicked Donnie's camera,' she said straight away. 'Who did you give it to?'

'Not here,' he hissed, glancing round nervously. 'I'm not about to blab to you in the middle of the market.'

'All right then, we'll go outside. You lead the way.'

She followed him along the aisle. Through a door, round a corner and into a dead-end street between two sections of the market. Concrete walls and roller doors and 'Loading Zone' signs plastered everywhere.

'There,' she said. 'Is this private enough for you? Come on, Lenny. Talk.'

'I would've told you before,' he grumbled. 'Only I thought you knew already, being a mate of The Dog and all. Didn't he ever tell you that the guy who organised him into stealing stuff was -?'

Then he broke off suddenly and stared over Blake's shoulder. Gasp and squealed and ran.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Blake chased after Lenny for a few metres, then stopped and spun back. Stared down the dead end street at Peter Piper, leaning against a stack of wooden pallets.

'Hello, Blake,' he said. 'I gather it's your fault that I've lost my room at the Majestic Pool Hall. Oh well, never mind. On the whole, you've been very useful to me - and now you can help me again. Tell Dog I'm tired of waiting. If he comes to our old place tonight, I'll give him what he wants. If not, he's history.'

As he flicked back his red and yellow scarf, a truck rumbled into the street. Blake swore and jumped out of its way. Dodged past its front wheel and looked round for the piper.

But the street was empty. Peter Piper had vanished.

She charged down to the end of the street. Glared at the blank wall and skidded back again. Nothing but smooth concrete walls and two metal roller doors, big enough to drive a truck through. No metal ladders leading upwards. No manholes leading downwards. No hidden trapdoors behind the stack of pallets.

Nothing at all.

So how did he escape? By magic, like a shaman? No way can I believe that.

Then the truck driver leapt out and strode over to the roller door. He gave it a shove and part of it swung open. *Oh. Now I get it. There's a person-sized door, set into the truck-sized door. That's how Peter Piper appeared in a dead-end street - and that's how he disappeared.*

She sighed and trudged back to the Honda. Waved goodbye to the

Majestic Pool Hall. Rode over the bridge and into the city and parked her bike under the hotel. As she stepped out of the lift, Andy Haines went speeding across the foyer. Blake grabbed the back of his jacket as he hurried past.

'Where's Dog?' she asked and the manager said, 'Practising with Dancer and the other musos. They'll be finished in half an hour - but don't waste your time hanging around. In case you've forgotten, they've got a concert tonight. Dog's stressed to the max already, so I'm not going to let you hassle him.'

'Fair enough,' Blake agreed and strolled back to the lift. Andy Haines stood and watched until the doors closed on her. *Rats. He knows I haven't really given up. Bet he'll get one of the security guys to guard the practice room. I'll have to think of something else.*

Luckily, that wasn't hard. As she wandered down the corridor, she saw a trolley parked outside Dog's room, loaded with sheets and towels and soap. Blake had worked as a maid at the Portside Hotel in Sunnyport, so she knew the routine. She flattened herself against the wall and waited for the maid to come out, carrying a mound of dirty sheets. Dodged inside, hit the floor and rolled straight under the bed.

She lay there, hardly breathing, till she heard the door slam. Then she wriggled out, dusted her jeans and settled down to wait for The Dog. Half an hour went by and then another half hour. *They're still practicing - and I'm bored. I need something to do.*

Blake looked around the room. Stacks of science fiction videos, a newspaper on the table, a phone beside the bed. For the next ten minutes she tried to pretend she was choosing a video to watch. And at the end of the tenth minute she snatched up the phone.

'Shane Barker,' said a familiar voice. 'Who's speaking?'

'Me,' she gasped. 'Blake. Is Kenny back yet?'

Shane hesitated and said, 'Just a minute.' Blake heard a click as he put the phone down, two voices arguing in the background and then Shane again. 'Kenny's here,' he told her. 'He has to go out at eight but you could come round at half-past six. Otherwise you'll have to wait till tomorrow.'

Oh no. Can't wait.

'I'll be there,' she promised. 'I'll be there, for sure.'

Then the door handle rattled and Blake dropped the phone. Crouched down behind a chair and waited till she'd made sure Andy Haines wasn't in the room. Rose to her feet and confronted Dog and Dancer.

'Hi, Dog,' she said. 'I've got news for you.'

Dog leaned against Dancer's shoulder while Blake told him the whole story. The minute she finished, he walked straight to the TV and slid a *Blake's 7* video into the VCR. He collapsed onto the couch and curled himself into a tight ball. Sometimes staring intently at Roj Blake and his outlaws, sometimes gazing down at the tats on his hands.

Finally he turned towards Blake and Dancer, who were watching from the far side of the room. 'Okay, Blake,' he sighed, 'there's something I haven't told you.'

'Yeah, I figured that out. What is it?'

Dog clicked the remote and turned the sound down. 'I was never a junkie in my street kid days,' he began. 'But I *was* a thief. That's what Peter Piper means when he says he's an unofficial youth worker. He, um, helps kids by organising them into doing burls for him, like Fagin in *Oliver Twist*. I was one of the best, so Peter always looked after me. He reckoned we were a team - but he never realised how much I hated it.'

Blake nodded. *Good. I guessed right about Peter Piper. Those kids who kept bringing parcels and cartons into the Majestic Pool Hall were bringing him stuff they'd nicked. And the kids who came up and asked for jobs while we were looking for Believe's graffiti - they wanted him to set up some burls for them.*

Beside her, Dancer ran her hands through her hair and burst out, 'Listen, Dog, I knew you used to be a thief. But I didn't know you worked for Peter Piper, and I definitely didn't know he had anything to do with the blackmail. How the hell could you keep quiet about that? I mean, this guy's trying to destroy Rabies, right?'

Dog stared at his hands again. 'You don't understand,' he murmured. 'Peter was nicer to me than my own dad ever was. I hated him for turning me into a thief but I guess I loved him as well. So I couldn't tell Andy's detectives about him - hey, I couldn't even tell Blake. I just sent her off to find Lenny and Mick and Nico and waited to see whether she'd find Peter as well.'

'And now?' Blake asked and Dog frowned.

'If Peter's the blackmailer - and I'm still not positive that he is - then he's doing it to force me into coming to see him. I suppose I'll have to face him at last. As long as you'll come with me, Blake.'

She swallowed hard. *Oh no. I promised I'd be at Kenny's place at six-thirty.* But Dog was gazing at her, like Roj Blake's crew waiting for orders, and Dancer was mouthing, 'Please, Blake. Please.'

'Hey, sure,' she said. 'Not a problem.'

For the next half hour they discussed their plans. How to deal with Peter Piper. How to smuggle Dog out of the hotel without Andy Haines seeing him. How to make sure he got to the concert on time.

After that, Dog turned up the sound on the TV. Dancer went off to rest and Blake returned to her room. She sat cross-legged on the bed, reading through her black notebook. Every word her mother had ever said to her. Every fact

she'd found out since then.

I'll bring it along tonight. Could be useful to have it with me, just in case I manage to get to Kenny's place.

At half-past five there was a knock on her door. The Dog, wearing a baggy coat over his concert gear. They sneaked along the corridor and found the stairs. Ran down eleven flights to the car park. Climbed onto Blake's Honda, puffing and panting, and set off across the bridge.

Twenty minutes later Blake pulled up in front of Baxter's Brewery. Dog jumped off the bike and smiled at the bars across the door. 'The guy who owns this place works hard at keeping people out,' he said. 'But the back door'll be open. Always was, the whole time I was living here.'

He led Blake round the side of the building. Stood back while she shone her pocket torch into the dark corridor. 'Watch out,' he warned as she stepped inside. 'The kids used to reckon there were booby traps all over the place - and there'll definitely be holes in the floor.'

They sidled past a row of concrete vats, four storeys tall. Climbed a shaky flight of iron stairs. Tiptoed down corridors, littered with broken bottles and O'Burger wrappers. Peered into empty offices with nests of rags and newspaper in the corners. Dodged round charred gaps in the wooden planks, where someone had decided to light a fire.

Finally Dog stopped outside a doorway at the front of the building. 'Yep, that's my old room,' he whispered. 'Blake, I'm scared. Too many memories. Will you go in first?'

She nodded and swung her torch up. Marched into the room and whirled the beam around. It flickered across a dark shadow by the window, picking up a flash of red and yellow.

Peter Piper in his Doctor Who scarf.

'Nice to see you one more time, Blake,' he murmured. 'You followed my trail of clues well. Did you like my little trick at the brewery last night? I noticed that you seemed to be bothered by gentlemen in green tracksuits, so I persuaded a musclebound friend of mine to dress up and scare you away.'

'It didn't work,' Blake snapped and the piper chuckled.

'Yes, I gather you met up with Nico all the same. Still, it didn't really matter. I knew you couldn't get anywhere without talking to Lenny. So I simply followed him around, till I had a chance to give you my last message for Dog - and to thank you for all your help.'

She scowled. 'I wasn't trying to help you, that's for sure.'

'Oh, but you did. To begin with, you talked Casimir into retiring from the drug trade, after I gave you a clue about the - ah, cheese in his fridge. By the way. I've been meaning to ask you how you managed that.'

'Well, Casimir kept raving on about his family in Bosnia,' Blake said with a shrug. 'He was crazy about them but he hadn't contacted them for yonks,

because he was scared they were dead. So I rang the priest in his village - and he talked to Casimir's mum - and she rang Casimir at the pool hall. And he's on a plane to Bosnia right now.'

'Very good,' Peter said admiringly. 'I should've thought of that. I don't approve of drugs and I've been trying to work out a way of closing Cazza down. All part of my unofficial youth work, you know.'

'Yeah, I know about your unofficial youth work,' she said, scowling even harder. 'Dog told me everything.'

'Oh yes, that reminds me of the second way you helped me. You brought Dancer to me - and now I hope you've brought The Dog. Let's see if I'm right.'

He lifted the recorder to his lips and played a line of music. Seconds later, Dog came charging in. 'Stop it,' he yelled. 'You know I hate that song.'

The piper laughed. '"Oh where, oh where has my little dog gone?'," he sang and then added, 'My mother taught me that song when I was a kid. It always made you angry - but I could never help teasing you. I've missed you, Little Dog.'

'Yeah, right,' Dog snarled. 'So you decided to show me how much you missed me, by sending me some photos.'

'I was upset by those photos,' Peter said with dignity. 'The day Lenny gave me the camera, I happened to be taking one of my own films to the chemist, so I had Lenny's film developed as well. Imagine how I felt when I found myself looking at pictures of you, sitting in the pool hall with Pixie and Lenny and Mick and Nico. I couldn't believe you'd come back to visit those losers, without contacting *me*. So I found out where you were and posted the photos, as a way of bringing you here.'

'Don't forget the note with the last photo, asking for a hundred thousand dollars,' Dog said grimly. 'You're the same as ever, Peter. You don't believe in anything but money. That's why I sent Blake to look for you, instead of coming myself - because I didn't want to see you ever again.'

Peter Piper stiffened. 'You didn't always think I was so terrible,' he said, sounding hurt. 'You were my best thief, Little Dog. I gave you everything. Books, music, your first guitar, a cable link-up to the power line outside for your precious TV ...'

'Hey, wait a minute. I earned that. I must've done at least a hundred burgers for you - and I hated every minute of it.'

'Really?' Peter said, surprised. 'But we were outlaws, just like Robin Hood or Roj Blake. Stealing from the rich, to give poor kids a chance. How could you possibly have hated it?'

'Because every time I broke into someone's house, I felt a bit more homeless,' Dog muttered. 'Besides, it was a waste. You ought to be playing real music, not stuffing around like this. I've been trying to protect you, Peter, but I'm over it now. This cop friend of Blake's is waiting at the back door. The

minute you walk outside, he'll nab you.'

'Then I'd better not walk outside,' the piper said calmly. 'I'll go out through the tunnels that link up with the storm drains, instead. Did I ever tell you about the tunnels, Dog? Maybe not. I always like to have a few secrets. They were built when the US Navy took over this building during the war, so that their staff could escape if there was an attack. That's why the kids think this place is full of booby traps, because they can't work out how I keep disappearing into thin ...'

In the middle of a word, he made a dash for the door. Blake lunged towards him but Dog lunged at the same time. They collided and staggered, grabbed each other and tumbled to the floor. Blake sat up and rubbed her head. Heard footsteps clattering down the iron stairs and fading into the distance.

'He's going to get away,' she grumbled. 'Did you do that on purpose?'

'I don't know,' Dog said in a low voice.

He held his hands out in front of him, fists clenched. LOVE in blue ink across his white knuckles. HATE on the other hand. Then he uncurled his fingers and a crumpled envelope fluttered to the floor. Dog picked it up and looked inside.

'Oh,' he said. 'It's the negatives, Blake. Peter pushed the negatives for the blackmail photos into my hand, before he ran.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The old brewery was even darker now. Dog and Blake fumbled along the corridors, following the dot of light from the torch. They edged down the stairs and sidled across the cement floor. As they wriggled between two of the enormous vats, Blake tripped and Dog caught hold of her. They stood side by side, staring down at a metal lid and a deep hole.

Heard the distant sound of a pipe playing, somewhere underground.

'Peter!' Blake gasped. 'Come on.'

She pointed the torch at the hole but the thin beam of light didn't even make a dent in the darkness. Dog laughed.

'Forget it. We've got the negatives. And more importantly, I've got a concert in an hour's time.'

While she hesitated, he nudged the metal lid with his foot. It dropped into place with a clang and the music stopped.

'Oh well,' Blake said, 'come to think of it, there's something I need to do as well.'

Kenny Malone. He'll still be there. If I hurry.

As they burst out of the back door, the fat cop came pounding after them. 'Hey, you two,' he puffed. 'Where's this bloke I was supposed to collar?'

'He escaped through the old war-time tunnels,' Blake said over her shoulder. 'His name's Peter Piper and he was running a ring of junior thieves. But I don't think you'll be seeing him around here again.'

She jumped onto her bike and revved the engine. Just before she took off, Dog shoved a plastic-coated card into her pocket. 'Your backstage pass for the concert,' he told her. 'You will be there, won't you?'

'Yeah,' Blake said. *Meaning, maybe. Depending on what Kenny has to*

say.

As she accelerated and sped away, the fat cop mopped his forehead. 'She's a live one, that girl,' he said to Dog. 'Just wait till I tell Belle Sherwood about this. First she closes down the Majestic Pool Hall and now she's scared off our local Fagin. What is she - Batgirl, cleaning up Gotham City?'

'Nah, she's Blake, teleporting down to save us from the Federation,' Dog said seriously. 'Just like I used to dream about, when I was a street kid squatting in that room upstairs.'

He turned and scrambled into the black BMW waiting by the footpath. Dancer examined him carefully, gave him a hug and swung the car away from the curb. The fat cop stood and watched the BMW roaring down the road.

'Kids,' he muttered. 'Kids and their crazy dreams.'

He glanced at the sky-blue patch of graffiti on the wall beside him. Noticed that someone had come back and finished it overnight. Grinned to himself and headed off to his own car, whistling as he went.

On the other side of the city Blake knocked at the door of an upstairs flat. Waited and listened for the sound of footsteps. Heard the drum beat of her heart instead. As the door began to open, her stomach clenched and her knees buckled. She grabbed hold of the door frame.

'Kenny?' she said in a small voice.

Kenny Malone was wearing jeans and a blue windcheater. Sandy hair and a wide high forehead. Grey-blue eyes, long nose and monkey lines down the side of his mouth. He looked a bit like Blake but then again, he looked a bit like a thousand other people as well.

He's the most ordinary guy I've ever seen, except for one thing. Somehow you can tell straight away that he's incredibly nice.

He was also incredibly nervous. Hands twitching at the band of his windcheater. Eyes fixed on Blake's feet, instead of her face. 'Come in,' he babbled. 'Make yourself at home. I'll just go and get you some tea - or coffee - or cocoa. Whatever.'

He escaped into the kitchen, with a gusty sigh of relief. Blake shoved her hands into her pockets and started pacing round the lounge room. She studied the photos she'd seen when she came to the flat before - Shane dancing, sometimes with a modern dance company and sometimes with an Aboriginal dance group. Then she noticed another bunch of photos on the opposite wall and drifted over to check them out.

The guy in these photos was shorter and stockier than Shane. Dressed in all sorts of dazzling costumes. A gladiator outfit of close-fitting gold leather. A genie in loose pink pants, pink turban and jewelled vest. A jester in red and

yellow tights and a cap with bells.

But my favourite's the one where he's standing there, hand on hip, in a silver body suit, wearing that amazing bird mask.

There was a rattle and a thump behind her. Blake spun around and saw Kenny setting a tray down on the table. A tea pot, a coffee pot, a jug of hot water and a tin of cocoa. He stood back, hand on hip, and glanced across at her.

'My Mardi Gras costumes,' he said, nodding at the photos. 'You can probably guess why I ran away from Mudgeebung.'

Mardi Gras? Oh, right. I think I saw the parade on TV once.

'You're gay, right?' she said. 'I guess it wasn't much fun, growing up in a little country town.'

He shuddered. 'You better believe it. Most of the kids at my school talked as though guys who loved guys were worse than murderers. Maureen Delaney practically saved my life.'

'How?' Blake asked. 'Tell me about Maureen.'

Kenny poured a cup of coffee and a cup of tea and held them both out. Blake took the coffee, warming her cold hands on the cup, while Kenny spooned sugar into the tea.

'Maureen was the town wild girl,' he said. 'Mad at her parents for sending her away - and even madder after her aunt let on that she was adopted. We teamed up, because we were both outsiders. And on the day Maureen turned eighteen, we headed for the highway and hitched a ride into the city.'

Blake closed her eyes and saw a young Kenny and a young Maureen, grinning at each other as they scrambled into the cabin of a truck. She remembered what she'd said to Belle Sherwood in the market that morning.

I'm pretty sure Kenny Malone isn't my dad, after all. But I'd better ask.

'You ran away together,' she said in a low voice. 'Does that mean you're my - my father?'

Kenny smiled at her. 'No, not me. Maureen and I were friends. Nothing more, nothing less.'

Blake stared down into her cup. Watched the coffee slosh to and fro as her hands shook. 'Who *is* my father then?' she demanded. 'Why was I born? And what the hell did you mean when you said Maureen sold me?'

Kenny took a sip of his tea and pulled a face. 'I must be more nervous than I thought,' he murmured. 'I don't even like sweet tea. All right, Blake, here's the story. Maureen and I were sharing this tiny flat in the city. I was studying art and she was doing odd jobs around the place - like cleaning your parents' house, for example.'

Blake shivered. *Oh wow. After all this time it's finally happening. Kenny's going to tell me everything. I'm going to find out all the family secrets at last. Wonder how I'll feel then.*

'So one day your father started chatting to Maureen,' Kenny was saying. 'He told her it seemed like his wife wasn't able to get pregnant. Then he asked her whether she'd be prepared to have a kid and give it to them, if he paid her ten thousand dollars. That's the answer to your question, Blake. Your father is your father - but not in the usual way. It was all arranged by this fancy doctor, with test tubes and syringes and that.'

She shut her eyes again and saw a picture of a doctor holding up a test tube with a tiny Blake in it. Took a deep breath and pushed the picture to the back of her mind. 'Okay, what happened next?' she asked steadily.

'Well, Maureen enrolled in a social work course, like she'd always wanted. She spent nine months studying and watching her stomach grow. And then, the minute you were born, she freaked.'

'Why?' Blake whispered and he sighed.

'Fact is, once Maureen saw you, she couldn't handle the idea of giving you away. Only one problem. Your father had got her to sign some papers and he brought in a mob of big-deal lawyers who said she had to stick to the agreement. It wasn't true. She could've fought it. But we were just kids back then - we didn't know that.'

'So my father won. Like he always does.'

Kenny nodded sadly. 'Maureen dropped out of her course and spent the next ten years making a mess of her life. But finally she got herself together and went looking for you. She was so rapt when you agreed to run away with her, Blake. Although she wasn't too happy about what happened next.'

She wasn't happy? How about me? I was the one who woke up in an empty house, with my father knocking on the door. I never left Maureen. She left me.

'Hey, I wasn't too rapt with her either,' she snapped and Kenny narrowed his eyes.

'So why do you want to see her again?'

'To sort things out,' Blake said straight away. 'What else?'

He blinked. 'Funny, that's what Maureen said too. The exact same words.' He turned his head and called, 'Shane, you better come in now.'

The door to the kitchen swung open and Shane walked in, with his graceful dancer's stride. He pushed back his thick dark hair and said, 'Sorry about lying to you the other night, Blake. You guessed that Kenny's been back for a while, didn't you? But I had to talk to Maureen before he could talk to you. She reckoned she'd trust my judgment - and I reckon you're all right. Here's her address in the Territory. And good luck.'

Blake leaned back against the seat of the taxi and watched the city speeding

past. *This is freaky. Too much, too fast. I didn't even get time to ask why Shane was the one who talked to Maureen, not Kenny. Oh well, I suppose it's not all that important.*

Kenny had guessed what she'd want to do next. He'd checked the flights to the Territory and even booked a ticket on the next plane, which was leaving in an hour and a half. *He's a nice guy. They're both nice guys.*

But it's still really freaky.

She hugged her backpack to her chest. Felt the outline of the black notebook, pressing against her ribs. In three hours' time she'd be standing on the doorstep of her mother's house. Facing Maureen again, after so many years.

She sold me - but then she changed her mind. She left me again - but for some reason Kenny seems to think it wasn't her fault. How do I feel about that? Dunno. Too hard. I need time to think.

The taxi cruised on through the centre of the city. Past office blocks and O'Burger signs and a big concert hall, with a mob of kids milling round outside. As she stared at the road ahead, Blake felt icy fingers grip her neck and twist. She turned and read the sign flashing above the doors of the hall.

It said, 'Rabies - the Hydrophobia concert.'

The icy hand was almost choking her by now. Blake gasped for breath. Clutched the seat and croaked, 'Listen, I've changed my mind. Can you drop me here, please?'

She paid the taxi driver with the last of Dancer's money. Ran over to the hall and showed her pass to the guy on the door. A security guard hustled her down a corridor and round to the back of the stage. Dozens of people in the wings - roadies, musos, the TV camera crew, a woman checking Dog and Dancer's clothes, while a guy powdered their faces.

Blake moved through them like a sleepwalker, guided by the icy hand. Stopped suddenly as its cold fingers dug into her collarbone. Andy Haines was propped against an amplifier, chatting to a woman with a note book.

'You might hear a few rumours about The Dog going round town,' he murmured. 'But I feel sure you won't write anything about that for your newspaper.'

He fanned out five hundred-dollar bills and waved them at the reporter. She pushed them away, turned and stormed off. The manager smiled to himself and started to tuck the notes back into his wallet. Then froze, as Dancer came striding past.

She stopped at the edge of the stage and peered out at the audience. Andy watched her hungrily, as though he wanted to swallow her with his eyes. He fumbled blindly with his wallet and dropped something on the floor. Blake edged closer.

Stared down at the balloon lying on the dusty boards beside his foot.

An orange balloon, like the ones in Casimir's cash register.

Ideas went racing through her mind at the speed of light. She remembered Andy saying. 'How could you possibly find Dog's friends, when a bunch of trained private detectives couldn't do it?' She thought about how easy it had been to track down Lenny and Mick and Nico. She realised that no one had ever said, 'Hey, you're the second person who's come around asking questions.'

So maybe that was why Andy's detectives couldn't find Dog's mates - because they hadn't really tried. Or maybe Andy was lying. Maybe he'd never hired any detectives in the first place. He reckoned it was better to concentrate on making friends with the newspaper reporters - but he was flashing money at them and getting them mad instead.

It doesn't make sense. Unless Andy secretly wants to get Dog into trouble.

There was another problem as well. If Peter Piper wanted to blackmail The Dog, he didn't need to wait till he got hold of those photos. He could've just threatened to tell the world that Dog was a thief. Peter had admitted that he sent the photos to Dog - but he never actually said he sent the blackmail note, demanding a hundred thousand dollars.

And I think I know why.

As the last piece of the puzzle slotted into place, Andy glanced up and saw her watching him. Before he could make a move, Blake pounced. She seized his wrist and twisted his arm behind his back, pinning him against the wall.

Called, 'Dog! Dancer! Quick, come here. I've found the real blackmailer.'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The audience was shuffling restlessly. The musos were tapping their feet and the TV director kept tugging at Dancer's sleeve. But Dog and Dancer stood side by side, hands clasped together, eyes fixed on Blake.

'Andy Haines is a junkie,' she told them. 'Another guy who turned to heroin because he had nothing else to believe in. He met Peter Piper because he went to the Majestic Pool Hall to score - and Peter must've showed him the photos, when he found out that Andy was The Dog's manager. But Peter just wanted to get Dog's attention. The blackmail was Andy's idea.'

'Why?' Dog demanded and the manager turned his head aside.

'Andy's in love with Dancer,' Blake explained. 'He thought that if he got you out of the way, he and Dancer could start playing together again.'

'In your dreams,' Dancer flashed. 'It's over, Andy. You're fired.'

Andy wrenched himself away from Blake. Scowled across at Dog and Dancer. 'If it's over for me, then it's over for you too,' he snarled. 'I've made copies of those photos and I'll send them to every newspaper in the country.'

'Don't bother,' Dog said with an angel smile. 'Peter Piper gave me the negatives and I had a look at them on the way here. There's another photo on the reel that proves Pixie still had a full bag of heroin *after* I gave him the money. The photos are useless, Andy. Like you.'

Andy stared at him for a moment. Then he turned and walked off, moving stiffly and jerkily, like a robot. Dog watched him go, frowning and biting his lip.

'Hey, forget about him,' Dancer said, slipping her arm round his shoulders. 'He's not worth worrying about.'

'Oh, I'm not worried about Andy,' he said in surprise. 'It's Peter Piper. I thought he was the blackmailer - but he wasn't. I have to do something about

that. Blake, can you wait around for a bit?’

She glanced down at her watch. ‘Sorry, Dog, I’ve got a plane to catch. It’s leaving for the Territory in an hour’s time, so I’ll need to call a taxi and -’

‘Not a problem,’ Dancer said. ‘We can fix that.’

She disappeared into the wings. Came back a few seconds later, signalled to The Dog and strode onto the stage. The crowd went wild. Dog and Dancer waited till they’d finished yelling and stamping and then Dog reached for the microphone.

‘Our first song’s dedicated to the guy who taught me to play guitar,’ he announced. ‘I know you’re watching tonight, Peter, so I want to say thanks for everything.’

He stepped back and struck a chord. It was the first time Blake’d had a chance to hear Rabies play. She leaned against the wall and listened to Dancer’s powerful voice, filling the hall. Dog’s guitar, helping her to soar higher. One of the backing musos, playing a plaintive tune on an electric recorder in the quiet moments.

And, most important of all, the words that Dog had written. Words that made pictures in Blake’s mind. City streets painted with graffiti. Kids who were down and out. Kids who believed. Dancer standing still as a statue while she belted out the chorus.

You can find your dreams in dirty places.

You can find your dreams in dirty places.

You can find your dreams in dirty places.

You gotta take your dreams where you find 'em.

Let 'em take you away.

As the kids in the crowd clapped and shouted, Blake blinked and stared down at her feet. *Oh wow. They're good. I hope Peter Piper heard that. Although I'm not sure why Dog was so keen for me to stay and listen.*

While she was still puzzling about it, the crowd went silent. Blake looked up and realised that Dog was standing beside her. He caught hold of her wrist and pulled her onto the stage. Said, ‘The next song’s for Blake’ and started to sing.

His voice wasn’t as strong as Dancer’s but it suited the song, all the same. A quieter, dreamier song about a kid watching TV and waiting for a super-hero to come and take him away. His sky-blue eyes watching Blake so intently that she just stood there, listening to every word. It was a shock when the song ended and the crowd began to clap and cheer.

Blake looked out at the sea of faces. Looked round at the bright lights and the TV cameras. Gulped and bolted off the stage.

Oh no. Nine months of running and hiding - and I've ended up on

nationwide TV. Everyone will've seen me, including Greg and Thumper. What the hell am I going to do now?

A hand touched her shoulder. Blake whirled round, fists clenched, and glared up at Dancer. 'Hey, it's cool, Blake,' she said. 'Everything's organised. We'll store the Honda for you - and pay for your ticket - and I found a driver who'll take you straight to the airport. As a matter of fact, he's been looking forward to seeing you again. Here he is.'

Dancer leaned forward and gave Blake a quick hug. As she ran back onto the stage, a young guy moved out of the shadows. Tall and slim and handsome as a model. Pale blond hair that was just like Blake's. Dark brown eyes that were just like his mother's.

Oh, great. Another blast from the past. That's my half-brother Dion.

The airport floors were blue-white and shiny, like an ice-skating rink. Fluorescent light. Fake air. The tinkle of musak. As they glided up a steep escalator, Blake turned to Dion and said, 'So how long have you been going out with Dancer?'

'Three months,' her half-brother said proudly. 'She's fantastic, isn't she? Pretty different from when she was a kid.' He hesitated for half a second and added, 'She told me you weren't mad at me and Mum any more. Is that true, Blake?'

She sighed. *I guess Dion's okay. At least he's calling me Blake, instead of that other name.*

'Yeah, it's true,' she agreed. 'Fact is, I was never really mad at you or - or Mum. I took off because I was mad at Dad. And I feel worse about him now, not better.'

They stepped off the escalator and went skidding across another stretch of shiny floor. 'Listen, Dad's not a monster,' Dion puffed. 'You've told me the whole story and I can see why you don't like it. But honestly, he only did all that stuff because he really wanted a kid.'

Blake scowled. *It's fine for you, Dion, you're the golden-haired boy. The bonus baby. The kid Mum and Dad thought they could never have. You know who your parents are. You don't have to cope with two mothers and a test-tube father.*

Unlike me.

'That's enough, little brother,' she snapped. 'I don't want to talk about it. And, by the way, I hope you're not planning to run home and fill Dad in on what happened. If you do, I'll never speak to you again.'

'Hey, I'm not stupid,' Dion said, sounding hurt. 'I wasn't going to tell him. Believe it or not, Blake, I'm on your side.'

Blake stopped and stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. 'Yeah, I know,' she said. 'Thanks, Dion. See you later.'

Then she took a deep breath and headed across the last stretch of shiny floor, leading to the corridor that led onto the plane. At the last minute she swerved and reached into her backpack. Pulled out the black notebook and dumped it in a bin.

I'll be seeing Maureen soon. So I won't need that any more.

She handed her ticket to an air hostess. Turned back, waved to Dion and hurried on down the corridor. Heart thumping, eyes blurred, knees shaking. And a chilly pressure on her left palm, as though cold fingers were gripping her tightly.

Oh. The icy hand. It's holding my hand, because I'm scared. Maybe The Dog was right, after all. Maybe I have been on a shaman's journey. Dreaming some strange dreams, developing some strange powers.

I just hope the last stage of the journey's going to be a bit easier.

Blake had reached the end of the corridor by now. She paused for a second at the door. Curled her palm around the icy fingers, squared her shoulders and walked onto the plane that would take her half way across the country to meet her mother.

Okay, Maureen Delaney, here I come.

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