

THE BLAKE MYSTERIES

8

On
the
Edge

JENNY PAUSACKER

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This book is dedicated to all the terrific people who gave me information, feedback and stories about the Top End—Marian Devitt, Josie Douglas, Francis Goode, Dino Hodge, Terry Whitebeach and the Northern Territory Archives Service. Where I got it right, it's thanks to you. Where I got it wrong, that's my own responsibility.

CHAPTER ONE

The plane was dropping through a layer of cloud. Blake felt as though her head was stuffed with air, like a balloon that had been blown up too far. She wiggled her jaw till her ears popped. Twenty minutes before they landed and she still hadn't worked out what she was going to do.

Too fast. It all happened too fast. I haven't had time to think.

She'd scuttled onto the plane three hours ago, in a last minute rush. Stared out the window and watched the lights of the biggest city in Australia, tilting and swivelling below her. Read the paper, full of stories about wars and fashion and land rights. Read the airline magazine, full of stories about ski resorts and tropical island paradises. Dozed for a while.

And after that she'd read the paper again, in case she'd missed something the first time. There was an article about an anthropologist who'd been talking to an old guy, the last person left in Australia who could speak some Aboriginal language. The anthropologist reckoned his tapes proved that Aboriginal people had been around for at least eighty thousand years, not just forty thousand years, the way people thought before. It was pretty interesting. Blake read it three times.

Then her ears started to pop and the pilot announced that they'd be landing soon. Blake folded the paper into a small square and stuffed it into the rack in front of her.

All right, I admit it. I had time to think - and I wasted most of it. Fact is, I didn't really want to think.

She pressed her face against the window and peered down. A little smudge of light, in the middle of a huge darkness. Dark land on one side, dark sea on the other side. And a small city in between them, stranded right at the top of the country. Out on the

edge.

Oh wow. What am I doing here?

Well, that was easy enough to answer. She was here to find her mother. Maureen Delaney, who'd given Blake up for adoption straight after she was born. Then, thirteen years later, Maureen came back and she and Blake went on the run together. Until suddenly, without any warning, Maureen took off and left her again.

At least, that's how I thought it happened - but actually it was way more complicated. I keep forgetting how complicated things got. Which is fair enough, seeing that Maureen's best friend Kenny Malone only told me the whole story four hours ago.

Blake leaned back against the head rest and closed her eyes. Saw Kenny and Shane's flat, lined with photos of the costumes Kenny designed, photos of the Aboriginal and modern dance groups that Shane worked in. Saw Kenny's face, with monkey lines down the side of his mouth and a wide high forehead. Then forced herself to remember everything Kenny had said.

How he'd met Maureen when she was packed off to live with her aunt Dell in a little country town called Mudgeebung. How the two of them had run away to the city together as soon as they turned eighteen. When Maureen got a couple of jobs cleaning people's houses, one of the guys she worked for started chatting to her every now and then. After a while the guy told her it seemed like his wife couldn't have kids - and then he asked Maureen if she'd be prepared to have a kid and give it to them.

And Maureen said yes, because she was broke and the guy - my dad - offered her a lot of money. But Kenny reckons that the minute I was born, she freaked. She wanted to keep me, only Dad had made her sign these papers and he brought in a bunch of fancy lawyers to scare her off.

It wasn't really legal but Maureen was just a kid herself and she didn't know that, so she backed off.

According to Kenny, Maureen spent the next ten years making a mess of her life. In the end she pulled herself together and went looking for Blake. They travelled round the country for three years, always on the go, always hiding from Blake's father. Fifteen moves to fifteen new towns. Working for peanuts, living in caravan parks.

So Maureen loved me, right? Okay, she was planning to sell me to Dad but she couldn't go through with it. She tried to hang onto me but Dad and his lawyers tricked her. And she came back for me anyway, didn't she?

Except that, if she loved me so much, why did she walk out on me again? Why did I wake up in an empty house, with Dad banging on the door?

Blake opened her eyes and frowned at the night outside. The lights were getting closer now. Hundreds of bright dots, each of them a streetlight or a house light. Including the house where Maureen Delaney lived.

She reached into the pocket of her leather jacket and pulled out the piece of paper

where Kenny's friend Shane had written Maureen's address. Rubbed the paper with her thumb, the way she used to rub the edge of Maureen's shirt while they were driving from one town to the next.

Questions, questions. I've still got so many questions. Why did Maureen leave me for the second time? Why did I decide to track her down?

And, come to think of it, why was Shane the one who knew Maureen's address? After all, Kenny was Maureen's friend. Shane was just Kenny's boyfriend. He was a nice guy and a great dancer but he hadn't grown up with Maureen or anything.

Another mystery. I need to think about that too.

But while she was settling back in her seat, the plane bounced and jolted. Blake jerked forward and saw trees and buildings zipping by. As the plane sped down the runway, her eyes blurred and she felt as though she was watching her life flash past on fast forward.

Leaving home to hunt for Maureen. Wandering round till she came to Sunnyport, the seaside town where Maureen had grown up. Finding out that Maureen had been sent away to Mudgeebung, after a little girl she'd been minding was killed in a bush fire. On to Mudgeebung, where Great-aunt Dell told Blake that Maureen was adopted, same as her. Across to the big city and Kenny Malone. Followed the whole time by two private detectives, Greg and Thumper, who were trying to get hold of her and drag her back to her father.

Nine months of searching and now she was finally on her way to meet Maureen. It was like being born all over again.

Then the plane bumped and shook and stopped. Seat belts clicked and people jumped to their feet, crowding the aisles and pulling bags down from the overhead lockers. Blake looked round and gulped.

Damn. We're here already - and I still haven't worked out what I'm going to do.

The airport doors hissed open. Heat wrapped around her and she started sweating straight away. She backed inside, stripped down to her t-shirt and tried again. This time the air felt warm and gentle, like silk against her skin.

That's better. Maybe I could just sit here for a while, till I come up with a plan.

No. Gotta keep moving.

Blake marched across to the nearest taxi. Climbed in, opened her mouth and found herself saying, 'Um, I need a place to stay but I'm not booked in anywhere. What should I do?'

The driver frowned. 'Could be a problem. The town's packed right now, on account of it being the dry season - or winter, as you tourists call it. Everyone comes here for their

holidays when it's nice and cool like this. But never mind, I bet we'll be able to find you something.'

Cool? This is cool? He has to be joking.

'Thanks,' she said, jamming her pack between her feet. 'So, okay, what's this town like when it's hot?'

As they drove into the centre of the city, the driver told her about summer and the wet season. Hot. Muggy. Damp. Sweaty. Air so thick that you could practically chew it. Tropical rain that fell out of the sky in sheets. He sounded like he could go on talking about the weather for hours.

Oh well, it's a pretty small, slow town. The weather's probably the most exciting thing that happens to them.

'You'll like it here,' the driver went on. 'The Top End, we call it, because it's at the very top of Australia - closer to Indonesia than to the other big Australian cities. It's a top place too, although we got a few problems. Blacks sitting round in the streets and getting drunk, for example.'

'So?' Blake said. 'I've met people like that in the big cities too, only they were mostly white.'

He grinned. 'Fair enough. All right, mate, let's see how we go at that hotel over there.'

The first two hotels didn't have any spare rooms but at the third place, the guy on the desk said, 'You're in luck. Someone just cancelled.' Blake collected her pack from the taxi and followed him out of the foyer. Past a swimming pool shaped like a miniature lake, with a mountain of rocks and a waterfall, palm trees and hibiscus flowers and a riot of tropical plants. Up a sloping walkway and along a balcony to her room.

She dumped her pack in a corner and sat down on the edge of the bed. *I'm not chickening out. I'm not. It's just that - well, I can hardly turn up on Maureen's doorstep at midnight, can I?*

Besides, I'm exhausted. I need to get some sleep, before I talk to her.

Blake slept for hours. When she woke up, she was starving, so she had to call room service and order some breakfast. Then she had to unpack. After that she had to go to the little shop in the foyer and buy sandals and a pair of baggy cotton shorts. And when she got back to her room, she realised she'd forgotten to pick up a map, so she had to race down to the foyer again. But finally she ran out of excuses.

Time to go.

She hurried down the walkway and out into the street, clutching the map in one hand and Maureen's address in the other. It was hotter than ever. Blake trudged along,

slowly at first but then faster and faster. Sweat trickling down her face. Her stomach twisting into a tight cold knot.

Maureen's house had a wide verandah and louvred windows all round. Blake straightened her shoulders, strode up to the door and knocked. Frowned down at her feet till she heard the door opening. Lifted her head and pressed her lips together, getting ready to say 'Maureen' or 'Mum'.

And saw an old woman with black opal eyes and a broad flat nose. Wild grey curls, wide mouth tucked in at the corners and skin that was the colour of dark chocolate.

Oh. Not Maureen. Shane must've given me the wrong address. I'll have to go back to the hotel and phone him.

But as she turned to go, she felt a cold grip at the back of her neck, squeezing tight and holding her there. The icy hand. The weird signal that warned her when she was in danger - or when she needed to think again.

Blake looked down and saw a real hand wrapped around her wrist. Chocolate-coloured fingers with pink nails and a pink palm lined with dark creases.

'Who you? I know that face,' the old woman said. 'Maureen, come quick. Your little girl's here.'

CHAPTER TWO

Footsteps clattered along the corridor. Next minute Blake was staring at a thin, wiry woman, a bit taller than her, with restless brown eyes and tangled blonde hair that looked almost white against her tanned skin.

The woman took a step forward and hugged Blake hard. Took a step back, tugged at the neck of her shirt as if it was strangling her and said, 'Alice. Shane reckoned you were on your way. But I wasn't sure if you'd turn up, after what happened last time.'

Blake leaned against the door, feeling giddy. *Alice? Oh yeah, that's what Maureen calls me. I'd almost forgotten.*

She wasn't sure what to say, so she didn't say anything. Maureen stared at her for a few seconds longer. Then she said, 'Well, don't just stand there. Come on in. I'll talk to you in a minute but I've got some business to settle first.'

She swung away and clattered off down the corridor. The old woman patted Blake's arm and led her down to a big lounge room, full of pictures and people. Huge paintings propped around the walls, brown and ochre and rock-red, cross-hatched with fine white lines. Half a dozen people, packed together on the couch or sitting on the floor, their faces brown or ochre or pale tan, like the paintings. All turning towards Blake.

'Okay, what about that graffiti all down the supermarket wall?' Maureen was saying. 'I rang the council and they told me they'd fix it - but they haven't. So it's our move now. Do we paint it over? Or do we leave it there, to show everyone how racist this town really is?'

Blake glanced round the circle of faces and nodded. *Uh-huh. I get it now. Kenny*

Malone said Maureen always wanted to be a social worker. She must've got a job in some Aboriginal organisation here.

And she's so wrapped up in it that she can't even be bothered to say hi to her own kid.

'Well?' Maureen asked impatiently and a skinny bright-eyed girl said, 'What do you reckon, Auntie Maureen?' Before Maureen could answer, a guy in jeans and riding boots stretched out his long legs and pushed back thick wavy black hair.

'I know you're mad as fire about this graffiti business, Maureen,' he drawled. 'But right now you got more important things to think about, eh?'

His eyes flicked towards Blake, deep brown with a shine like oil on dark water. *He's got eyes like Kenny's boyfriend Shane. And he's kind of like Shane too. He's telling Maureen that she ought to be thinking about me.*

She gritted her teeth and waited. But Maureen just said, 'Yeah, Kevin, you're right. I'm worried about this whitefella mob that's coming to inspect the youth centre. That graffiti's part of the problem, though, because they'll see it when they're driving through town. We gotta make a good impression on them, y'know. With all this drama about land rights, the papers'd love to get a hot news story about an Aboriginal group stuffing up.'

Blake sighed and slumped back against the wall. It was hopeless. Kevin had done his best but Maureen seemed to have forgotten she was there. While the others went on discussing the graffiti, she scowled down at her hands, counting the blue veins under the white skin at her wrists. So many different skin colours in the room but no-one was as pale as her.

Even Maureen's got a deeper tan than usual, from all that sun. She looks more like them than me.

All of a sudden she couldn't stand it any longer. As the skinny girl called Maureen 'Auntie' for the third time, Blake muttered, 'Just getting a glass of water' and ran. Into the kitchen, over to the back door and out into the yard. She didn't stop running till she hit the back fence.

Sunlight blinded her. She blinked hard and realised she was standing under a stumpy tree. Long twisty grey branches that looked nice and easy to climb. Blake smiled for the first time in ages and reached up.

Seconds later she was settling herself on a high branch, feet dangling, arm wrapped around the trunk. Looking out at a pale blue sky, with a froth of white clouds at the horizon. Sniffing air that smelt leafy and spicy, like a tropical compost bin.

This is all wrong. It shouldn't be warm in winter. Maureen shouldn't be talking to those people, instead of me.

I probably shouldn't even be here.

As she kicked at the air, Blake noticed a young guy in the next yard, leaning on a

lawnmower and watching her with a puzzled frown. 'G'day,' he called. 'Who are you? Haven't seen you round here before.'

'I'm Blake,' she said. Took a deep breath and added, 'Maureen's daughter.'

He laughed. 'You're joking, right? You don't look a bit like her.'

Blake kicked even harder. *Yes, I do! I'm sure I do.* While she swung her foot crossly, the young guy came over and scrambled onto the fence, lounging back and looking up at her. He was tall and lanky. Straight ginger-red hair, yellow baseball cap and pale blue eyes, like the sky. A splatter of freckles across his pale skin and a friendly grin.

'My name's Ashley Fenner but everyone calls me Ash,' he told her. 'I live here with my dad, who's cool, and my sister, who's a pain. How about you? Got any brothers or sisters?'

Blake grinned back. *He asks too many questions but I kind of like it. At least it's better than being ignored.* 'One brother,' she said. 'Well, half-brother, at any rate. He's back in the city, with our mum and dad.'

'Thought you said Maureen was your mum,' Ash commented and Blake bit her lip.

'She is. I'm adopted.'

And why am I telling him that? I must be more freaked than I realised. I hardly ever talk about that stuff.

She glared down at Ash, getting ready to snap at him if he looked sorry for her. But the freckle-faced guy just nodded and said, 'Yeah, I seen a story like that on the telly. You've come up here to find your real mum, right? Must've been a bit of a shock. How's it going?'

'Not so great,' Blake admitted. 'This place is kind of weird. Can't get used to all the sunshine.'

'Hey, it's the best place on earth,' Ash said indignantly. 'I wouldn't live anywhere else, not if you paid me a million dollars. I get that from my dad - he really loves this town and he does heaps for it too.' He thought for a moment and added, 'Actually, he's organising a meeting this arvo. If you need a break from your mum, you could come along. Four o'clock, at the big hall halfway down the mall.'

She nodded. *Why not? It might be good to get away for a while.* 'Okay, see you there,' she said and then she jumped as Maureen yelled, 'Alice! So that's where you are. What do you think you're doing?'

Blake waved to Ash and dropped down to the next branch. As she swung out, her runner slipped on the smooth bark and she landed in a heap at Maureen's feet.

'You kept raving on, so I went outside,' she said, glaring up at Maureen. 'What's wrong with that?'

'It was pretty rude, if you ask me. Walking out on your family, the first time you meet them.'

She pulled her knees to her chest and hugged them tight. 'Have you gone nuts or

something? What are you talking about?’

‘I’m talking about your family,’ Maureen snapped. ‘The people in that lounge room.’

‘No,’ Blake said. ‘That doesn’t make sense. You’re not Aboriginal. You’re -’

Maureen leaned down and hauled her to her feet. She rested her long thin hands on Blake’s shoulders and looked straight into her eyes. ‘Hold it,’ she said. ‘I forgot I hadn’t told you. There’s been a few changes since I saw you last-like, for example, I’ve changed my name. I’m not Maureen Delaney now. I’m called Maureen Nagalarramba, after my granny’s land.’

‘So - so you got married?’ Blake guessed, remembering the guy with the shiny dark eyes.

‘That’s not the point,’ her mother told her. ‘I just didn’t want to have a whitefella name any more. Not since I found out I’m Aboriginal.’

Blake stared down at her feet. *Well, that explains one thing, at least. No wonder I couldn't find Maureen's name in the Register of Voters - or the interstate phone books - or the Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages. No wonder my hacker mate Spider couldn't find her anywhere on the Web.*

We were looking for Maureen Delaney, not Maureen Nagalarramba.

She glanced up at her mother and said, ‘You never registered your new name, right?’

‘Why bother?’ Maureen shrugged. ‘It’s not important, anyway. Stop asking stupid questions, Alice, and tell me how you feel.’

Her hands tightened, as if she was getting ready for another hug. Blake ducked her head and wriggled out of Maureen’s grip. ‘Dunno,’ she whispered. ‘I don’t know what to feel.’

There was silence for a moment and then Maureen said briskly, ‘Oh well, I suppose you better come in and meet the rest of the mob.’ She grabbed Blake’s shoulder again and shunted her into the house. Half of the people had disappeared while she was outside. The only ones left were the old woman, the tall lean guy and the young girl.

‘This is Auntie Vi, who’s come in from the community for some city business,’ Maureen told her. ‘Kevin drives road trains between here and Alice Springs - he’s having a few days off at present - and Debbie’s one of my cousin’s daughters. She’s staying here for her school holidays.’ She turned to the others and added, ‘And this is my daughter Alice.’

‘No,’ Blake said firmly. ‘Not Alice. I’m Blake these days. I wanted to have a name that was *my* name, not your name or Dad’s name.’

Maureen’s head jerked back, as if Blake had slapped her. ‘Don’t talk about that man

in my house,' she snarled and stomped out of the room.

Oh, great. She's mad at me again. I always seem to say the wrong thing.

She glanced sideways at Auntie Vi and Kevin and Debbie. Tried to think of a comment or a question and realised her mind was a total blank. Shuffled from one foot to the other and said, 'Listen, I better go now.'

But as she turned away, Maureen burst through the door, carrying a tray full of mugs and a big brown tea pot. She stopped with a clink of china and said, 'Alice - I mean, Blake! Where are you off to?'

'Some friends,' she muttered and Maureen laughed.

'Stop making excuses. You don't have any friends round here.'

'Yes, I do,' Blake shot back. 'I'm going to Mr Fenner's meeting.'

Then she waited, hoping that Maureen would talk her out of it - or Kevin would say something kind - or Auntie Vi would pat her arm. But the others just sat there silent, while Maureen said in a tight, shaky voice, 'All right then, get out - and don't bother to come back. I made a big mistake. You're not my daughter, after all.'

Blake gulped and headed for the door. Tripped on the carpet, steadied herself and kept going. As she fumbled with the lock, the old woman appeared beside her.

'It's not easy, my girl,' she said. 'But don't you worry. You and your mum, you're two of a kind. You'll talk to each other when you're ready.'

Blake gave her a small watery smile. *I'm glad she thinks so - but I'm not sure I believe it.*

'Thanks, Auntie Vi,' she said and hurried out into the street, rubbing her eyes and blinking at the blaze of sunshine.

CHAPTER THREE

It was half past three. The sun was slipping down the sky and a little breeze tickled the back of Blake's neck. She zigzagged along the patches of shade under the high green trees, frowning to herself.

I don't really want to go to that meeting. Just said it to annoy Mum. But then she went right over the top, shouting at me and all, just because I wasn't doing what she wanted. So now I can't back down.

She pulled out the crumpled map and checked to see where the mall was. Stopped to watch a bunch of tiny silver-grey birds with feathery curls on top of their heads, pecking for seed in the grass. There was a picture of one of them at the bottom of the map, labelled 'Peaceful Dove'.

Peaceful. Nice idea. But, come to think of it, Maureen was never real peaceful. Sometimes she was incredibly happy, sometimes she was incredibly down. Sometimes she was really loving and other times she used to get mad at herself for leaving me.

Although she never got mad at me before.

Blake sighed and the doves scuttled away from her. She took a deep breath and pushed the memories to the back of her mind. Auntie Vi was right. It wasn't easy, meeting your mum again after so many years. Maybe it was a good idea to get out of there and let things cool down. After she'd been to the meeting, she could decide what she was going to do tomorrow.

She didn't have any trouble finding the hall, because there was a bunch of people waiting around outside. Some young guys in jeans. Families, dressed in their best

clothes, as if they were going to church. And a lot of men in their forties, wearing shorts and open-neck shirts with little gold badges pinned to their collars. As Blake brushed past one of the men, she sneaked a closer look at his badge.

A white map of Australia, floating on a gold sea. Haven't seen that one before.

Ash was standing by the door in his yellow cap, handing out leaflets. He flashed his friendly grin and came racing over. 'Blake!' he said. 'Glad you made it. Dad'll be starting in a minute. Want to come and sit with me?'

He hustled her down to the front of the hall and they squeezed into a gap between two men in shorts. The one next to Blake beamed and said, 'Good to see a few of you young ones here today. I'm Harry Banks and I run a printer's shop in town. Printed those leaflets for nothing, because I believe in what Tom Fenner's saying. Has young Ashley given you one yet?'

Ash peeled off a leaflet and handed it over, rolling his eyes at Blake. 'I hate it when people call us "young ones",' he whispered.

Blake pulled a face like Harry Banks and hissed, 'Don't be cheeky, young Ashley.'

They were still giggling when Ash's dad climbed up onto the platform. Tom Fenner looked like an old-style Australian film star. The kind of bloke who could've played a drover or a shearer or the man from Snowy River. Sun-blond hair. Sun-tanned face. Crinkles round the eyes, from staring into the sun.

'What a great turnout,' he began. 'I called this meeting because I was worried about what's happening to this country - and you're here because you're worried too.'

Blake started to yawn straight away. *Rats. I should've asked Ash what the meeting was all about. I thought it'd be a talk on the history of this place or something. But come to think of it, Ash said his dad's done heaps for the city, so he's probably running for council or parliament.*

That means he's going to make a speech. This'll be as boring as school speech night at Cabrena Ladies College.

She clamped her jaw shut, to stop the yawn, and stared out of the window, thinking about Maureen. When she tuned in again, Tom Fenner was saying, 'Us whites got this country going but now we're really copping it. We work hard and pay our taxes but all these other groups - migrants and Aborigines and that - just sit around on their backsides, holding their hands out. And as if that's not enough, the Aborigines want our land, as well as our money. They'll claim your backyards, if you don't watch out, and those politicians down South won't do a thing to stop them.'

There was a bitter taste at the back of Blake's throat. She swallowed hard and coughed and Ash thumped her on the back. 'You look real pale,' he hissed. 'Are you okay?'

'Feel sick,' she muttered. 'Gotta go.'

She scrambled to her feet and staggered down the side of the hall, past twenty rows

of people, all listening quietly. When she reached the door, she turned back to face Tom Fenner. She wanted to yell, 'That's my mother you're talking about' but her throat was too dry and she was shaking too hard. So she just pushed the door open, stumbled out and collapsed onto the steps, breathing fast.

Blast. I really stuffed up this time. Now I know why Maureen was mad at me. She hates the graffiti on the supermarket, so she'd hate this sort of stuff even more.

I bet she thinks I went to Ash's dad's meeting on purpose, in order to get at her.

Oh wow, this is terrible. I've finally found my mum but everything's going wrong.

Blake walked back to the hotel in a daze. Bought a Big One from an O'Burgers shop and ate it without tasting a thing. Walked into her room, threw herself on the bed and fell asleep straight away.

She dreamt that she was running from someone, through a huge empty house. Searching for someone, down long empty streets. Then falling into a deep black pit. Falling, falling, falling and never hitting the bottom.

When she opened her eyes, sunlight was blasting through the window. Blake squinted across at the bedside clock. *Oops, I just slept for twelve hours. A cup of coffee, to wake me up, and then I better go straight to Maureen's place and tell her I'm sorry.*

She was dragging a chair out onto the little balcony when she noticed Ash's leaflet, lying on the table. It was set out like a letter, with 'Dear Fellow Australian' at the top and Tom Fenner's signature scrawled at the bottom. *Smart idea - but hey, he seems like a smart guy. I just wish he hadn't decided to blame my mum and Auntie Vi for all his problems.*

And me too, I suppose. If Mum reckons she's Aboriginal, does that make me Aboriginal too? Not sure. Need to find out.

Need to talk to Maureen.

She finished her coffee and jumped up. Raced down the walkway, took a wrong turn and ended up on the opposite side of the hotel. Tried the other walkway and hurtled out into the street, heading for Maureen's house.

This time Debbie opened the door. 'Where's Mum?' Blake demanded and the girl backed away.

'Auntie Vi wanted to see the youth centre, so Auntie Maureen drove her over. About ten minutes ago,' she added, before Blake could snap at her again.

'So, okay, how far away is it?'

'Not that far. I could take you there, if you like.'

Blake hesitated. She wasn't keen to ask Debbie for help but, on the other hand, she

wanted to apologise to Maureen as soon as possible.

'All right,' she said. 'Let's go.'

Debbie chatted non-stop the whole way, telling Blake about her brothers and sisters, about the school she went to, about how exciting it was to be staying with Auntie Maureen. She bounced into the centre, singing out, 'Auntie Maureen? It's me and Blake.'

Then she stopped suddenly and gasped. Blake peered over her shoulder and whispered, 'Oh no!'

The youth centre was a wreck. Books and magazines scattered across the floor. Nests of newspapers in the corners, as though people had been sleeping there. A strong sharp fruity smell. *As though people have been peeing in the corners too.* And graffiti spraypainted all over the walls.

'LAND RIGHTS FOR US MOB. BLACKFELLAS RULE. GET THE WHITEFELLAS OFF OUR LAND.' Maureen and Auntie Vi were standing in the middle of the mess, staring at the walls. Auntie Vi just nodded and sighed but Maureen was twisting her hands together, to stop them from shaking.

'I can't believe how much people hate us,' she burst out. 'Someone broke in last night and trashed the centre ... and they made it look as though a bunch of Aborigines did it.'

'Urn, how come you're so sure a bunch of Aborigines *didn't* do it?' Blake asked cautiously.

'Because of the graffiti,' her mother explained. 'That's not the sort of thing we'd say - but it's the sort of thing some whitefellas *think* we'd say. Thank heavens Auntie Vi wanted to come and see the place today! Otherwise I wouldn't've found out till Monday morning, just before that city mob turned up - a bunch of people who've come here for a conference on youth affairs, with a journalist in tow, writing a story about them. And I wouldn't have had time to fix the centre then.'

'Well, we can fix it now,' Blake told her. 'Have you got any cleaning gear here?'

Maureen frowned. 'There's rags and disinfectant and stuff out the back. But we won't be able to wipe off that graffiti.'

Blake scanned the walls. 'Not a problem,' she said. 'Just collect those paintings from your house. They're the right size. You can hang them in front of the graffiti.'

Maureen glanced at Auntie Vi and the old woman smiled. 'Go on, girl,' she murmured. 'Do what your daughter says.'

Maureen pulled out her car keys and headed for the door but Blake dodged past her and blocked her way.

'Wait a minute, Mum. There's something else we need to decide. Are you planning to report the break-in to the cops?'

Maureen fidgeted with the buttons on her shirt. 'Nah,' she said finally. 'If we go to the

cops, we won't be able to clean up, because they'll need to check the place out. And then that journalist'll go away thinking that a gang of Aboriginal kids wrecked their youth centre - which is exactly the sort of story some people would like to hear.'

'Fair enough,' Blake agreed. 'Okay, let's get started.'

While Maureen fetched the paintings, Blake and Debbie and Auntie Vi tidied and scrubbed, stuffed newspaper into bags and splashed disinfectant across the carpet. They made a good team. Auntie Vi sang quietly as she worked. Debbie found a yellow baseball cap in a pile of old clothes and tugged it over her dark curls. Blake bustled around, carting buckets of soapy water and hauling garbage bags out to the bins.

As she came back inside and looked round, checking the floor for stains, she spotted something small and bright, caught in the crack where two bits of carpet joined together. She stuck her finger into the crack and tugged. Stared down at the badge cupped in her palm.

A little gold badge with a white map of Australia on it.

Oh wow. That's what those guys at Tom Fenner's meeting were wearing - and Tom Fenner was raving on about how Aborigines get too many handouts. What if he knows about the conference people's visit?

What if he set this whole thing up, to make sure the journalist writes a nasty story about Mum's centre?

CHAPTER FOUR

The door swung open and Maureen walked in sideways, carrying one of the paintings. Blake leapt to her feet and started to say. 'Look at this' but then she changed her mind and clamped her mouth shut.

Hang on a second. If I show Maureen the badge, I'll have to tell her where I saw it - and I haven't said I'm sorry about going to that meeting yet. Maybe I'll wait till later.

She stuffed the badge into her pocket and went to help Maureen bring in the rest of the paintings. They hammered nails into the walls and hung the paintings in front of the graffiti. Stood back and gazed round the room, smiling with satisfaction.

'Good work,' Maureen said, resting her hand on Blake's shoulder. 'It looks fine now - but it still doesn't smell too great.'

'You got your car outside, eh?' asked Auntie Vi. 'We go up the point, get some of that ti-tree. Ti-tree'll take the bad smells away.'

They piled into Maureen's old Holden and rattled through the town. Drove along the coast till they came to a long strip of land, jutting out into the sea. Auntie Vi led them to some low straggling bushes and showed them how to strip off the tiny sharp leaves. She crushed a handful of leaves between two rocks and Blake's nose twitched at the strong sharp smell.

'Pound them up and put a bowl in every corner,' the old woman told Maureen. 'That'll fix them smells.'

They filled a bag with ti-tree leaves and then followed a narrow path down to a wide plain of grey-brown sand, covered by a wash of grey-blue water. Debbie paddled in the

shallows. Maureen stood in the middle of the beach and opened her arms to the sky. Auntie Vi sniffed the salty air and said contentedly, 'This piece of country, it's a special place for me. Always feel close to my granny here.'

And Blake stood back, watching all of them and feeling happy and sad at the same time.

Family. Maureen reckons they're my family. That's kind of nice, in a way.

Except that, after what happened with Dad and Maureen, the word 'family' gives me shivers down my spine.

They carried the ti-tree branches back to the car and set off for home. Stopped along the way to get some cool drinks from the jet ski club. Maureen played three games of pool with some guys she knew and won them all. Then she sat on the sand, drinking ginger beer from a round brown bottle and pushing her tangled hair back from her forehead.

Blake glanced around and smiled. Sunlight rippling across the water. Japanese and Australian tourists, drinking beer or lemonade and taking photos of the sea. Two backpackers in sarongs and tie-dyed t-shirts, spreading out their maps, while a fat bald baby crawled around under the table.

And Maureen, looking relaxed and contented for the first time since Blake had turned up. She hesitated, shoved her hand into her pocket and went over to her mother.

'There's something I ought to show you,' she said, pulling the badge out. 'I found it when we were cleaning up. Do you know what it is?'

She nodded. 'Oh sure. I've seen those things before. Tom Fenner's a neighbour of ours, remember. So you reckon your new friends are the ones who broke into the centre, eh?'

'They're not my friends,' Blake said in a rush. 'Ash never told me what the meeting was about. I'm sorry I went, Mum. Truly I am.'

'Yeah, sure,' Maureen said, rubbing the dark circles under her eyes. She yawned and stretched and added, 'Listen, you shouldn't go on staying at that hotel, all by yourself. You need to be with your family. Why don't you bring your stuff around to my place when we get back? We can have a good long talk later on tonight.'

Blake gulped. *But I like being on my own. I don't know whether I can cope with all those people.*

'Um, I can't check out of the hotel this late in the day,' she mumbled. 'Besides, tomorrow would be a better time to talk, after you've finished with the people from the conference.'

'Fair enough,' Maureen said with a shrug. 'I'm pretty tired now. Wouldn't mind having a rest, before I have to put on a performance for some journalist from down south.'

She looked sideways at Blake, swapping the ginger beer bottle from one hand to the other. *Nervous? Nah, not possible. Not Mum. I'm the one who's nervous.* They sat there

in silence for a while, gazing out at the sea. Then Maureen said 'Blake -' and Blake said 'Mum -' and they both stopped and waited for each other to go on.

Except that, right at that moment, Debbie came belting over, calling, 'Auntie Maureen, Auntie Maureen! Tell Auntie Vi about that man at the university.'

Maureen swung towards Debbie and said, 'Yeah, I read about this anthropologist guy in the paper. He works at the Top End university, so I went and paid him a visit on Friday arvo. Turns out that he got friendly with one of the elders from round here and made these tapes of his language. He reckons some of the Aboriginal words match up with this ancient Indian language, which proves that us mob have been here practically forever. Pretty interesting, eh?'

Debbie nodded hard and Blake frowned to herself. *Sounds familiar. Oh right, that article I was reading on the plane.*

But Auntie Vi just smiled at Maureen and said, 'It's not news to me, my girl. We know that story. We been knowing that for a long time.'

Half an hour later Blake was walking down the main street towards the hotel. Part of her feeling glad to be on her own again. Part of her wishing she'd said, 'Yeah, Mum, I'll move in straight away.'

She found a seven-day supermarket and bought some fruit for her breakfast. Strolled on, scanning the covers in a bookshop window and pausing in front of an Aboriginal art gallery. While she was studying a wooden bowl, carved with crisscross brown and yellow lines, the door opened and a tall man came out.

Followed by a young guy who stopped suddenly and said, 'Look, Dad. It's A-'

'Blake,' she said quickly, getting in first this time. 'I'm calling myself Blake these days.'

The tall man narrowed his eyes at her, as if he was checking a filing system inside his head. 'That's right,' he said, finding her file. 'Your father said you were going through a rebellious stage. You've been travelling around Australia for a while, haven't you? Seeing the world.'

So that's the story Dad's telling people. Well, I suppose it's true, in a way. I have been seeing the world, for sure.

She looked the tall man up and down. He had silver-grey hair, black eyebrows and navy blue eyes. Strong jaw. Narrow mouth. A silver-grey suit that matched his hair and a fancy aftershave that made her nose itch.

What's his name? Oh yeah, I remember. Hugh Madison and his son is - um, Lewis.

'Are you still working for Interco, Mr Madison?' she asked.

'No, I left six months ago to start a consulting firm, although I still see your father

every now and then,' he told her. 'He was a good boss - but I like being my own boss even better. It gives me a chance to take holidays when I need them. For example, when I want to spend some time with my son.'

He reached out to grip his son's shoulder but Lewis had drifted off. Blake looked around and saw him aiming his expensive camera at the bowl in the window. He was as tall as his dad but only half as wide. A faint tan on his pale skin. Stick-thin arms, long thin neck, knobby knees and hair like a sooty mop.

Poor old Lewis. He was a dork when he was a little kid and it looks like he's still a dork.

She was turning to go when Hugh Madison said, 'Why don't you have dinner with us tonight? Lewis always liked you and it'd be nice for him to have another young person to talk to.'

Blake shifted from one foot to the other. Remembered Lewis as a skinny six year old, trailing her and her brother Dion round the house when his parents came to visit. *I don't want to turn into Lewis's babysitter again. But hey, one dinner can't hurt.*

And besides, it's not like I've got anything else to do.

'Why not?' she said and Hugh Madison wrote down the address of their holiday apartment. Lewis still hadn't said a word to her, although he lifted his camera and snapped a photo while she was waving goodbye.

Blake went back to her hotel room and lay on the bed for an hour, thinking about nothing. Then she sat up, studied her map of the city and decided to walk to the Madisons' place. She wandered through streets of old wooden houses, built on stilts that lifted them high off the ground. Round the side of a hill, bristling with small tough trees and bushes, and down into a very different suburb.

No more trees. Just bare earth and a row of luxury apartments. Long white buildings with streamlined balconies. Chunky pale blue buildings with dark blue stairs and walkways jutting out dramatically. Tall towers with high curved sun roofs arching above them.

The Madisons' apartment was in the biggest and fanciest building of the lot. Two towers back to back and walkways in between, dripping with tropical vines. Blake climbed up; to the fourth floor, peered over the edge of the walkway and knocked on the next door.

Hugh Madison beamed at her and called out, 'Lewis, your friend's here. *Lewis!*' After half a minute of silence, he scowled and said, 'Sorry, he must be playing with his toys. Come and have a look.'

He led Blake into one of the bedrooms, where Lewis was sitting in front of a laptop computer. 'He insisted on bringing this junk with him,' Hugh said, half laughing and half frowning. 'Can't survive for two weeks without his computer games and Internet chat lines. Mind you, I'm glad he's getting some use out of the stuff. I paid enough for it - and

he keeps wanting extra gadgets and gizmos.'

Lewis twisted his long neck around and stared at his father. 'It's okay, Dad,' he muttered. 'I promise I won't ask for any more money while I'm here.'

'Don't worry,' Hugh sighed. 'Just show Blake what you're doing. She might be interested.'

As he strode out of the room, Lewis glanced sideways at Blake. 'You don't have to pretend,' he said. 'I bet you *aren't* interested. Dad isn't. He thinks computers are for business, not for fun.'

'I don't know much about computers,' she admitted. 'One of my mates is a hacker but -'

'Oh, I'm not into hacking,' Lewis told her. 'I like MUDs. Multi-User Domains, where people pretend to be wizards or thieves or heroes and go on fantasy adventures. It's ace, because you can give yourself a new name and a whole new personality.'

'Uh-huh. What's your name?'

He blushed. 'Prince Valiant. I'm, like, a hero in the game.'

'Cool,' Blake said, trying not to laugh. She decided she'd better change the subject and added, 'Hey, how come your mum isn't here?'

Lewis thumped a couple of keys and switched off the laptop. 'Didn't you know?' he mumbled. 'My folks split up, about nine months ago. I live with Mum now but I see Dad for holidays and that.'

Oops. That must've happened just after I ran away from home. Should've guessed, though. It explains why Lewis and Hugh are so jumpy around each other.

She was still trying to think of the right thing to say when Lewis scrambled to his feet and bolted out of the room. Blake followed him into the lounge, where Hugh was talking to a small plump man with big ears and little hands and a face that kept changing all the time. Surprised one second, sad a second later and then laughing a few seconds after that.

'Blake, this is Sandy Ross,' Hugh said. 'He's coming to dinner as well - and we'd better get a move on.'

As they hurried down the stairs, Sandy told Blake that he was an art dealer from the big city. When she asked whether he was on holiday too, he explained that he'd come to the Top End to check out an important new artist for his gallery.

'An Aboriginal artist, of course,' Hugh said, leading them out into the street. 'Aborigines are big news just now. Mind you, this land rights business is serious stuff. If the government keeps on giving Aborigines more rights to the land, it could be bad for the pastoralists who own big properties down towards the Centre - and it could be bad for Aboriginal people too.'

'What do you mean?' Blake asked, frowning.

Hugh shrugged. 'Well, the fuss about land rights means that all the TV stations and

newspapers want to do stories on Aborigines. So people are watching Aborigines more closely and criticising them more, as well. For example, a journo mate of mine's staying in the next apartment, because he's writing a big feature article for one of the major papers. He has to inspect the Aboriginal youth centre tomorrow - and heaven knows what he'll find.'

Blake's fists clenched. *He sounds like he thinks Mum's centre will be a total grot-hole.* 'As a matter of fact, the youth centre's fine,' she snapped. 'I was there today, helping with the final clean up. We hung a whole lot of paintings on the walls. Really beautiful pictures - all these amazing earth colours with patterns of fine white lines.'

Sandy Ross let out a startled squawk. But before he could say anything, there was a rattling sound behind them. Blake swung round and saw a ginger-haired boy pushing an old bike with a basket full of rolled-up posters.

Hey, I know that kid. It's Ash.

Ash didn't seem to recognise her at first but then he grinned and waved. Blake glared back. 'You tricked me,' she yelled. 'You should've said what your dad's meeting was about.'

'I thought you knew,' he called. 'Listen, I'm busy now. Why don't you drop round tomorrow and have a rave?'

He parked his bike beside a lamp post and started to hunt for something in the basket. Blake glared at the top of his ginger head.

Yeah, right. Like I want to talk to you, after the trouble you got me into. Forget it, Ash Fenner. I never want to see you again.

CHAPTER FIVE

As Blake turned her back on Ash, Sandy Ross came sidling over with a worried look on his rubbery face. 'Those pictures in the centre,' he began. 'Were they painted by an old lady called Violet -?'

'Auntie Vi?' Blake cut in, remembering how Maureen had glanced at the old woman when she suggested borrowing the paintings. 'Yeah, I think so. How did you know?'

Sandy slapped his forehead. 'Omigod. I don't believe it. Those priceless paintings, stuck on the wall of some youth centre!'

Blake stared at him, trying to figure it out. *Priceless paintings? What's he on about? Oh, wait a minute. I get it. That important new artist he was talking about - it's Auntie Vi.*

'Auntie Vi didn't mean to upset you or anything,' she told Sandy, while they walked into the restaurant. 'She lent her paintings to the centre because she wanted them to be useful, that's all.'

'Useful?' Sandy squeaked in horror, his jaw dropping open. Then, all of a sudden, his mouth twitched into a smile. 'Useful,' he repeated. 'Yes, of course. That's why Vi's such a wonderful artist, because she's got a strong connection to her people. It's a nice story, Blake. I can use it for our publicity.'

'No, don't,' she said quickly. 'I wouldn't have told you, if I'd realised you knew Auntie Vi.' *And I don't want to get myself into more trouble with Mum.*

Sandy's mouth drooped but seconds later he was smiling again. 'Oh well, never mind,' he said. 'Vi's told me dozens of fabulous stories already. I'll have no trouble selling her work.'

They sat down at a table and started to read through the menus. 'You certainly get

around,' Hugh Madison commented to Blake. 'You've met Sandy's new artist - you've been to the Aboriginal youth centre - and you were at Tom Fenner's meeting yesterday as well.'

She blinked. 'Were you there too? I didn't see you.'

'Yes, Lewis and I were sitting up at the back. I don't agree with all Tom's ideas but I wanted to take a look at him. All talk and no action, I'm afraid. He'll probably never do anything about the Aborigines. Still, he's very well organised. Some good leaflets - I talked to a chap called Harry Banks, who printed them - and those clever badges too. Have you seen them?' He felt in his pocket but his hand came out empty. 'Blast. I must've lost mine somewhere.'

While Blake stared at Hugh's empty hand, Lewis leaned towards her and muttered, 'Dad reckons Tom Fenner's going to start a new political party. We had to sit through that boring meeting so he could meet Tom, in case he turns out to be important. It's typical. Dad's always working, even when he's supposed to be on holiday. Tom Fenner on Saturday arvo, some company manager on Sunday arvo and -'

'That's not true,' Hugh snapped. 'I took you to the university on Friday and we're going on a river cruise tomorrow. But I'm a consultant now, Lewis. I help people to plan their businesses, by telling them what's going on in the world. A lot of my clients are pastoralists, so they want good accurate information about people like Tom Fenner. And as I always say -'

'Yeah, yeah, I remember,' Lewis sighed. 'You always say, "If a job's really important, you have to do it yourself. You can't rely on other people to do it for you."''

He scowled at his father and Hugh scowled back. Sandy Ross looked worried. He started telling stories about the artists who came to his gallery, pulling funny faces and making them laugh. Then he and Hugh talked about money and business, while Blake asked Lewis some more questions about his adventures in the MUD site. He got so excited and waved his hands around so much that he knocked his glass over three times.

Finally Hugh called for the bill, saying, 'Let's get out, before Lewis wrecks the restaurant.' But as they were heading for the door, someone waved to them and he stopped. 'Dr Burton and Dr Cawthrop,' he said, smiling down at a neat dark-haired woman and a man who was staring sadly into his soup. 'This *is* a small city. Good to see you again.'

'It hasn't been a very good day for us,' the woman told him. 'I'm taking Francis out to dinner to cheer him up, because he just got some bad news. You know those Aboriginal language tapes that we showed you when you came to the university? They've been stolen.'

'Really?' Hugh said. 'That's terrible. Is there anything you can do, Dr Cawthrop?'

The man lifted his head and said, 'Nothing at all. The most important discovery I've

made since I started working as an anthropologist - and it looks as though the tapes have gone for good. I'm sorry, I don't want to talk about it right now.'

He sighed deeply and stared down into his soup again. Hugh murmured, 'Of course' and hustled the others outside. He paused on the steps of the restaurant, gazing up at the blaze of stars in the clear night sky.

'Well, well,' he said. 'The Top End really is an interesting place. Something new happening every minute. Aren't you glad we came here for our holidays, Lewis?'

Lewis kicked at a pebble and watched it rattle down the steps. 'Oh, sure,' he muttered. 'It's cool fun. Best holiday I ever had in my life.'

Sandy Ross gave Blake a lift back to the hotel. After he drove off, Blake hesitated on the footpath for a moment, looking up at the night sky. This place didn't even get cold after the sun went down. It was still warm as summer, even though it was supposed to be winter.

Then, as she swung away, she felt a sudden chill down the back of her neck. *Oh-oh. The icy hand. It's trying to tell me something. But what?*

She looked from side to side. Spotted a sheet of paper, taped onto the nearest lamp post. It reminded her of Tom Fenner's leaflet, which reminded her of Ash.

That's it! Ash was wheeling his bike along behind us when I told Hugh Madison about cleaning up the youth centre. If Ash tells his dad - and if Tom Fenner did trash the centre - he might decide to come back and trash it again, before Hugh Madison's journalist friend gets there.

She thought about phoning Maureen and then changed her mind. After all, Maureen was tired and besides, it'd be easy enough to guard the centre herself. So she dashed into the hotel, pulled on a black t-shirt and dark cotton pants, collected her thin silver torch and dashed out again.

The streets looked different at night but Blake found her way back to the centre without too much trouble. She prowled around, checking the doors. Flashed her torch through the windows, to make sure Tom Fenner hadn't been there already. Climbed one of the high green trees, wedged herself between the trunk and a nice thick branch and settled down to wait.

She sat there for three hours, playing with the big empty seed pods that hung from the branch above her. It was kind of exciting at first - feeling like a secret guard, feeling like she was helping Maureen. But before long it got pretty boring. In the whole three hours, only three things happened.

A battered old combi van parked on the opposite side of the road for a quarter of an hour, then rattled off. A pair of backpackers - the ones she'd seen at the pub - peered

through the window and told each other how cool Auntie Vi's paintings were.

And three Aboriginal people came wandering along. Two men and a woman, shouting at each other. To start with, Blake couldn't understand a word they were saying. Then, after a few minutes, she realised they were arguing in their own language.

I've never heard, any Aboriginal languages before. Didn't recognise it - but it could be Maureen's language.

Mine too, I suppose.

The two men went on arguing but the woman drifted off to lean against the door of the centre. Blake froze, wondering whether Maureen had got it wrong. Maybe Tom Fenner hadn't trashed the centre, after all. Maybe those three people had broken in last night - and now they'd come back to sleep there again.

But while she watched, the two men called to the woman and wandered on down the street. Blake relaxed and tried to shift into a more comfortable position. As she wriggled around, she noticed a shadow moving across the yard. A tall dark figure, creeping towards the back door.

Oops. Someone must've climbed the fence when I wasn't looking. Quick, Blake!

She slithered down the tree. Pressed herself flat against the fence. Sidled along, trying not to make a sound, till she got to the corner. There was no-one at the door but she could hear a scratchy, squeaky sound. When she squinted into the shadows, she saw the tall dark figure levering at the window with a knife. The icy hand landed heavily on her shoulder and squeezed tight.

Yeah, I know. I gotta catch him. Okay, here goes.

Blake eased herself away from the fence and took a step forward. Her foot landed on one of the dry seed pods and it crunched loudly. As the dark figure whirled round, she hurtled towards it in a rugby tackle. Missed. Swung her leg sideways and felt her runner slam against a bony kneecap. Watched the dark figure topple and fall, face down, into a patch of shadow.

She stood there, breathing fast. Getting ready to leap onto the dark figure's back and pin it down. But before she could make a move, someone grabbed her, wrenching her arm behind her back.

Rats. I'm a fool. There's two of them.

While she struggled, the dark figure leapt to its feet and ran for the back fence, with someone else running after it. *Wait a minute. I know who the second person is. It's Maureen.* Blake twisted around and stared up into the face of the guy who was holding her.

'Kevin,' she said. 'I'm Blake. Let me go.'

The long lean guy blinked at her. Then he released her arm and they both sprinted over to the fence. Maureen was balanced on the cross bar, frowning off into the distance. She dropped down beside them and started frowning at Blake instead.

'Oh, it's you,' she snapped. 'Thanks a lot. That guy got away, because you came barging in. Our big chance to prove the centre was trashed by racists - and you blew it.'

Blake frowned back. 'Hang on, it wasn't all my fault. You could've called the cops when we found that garbage in the centre. But you didn't.'

'Well, we didn't have any proof,' Maureen pointed out. 'Okay, the centre was wrecked but anyone might've done it. This time, we could've handed the vandal straight over to the cops. Kev and I were hiding inside, so we would've jumped him the minute he climbed in. Only you stuffed that up and then Kevin grabbed *you*, because we didn't see the guy on the ground. What a mess. Why can't you listen to your elders, the way Debbie does? That's the proper Aboriginal way of doing things.'

Blake's fists clenched. 'Sorry I'm not perfect, like Debbie,' she spat. 'Just remember, I didn't even know you were Aboriginal till yesterday. Fact is, I don't really know a thing about you, except that you dumped me. Twice.'

Maureen's eyes opened wide. For a moment she looked small and helpless, like a little kid lost in a crowd. Then she opened her mouth to say something but Kevin ducked between them, murmuring, 'Steady on, eh?'

Blake scowled at him. Scowled at Maureen. Hesitated for half a second, spun round and went marching away.

CHAPTER SIX

Blake belted down the street, so fast that her feet tangled and she almost tripped. She lurched sideways and bumped into a lamp post. Leaned against it, gasping for breath and feeling sorry for herself.

Damn, damn, damn. Why do Mum and I always end up fighting? And why didn't I realise she'd be watching the centre tonight? The icy hand even tried to warn me. It wasn't pushing me towards the dark figure, like I thought. It was trying to hold me back.

She sighed and scratched at the sticky tape round a poster on the lamp post. Stared down the dark street and thought about the icy hand. It had always been there, ever since she was little, but she'd never really taken much notice of it till she went on the run. And even then, she didn't want to believe in it.

Daffy Clarke, the old artist in Sunnyport, reckoned Blake had psychic powers but she'd been convinced that Daffy was just a wacker. Except that once she started to pay attention to the icy hand, it turned out to be a real help.

It warns me about danger. It nudges me when I need to think twice. There's only one problem - I still don't always get what it's trying to tell me.

Blake scratched harder at the poster and tore off one of the corners. Felt a chilly tickle along the back of her hand. She looked around. Looked at her hand. Looked at the poster.

And gasped.

'Oh no!' she yelled. 'That's a picture of Mum.'

She pulled the poster off the lamp post and held it up to the light. Saw a big black heading that said, 'WATCH OUT FOR THIS WOMAN.' Then a photo of Maureen with a

bottle in her hand and more writing underneath.

'Meet Maureen Nagalarramba, the latest out-of-towner who's poking her nose into Top End business. She's a big drinker and she's big trouble. Has anyone noticed how some important tapes vanished from the university, straight after Maureen went to look at them? Maybe she thought the tapes ought to be given back to the Aborigines. Maybe she'll want your backyards next.'

And after that there were two more lines that had been crossed out with a black marker pen.

Blake scowled and screwed the poster into a ball. Marched on to the next lamp post, found another poster and ripped it down as well. No poster on the third lamp post or the one after that. She thought for a moment, then swung round and went hurrying back.

I bet I know what's going on. But I need to make sure.

She'd guessed right. The posters were all clustered round the Aboriginal youth centre, where the people from the youth affairs conference would've seen them. Blake ripped them off the lamp posts as she sped down the street. She ducked behind a row of parked cars, crept along and darted out to snatch the poster right outside the centre.

Don't want Mum to see me and get mad for the second time tonight.

Then she continued on for another block, until the posters stopped again. She dumped the bundle of paper into a wheelie bin and stood there, chewing her thumb. It wasn't too hard to work out where the posters came from. After all, Tom Fenner had said a lot of stuff at that meeting about Aborigines wanting to claim white people's backyards.

They're his words, so I bet they're his posters. But I've fixed him now. Why am I still feeling worried?

Blake closed her eyes and tried to concentrate. A picture came floating into her mind. Ash in the street outside the Madisons' apartment, with his bike basket full of rolled up posters.

Yes! That's it.

Hugh Madison had told her that his journalist friend was staying in the apartment next to him. He must've told Tom Fenner too, when he went to Tom's meeting. And Tom must've sent Ash to stick up some posters around there.

She opened her eyes and saw a ball of light bobbing towards her. The light on top of a taxi that was cruising down the street. Blake stepped off the footpath and hailed it. Scrambled in and told the driver to take her to the apartments. Watched the city flash past, paid the driver and went to check the nearest lamp post.

Another poster. Well, at least she wasn't wasting her time. Blake worked her way along the street, tearing the posters down, and ended up outside the restaurant where she'd had dinner. There was a phone box near by. She rang for a cab and slumped against the wall to wait.

Big night. I'm exhausted Maureen ought to be pleased - except I'll never tell her, because she'd think I was sucking up to her. So why did I do it, then? Dunno.

Well, yeah, I do know, really. Okay, Mum makes me mad. But Tom Fenner's stuff makes me even madder.

She trudged over to a litter bin and started to rip up the posters, grinning as the white pieces fluttered down like melting snowflakes. Then a car horn tooted. Blake rolled up the last two posters and raced across to the taxi that would take her back to the hotel.

For the third time in a row Blake slept till the middle of the morning. She blinked at the sunshine, stumbled to the fridge and got some fruit, made coffee and went out to sit on the balcony. Warm air stroking her bare arms. Tall palm trees rustling softly at her. After a while, she rubbed her eyes, stood up and went to collect the posters.

She spread one of them on the table and frowned at it. A pack of lies. Mum wouldn't have nicked those tapes - she was really interested in what the anthropologists were figuring out. She's not an out-of-towner either - okay, she grew up in Sunnyport but her folks come from around here.

Plus she never drank beer or anything, not while I was living with her.

Blake stared down at the picture of Maureen with a bottle in her hand. The photo hadn't been taken long ago. Maureen's eyes and hair and face looked the same as they did now. She was even wearing the same baggy shorts and shirt that she'd been wearing while they cleaned up the youth centre.

So maybe someone had snapped the photo yesterday. Outside the jet ski club, for example. Where Maureen had been drinking ginger beer from a brown stubbie that looked like a beer bottle.

Oh, right. More lies.

Before she could stop herself, Blake had torn the poster to shreds. She frowned down at the pieces, took a deep breath and unrolled the second poster. Studied it carefully, forcing herself to stay cool. Trying to figure out the angles and guess where the person with the camera had been standing.

Must've been a backpacker or a tourist, except that doesn't help much. I never really looked at them properly. I suppose one of the Australian tourists could've belonged to Tom Fenner's mob - but I wouldn't even recognise him if I saw him again.

Blake sighed and started to roll the poster up. But as she took hold of the bottom edge, she realised there was something different about it. On all the other posters, the last two lines had been crossed out. On this poster, the words were still there. She read them out.

'After all, Maureen's already letting Aboriginal kids make a mess of the Aboriginal

youth centre - which is paid for by your taxes. What will she do next?'

Blake's eyes narrowed. *Interesting.* So the person who wrote that stuff knew the centre had been wrecked - but then they changed their mind about blaming Maureen. Or maybe there were two people. Maybe Tom Fenner wrote the words and then Ashley Fenner crossed the last lines out, after he heard Blake saying that the centre had been cleaned up.

That makes sense, in a nasty sort of way. Hmm. Ash asked me to drop round today, didn't he? I was sure I never wanted to speak to him again.

But it mightn't be a bad idea, after all.

There was something else she needed to do first, though. Fifteen minutes later Blake was knocking on the door of Maureen's house, getting ready to apologise for the second time. Auntie Vi opened the door and beamed at her.

'Back again, my girl? Your mum's not here. Still talking to that mob from the conference.'

'Too bad,' Blake sighed. 'I better not go round there and interrupt.'

Then she shuffled from one foot to the other, while the old woman watched from patient, amused dark eyes. *It's funny, I could talk to Auntie Vi yesterday, all right. But now I know she's a famous artist, I can't think of a thing to say.*

Luckily, Debbie came speeding up the corridor, tossing her yellow baseball cap and catching it. 'Blake!' she yelled. 'This is cool. Come and have a drink or something, cuz.'

She grabbed Blake's hand and dragged her down to the lounge room. A couple of people were sitting there - a new lot, not the ones who were there yesterday. An old woman in a flowery dress and a young guy in jeans and riding boots, like Kevin.

Both Aborigines. Are they part of my family too? Dunno. I really have to talk to Maureen. Soon.

Debbie hauled her out into the kitchen and made her a glass of cordial with ice clinking in it. 'You're so lucky to have Auntie Maureen for a mum,' she sighed. 'She's deadly. Like, she left school at sixteen but now she's studying to be a social worker. She's got this big house, so anyone from our mob out in the communities can stay here when they have to come into town. And she's real busy but she always makes time to sit down with me and tell me stories and that. I want to be exactly like her when I grow up.'

Blake gulped down her drink and slammed the glass onto the bench. 'Thanks for the cordial,' she muttered. 'I gotta go now.'

'Did I say something wrong?' Debbie asked, opening her big eyes even wider, and Blake shrugged.

'Listen, kid,' she said, 'Maureen's probably a terrific auntie. But I have to tell you, she wasn't all that great as a mum.'

Then she marched out, pushing past Debbie, dodging round Auntie Vi. The minute the door slammed, her shoulders slumped and her head drooped. She trudged along the street, kicking a small white stone ahead of her.

That wasn't real smart. Debbie'll tell Maureen and Maureen'll be furious again. This is hopeless. I keep losing it, all the time. What's the matter with me?

The little stone went spinning off into the grass. Blake pulled her shoulders back and stuck her chin out. Oh well, at least there was one thing she could do for her mum. She could go and talk to Ash. Force him to admit that he and his dad had wrecked the centre and stuck those lying posters all round the place.

Mum said she wanted to prove the centre was trashed by racists - and I bet I can do it. Debbie may be practically perfect but I reckon I'm a better detective.

She walked to the corner, counting houses. Hurried along the next road and turned into the street that ran parallel to Maureen's street. Counted houses again, stood on tiptoe and nodded when she spotted the tree she'd climbed.

Yep, this must be the Fenners' house. Right at the back of Mum's place.

As she rang the bell, Blake felt a sharp tug at the back of her t-shirt. She turned and looked into Debbie's brown eyes, glaring at her from under the yellow baseball cap.

'You're sick,' Debbie hissed. 'Totally sick. Running off to the Fenners, every time you have a fight with us. Auntie Maureen would freak if she knew. Come on, quick, before they see you.'

But the door was already opening and Ash Fenner was peering out. 'Blake,' he said, looking pleased to see her. Then he glanced over her shoulder at Debbie and his face changed.

'Thief!' he said. 'You stole my cap.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

'Did not,' Debbie said and Ash said, 'Did.'

'Did not.'

'Did so.'

'Did not.'

Blake groaned. *They sound like kids in a day care centre - but they're at least fourteen years old.*

'Stop it,' she snapped. 'Calm down. Let's try and sort this out. Ash, why do you think it's your cap?'

He scowled. 'Because I lost my cap the day before yesterday and that cap looks exactly the same. I bought it when we were on holiday, so there aren't any other caps like it around here. Besides, if it's my cap, it'll have AF written in biro inside. Go on, take a look. I dare you.'

Blake turned to Debbie. She scowled even harder than Ash. pulled the cap off and flipped it upside down. They all crowded round and peered into it. And saw Ash's initials, printed at the front.

'All right, take your stupid cap,' Debbie yelled, shoving it at him. 'See if I care.'

Ash shoved the cap back. 'No way. I don't want it, now it's been on your head. I just want you to admit that you nicked it.'

'Well, I can't, because I didn't,' Debbie growled. 'I'm not a thief. But you're a liar, Ash Fenner.'

'Hold on,' Blake said, edging between them. 'We still don't know the whole story. You reckon you lost the cap two days ago, right, Ash? When did you notice it was missing?'

'After the meeting. But she could've pinched it earlier on.'

Blake shook her head. 'Nah, you were wearing the cap just before the meeting. Maybe you left it under your chair or something.'

'Oh yeah? Then how did *she* get hold of it? Trust me, there weren't any blacks at Dad's meeting.'

'That's for sure,' Debbie agreed. 'Which proves I *didn't* steal your cap. As a matter of fact, I found it in a pile of old clothes, when we were tidying up the centre.' She gulped and took two steps back. Stared at Ash and gasped, 'You did it! You trashed the centre.'

Ash yawned. 'Ah, come off it. You're a great actor but you can't fool me. Everybody knows what happened at the centre. A bunch of black kids broke in and made a mess of it, only you managed to cover it up.'

'Everybody knows?' Blake repeated. 'Funny, *we* didn't tell anyone. And it's even funnier that I found this, down a crack in the floor.'

She whipped the badge from her pocket and held it out. Ash looked at it and shrugged.

'So? That's one of my dad's badges but anybody can buy them. It doesn't mean a thing.'

'Wrong,' Debbie announced. 'I bet people'd remember if a blackfella bought one of your white Australia badges. Some whitefella came sneaking into our centre - and I reckon it was your dad.'

Ash thought for a moment. 'Well, I reckon Maureen Nagalarramba nicked a badge from somewhere and planted it in the centre, so she could blame us. Hey, maybe she even trashed the centre herself, to make it look like my dad's group did it. If she could steal those tapes from the uni, she could do anything.'

Blake twisted one foot round the other ankle, to stop herself kicking Ash. She was sure Maureen hadn't stolen any tapes ... although, come to think of it, her mum could've done a job on the centre. It was kind of weird, the way she'd been so dead set against calling the cops. If Auntie Vi hadn't wanted to see the centre, the conference people and the journalist would've turned up and found the place in a mess.

What if Maureen had been planning to discover the badge in front of them, to prove how bad Tom Fenner's group was?

Then Debbie said, 'Look, mate, Auntie Maureen wouldn't do that to her own centre,' and Blake sighed with relief.

Debbie's right. Mum's really proud of that place. She'd never even think of wrecking it.

'Well, my dad wouldn't do it either,' Ash snarled. 'He's not a vandal or nothing.'

'Yeah, of course you'd say that,' Debbie told him with a sudden grin. 'I wouldn't tell anyone my dad had done something wrong - even if it was true.'

Ash nearly grinned back but he stopped himself, just in time. 'Listen, I know Dad

couldn't have broken into the centre,' he said more calmly. 'He was busy all weekend, because people kept coming round to talk about the meeting. If you like, I'll ask him to give you a list of their names when he gets home.'

Blake and Debbie glanced at each other. They'd almost decided to believe Ash when he added, 'Fact is, my dad's really honest. *He* doesn't go round pinching stuff from universities.'

Blake looked him straight in the eyes. 'Okay,' she said. 'It's a deal. You get that list from your dad - and we'll take you out to the uni and prove Maureen didn't steal those tapes. Now.'

The university was a confusing place. Lots of long modern buildings, all bumping into each other. They asked someone where the anthropology department was, got lost, asked someone else and got lost again. Then Blake noticed a tall stick-thin guy, aiming a camera at a huge banyan tree.

That's Lewis - and for once, I'm really glad to see him.

'Lewis Madison,' she yelled. 'What are you doing here?'

He jumped and twisted his long neck around. 'Oh, it's you,' he said. 'Dad dragged me back to the uni because he wanted to talk to one of those anthropologist types again. Dr Burton, the woman we met at the restaurant. I think he fancies her or something.'

'So you know where the anthropology department is?' Blake asked. 'Good. You can take us there.'

She introduced Lewis to Debbie and Ash and they set off towards another long modern building. Blake trailed along behind the others, watching them and smiling to herself. The three kids were much the same age but they couldn't have looked more different.

Ash, red-headed and freckled, like a kid in an old TV sitcom. Debbie with her milk-coffee skin and her blue-black hair and her graceful gliding walk. And Lewis, towering over both of them, moving as fast and jerkily as a big heron, so that they had to run to keep up with him.

He charged up a flight of stairs and knocked on a door labelled 'Dr Francis Cawthrop'. When they crowded in, Blake saw the guy from the restaurant sitting at a big desk, covered with stacks of paper. He frowned, pointed a finger at them and said, 'Lewis. Lewis Madison. You came here with your father last week. How can I help you?'

'You've got a good memory,' Lewis said, sounding surprised that anyone would bother to remember his name. 'Actually, I'm sort of here by accident. It's my friends who need a bit of help.'

'That's right,' Blake cut in. 'I'm Maureen Nagalarramba's daughter, Blake. I wanted to see you because people are saying Maureen nicked your tapes - and I'm hoping you can prove it's not true.'

Dr Cawthrop's silver-rimmed glasses went slipping down his nose. He shoved them back into place and yelled, 'Maureen? Someone thinks *she* stole the tapes? How ridiculous!'

Debbie glanced smugly at Ash and whispered, 'Told you so.' But Ash gripped the edge of the desk and said, 'Sorry, Dr Cawthrop, that's not good enough. A lot of people round town are really worried about this business. You can't just say it's ridiculous. You gotta give us the facts.'

'I can do better than that,' Dr Cawthrop announced, jumping to his feet. 'I'm on my way to the language unit right now, so I'll take you there and show you what happened.'

He flapped his hands at them, shooing them out of his room and down the stairs. As they headed over to the next building, Lewis tried to ask a long complicated question about Aboriginal languages. But Dr Cawthrop gave him a one-word answer and then veered over to walk beside Blake.

'Your mother's a wonderful woman,' he told her. 'So lively and interested - and she has a very good mind. She'd make an excellent anthropologist, if she had some training.'

Blake sighed. *Yeah, yeah. Another of Mum's fan club. This guy sounds like he's got a major crush on Maureen - but, oh well, at least that means he's keen to help us.*

Dr Cawthrop shunted them into a lift and then herded them out into a huge bright room. Windows all down one side. A whiteboard covered in notes and diagrams. Two desks, each with a big tape recorder and earphones and a foot pedal for stopping and starting the tape. A young woman pulled off her earphones and looked up, pushing springy black curls back from her biscuit-brown forehead.

'G'day, Dr C,' she said. 'Haven't finished transcribing your interviews yet, because Dr Burton asked me to check -'

'I'll be with you in a minute, Terri,' Dr Cawthrop interrupted. 'I just have to explain something to these kids. You were there too, Lewis, so you can remind me if I forget anything.'

He strode across to the whiteboard, with Lewis close behind. 'I've done a lot of work on Aboriginal languages,' he began. 'So I was pretty excited when I started talking to one of the elders here and found out that he was the last person alive who knew this particular language. And I was even more excited when I realised his language had links to ancient Dravidian.'

He paused and beamed at Blake, as if he was sure she would be excited too. 'Ancient Dravidian?' she muttered. 'Sorry. Never heard of it.'

Terri grinned. 'The Dravidians were the first mob who settled in India, way, way

back,' she explained. 'They looked kind of like Aborigines - dark skin, wavy hair, same bone structure and all. If Dr Cawthrop and Dr Burton could show that they used the same words as well, it'd prove that the Aborigines and the Dravidians started out in the same area and then went heading off in different directions.'

'Mind you, I'm only guessing,' Dr Cawthrop said quickly. 'Jane Burton didn't agree with me at first - although, after she'd studied my lists of words, she decided I was probably right. Jane's very smart. She worked out straight away that, if the Aborigines came to Australia at the same time as the Dravidians went to India, Aboriginal people must've been here much longer than we thought.'

'That's why Dr Burton talked to the reporter from the local paper,' Terri added. 'She was hoping someone would get interested and give us some money, so we could keep on studying the two languages.'

'Well, you can still do that, can't you?' said Blake. 'I mean, even if the tapes have gone, it'd be easy enough to talk to the old guy again.'

'I'm afraid not,' Dr Cawthrop said sadly. 'You see, he died two months ago.'

'But you made copies of the tapes, didn't you?' Ash asked. 'That's the obvious thing to do, right?'

Dr Cawthrop took his glasses off and started to polish them. 'Ah, yes,' he mumbled. 'Terri copied the tapes, of course. Then I put the copies in the safe next door, along with the originals. So -'

'So the copies got stolen too,' Blake groaned. 'Oh wow, what a mess. How did it happen, anyway?'

'Well, Lewis's father came to see me last week,' Dr Cawthrop told her. 'He wanted to hear the tapes that had been mentioned in the newspaper, so I asked Terri to bring them out from the safe.'

'When was that?' Debbie asked and Dr Cawthrop's finger shot out and pointed at her.

'Good question. I'm talking about Friday afternoon - and Maureen Nagalarramba came here on Friday morning. Remember that, while I tell you the rest of the story.'

Blake smiled to herself. *Funny guy. I reckon he must be a born teacher, because he can't help treating us like one of his classes.*

'I played the tapes for Hugh and his friend Sandy Ross,' Dr Cawthrop went on. 'Then, while we were chatting, one of our support staff - the guys in grey coats - came to collect the tapes and take them back to the safe. At that point Sandy and Terri and I were over by the windows. Hugh and my colleague Dr Jane Burton were at the bench. And Lewis was - where were you, Lewis?'

Lewis dropped the microphone that he'd been fiddling with and clasped his big hands behind his back. 'Urn, sorry. I'm not sure,' he mumbled.

Dr Cawthrop glanced over his shoulder. 'Terri, do you know where Lewis was

standing?' he called but the young woman shook her head, looking embarrassed.

Dr Cawthrop looks kind of embarrassed too. Poor things. They can't remember Lewis, because no-one ever notices Lewis. He sort of fades into the background, even though he's so tall.

Meanwhile Ash was tapping his foot impatiently. 'What's the point of all this, anyway?' he asked.

'Oh, didn't I tell you?' Dr Cawthrop said, catching his glasses as they slid down again. 'That's when the tapes disappeared. You see, the bloke in the grey coat -'

Before he could finish, Lewis grunted and started slapping his pockets. 'Hey, I remember what I was doing,' he said. 'I was in the next room, taking a snap of that banyan tree. Here it is, with the date and time on the bottom.'

He pulled out a folder, found the photo and passed it round. 'Wish I had one of those fancy cameras,' Ash sighed and Debbie pulled a face at him.

'Forget about fancy cameras, Ash. Lewis just said something really important. You were in the next room, right, Lewis? The room where the safe is?'

He nodded. 'Yep - and nobody came in while I was there. No guys in grey coats. No-one at all.'

'Exactly,' Dr Cawthrop butted in. 'That's what I've been trying to tell you. We thought the bloke was putting the tapes back in the safe - but in fact he just collected the copies and walked straight out of the building, taking the tapes with him.'

'So why haven't the cops caught him?' Blake demanded and Dr Cawthrop groaned.

'Because he wasn't really one of our support staff at all. He was a total stranger. But none of us ever looked at him properly, because he was wearing that grey coat.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

'That was pretty smart,' Blake admitted. 'I mean, you don't usually notice someone's face when they're wearing a uniform. You tend to look at the uniform instead.'

'Dead right,' Ash said straight away. 'In which case, it could've been your mum in disguise.'

'Not unless Maureen can make herself look like a white guy,' Terri said with a grin. 'I wasn't looking too hard but I got a general impression. Trust me, the person in the grey coat *wasn't* Maureen Nagalarramba.'

Ash chewed at his bottom lip and then said, 'Okay, fair enough. But who else would want to steal that stuff?'

'Collectors,' Terri told him. 'People who like the idea of owning Aboriginal stone axes - or old coolamons, those wooden dishes - or the only tapes of a lost language. Sure, they could never show the tapes to anyone else but the really nutso collectors wouldn't care about that.'

'Besides, a lot of anthropologists disagree with my ideas, you know,' Dr Cawthrop muttered. 'Someone could've hired a thug to steal the tapes and stop my research.'

Blake laughed. 'Yeah, right. I bet that sort of thing happens in universities all the time.'

'No, of course not,' he said with an unwilling smile. 'Most university professors wouldn't recognise a thug if they fell over one. But plenty of other people don't like the things I've been saying. They seem to think that if Aborigines have been here for eighty thousand years - not forty thousand years, as we used to believe - it strengthens their

claim to the land. Although, of course, Aboriginal land rights aren't dependent on -'

'No way,' Ash cut in. 'Blacks don't have *any* claim -'

Then Debbie closed in on him from one side and Blake grabbed his other arm. They hustled Ash out of the room, while Dr Cawthrop called, 'Please say hello to Maureen from me, will you, Blake?'

'Why did you shut Ash up?' Lewis asked, striding along beside them.

'In case you missed it, Terri's Aboriginal,' Blake snapped. 'I didn't see why she should have to listen to Ash's stupid ideas.'

'Nothing wrong with my ideas,' Ash grumbled. 'This whole land rights business is stuffed. Like, for example, my dad was talking to a bloke who's got this property that he's worked real hard on. He was going to let the local Aborigines have five hundred hectares as a reserve - but a bunch of city blacks came up here and reckoned that Aborigines should have total control. That bloke really loves the land, right? You can't tell me it's fair to take his property away from him.'

'Can't I?' Debbie asked. 'Then *you* can't tell *me* it's fair to take our land away from us.'

Ash shrugged. 'Listen, the local Aborigines were cool. The city blacks - the ones like Maureen - are the real problem.'

'Maybe. I don't know about that. But even if some Aboriginal people made a few mistakes, so what? Are you saying we can't have any rights unless we're all perfect? I mean, white people don't have to prove they're perfect before they can get health care - or pensions - or state schools - or tax cuts - or -'

'Okay, okay,' Ash yelled. 'Stop it, Deb. That's enough.'

Debbie grinned at him. 'See? It's not as simple as you thought. We could go on arguing for - for eighty thousand years. Or we could say, "Hey we're living in the same community, so we should try to get on together" and then go and catch the bus.'

'Let's catch the bus,' Ash said, grinning back. 'I don't want to argue with you.'

'Because I'm too good, eh?'

'Nah. I just don't feel like it.'

They fell into step and headed for the bus stop. Blake and Lewis followed along behind, swapping relieved smiles.

I'm glad those two decided to stop fighting. Otherwise I would've had to join in - and I don't know enough about it to argue properly, not yet.

As they waited on the footpath, a black Saab pulled up beside them. Hugh Madison pushed a button to wind down the window and called, 'Lewis! What do you think you're doing? Get in at once.'

'No,' he said in a small voice. 'I'm staying here with my friends. I'll meet you back at the apartment, Dad.'

'This is supposed to be our holiday time together,' Hugh reminded him. 'You'd better

come -'

'It's *not* a holiday,' Lewis squeaked. 'It's a business trip. You just came here to check on stuff for Interco.'

His father stared at him for a moment and then said, 'Very well then. If you want to behave like a spoilt brat, I can't stop you.'

The window slid up and the Saab purred off. When Blake looked at Lewis, he was shaking so hard that his knees bumped. She tried to think of something friendly to say but her mind was a total blank.

'Cool car,' Ash commented. 'What's it like to drive?'

Oh, good one, Ash. That ought to cheer Lewis up.

But Lewis just ducked his head and mumbled, 'Don't know. Dad won't let me drive it.' Then he gave Ash a tiny smile and added, 'I've got a Kawasaki at home, though.'

'Hey, great,' Blake said. 'My bike's a Honda Rebel. I had to leave it in the city too and I miss it.'

They talked motorbikes for a while, until Ash butted in and started telling them about his Mongoose stunt bike. Then Debbie told them walking was best, because it was the only way you could feel the wind and the sea smells and the earth under your feet. They were still arguing about it when the bus pulled up, so they laughed and scrambled on and kept arguing all the way back into town.

It was half past four by the time they hit the mall. Ash reckoned his father wouldn't get home from work for another hour and Lewis said he'd shout them all to thick shakes. But when he pulled out his wallet, his eyes went blank and he swallowed hard.

No money. Typical Lewis. He can't do anything right.

Blake passed him twenty dollars under the table and he paid the bill. After that, they headed across to the Fenners' house. As they passed Maureen's street, Blake edged closer to Debbie and hissed, 'Are you sure you want to come? Tom Fenner isn't exactly crazy about Aborigines.'

'Hey, I'm not scared of him,' Debbie whispered back. 'Besides, Ash isn't so bad, once you get to know him. Maybe his dad'll be all right too.'

Tom Fenner was sitting out on the verandah, with his shirt sleeves rolled up and a cup of tea beside him. He focussed on Debbie straight away and gave her a big friendly smile. *Just like Ash's smile.*

'G'day,' he said. 'Pleased to meet you. I knew some Aboriginal people'd be interested in my ideas. You're not all fooled by those out-of-towners, like Maureen Nagalarramba.'

'Actually, Debbie is Maureen's niece,' Ash said quickly. 'She's here - we're all here because we need to ask you something, Dad. See, people are saying your group broke into the Aboriginal youth centre on Saturday. But I told my mates you could prove you were busy the whole time.'

Tom Fenner's smile vanished, as if it had been wiped off with a wet rag. 'Your mates, Ash? Since when did you have a black kid as a mate?'

Ash blushed between his freckles. Debbie glared. And Blake straightened her shoulders, clasped her hands behind her back and said, 'Two black kids, Mr Fenner. I'm Maureen's daughter.'

Huh? Didn't know I was going to say that. I'm not even sure whether I can call myself a black kid, when I've got white-blond hair and skin that's paler than Ash's.

Still, I wasn't going to stand here and listen to him badmouth Maureen and Debbie, without saying something.

Tom Fenner looked her up and down and laughed. 'A black, are you? Well, you can't always tell,' he commented. 'Your father must've been a white man, though. Funny, it's hard to imagine Maureen Nagalarramba falling for a whitefella.'

Blake stared back. *Actually, Mum and Dad were never in love or anything. It was a business deal, all done by a doctor with samples and test tubes. But I don't need to tell Tom Fenner that.*

'Well, Mr Fenner?' she said steadily. 'Do you have an alibi for Saturday or what?'

He smiled again but this time his smile wasn't very friendly. 'It's none of your business, you know,' he growled. 'I'll tell you, though, because I don't want any nasty gossip that might hurt my group. Ash, get my address book.'

While they waited, Tom Fenner leaned back and watched Blake and Debbie in total silence. He didn't say a word until Ash returned. Then he told them he'd spent all of Saturday morning at the hall, getting it ready for the meeting, and read out the names and phone numbers of the people who'd helped him.

'After the meeting, five blokes came back to the house and we yakked for a while,' he went on. 'Around nine, just as they were leaving, another bloke arrived on the doorstep. He'd missed the meeting, because his ute broke down on the way into town. By the time I'd filled him in, it was midnight, so he dossed down on the couch in the lounge room and took off after breakfast. There's a squeaky board near the door - he would've woken up if I'd gone out in the night. And that was it, till Harry Banks, the printer, turned up in the late afternoon with some posters.'

'Posters with my mum's photo on them?' Blake cut in. 'When did you ask him to print them?'

'I didn't,' Tom said and Ash let out a small, surprised squeak.

'What? Where'd they come from, then?'

'Dunno. Harry said he'd got a note, signed by me, but he must've made a mistake. I reckon the posters were probably a gift. A donation from someone who believes in my ideas.'

'Yeah, right,' Ash said, frowning. 'So the posters just appeared out of nowhere. Did you check the facts, Dad?'

Tom shrugged. 'Why bother? I'd already said most of those things at the meeting. The only new fact was the stuff about Maureen Nagalarramba letting a bunch of black kids trash the youth centre. And I didn't have time to check on it, because we needed to get the posters up before that journalist arrived. You got a problem with that, Ash?'

Ash stared down at his feet for a while. 'Nah, Dad,' he said finally. 'It's cool.'

'What about the rest of you?' Tom demanded, frowning at Blake and Debbie and Lewis. 'Want to know what I had for breakfast or what socks I was wearing?'

Blake thought for a moment. *No, that's enough. The centre must've been wrecked overnight, so I don't need to find out what Tom did after his visitor left.*

'Just give me the phone numbers for Harry and those other guys,' she said, clicking her biro, and Tom laughed.

'Yeah, you're Maureen Nagalarramba's daughter, all right. As pushy as she is.'

He flipped through the address book, reading out names and numbers. 'And the fifth bloke was Hugh Madison, so young Lewis can tell you about him,' he finished up. 'Now, get out and stay out. We don't want to see you blacks round here again. Right, Ash?'

Debbie tugged at Blake's hand and they were halfway to the gate before the door slammed. As they sprinted down the street, Blake heard the sound of running footsteps. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Ash, pelting towards them.

'Deb, I'm sorry,' he panted. 'Dad didn't mean -'

But Debbie scowled and swung away. Ash slumped against a fence and stared after her, holding his side. Blake turned back to face him.

'You crossed out the last lines on those posters, didn't you?' she asked, just to make sure.

'Yeah,' he gasped, still breathless. 'I heard you telling Hugh Madison that the centre looked okay. I know Dad's right and all, Blake - but I didn't want to say anything that wasn't true.'

'Well then, you better stop dumping on Auntie Maureen,' Debbie called to him. She hesitated and shoved her hand into the pocket of her shorts. Pulled out Ash's cap and tossed it over, saying, 'Here, have this back. It's yours, anyway.'

Then she marched off and left Ash leaning against the fence, with the yellow baseball cap clutched to his chest.

CHAPTER NINE

When Blake and Lewis turned the corner, Debbie was already disappearing into Maureen's street. Blake sighed. *Oh, great. I was trying to solve the mystery of the poster, to make things better for Mum. But I just made things worse for Debbie, because she had to listen to Tom Fenner insulting her.*

She glanced at Lewis, hoping he'd have something useful to say. The tall guy yelped, lurched off the footpath and stumbled into the middle of the road, waving his long arms wildly.

Huh? That's weird, even for Lewis.

As she stared in surprise, a white Toyota braked, reversed and pulled up beside her. Sandy Ross leaned out and said, 'Lewis? What on earth are you doing?'

'I saw your car and I thought you could give me a lift back to the apartments,' Lewis mumbled. Then he looked at Blake and added, 'You won't want me round anymore, with Debbie upset and all.'

Blake bit her lip. *Poor old Lewis. I almost feel sorry for him - but it's true, I don't want him round. Not because of Debbie but because I'm hoping Maureen'll be back from the centre by now.*

'Thanks a lot, Lewis,' she said. 'You've been a real help. Hey, don't forget to ask your dad about Tom Fenner's alibi. You can give me a ring and tell me what you find out.'

Lewis cheered up straight away. 'Sure, Blake,' he said, nodding so hard that his hair flopped down into his eyes. 'It'd be nice to see you again.'

Rats. I just wanted him to phone me - but now I'm stuck with him. Looks like I'm

going to be Lewis's babysitter for life.

As he climbed into the Toyota, Sandy Ross waved to her. That reminded Blake of something. She dodged round to the other side of the car and said, 'Sandy, you sell a lot of Aboriginal art, right? Do you know anyone who collects tapes of Aboriginal languages?'

The little man's eyebrows shot up. 'Good heavens, no. I only know about paintings.'

'So you wouldn't be interested in buying the only tapes of a lost Aboriginal language, if someone offered them to you?'

His eyes narrowed. 'Are you offering to sell me something like that?' he asked sharply.

'No, I just -'

'Well then, it's a stupid question,' he snapped and revved the engine. Blake hardly had time to jump out of the way before the Toyota took off.

That's funny. Sandy seemed like a jolly sort of guy but he really lost it just then.

So what if somebody *had* been trying to sell him the stuff that was stolen from the university? Suppose he'd got an anonymous phone call or whatever. He could've thought that Blake was the person who'd rung him - and then freaked when she said it wasn't her.

She strolled on down the street, thinking hard. Maybe she wasn't such a bad detective, after all. She'd found out quite a lot already and it'd be easy to find out more. For starters, it would be good to talk to Sandy again, because he might have a few clues about the thief. Then there was Hugh Madison. He'd lost his white Australia badge and Blake had found a badge at the centre. Plus he was at Tom Fenner's place on his own, not with Lewis, so he could've wrecked the youth centre on his way home.

But why? Well, he might've wanted to spread some nasty stories about Aboriginal groups. After all, a lot of the people he worked for were worried about Aboriginal land rights, because they owned huge properties. Including Interco, according to Lewis.

Interco, the multinational company that my father runs. It keeps turning up everywhere. I can't get away from it.

Blake pushed Interco and her father out of her mind and went back to puzzling about Hugh. The guy didn't look like a vandal. He was a big deal consultant who wore expensive silvery suits. If he wanted to smash up a youth centre, he'd probably hire someone else to do it.

No, wait a minute. What about that stuff he keeps saying to Lewis? 'If a job's really important, you have to do it yourself. You can't rely on other people to do it for you.' So maybe he decided to wreck the centre himself.

Or maybe not. Either way, I can't prove it.

Then again, Hugh Madison wasn't the only one on her list. There was Harry Banks, the printer. Harry said he'd got a note from Tom, asking him to print the posters, but he

could've been lying. What if he was the one who wrote that stuff about Maureen - and what if he knew the youth centre had been trashed, because he'd done the trashing?

And there was Tom Fenner as well. Blake didn't intend to cross him off the list, not till she'd checked his alibi. He was tall, like the guy she'd almost caught breaking into the centre. *Although Hugh and Ash are both pretty tall as well.* What's more, Tom knew about the journalist who was planning to visit the youth centre and he definitely hated Maureen.

I reckon he'd jump at the chance to get her into trouble.

Thinking about Maureen made her remember where she was heading. Blake looked up and realised she'd just walked past Maureen's house. She raced back and knocked on the door. Waited with her fingernails digging into her palms.

And groaned out loud when Debbie said, 'Sorry, Blake. Auntie Maureen's not here.'

Half an hour later Blake was trudging into the hotel. *What now? There wasn't much point in hanging round at Maureen's place, after we phoned the centre and no-one was there. But I haven't made any other plans, because I was so dead set on seeing Mum.*

She took the wrong turning on the walkway and ended up on the other side of the hotel again. Hurried along the ramp, swerved round a corner and saw someone sitting on the landing outside her room. Someone thin and wiry, with brown arms wrapped round her knees and tangled blonde hair hiding her face.

Oh. It's Maureen.

'Hi, Mum,' she said. 'How did your meeting go?'

Maureen jumped up, took a step towards her and stopped. 'I thought you'd never get back,' she said in a flat voice. 'The meeting went fine. Where have you been?'

'At your house,' Blake said, trying to stop herself from - *from what? Laughing? Or crying? Mum and I always manage to stuff things up. It's like she thinks I'm going to push her away, so she backs off first. But why would she think that? I mean, she was the one who ditched me, not the other way round.*

'I think the journalist and the conference mob were pretty impressed,' Maureen was saying. 'I'm not planning to get too excited, though. We'll have other problems soon. There's always something.' Then she turned away, adding, 'Well? Are you going to ask me in?'

The minute she'd opened the door, Blake scuttled off to find cups and make coffee. When she came back, Maureen was standing by the table, frowning down at the poster.

Oops. Looks like I'll have to tell her about the posters, after all.

'Someone was sticking those things up, outside the centre and the apartment where the journalist was staying,' she said in a rush. 'But I pulled them down, before the

conference mob saw them.'

Maureen tugged at a handful of hair. 'Thanks,' she said vaguely, as though she was thinking about something else.

Blake slammed the cup of coffee down in front of her. *Typical. I stay up half the night to help her and she doesn't even care. She doesn't care about me at all.*

She walked over to the window and gazed out at the palm trees. Behind her, Maureen said, 'Alice - no, Blake, it's time I told you what's been happening to me.'

'Okay,' she snapped. 'Go ahead.'

A moment of silence and then Maureen said, 'You're not making this easy.'

'Why should I?' Blake muttered but she swung round and went to sit at the table. Her mother sat down opposite her and they stared at each other for a few seconds. Then Maureen took a deep breath and began.

'All the time I was growing up in Sunnyport, I thought I was Mike and Lena Delaney's kid. Okay, they didn't seem to like me too much but I figured I was stuck with them. Even when my aunt got mad and told me I was adopted, I didn't want to go looking for my mum. What if she was dead? Or what if she didn't like me either? It would've only made things worse.'

Blake chewed at her thumb. *Rats. I'm starting to feel sorry for her already. At least I was always sure that Dad and my other mum liked me, even after they had my half-brother Dion as well.*

'Go on,' she whispered and Maureen nodded. 'So, okay, I was a mess after I gave you to - to your father. And I was an even bigger mess after I lost you for the second time. Once I'd pulled myself together, I thought about checking the adoption records and searching for my mum. But somehow I never got around to it. Still scared, I guess. Then I found out by accident and that changed everything.'

She leaned her cheek against her hand and stared out through the window. A pattern of palm tree leaves, sharp and black against the gold-orange clouds of the sunset. Blake held her breath and waited for her mother to go on.

'My granny came from around here but they shifted her to Alice Springs,' Maureen said. 'They could do that sort of stuff to Aboriginal people, back then. One of the Aboriginal Protection Officers took a fancy to her and she had two kids by him, my mum and Uncle Johnny. But when my mum was three, they took her away from my granny and packed her off to a girls' home in the far north. She got pregnant when she was sixteen, to this bloke in the house where she was working as a maid. It wasn't easy to be a single mum in those days - but my mum was determined to hang onto me.'

'So what happened?' Blake breathed.

Maureen's hands tightened round the coffee cup, so hard that Blake could see the bones pushing against her skin. 'Well, the government had this scheme where Aboriginal kids could go down south and stay with a white family for the Christmas

holidays. My mum thought it sounded like a good idea, so I was sent to stay with the Delaneys. But they never sent me back. They asked if they could adopt me instead, because they couldn't have kids of their own. And the Aboriginal Affairs mob said yes, without even talking to my mum.'

Blake shivered. 'Oh, Mum. That was tough. You must've felt terrible when you found out.'

'Yes and no,' Maureen said. 'My mum *was* dead by then and that was tough, all right. But I discovered I've got heaps of cousins and aunties and uncles, so I was pretty happy about that. They're your cousins and aunties and uncles too, of course. I better take you round to meet them all, eh?'

'Later,' Blake said. 'Finish the story first.'

Her mother leaned back and stretched. 'Well, it was great to have my own family at last. But the best thing was realising that I was Aboriginal. I'd always felt as though I didn't fit in and suddenly I knew why. It was like I'd found the missing piece of a jigsaw - the one that makes everything else slot into place.'

Blake frowned at the wiggly blue veins under her pale skin. *You're lucky, Mum. Well, not exactly lucky but something like that. I've never felt as though I fitted in either.*

And I still don't.

'So does this mean I'm Aboriginal too?' she asked and Maureen shrugged.

'Listen, my dad was white and my grandad was white - but I call myself Aboriginal, because I *feel* Aboriginal. The same goes for you, A - Blake. It all depends on how you feel.'

Yeah, but I don't know how I feel. I was hoping Mum would tell me what to do. No such luck, though. Looks like I'll have to work it out for myself. As usual.

'You haven't told me how you found your family,' she said, to change the subject, and Maureen laughed.

'Ah, that was an amazing bit of luck. I'd been travelling round and when I came back to the city, I had this mad urge to phone my old mate Kenny Malone, even though we hadn't seen each other for years. Kenny got all excited and said his boyfriend Shane had something to tell me. Apparently Shane and Kenny'd been chatting on about the places where they grew up, and all of a sudden Shane goes, "Wait a minute. I think your friend Maureen Delaney's my cousin Maureen." He'd been trying to track me for ages, him and the rest of the mob. Can you believe it, Blake? They were actually looking for me, all that time.'

Blake was chewing her thumb again. Nipping at a bit of loose skin and tearing it off. Staring down at a bubble of red blood.

'Sure I can believe it,' she said. 'Why not? I was looking for you too.'

CHAPTER TEN

'Tell me,' her mother said softly. 'Tell me *your* story now.'

So Blake explained how she'd walked out on her father nine months ago and gone searching for Maureen. Starting in the city where her mother had left her, moving on to Sunnyport and Mudgeebung and the big city.

'I've met a lot of people you used to know,' she ended up. 'Kenny Malone. Your Aunt Dell. Daffy Clarke, that crazy old artist who lived near you in Sunnyport. By the way, Daffy told me why the Delaneys packed you off to live with Aunt Dell when you were fifteen - because the Larsen kid got killed in a bushfire, while you were supposed to be looking after her. But I found out what really happened, Mum. It wasn't your fault.'

'Yes, it was,' Maureen muttered. 'I let Sara go wandering off on her own. I shouldn't've been left in charge of a little kid.'

Blake shook her head. 'Trust me, you did fine. *Listen*, Mum. Just listen to me, for a change.'

She launched into the story of the bushfire that had hit Sunnyport while she was there - and the way it'd stirred up people's memories of the bushfire twenty-seven years before, when the Larsen kid had died - and the man who'd felt guilty ever since because he'd seen Maureen wave and point to Sara and then decided he was imagining things. When she'd finished, Maureen sat there in silence for a while and then sighed.

'Thanks, kid. It's the best present you could've possibly given me. I've been blaming myself for twenty-seven years - but I can stop now. Wish I could tell you something that good in return.'

'You can,' Blake said. 'You can tell me what you were doing on Saturday night, when

the centre was trashed. Ashley Fenner reckons you could've wrecked the place yourself, to make his dad's group look bad. I don't believe him,' she added quickly. 'But I'd like to be able to prove he was wrong.'

Maureen blushed. 'Well, actually I was at home on Saturday night. Um, with Kevin. We got married about six weeks ago. I would've mentioned it before, except I thought you might feel ...'

Feel what, Mum? Left out? Second best? Like I'm not really part of your life? Don't worry, I felt that way already.

'Hey, Kevin seems like a nice guy,' she said with a shrug. 'It's fine by me, as long as he doesn't want to pretend he's my dad. I've got enough parents in my life right now. Too many of them, really.'

Maureen pushed both hands into her hair and tugged hard. 'All right Blake,' she groaned. 'I get the message. We need to talk about your father as well. I promise I'll give you the full story this time, because you're old enough to understand it now - but can we please get something to eat first? I'm starving.'

Blake nodded. 'Sounds fair. Come to think of it, I'm pretty hungry too.'

They set off down the walkway, arguing about whether to go for Indian or Italian food. *Just like old times. Mum always liked curries best. Me, I prefer pizza.*

Halfway up the main road, Blake said, 'Okay, Indian' and Maureen said, 'Okay, Italian.' They laughed and slapped hands - and that was when Blake spotted the battered combi van, crawling along the curb behind them;

Her heart lurched inside her chest and then started to beat faster. She peered back at the van but yellow light from the street lamps was reflecting on the windows, so she couldn't see the driver's face. Just a tall dark outline, with a small dark outline in the passenger seat.

Too small for Greg and way too small for Thumper. Phew. That's a relief. My dad's private detectives haven't found me, after all.

But as she started to turn away, Blake took a second look at the combi. *Hang on. I don't recognise the driver - but I know that van.* She rubbed her forehead, trying to remember. Closed her eyes for a second and saw a picture of the van in her mind, at a strange angle, as though she was looking down from the clouds.

Oh yeah, of course. It's the van that parked outside the youth centre on Sunday night. I noticed it when I was up in the tree, keeping watch.

She grabbed Maureen's hand and hissed, 'Come on, Mum. We gotta walk faster.'

Maureen swung towards her with a puzzled frown. Then she glanced over Blake's shoulder and her eyes widened. As Blake hauled desperately on her hand, she heard a voice call out, 'Maureen! Maureen Delaney.'

Damn. They know Maureen. And the driver's tall, like the guy I saw breaking into the centre. They must be the people who've been trying to get at Mum.

'Run!' she shouted, giving Maureen a sharp tug. But her mother was pulling against her. Jerking her hand free. Racing over to the combi van and yelling, 'I don't believe this. It's Fay Delaney, my auntie. G'day, Auntie Fay!'

The driver's door swung open. A tall old woman in an Akubra hat jumped down from the van and flung her arms around Maureen. Wrinkled brown skin, tough as old leather, iron grey hair chopped off short and steady brown eyes.

'Yeah, it's me,' she said with a grin. 'But you're old enough to call me Dell now, like the rest of my mates. Nice to see you again, Blake. Win'll be pleased too.'

She pointed back to the van. A tiny woman with white hair that fluffed out like a halo was waving from the side window.

'Isn't this exciting?' she called to Blake. 'You know how we decided to travel round Australia together? Well, Dell said she wanted to begin by finding her niece. She checked the adoption records, got Maureen's mother's name and worked out that her family must've come from the Top End - wasn't that clever of her? And here we are.'

Maureen hugged Dell tighter and laughed. 'This is incredible. Seems like everyone's been looking for me lately. My family and Blake and now you.'

'That's right,' Dell said gruffly. 'After I talked to Blake, I started to think about a lot of things, like the way I picked on you when you were a kid. Telling you that you were adopted, as if it was a slap in the face. Saying you had bad blood, because your parents had let on that you were Aboriginal. I can't change the past, Maureen, but at least I can change the future. So I've come to say I'm sorry.'

Blake stared. She'd been sure that Dell was levelling with her in Mudgeebung but apparently the old woman had only told her half of the truth. *More secrets. She could've saved me a lot of time if she'd told me Maureen was Aboriginal, way back then. I hate secrets - and I hate Dell too.*

Who cares if she's sorry? It's too late now. She should've been nicer twenty-seven years ago. Mum should just spit in her face.

But to her surprise Maureen hugged her aunt again and said, 'Thanks. That means a lot. Hey, would you and Win like to come and have dinner with Blake and me?'

Blake's fists clenched. As Dell nodded, she found herself blurting, 'Count me out. I'm really tired, all of a sudden. Better get back to the hotel.'

Then she turned and ran, with Win staring at her from the combi's window and Maureen yelling, 'See you tomorrow, Blake. There's still a lot more to talk about. You won't get away from me this easy.'

Blake sat on the end of the bed, hugging her knees. *It's not fair. I'm Maureen's daughter. Dell's only her stupid old aunt. She should've told Dell she'd see her*

tomorrow, not me. I'm always second best. It's not fair.

Then again, Maureen hadn't said 'See you tomorrow' until after Blake ran away. When she tried to think about it, she couldn't really remember why she'd run. Okay, she was mad at Maureen for inviting Dell and Win to dinner - but on the other hand, it had been kind of interesting to see the old women again.

What's the matter with me? Why couldn't I just be nice to them? It's like I've been on the run for so long that I've forgotten how to stop running.

Her head was aching and her eyelids kept sliding shut. Oh well, at least she hadn't been lying when she said she was tired. Blake kicked off her sandals, crawled under the sheet and curled into a small tight ball.

And slept for the next nine hours, without a single dream.

When she woke up, her head felt fine and her brain was packed full of plans. She made a quick cup of coffee and headed straight for the phone. It was early, so Tom Fenner's mates would still be having breakfast. She could catch them before they headed off to work.

Blake dialled the first number on her list. Said, 'Hi, I'm Tom Fenner's cleaner. I found a silver pen when I was cleaning his place and Tom reckoned you might've left it behind on Saturday, after the meeting. Do you remember who else was at his house?'

A few more questions and then she murmured, 'Uh-huh. So you all left in a bunch at nine o'clock and Tom was there the whole time. Hard to work out who dropped the pen, then. But thanks anyway.'

She had the same conversation three more times, with the other three guys. They all said exactly the same thing. Then she rang the people who'd helped Tom Fenner set up the hall and tried the same story on them. They reckoned that Tom had been at the hall from eight in the morning till the meeting started, without a break, except when he went to the cake shop with one of the helpers.

After that she rang the man who'd turned up at nine on Saturday night. This time Blake said she was a newspaper reporter looking for a story about how Tom Fenner listened to ordinary people. The man raved on for twenty minutes, telling her that Tom had talked to him till midnight and then let him sleep on his couch.

'Mind you, I lay awake all night, thinking,' he finished up. 'I was convinced it was my fault that my farm's going bust - but Tom made me see that it's the fault of the blacks and the migrants. He's a great bloke, miss. One of the best.'

She put the phone down and sighed. That settled it. Tom Fenner had some weird ideas but he definitely didn't trash the centre. There was someone watching him the whole time, from Saturday morning right through to Sunday morning. It looked as though

he was in the clear, unless Lewis found out something useful from Hugh Madison.

Blake crossed off the man's name and sat staring at the last name on the list. Harry Banks, the printer. The most interesting one of the lot. He reckoned Tom Fenner had asked him to print the posters. Tom reckoned he hadn't.

Yeah, gotta talk to Harry, for sure. But maybe I'll drop in on him, instead of phoning.

Her stomach was growling, which reminded her that she hadn't eaten anything since lunchtime yesterday. She got up and wandered over to the fridge. Collected some fruit and biscuits and went out to sit in the sun. The palm trees rustled and the sky shone blue over her head. Another warm bright day and yet after a while Blake realised she was shivering.

Cold dark pictures inside my mind. Kids crying. Mothers watching as their kids are taken away. Maureen's stories from last night. Maybe that's why I ran, because it was all too much.

She pushed her chair back and jumped to her feet. Okay, she couldn't do anything about the government sending Maureen's mum off to the mission in the North - or the Delaneys hijacking Maureen - or her father tricking Maureen into giving Blake to him. But she *could* do something about the way Tom Fenner and his mob were blaming Maureen for all their problems.

Time to go and see Harry Banks.

The printer's shop was at the far end of the main street. When Blake walked in, Harry Banks was sitting at a bench behind the counter, tapping the keys of a computer. He looked up and said, 'Well, well. It's the girlie who was taken sick at Tom's meeting. Feeling better now?'

'Much better, thanks,' Blake said politely. 'Listen, Tom asked me to check something out. You know that poster you printed for him at the weekend. Could you tell me a bit about it?'

She pulled out her copy of the poster and spread it on the counter. Harry Banks came over and peered at it, mopping his red face with a big white hanky.

'I had a sleep-in on Sunday morning,' he said. 'Went for a bit of a stroll in the afternoon. Found an envelope under my door when I got home, with a disk and a note from Tom. Printed the posters from the disk and dropped them round straight away. But I could tell Tom thought there was something funny going on, so I'm not surprised you're here.'

'Are you sure the note was from Tom?' Blake asked and Harry shrugged.

'Here it is, girlie. And here's that other leaflet I printed for Tom, the one set out like a letter with his signature on the bottom. Take a squiz at both of them and see what you

think.'

He tossed the note and the leaflet onto the counter. Blake lined them up and stared at them. The note had been typed on a computer but Tom's name was scrawled in biro at the end. She glanced at the signature on the leaflet and nodded.

'I'm no expert but they look the same to me, all right.'

As she passed them back, she felt the icy hand grab her and squeeze tight. 'Hang on,' she said, whisking the leaflet out of Harry's fingers. 'You know what this means. It would've been dead easy for someone to copy Tom's signature.'

'Not that easy,' the printer told her. 'Tom's writing is a real mess, all curly and squiggly. Dunno whether I could copy it myself - and I've got a good eye for that sort of thing.'

He picked a pen out of a jar and found some scrap paper. 'Smart idea,' Blake said, reaching for another pen. They leaned on the counter, side by side, frowning at the leaflet and making squiggles on their pieces of paper. After a few minutes they looked at each other and laughed.

'You're right,' Blake agreed. 'It *isn't* easy. Either Tom wrote the note himself or there's a pretty good forger around.'

Harry's face turned two shades redder. 'If Tom reckons he didn't write the note, then he didn't,' he said sternly. 'He's not the sort of bloke who tells lies.'

Oops. Big mistake. I'm pretending to be one of Tom's fans, so I shouldn't say anything against him.

She looked around for a way to change the subject. Her elbow bumped the poster and moved it closer to the leaflet. 'Hey, they look different,' she said in surprise. 'Different sorts of lettering and different headings. How come, when you printed both of them?'

It was the right thing to say. Harry liked the idea of telling her about his work. 'Well, I used Pagemaster to do the leaflet,' he explained. 'That's the name of the desktop publishing software on my computer over there. But the fellow who did the poster - he used the new EasyWriter software.'

'Can you tell, just by looking at them?' she asked and Harry beamed.

'Course I can, girlie. That's my job.'

She thought for a moment. 'So we need to find someone who's good at copying signatures - has EasyWriter software on their computer - and doesn't have a printer, because they had to ask you to print the posters.'

'Spot on,' Harry agreed. 'Find all those things and you've got your bloke. Although, mind you, I don't know why Tom's so worried about this whole business. The posters were a bonzer idea. Someone really ought to stop that Maureen Nagalarramba.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Blake marched out of the shop, scowling. *Rats. I was actually starting to like Harry Banks, till he said that stuff about Mum. Maybe he made the posters after all, if he feels that way.*

She swerved into a cafe, ordered a coffee and sat down to think it through. Okay, Harry used Pagemaster for most of his jobs but he could've used EasyWriter for the posters, as a kind of disguise. It wouldn't be too hard to load another software program onto his computer. Plus he might've just been pretending he couldn't copy Tom's handwriting.

But why would Harry bother to pretend? He was a big fan of Tom Fenner's ideas. If he'd made the posters, surely he would've boasted to Tom about it. And he thought Blake was one of Tom's fans too, so there would be no point in pretending to her.

Face it, Blake. You want to blame Harry, because he was horrible about Maureen. But that's just as bad as Tom and Harry blaming everything on Aboriginal people.

Blake sighed. Picked up a teaspoon and drew squiggles in the froth on top of her coffee. It was all too complicated. She was trying to deal with three mysteries at once. The posters. The break-in at the youth centre. The tapes that had been stolen from the university.

Maybe the same person did all those things - or maybe it was three different people.

That gave her an idea. She gulped the rest of her coffee and headed on down the street. Ten minutes later, she was ringing the Fenners' doorbell. Ash opened the door, wearing his yellow baseball cap and a wobbly smile.

'Blake!' he said. 'This is great. After yesterday, I thought you weren't speaking to me.'

'Hi, Ash,' she said, refusing to smile back. 'I need to ask you something. Do you have a computer?'

He shook his head and said, 'I wish.' Blake stared hard at him and he added, 'If you don't believe me, you can come in and have a look.'

'Thanks. I will.'

She strode through the house, checking all the rooms, one by one. No luck. No computer anywhere in the place. *Damn. I know Tom Fenner didn't wreck the youth centre but I thought he might've designed the posters. Wrong again. Unless -*

'Where does your dad work?' she demanded and Ash said, 'He's a baker. He owns the cake shop in the main street.'

Yes! So he could've made that disk when he went to collect the cakes for the meeting on Saturday morning.

'Is there a computer at the shop?' she asked, crossing her fingers behind her back.

But Ash said, 'No way. You don't need a computer for baking cakes. Besides, Dad hates computers. He's always going on about how machines are taking over the world.'

Blake shrugged. 'Okay, that's all. Goodbye.' She headed for the door but Ash came racing after her. 'Hold on,' he gasped. 'Aren't you going to tell me what this is all about?'

'No,' she said. 'Why should I? We're on different sides, Ash. You're on your dad's side. I'm on my mum's side. That's just the way it is.'

'And Debbie's on your mum's side too,' Ash muttered. 'Do you think she hates me now, Blake?' He pulled his cap off and turned it round in his hands, smoothing the peak.

Blake blinked at him. *Oh wow. Twenty-four hours ago Ash wanted to throw that cap away, because an Aboriginal kid had been wearing it. Now he's acting like it's the best thing he owns.*

Something tells me he's in love.

'Debbie wasn't real impressed,' she said, a bit more kindly. 'You just stood there and let your dad badmouth us, remember.'

'I tried to help you,' he mumbled. 'But it wasn't easy. I mean, the guy's my dad and all.'

Blake bit her lip. *Fair enough. It's hard to stand up to your father, even when you think he's wrong. I should know. I never really stood up to my own dad.*

'Listen, I'll tell Debbie you didn't mean to dump on us,' she said. 'Don't expect her to come running round with a bunch of roses, though. If you want her to like you, you'll have to work at it.'

'I know that,' Ash nodded. 'Plus I'll have to work on Dad too.'

She grinned. 'Good luck. Oh, and by the way, those questions I was asking - I was trying to work out whether your dad could've made the posters. But he couldn't, so at least that's one thing you don't have to worry about.'

She waved goodbye and hurried off. When she got to the corner of Maureen's street, she slowed down, frowning to herself. *I'm glad I could say something nice to Ash - but I'm sorry his dad's off the hook. I was so sure Tom Fenner and his mob were behind all of this. I don't really know where to look next.*

Better stop hassling about it and take a break. I'll go and see whether anyone's home at Mum's house.

Debbie flung the door open and gave her a huge smile. 'Eh, cuz, I was hoping you'd turn up. Auntie Maureen's at the youth centre, Auntie Vi's taken her pictures to the gallery and Kev's sleeping in, because he's got a late night start with the road train tomorrow. So I'm here on my own, for once. Want to go into town and look around?'

Blake nodded. 'Sure. Why not? I haven't had time to do any tourist stuff yet.'

Debbie dashed inside and collected her bumbag. As they set off, Blake said, 'Thanks for coming to the uni with me yesterday - and I'm sorry about the hassle with Ash's dad.'

Debbie frowned. 'Yeah, well, we shouldn't have gone nosing round on our own, without talking to any of the elders first. I was going to tell Auntie Maureen last night, only she didn't come home till late.'

Oh rats, I forgot about that. Listening to your elders. Mum said that was the proper Aboriginal way of doing things. But hey, I can't always get it right. I've only had a few days practice.

'That Ash Fenner, he makes me so mad,' Debbie was saying when she tuned in again. 'One minute he's acting like a normal person. Next minute we step onto his front verandah and he turns into a raving racist.'

'He didn't mean it,' Blake said, remembering her promise to Ash. 'I saw him today and he reckoned he was doing his best to stick up for us.'

'Did he?' Debbie asked with a sidelong look at Blake. Then her eyes clouded and she added, 'Well, his best isn't real good. He just kept going, "Yes, Dad. Whatever you say, Dad. Okay, I'll throw Blake and Debbie out, Dad."'

'So you still don't like him, cuz? I got the feeling he really likes you.'

'That's his problem,' Debbie snapped but after that she walked along in silence for a while, staring at her feet. Blake sighed.

It's like Romeo and Juliet or something. Two kids who might have had a good time together, if only things were different. I wonder if Ash'll keep on trying to impress Debbie. I wonder how Debbie'll feel if he does. Maybe I'll

even stick around and find out.

Fact is, it's time I stopped running.

By the time they reached the main street, Debbie had cheered up. They strolled along, checking out the tourists and looking in all the shop windows. While they were spinning a rack of postcards, Blake's stomach gurgled loudly.

'I'm hungry again,' she said in surprise. 'Show me a good place to eat and I'll shout you to some lunch.'

'Let's go to the arcade near the backpacker hotels,' Debbie said straight away. 'You can get great food there, plus we can sit and watch the ferals.'

There must've been at least twenty food shops jammed into the little arcade. Middle-aged guys in hippy beads and ponytails selling smoothies and fruit juice. Smiling Thai families selling tiny spring rolls and bowls of green curry. Blake bought a lentil burger for herself and a bag of spring rolls for Debbie and followed her cousin outside.

It was like a huge party. Dozens of chunky concrete tables and bright plastic chairs. Dozens of kids sitting at the tables, on the tables, under the tables. Silver glints from the rings in their noses and eyebrows and bottom lips. Red and green and blue dreadlocks, wound with coloured thread. Sarongs and tie-dyed t-shirts and Indian shirts, bright but softly faded, making them look like a swarm of tropical butterflies.

'See what I mean?' Debbie said. 'This is the best place for people-watching. The bus station's just round the corner, so all the backpacker kids meet up at the arcade.'

They found an empty table and dumped their things on it. While they ate, Blake flicked her eyes around, checking out the butterfly kids. 'They look cool,' she told Debbie. 'Wish I was into photos. I'd love to take a shot of those kids over there.'

She made a square with her hands and framed the three of them. A really tall guy in his twenties, with a guitar slung across his bare white chest. Baggy purple pants, jaw-hugging black beard and a cloud of black hair. A curvy brown girl in her late teens, who fitted neatly under his arm. Yellow dreads, crocheted bikini top and a green sarong twisted round her hips. And a fat baby with a smooth bald head and a smooth bare bum, playing with a sandy dog and her puppies under the table.

As Blake clicked her imaginary camera, something clicked inside her head. Photos. Baby. That reminded her of - *of what?*

Yes. Got it.

The jet ski club where they'd stopped for a cool drink, after picking the ti-tree. The place where she'd seen a pair of backpackers with a baby, plus tourists taking photos of the sea. The place where someone had taken a photo of Maureen with a bottle in her hand and then used it for the poster.

Before she had time to think, Blake was on her feet, heading for the

backpackers. 'G'day,' she said. 'Did I see you at the club out along the coast road on Sunday?'

The guy trailed his hand across the guitar. A ripple of notes and then he said, 'Maybe. I don't know what you saw. You're the only person who can know that.'

Blake frowned and the girl giggled. 'Jed and me and the kid were there,' she said, picking up one of the puppies. 'So if you were there too, you could've seen us. But who cares? Why stress about it?'

Blake hesitated for a moment. *These guys are off in their own world. How am I supposed to get through to them?*

Well, I could tell them the truth, I guess.

She tugged the poster out of her pack and unrolled it. 'This is a photo of my mum,' she said. 'I was wondering whether you'd noticed the person who snapped it.'

Jed leaned over her shoulder and read the writing on the poster. 'Oh, man,' he murmured. 'That's, like, really bad news. Hassling your mum, just 'cause she's a Koori. Me and Star and Flash, we don't believe in that sort of thing. What do you reckon, Star? Can you remember anything?'

Star peered at the photo. 'I remember *her*, because she had such a beautiful strong face. And there was this guy who seemed real interested in her - right, Jed?'

'Yeah, man,' Jed agreed, snapping his fingers. 'He kept moving round, so he could watch her and - yeah, yeah, he *was* taking pictures of her.'

Blake beamed. 'Fantastic! What did he look like?'

'Incredibly tall,' Star said but Jed said, 'Nah, just medium tall. He was pretty young, but.'

'No way. He was quite old and, like, totally pale.'

'Wrong again,' Jed cut in, stroking Star's arm. 'He wasn't as brown as you but he wasn't all that pale. Sorry, man. This isn't much help, is it?'

'Not really,' Blake admitted. 'But thanks for trying.'

She rescued the poster from the puppy, who was chewing one of the corners. Bent down, unwrapped the baby from her ankle and trudged back to Debbie. Her cousin looked at her suspiciously.

'What's going on, Blake? Are you nosing round again?'

She sighed. 'Yeah, I was. You needn't worry, though. I didn't find out a single thing.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

Debbie showed Blake the long way home through the park on the cliffs, where they could look down at the sea. They wandered between the trees, watching peaceful doves peck in the grass, reading the names of famous Top Enders on tiles beside the path. Sometimes Blake told Debbie stories about life in the big city. Sometimes Debbie told Blake stories about her family. And sometimes they just strolled along in friendly silence.

I like my new cousin. Can't remember why I was so jealous of her to start with.

By the time they got back to Maureen's house, the sun was settling down into the trees on the horizon. They found Maureen in the kitchen, bossing Kevin around. She glanced sideways at Blake, then darted over and gave her a quick hug.

'Auntie Vi reckoned you'd be back,' she said. 'We're going to the market down by the beach, meeting the cousinbrothers and sistergirls and all. Want to come along?'

Yeah, that's typical Maureen. She told me last night it was time I met my family. So she's going to make it happen straight away.

'Sure,' she said and her mum gave her a longer hug.

'Okay then, grab a jacket from the cupboard, in case you get cold. Kevin'll show you where my room is.'

Blake groaned silently. *Oh no. Sometimes Mum's a bit too bossy. Packing me and Kevin off together - that's so obvious. What the hell am I supposed to say?*

She followed him down the corridor, feeling shy and awkward. Kevin found a light cotton cardigan and tossed it over. 'Your mum's a good person, eh,' he

commented. 'Don't worry, Blake. I'll do right by her.'

Her eyes stung and she blinked hard. 'Yeah,' she said, surprising herself. 'Yeah, I know you will. It's time something went right for her, just for a change.'

Then she followed Kevin back to the kitchen, still blinking. *Funny, we only said two sentences to each other but I feel like I made another new friend.*

The market was enormous. Rows of stalls selling silver rings and pots of orchids, didgeridoos and wristbands in the Aboriginal colours, red and yellow and black. More rows of stalls selling food from just about every cuisine in the world - Thai, Japanese, German, Indonesian, Mexican, Vietnamese, Greek. Crowds of people, jostling cheerfully together. Rows of lights bobbing overhead. A buzz of voices and the soft murmur of the sea, off in the distance.

'Food first,' Maureen announced. 'What does everyone want?'

Blake felt as though she'd been eating all day but for some reason she was hungry again. She prowled round the stalls and chose fried rice and prawns on a skewer. Did some more peoplewatching with Debbie and Auntie Vi, while Maureen and Kevin stood in the queues. Scrambled over the sandhills, just in time to see the sun disappear into the sea.

One minute the sky was full of flashy red, orange and purple clouds. Next minute it was flat and grey, like the sea, with a few leftover orange curls and a sprinkle of stars. Auntie Vi steered them down the beach, weaving between all the tourists and locals who'd lined up to watch the sunset. Led them over to a small fire, flickering in a sandy hollow.

Maureen sidled up to Blake. 'Are you ready for this, kid?' she asked and Blake nodded. 'Okay then, here goes. Meet the family.'

A dozen smiles. A dozen new faces, brown and ochre and pale tan, with the firelight dancing across them. A dozen voices calling her 'cuz' or 'sister' or 'Maureen's girl'. So many new people that Blake's head started to spin. She sat down cross-legged on the sand, hiding in Maureen's shadow.

For the next hour she watched and listened. Watching the faces and trying to remember everyone's names. *That's Uncle Ernie. I think he's married to Lil. And the young fella's Tony.* Listening to the voices, soft and blurred and lilting. A different sort of sound, even when they were speaking English. Way more different when someone said, 'Sorry, we gotta talk language now' and changed over to Aboriginal words.

My family? Yeah, my family. It still feels kind of strange but I believe it.

As she smiled into the orange flames, Maureen leaned towards her. 'About last night,' she began. 'Are you feeling better now?'

Blake shrugged. 'I'm fine. Sorry I ran off like that.'

'Are you sure? If you need to ask some more questions, then ask away.'

She thought fast. *I want to ask about you and Dad - but not when Kevin's sitting on the other side of the fire. And I'm still sad about the story you told me - but that's fair enough, because it was a pretty sad story.*

'Not now,' she decided. 'Later, okay?'

'Sounds good to me,' Maureen said and then her head whipped around suddenly. 'Look! There's Dell and her friend Win. They must've come to look at the market. What do you reckon, Auntie Vi? Should I ask them to join us or not?'

She turned to the old woman, who was sitting on the other side of her. Auntie Vi looked back steadily. 'Your auntie, she bring you up,' she told Maureen. 'You know her, my girl. What you think?'

'Well, she said some pretty bad things about our people. But she reckons she's changed ... and I reckon I believe her.'

'Go on, then. If your auntie doesn't want to sit down with a mob of blackfellas, she can say no.'

Maureen leapt to her feet and went racing along the beach. Blake's eyes followed her for a while and then drifted up to the sky. The stars were thick and bright now. She studied them, looking for patterns. The Southern Cross. Orion. Scorpio, her own personal star sign.

Wish it was that easy to find a pattern in all these mysteries. I thought I was onto something, when I spotted the backpackers this afternoon. I mean, they actually saw the guy who took the photo - but they couldn't describe him properly. So that's no use.

Blake shivered. Pulled Maureen's cardigan around her and rubbed the back of her neck. Found a cold patch on her skin, where chilly fingers had been tickling her.

Blast. The icy hand thinks I've missed some sort of clue. But what?

As she shifted closer to the fire, she realised Auntie Vi was watching her. 'What you thinking, girl?' she asked quietly and Blake sighed.

'It's this weird thing that happens to me sometimes. This cold hand that tells me to pay attention or warns me when I'm headed for trouble.' She paused for a few seconds and then said, 'It - it's not some sort of Aboriginal business, is it? I mean, it's not like a Mimi or a Rainbow Serpent or something. Just an icy hand.'

Auntie Vi frowned. 'I can't say. That's not our word. You want to understand, you have to know our culture way. You have to go and put your foot back there in mother land. The land must know you, girl. Then it give you what you need to know.'

Blake shivered harder. *The icy hand again.* 'I don't get it,' she whispered. 'Could you tell me a bit more, please?'

But before Auntie Vi could answer, Maureen came dancing over, towing

Dell along behind her. 'I just found out something about my auntie,' she announced. 'She's scared of meeting new people. Here, Dell, sit next to Auntie Vi. She'll look after you.'

Dell squeezed into the space between Blake and Auntie Vi. Maureen sat on the other side of Blake and Win settled herself next to Kevin. Blake scowled at all of them.

Rats. Auntie Vi was just going to tell me something important and now they've spoilt it.

But she couldn't stay angry with the old women for long, because they were so pleased to be there. Within five minutes Win was playing cards with half of Blake's family, while Dell chatted to Maureen and Auntie Vi and the rest of the mob. Blake closed her eyes and listened to the lilting voices again.

'What that? What you say? You got a lot of cheek.'

'That's right, sister. I got no real big fight with you.'

'Eh, cool him off, that young fella.'

She fell asleep on someone's shoulder, just as Auntie Vi and Dell were starting a singalong. Woke to find Kevin and Maureen walking her to the car, with stars whirling round overhead. Went back to sleep and woke to find Maureen kissing her on the forehead and tucking her into bed.

'Goodnight, Blake,' she whispered. 'I love you, right?'

'Yeah, I know,' Blake mumbled and then fell asleep for the third time, before her mother had even tiptoed out and closed the door.

Sunshine in her eyes, a warm spot on her forehead and the memory of a dream inside her head. Not her usual dream - the one where she was running through a huge empty house and searching down long empty streets. This time she'd been walking barefoot on warm red earth, while a shiver tickled all the way along her spine.

Oh. I know what I was dreaming about. Putting my foot back there in mother land, like Auntie Vi said.

Blake swung herself out of bed. Checked the fridge and realised she'd eaten all the fruit. Showered and dressed and set off down the walkway to find a cafe and breakfast, whistling as she went and wondering whether she could borrow a swimsuit from Debbie. The pool in the hotel looked great, tropical plants all round it and a waterfall in the middle. It'd be a pity not to try it, at least once.

She ate her way through a stack of raisin toast and then headed for the gallery where she'd met Hugh Madison and Lewis. Walked in and spotted Sandy Ross, chatting to a couple of Aboriginal guys. The minute he saw Blake, his round pink face went pale and his mouth opened and shut like a

goldfish. He raced over and dragged her into a quiet corner.

'Okay, I admit it,' he gasped. 'Someone phoned me and tried to sell me those tapes - and I didn't say no. I know a lot of collectors, especially people who collect anything to do with Aborigines. But I thought about it afterwards and when that person rang back today, I told them I couldn't buy and sell Aboriginal history. I don't have the tapes, Blake. So will you please stop following me around?'

She bit back a smile. *Hey, that was easy. I better not tell him I just turned up by accident.*

'I don't know whether I believe you,' she said sternly. 'Can you prove it, Sandy?'

The little man spread his hands wide. 'How? I can only swear I didn't do it. Fact is, I'd never be able to look Auntie Vi in the eye again.'

'Why? Auntie Vi isn't a mind-reader or anything. She wouldn't know you'd sold the tapes.'

'Yes, she would,' Sandy said miserably. 'She wouldn't need to read my mind. The whole world can read my face, you know.'

Blake laughed out loud. It was true. Sandy's face always showed everything he was feeling. Right now, he was obviously feeling like a kid who'd been caught trying to steal from his mum's purse.

He couldn't fake that. So he must be genuinely sorry he thought about buying the tapes. Blast. I'll have to cross him off my list of suspects. Now there's no-one left, except Hugh Madison, and I never really suspected him in the first place.

'This person who phoned you, did you recognise their voice?' she asked hopefully.

Sandy slapped the side of his head, as if he was trying to start his memory ticking. 'Maybe,' he said. 'I did think the voice sounded a bit familiar. But he - or she - didn't say much, so I can't be sure.' He shuffled his feet and added, 'You won't tell Auntie Vi about this, will you?'

Blake grinned. *That Auntie Vi, she's a powerful bosswoman. She's got Sandy treating her like an elder, same as Debbie and Kevin and Maureen.*

'What's to tell?' she said with a shrug. 'You haven't done anything, have you? See you later, Sandy. I actually came to see the pictures.'

She swung away and strode across to the main part of the gallery, where Auntie Vi's paintings were hanging on the walls. For the next hour Blake moved from picture to picture. Following the lattice of white lines. Standing back and studying the shifts of colour, from brown to rock-red, from ochre to tan. Letting the figures and patterns sink deep into her mind.

As she stared into one of the paintings, she heard a voice in her mind repeating, 'You have to put your foot back there in mother land.' Her heels and toes tingled, as if they were touching the warm red earth from her dream.

Oh, I see. Auntie Vi's told me everything I need to know already. If I want to understand, I have to do what she said. I've found my mother but now I need to find my mother country. I'm not sure how to go about it.

But I'd like to try.

She took a long step backwards, so she could see the painting from a different angle. Slammed straight into someone who was hovering close behind her.

Looked up, groaned and said, 'Lewis. I might've guessed it was you.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

'I saw you going into the gallery,' Lewis said, as they sat down at one of the tables in the cafe. 'So I asked Dad to let me out of the car. He was going to see Tom Fenner again and I would've been bored off my brain. And besides, I'd much rather be with you.'

Blake sighed. *Thanks, Lewis. I really love being your babysitter.*

'Did you check with Hugh about going to Tom's place after the meeting?' she asked and Lewis nodded. 'Great. Can you tell me how late it was when he got back to the apartment?'

'He reckoned he came home around nine-thirty. But I was in bed by then, so I don't really know for sure.'

'You wouldn't have been asleep, though, not that early. Did he look in and say goodnight?'

'Dad? You have to be joking. He'd probably forgotten I was there. He only remembers when he wants to yell at me about how I do everything wrong.'

Uh-huh. So in that case, Hugh could've got home later than he said, which means he could've trashed the youth centre on the way. Although I still can't see why he'd want to.

'What about the people Hugh's been working for, while he's up here?' she tried. 'You said he was doing a job for Interco, right?'

'Your dad's company,' Lewis said straight away. 'Yeah, your dad asked my dad to check out this whole land rights deal. That's why Dad's been talking to Tom Fenner and those geeks at the uni.'

'Is he going to talk to some Aboriginal people as well?' Blake demanded.

Lewis looked surprised. 'Nah. Why should he? Interco wants to stop Aboriginal land rights, not help them.'

Blake's face went scarlet. 'Lewis, you're such a dork,' she yelled. 'You ought to stop and listen to yourself, because you sound like a real racist. In case you didn't know, my mum's Aboriginal, which makes me Aboriginal too. Are you trying to tell me I don't have any rights in this country?'

The waitress had been heading over to their table but she turned and scuttled away. Lewis sat there for a while, head bent, blinking fast. Then he looked up and said, 'I *didn't* know, Blake. Honest, I didn't. I mean, your mum doesn't look Aboriginal at all.'

Blake held her hands against her cheeks, till they cooled down a bit. 'As a matter of fact, she's not my mum,' she said finally. 'Sorry, I guess that's kind of confusing. The thing is, you've only met my second mum, the one who brought me up. But my first mum - the one who gave birth to me - she lives in the Top End. That's why I came here, to find her again.'

The waitress sidled over, pushed their coffees onto the table and ran. Lewis stared down into his cup, tugging his bushy black hair. *He looks as upset as I feel. Funny, I didn't realise it'd be so hard to tell people about all this stuff. I better give him a break and talk about something else.*

'Are those the photos you've been taking?' she asked, poking a folder that lay beside him on the table.

'Yeah,' Lewis said, sounding relieved. 'Want to have a look?'

They flicked through photos of trees and birds, sea and sunsets. 'That's nice,' Blake told him. 'Reminds me of the first time I saw the sea, two days after I got here.' Then they chatted about computer games and books and music. Lewis's favourite band was Rabies, same as Blake. And Blake's favourite fantasy series was *The Time of the Phoenix*, same as Lewis.

'Wish I could meet The Dog and Dancer from Rabies,' he said wistfully. 'I've got so many questions I'd like to ask Dog about his songs.'

Blake thought fast. *Fact is, I owe Lewis for shouting at him in public. Plus he and The Dog would probably get on well, because they're both weirdos.*

'Actually, I went to school with Dancer,' she said. 'Here, I'll give you their phone number.'

She ripped a page off her notepad and wrote down their names and the number in her neat spiky printing. Lewis gazed at the piece of paper, as if he couldn't believe his luck.

'What can I give you in return?' he muttered. 'Right, I know. If you liked *The Time of the Phoenix*, you'll love the *Broken Wheel* series.'

He wrote the names of the books on Blake's notepad. Then he stood up. 'This has been totally perfect,' he told her. 'I don't want to spoil it, so I'll go and take some more photos now. See you round, okay?'

Blake watched him hurry out of the cafe, tripping on the mat and getting his t-shirt caught in the door. *Poor old Lewis. I screamed at him and then told him all about my two mothers. But he reckons he had a perfect time, because*

his dad doesn't talk to him at all.

She smiled sadly and reached for the notepad. As she was unzipping the front pocket on her pack, the icy hand clamped around her wrist. Blake yelped and dropped the notepad. Picked it up and stared at the neat spiky printing.

Hey, that's my handwriting. But I didn't write that list. Lewis did.

In other words, Lewis is ace at copying other people's writing.

That's interesting.

Very interesting indeed.

An hour later Blake was propped against a stone wall opposite the Madisons' apartment block. The sea shining in the distance. A gull hopping over to see whether she had any food. Her brain working at twice its usual speed.

I better run through the whole thing again, point by point, to make sure I've got it right.

Point 1. When Hugh Madison was checking out Dr Cawthrop's tapes at the university, Lewis was taking photos in the room next door. He could've easily raided the safe, found a grey coat and gone in to collect the other tapes. No-one would've recognised him, because no-one ever looks twice at Lewis, not even his dad.

So, okay, Lewis could've stolen the tapes and the copies.

Point 2. Lewis had been alone in the apartment on Saturday night, while his dad was at Tom Fenner's house. He could've sneaked out to the Aboriginal youth centre, because he knew Hugh wouldn't check on him when he got home. Then he could've sneaked into the apartment, after the lights went out - and he could've done the same thing next night, when Blake saw that tall dark figure prowling round the centre.

So Lewis could've trashed the centre too - and then come back to try and trash it again.

Point 3. One of Lewis's photos looked exactly like the view of the sea from the jet ski club where Blake and Maureen and the others had stopped for a cool drink. The backpacker kids reckoned that the guy watching Maureen was taller than Star but shorter than Jed, browner than Jed but paler than Star, older than Star but younger than Jed - which fitted Lewis pretty well. And Lewis took photos everywhere he went.

So he could've taken that photo of Maureen.

Point 4. Lewis was good at copying people's handwriting. He'd been at Tom Fenner's meeting, where Ash was handing out leaflets with Tom's signature on them. He had a laptop in his room but no printer. But he knew about Harry Banks, because his dad had talked to Harry at the meeting.

So Lewis could've designed the poster, written a note in Tom's handwriting

and pushed the disk under Harry's door.

Plus there were two other things. Ash lost his yellow baseball cap at the meeting and Hugh's white Australia badge was missing, which meant Lewis could've nicked both of them and dropped them in the centre. And Lewis told his dad he wouldn't take any more money from him, which would explain why he'd tried to sell the tapes to Sandy Ross.

Blake frowned and kicked at the wall. She could hear the echo of a grumpy voice inside her head. Her science teacher from Cabrena Ladies College saying, 'The simplest explanation is usually the right one.' It was pretty easy to work out how Lewis could've stolen the tapes and trashed the centre and made the posters. Pretty hard to work out how anyone else could've done it.

But why? Why the hell would he want to do all of that?

I used to babysit Lewis when he was a little kid. I can't believe he's the guy I'm looking for, not unless I get some real proof.

She tilted her head back and studied the apartment building. Two tall towers, back to back, and walkways in between. Fat green concrete pillars at each corner, leading up to an arched roof. A balcony outside each apartment, with a metal railing and a slatted wooden blind.

Oh wow. This is going to be so easy. My climber mate Marty wouldn't even be interested.

The Madisons' apartment was on the fourth floor in the second tower, so Blake dodged round to the back of the building. She hugged the fat green pillar and began to haul herself up it, pushing with her knees, pulling with her palms.

Before long, her head banged into the floor of the first balcony. She swore softly. Flung her left hand up and grabbed one of the bars on the railing. Gripped tight, swung her right knee onto the ledge and heaved.

Then she was balanced on the edge of the balcony, with her stomach pressed against the railing. Blake grinned in triumph. She stretched up, wrapped her arms around the pillar and started all over again.

Just hope there wasn't anyone inside the apartment, watching me.

But all the people from the apartments must've been out doing tourist things, because nobody came storming onto the balconies to yell at her. By the time she reached the third floor, Blake was feeling pretty pleased with herself. So pleased that, as she reached for the railing on the fourth balcony, she looked down to see how far she'd come.

It was a long way to the ground. A very long way. Long enough to make her heart beat faster and her palms go slippery with sweat. Blake's hand skidded off the metal bar. She yelled in panic. Clenched her knees. Whipped her arm back to the pillar and held on with all her strength.

She clung to the concrete for a few minutes, like a koala hanging onto a gum tree. *Yeah, well. That's Marty's first rule of climbing. 'Don't look down.'*

When her hands had almost stopped shaking, Blake gritted her teeth and made another grab for the railing. She focused on her fingers, curled safely round the metal bar. Focused on her foot, finding a safe place on the balcony's edge. Refused to think about the dangerous drop below her, even for a second.

It worked. A minute later she was tumbling over the railing and staggering across the Madisons' balcony. She pushed at the glass door, lurched inside and collapsed into the nearest chair.

Oh hell, I'm exhausted - and I haven't even started yet.

Blake would've liked to rest for the next hour or three. But Lewis could easily decide he'd taken enough photos. Or Hugh Madison might come back from his meeting with Tom Fenner. So she pushed herself out of the chair and stumbled off to Lewis's room.

She switched his laptop computer on. While it hummed and whirred, she went to look through Lewis's cupboards. She was checking the drawer where he kept his socks and underpants when the laptop pinged. Blake scooted over, clicked the cursor and found the menu. Scanned the list and saw EasyWriter halfway down the screen.

So Lewis has the right software for designing the poster. Rats. This is looking worse all the time.

Blake turned away from the laptop and slammed the sock drawer. She pulled out the next drawer, which was full of t-shirts. Moved two t-shirts and found a plastic bag underneath. Opened the bag and stared down at a jumble of tapes with an Aboriginal name on their labels. Stared and stared, until her eyes blurred.

Oh, you idiot. You really did it. Why, Lewis? Why?

She wiped her eyes and blew her nose, so hard that her ears clicked. Then she heard another click. A key in the front door. Blake bolted out of Lewis's room, heading for the balcony. But the door was already starting to open, so she dodged sideways into the next room. Dived into the cupboard, wriggled between two coats and crouched down, holding her breath.

She was in Hugh's room, for sure. The coat belonged to his silvery suit and besides, she could smell his fancy aftershave. A strong spicy ticklish sort of smell. Blake's nose twitched like a rabbit. She pinched her nostrils and clamped her mouth shut.

And sneezed.

The cupboard door swung open. Hugh Madison stood there in his shirt sleeves, with another coat dangling from his hand. *Just my luck. Why couldn't he have been in the bathroom when my nose exploded?*

'Good heavens, Blake,' he said, black eyebrows shooting up towards his silver hair. 'What on earth are you doing in my wardrobe?'

Before Blake could think up a good excuse, the door clicked again. Lewis went bouncing down the corridor and into his room. There was a loud yelp and then he hurtled out again.

Looked into his father's room, met Blake's eyes and said, 'Damn. You found the tapes. You know, don't you?'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

'Would you mind filling me in?' Hugh snapped. 'Exactly what does Blake know?'

Lewis straightened his shoulders and beamed. 'It was meant to be a surprise, Dad. I've been helping you, see. I stole those tapes from the uni, to stop the land rights people saying they'd been here for eighty thousand years. I wrecked the youth centre and I made that poster about Maureen Nagalarramba and -'

'And how was that supposed to help me?' Hugh asked in a quiet, even voice. *Dangerously quiet - but poor old Lewis doesn't seem to realise he's in danger.*

'Well, you said Tom Fenner's group was all talk and no action,' he explained. 'So I made it look as though he'd done something about the Aborigines. That's what you wanted, isn't it?'

Hugh Madison took a step forward, smiling at his son. Then he pulled his arm back, slapped Lewis across the face and shouted, 'No! I can't believe a son of mine would be so stupid. Stealing, breaking and entering, vandalism - how could I possibly want you to do that?'

Lewis blinked and rubbed his cheek. 'But you always say, "If a job's really important, you can't rely on other people to do it for you",' he stammered. 'You told me you have to do it yourself. So I did.'

'Good lord, you're even more of a fool than I thought,' Hugh snarled. 'Listen to me, Lewis. Listen very carefully. I can look after my own business. I don't need your help. Take your silly little photos, play with your funny little friends but please, *don't* stick your nose into my work, ever again.'

Silence for a moment. Blake's fists were clenched so hard that her hands hurt. She didn't want to look around but in the end she made herself turn her head. Lewis had been hanging onto the door but as she watched, he slid down slowly and sat on the carpet, staring at his father from wide blank eyes.

'What a mess,' Hugh sighed. 'I'm sorry about this, Blake. I'll make sure Lewis is punished - but I hope you're not planning to report him to the police as well.'

Blake swallowed. 'Dunno. Haven't thought about it. I - excuse me, Mr Madison. I gotta go now.'

She raced for the door, before Hugh Madison could try to stop her. As it closed behind her, she heard Hugh yelling and the sound of Lewis's sobs.

Halfway back to the hotel, Blake stopped suddenly. She turned round, swerved down a side street and ended up at Maureen's house. Kevin came to the door, stretching and yawning.

'Oh, sorry,' she said. 'Did I wake you?'

'Ah, it's time I was getting up, anyhow,' Kevin said. He rubbed his eyes and took a closer look at her. 'Eh, girl, are you all right?'

'Not exactly,' Blake admitted. 'But I don't want to talk about it yet. Can I just hang round for a while?'

Kevin grinned. 'No need to ask. This is your place, whenever you want. Come on in.'

The lounge room was crowded with people. Debbie and Auntie Vi - Uncle Ernie and Lil and Tony from last night - and another woman called Mary, who she hadn't met before. For the next half hour everyone tried to work out whether Blake and Mary were related. In the end they decided the answer was 'yes', although it was too complicated for Blake to follow.

I think her stepfather grew up in the same house as one of Maureen's cousins. Or was it the other way around?

After that she leaned back and listened to the others talking. Once she'd relaxed a bit, she even started to join in. Sometimes she said the wrong thing. Sometimes she said the right thing. But either way, it felt good. It felt like she was part of the family.

I'm getting to know them better. Uncle Ernie's a bit of a show-off. Lil laughs like a circus clown. Tony's cheeky.

They're turning into real people now, not just faces in the firelight.

She was swapping jokes with Tony when Maureen burst into the room, dragging Dr Cawthrop behind her. Everybody stopped talking and looked at her.

'You'll never guess what happened to poor Francis,' she announced. 'His

tapes were left outside his office, in a box with no name on it. But the university says he's not allowed to work on them any more.'

'It's not quite as simple as that, Maureen,' Dr Cawthrop protested, pushing at his glasses. 'Someone donated money to the university, to help us study the tapes. Trouble is, they want Jane Burton to have the money, not me.'

Blake gasped and wriggled. She felt cold all over, as though someone had squeezed a sponge full of water down the back of her t-shirt.

Ouch. The icy hand's going out of control.

'Who gave the money to the university?' she asked, rubbing her neck.

'I don't know,' Dr Cawthrop told her. 'It was an anonymous donor. Probably some big company, because it was a lot of money.'

'Why's that so important?' Debbie asked and Maureen said, 'Because Dr Burton told Francis today that she reckons they got it wrong. She's going to use that money to prove that Aboriginal people *haven't* been here for eighty thousand years - just forty thousand years, like people used to think.'

'Well, that's fair enough,' Dr Cawthrop said with a sigh. 'There's two ways of looking at everything. Jane wasn't sure about the link between the Aborigines and the Dravidians, to start off with - and now she's decided she doesn't believe my theory, after all.'

Blake's stomach hurt. *Damn. I know what's going on.* Hugh Madison had been spending a lot of time with Dr Burton. Lewis thought his dad had a crush on her but now it looked like Hugh must've been trying to make her change her mind about the tapes. As soon as she agreed with him, Hugh - or Interco - had donated the money to the university.

No wonder Hugh got mad at Lewis. Like he said, he can take care of his own business. He's got exactly what he wanted, without breaking the law at all.

The pain in her stomach got worse. While the others went on chatting, Blake sat and hugged herself tightly. She tried to eat some of the dinner Auntie Vi had cooked but in the end she gave up and said, 'Listen, I'm not feeling too good. I better go back to the hotel. See you tomorrow.'

As she headed for the door, Maureen came running after her. 'Hope you didn't mind me bringing Francis back here,' she said. 'When he rang me at the centre, he sounded so miserable that I thought he needed cheering up. But I still want to talk to you about all that other stuff, okay?'

'Sure,' Blake said. 'We got plenty of time. Bye, Mum.'

At the last minute she flung her arms around Maureen and kissed her. Then she turned and hurried off into the night.

Warm rain, turning the streets silver. Long shadows, shiny as black satin. Tropical air, smelling of flowers and leaves. Blake paced along, frowning. Everything had seemed so simple when she was standing in front of Auntie Vi's paintings but now it had got complicated again.

I don't know what to do. Need to be on my own, so I can have time to think. Half of me wants to tell Maureen about Lewis, because that's the proper Aboriginal way of doing things. The other half wants to protect Lewis, because he's part of my old life.

She dived into the hotel foyer with a sigh of relief. Hurried past the tropical plants round the swimming pool, heading for the walkway. Skidded to a halt as someone called out, 'Blake! Over here.'

It was Hugh Madison, sitting at one of the tables under the palm trees by the pool. Blake groaned. *Oh, great. The last person I want to see right now.* For a split second she thought about pretending she hadn't heard him. But he knew she was here, which meant he could just follow her up to her room.

She marched over and said, 'So you won, Hugh. You sent the stuff back to the uni - but you screwed up Dr Cawthrop's research, by bribing Dr Burton.'

Hugh smiled. 'Bribing? What a nasty word, Blake. I haven't done anything criminal, the way Lewis did. True, the land rights people won't like Dr Burton's ideas as much as they liked Dr Cawthrop. But it's all perfectly legal, I assure you.'

Blake turned her head away and scowled at the little waterfall trickling down the rocks in the middle of the pool. 'Sleazebag,' she muttered. 'You're more of a racist than Tom Fenner.'

'Good heavens, no,' Hugh said, sounding shocked. 'I've got nothing against Aboriginal people - in fact, I own several of your Auntie Vi's paintings. I'm not interested in the colour of people's skin, Blake. I'm only interested in the colour of their money.'

'Yeah, right,' she spat. 'Money's all you care about. You don't even care about your own son.'

'Not true,' he told her. 'As it happens, I'm still worried about whether you're going to hand Lewis over to the police. That wouldn't do him any good - and it wouldn't do my business any good either. So I decided I'd better get you out of the way.'

He snapped his fingers and two men came bursting out from the tropical plants. A small guy with a lined face and sandy hair creeping back from his forehead. And an enormous guy built like a tank, dressed in a baggy singlet and tiny shorts. Blake stared at them in disbelief.

Greg and Thumper, Dad's private detectives. Hugh must've phoned Dad and told him where I am. Those hoons could've hopped on a plane straight away and got here in three hours.

While she was still staring, Greg and Thumper closed in, one on each

side. Thumper rested his enormous fist on her shoulder. He wasn't actually trying to hurt her but his hand was so heavy that Blake almost slid off her chair.

'You think you're smart, don't you?' she snapped at Hugh. 'Well, I won't go without a fight. And I reckon someone'll call the cops if they see these thugs dragging me out of the hotel.'

'Yes, I thought you might feel that way,' Hugh smiled. 'Don't worry, Greg and Thumper are just here as bodyguards. You'll go back to the city because *she'll* take you.'

He raised his hand and pointed. A woman was standing at the edge of the tropical jungle by the pool. She was tall and plump, wearing a flower-patterned silk dress that clung to her round hips. Olive skin, curls like bunches of black grapes and big, dark, worried eyes.

'Athena! It's really you,' she said in a shaky voice, taking a small step forward.

Blake slipped further down in her chair. Glanced up at the woman and mumbled, 'Yeah. Hi, Mum.'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

'Athena?' Thumper said from behind her. 'Thought the kid's name was Blake.'

'That's what she calls herself,' Greg told him. 'But her folks call her Athena, after some Greek goddess. Her brother's the same. He's Dion, short for Dionysus, who's a Greek god. Their mum's Greek, see, so she -'

'Shut up, Greg,' Thumper rumbled. 'I'm trying to listen. This is as good as *The Ricki Lake Show*.'

Blake gulped. *Terrific. I'm face to face with Mum for the first time in nine months - and I have to talk to her in front of an audience.*

'Why don't you all piss off?' she snarled and Hugh laughed.

'So you can run away again? No, Blake, that doesn't sound like a good idea. You've been a naughty girl, you know. Your mother's missed you, haven't you, Theia?'

'She's *not* my mother,' Blake growled as the woman edged closer.

Theia clutched a handful of silk, twisting it into sharp creases. 'Athena,' she whispered. 'Is that what you really believe?'

Yeah, is it? Dunno. Can you have two mothers?

'I thought you were my mum till I was thirteen,' she said. 'Nothing can change that. But ... you should've told me about Maureen.'

'How could we?' Theia demanded. 'It wasn't an ordinary sort of adoption. We paid Maureen to have a baby for us. A doctor organised it, using her eggs and your father's sperm. How do you explain that to a little child?'

Blake shrugged. 'By telling the truth, I suppose. It's better than telling lies.'

'I wasn't lying,' Theia flashed back. 'You *are* my daughter, in all the ways that count. I've been worrying about you for almost a year, Athena, and so

has your father. Why did you walk out like that? And why couldn't you at least phone me every now and then?'

Her knees were shaking so much that it made her silk dress ripple. She dropped into a chair, fixing big dark eyes on Blake.

'I'm sorry you were upset, Mum,' Blake said. 'But I'm not sorry about Dad. That's why I couldn't contact you, because I knew you'd tell him all about it.'

'Yes, of course I would. He's your father. He loves you just as much as I do. We did all those things because we really wanted you, Athena. I don't understand why you can't see that. We never treated you any differently from Dion. We always tried to do what was best for you. We -'

'Not always,' Blake interrupted. 'Sure, you looked after me, you gave me stuff, you sent me to a posh school and all. But there were too many secrets. I don't know who I am. Maureen calls me Alice, you call me Athena, I call myself Blake - but which one's the real me?'

'Good question,' Thumper agreed, breathing down the back of her neck. Blake almost started to laugh but then she saw Theia scrubbing at her cheek, trying to get rid of a tear track before anyone noticed.

Oh, rats. She's mad at me or anything. She's just really upset.

'Please, Mum, give me a bit more time,' she said urgently. 'I need a chance to sort this stuff out.'

More tears went rolling down Theia's face. Greg coughed, Thumper shuffled his feet and Hugh Madison studied the waterfall in the pool. After a while Theia fumbled in her hand bag, pulled out a tissue and mopped her eyes.

Looked across at Blake and said, 'Yes. All right. Mr Fender and Mr Rabbitt, will you please let Athena go?'

Greg cleared his throat. 'Sorry, Mrs Williams,' he said. 'No can do. We take our orders from *Mr Williams*, see.'

Blake kicked the leg of the table. *Damn. I actually convinced Mum ... but Dad'll never let me stay. What am I going to do now?*

There was silence for a few minutes, while they stared at each other blankly. Then they all jumped as someone yelled, 'Dad! At last. I've been looking for you everywhere.'

As Blake glanced over her shoulder, Lewis came running round the curved edge of the pool. He stopped in front of Hugh and scowled down at him. His eyes were red and he looked as though he'd been crying even harder than Theia. But he was standing straight and tall, for a change.

'I'm leaving on the last plane tonight,' he told his father. 'I went and saw Maureen Nagalarramba, to tell her I was sorry about what I did. She said that was a good start but she reckons there's still gotta be some payback. So I'm going to work for the rest of the holidays and give the money to a land rights fund. I'll do the same thing in the summer holidays too, which means I won't

be able to visit you, Dad. But I bet you won't even notice.'

More silence, while Lewis stood there with his chin jutting out, and then everyone started talking at once. Hugh Madison said, 'Lewis, don't' in a strange ghostly whisper.

Theia said, 'Hugh, you can't just boss him around. You have to let him know you love him.'

Thumper punched Greg's arm and said, 'Mate, this is *better* than *The Ricki Lake Show*.'

And the minute Thumper's hand lifted off her shoulder, Blake took off and went hurtling towards the tropical plants. Thumper made a grab for her and she dodged. But her foot slipped and she went skidding across the tiles. Greg darted ahead and crouched down like a goal keeper, waiting for her.

Thumper behind her, Greg in front. Blake thought fast, kicked off her sandals and plunged into the pool. She dog-paddled across to the waterfall. Hauled herself onto a slippery boulder. Climbed up the mountain of rocks and paused to look back.

Hugh Madison was still sitting at the table, like a stone statue. Theia was patting his hand. Greg and Thumper were arguing at the edge of the pool, trying to decide which one of them had to get wet. And Lewis was sneaking up behind them.

Hooking his foot round Thumper's ankle and jerking hard.

Thumper yelled and made a grab for Greg. They toppled into the water together, with a splash that rose two metres high. Lewis laughed and raced for the exit, shouting, 'Go, Blake' as he ran.

Off to catch his plane. Good luck, Lewis. You turned out to be a hero after all. Just like Prince Valiant in your fantasy game.

Blake waved at Lewis's back. Then she stood on tiptoe and measured the gap between her fingers and the walkway. It wasn't far. She took a deep breath, tensed her muscles and jumped. Her hands hooked around the concrete edge. Clutched and scrabbled and held tight.

Which is a relief, because I could've broken an ankle if I'd fallen back onto the rocks.

She hoisted herself onto the walkway and raced to her room. Snatched up her pack and her runners and hurtled out. Went speeding past the other rooms and then braked suddenly. There were two walkways ahead of her. One slanting down to the pool and the foyer. One slanting across to another row of rooms.

I keep picking the wrong walkway but I have to get it right this time. Which is which?

As she hesitated, she heard Thumper booming, 'There she is, Greg.' Blake panicked and ran. It was like a game of snakes and ladders. To start with, she dashed down the first walkway and found herself staring at a line of

closed doors. So she swung round and raced back to try the second walkway - but Thumper was already waiting at the bottom.

Too many snakes. I need some ladders instead.

She went speeding along the balcony, to see whether there were any stairs at the end. There weren't - and by the time she got back, Greg was guarding the first walkway, while Thumper came squelching up the second ramp. Blake groaned and slumped against the railing.

'Okay, that's it,' she muttered. 'I give up.'

'Not yet,' someone sang out. 'One last try, Blake. You can do it. I've got him.'

Blake turned her head and saw Thumper pinned against the rail on the walkway, with two brown hands clamped round his ankles. She peered over the balcony and laughed.

It's Kevin. He's grabbed Thumper from below. But how the hell did he happen to turn up here at exactly the right time?

Nah, forget it. No time to think about that now.

She took a deep breath and shoved past Greg. Swerved to miss Thumper. Skidded down the second walkway. Went belting around the pool, with a quick wave to her mum, and scooted over to the foyer.

As she pushed at the glass doors, the last thing she heard was Theia's voice calling out, loud and clear, 'Go, Blake!'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Blake burst out of the hotel and looked round frantically. Dell's combi van was parked in the taxi zone, back doors flapping. Maureen leaned out and signalled to her.

'This way, Blake. Quick!'

She scrambled into the back of the van and Maureen slammed the doors. Seconds later another door slammed as Kevin hopped in beside Win. 'Better move it,' he gasped. 'Those yobbos have got a V-6 Commodore -rented it at the airport. You'll have trouble staying ahead of it in this old thing.'

'Don't worry,' Dell said. 'I'm a country driver, Kev. I've learnt a few tricks in my time.'

She swung the van around and went speeding down the main street. Win squealed happily, Kevin fired off directions and Blake and her mother bounced around in the back, hanging onto each other.

'How come you turned up at - ouch! - exactly the right time?' Blake gasped, slamming against Maureen as the combi swerved round a corner.

Maureen flung an arm out to steady her. 'After Lewis came over, I started to get worried. I remembered how you'd been sitting there, all pale and silent. So I thought there might've been something you weren't telling us.'

'You were right,' Blake admitted. 'I wanted to solve all those mysteries, to prove I was an okay daughter - but I should've talked to you about it along the way. I guess I've got used to being a loner.'

Maureen grinned. 'Hey, I know what you mean. I was on my own for ages as well. It's kind of hard, learning how to be part of a family. But it's worth it, eh?'

Blake nodded and then realised that her mother couldn't see her in the darkness. 'Yeah,' she said. 'It's worth - yow!'

The combi lurched and jolted. Win shot up into the air and landed back on the seat with a thump. 'This is fun,' she announced. 'Why are we driving into a paddock, Dell?'

'No time to talk,' Dell snapped. 'Just wait and see. If you want to be useful, you can keep an eye on the Commodore in the side mirror.'

More bumps and thuds. Blake held onto Maureen's shoulder and tried to peer out of the window. But the combi bounced over a pot-hole and she went tumbling backwards.

'The Commodore's still following us,' Win reported. 'You shouldn't have gone round the edge of the paddock, Dell. Those men are cutting straight across the middle. They'll catch up with us any minute now, unless - oh! Oh, I see.'

Kevin checked the rear vision mirror and laughed. 'City drivers,' he said. 'They never look where they're going. Dell steered us round that patch of sandy soil but the Commodore ploughed straight into it. Now the idiot's making it even worse, by spinning his wheels.'

'Look, there's sand spraying everywhere,' Win squeaked. 'All over the car and right across the windscreen. You *are* clever, Dell. The Commodore's bogged. They'll have to get out and push.'

'And they'll have to find some branches to put under the wheels, so they can get a proper grip,' Kevin said. 'That won't be real easy round here. Nice work, mate.'

Dell chuckled and stopped the combi. She tapped on the horn, playing a teasing little tune. The Commodore blared back at them. A long angry blast, as though someone was leaning their elbow on the horn.

*That's Thumper, I bet. Tough luck, guys. You stuffed up.
You'll never catch us now.*

The combi rattled on through the night. Dell and Kevin replayed the entire story of how they'd trapped the Commodore. Win told them how smart they'd been. And Blake and Maureen went slipping and sliding across the floor, every time the van turned a corner.

This'd be a good chance to talk to Mum - if only I could stay still for more than two seconds.

Then she landed on top of Maureen again as the combi jerked to a stop. They untangled themselves and tumbled out. Hurried round to the front of the van, where Dell and Win and Kevin were staring up at the biggest truck Blake had ever seen.

It was four metres high and fifty metres long. A cabin and three trailers, loaded with containers. Thirteen sets of enormous tyres. A giant bull-bar at the front.

Bull-bar? Nah, that's an elephant-bar, for sure.

'This is Xena,' Kevin said proudly. 'My road train. She's a triple. Not bad, eh?'

'I can take you anywhere you like in a minute,' Dell told Blake. 'But we had to come out here first, because Kev needs to leave now, if he wants to get to Alice on time.'

Blake's eyes narrowed. 'You're driving down to Alice Springs, Kevin?' she asked. 'So -'

But before she could say, 'So could I come too?', Dell and Kevin both turned on her.

'You planning to take off again?' Kevin said. 'That's no good. What about your mum?'

'Yeah, you can't go on running away all your life,' Dell agreed. 'You gotta stand and face things some time. Now, for example.'

Blake looked from Kevin to Dell and back. *The black side and the white side of the family - and they both reckon I ought to stick around.* She bent her head and started to draw patterns on the earth with her runner. And jumped as someone grabbed her arm.

'Hang on a minute,' Maureen said. 'Before we go any further, Blake and me have to talk.' She steered Blake behind one of the enormous wheels. Grinned at her and said, 'Okay, we better make this quick. I know you gotta decide what to do next. But -'

'But there's one question I need to ask first,' Blake cut in. Then she laughed, because Maureen was saying exactly the same words at exactly the same time. 'You start,' she told her mum but Maureen shook her head.

'No, *you* start,' she ordered, so firmly that Blake blurted out, 'All right then, why did you leave me like that? Why did I wake up in an empty house, with my father knocking on the front door?'

Maureen blinked. 'That's a pretty odd sort of question. I explained the whole deal in my letter.'

'Letter? You never sent me any letters.'

'Of course I didn't. I left it on the kitchen table before I went, next to the book you were reading. You couldn't have missed it.'

'No. No, I couldn't. Unless it wasn't there.'

Maureen's shoulders slumped. All of a sudden she looked years older and incredibly tired. 'In other words, you don't believe me,' she sighed. 'Oh well, I guess I deserve that. I haven't been the most reliable mum in the world.'

'Hang on,' Blake told her. 'You've got it the wrong way round. I bet the letter wasn't on the table because Greg and Thumper broke in and pinched it.'

I bet Dad read it before he knocked, to see what you were saying, and then - then I suppose he must've ripped it up.'

They looked at each other in silence for a while. *Oh. Now I understand. That's why Maureen kept backing off from me. I was convinced that she'd ditched me - but she was convinced that I'd ditched her.*

'So you thought I'd nicked off without saying goodbye?' Maureen said finally.

'And you thought I couldn't even be bothered answering your letter?' Blake guessed. 'Oh wow. My dad's a ... No, I don't have time to say what he is right now. Forget about him. Just tell me what the letter said.'

Maureen licked her finger and began to draw squiggles in the dust on the tyres. 'I'd been worrying about you, see,' she said, frowning at the doodles. 'We were on the run all the time. You weren't getting an education or nothing. Your dad could give you the world and I couldn't give you a bloody thing. So I phoned and told him our address - but I left a note, telling you where I'd gone, in case you wanted to come and join me. I waited there for the next six weeks. Then I took off and started making a mess of my life for the second time, till Shane found me and I ended up here.'

Silence again. Blake rubbed her eyes and whispered, 'I would've come. Mum. I swear I would.' She drew in a long shaky breath and added, 'Okay, what's your question?'

'It's pretty simple,' Maureen said. 'I just want to know why you started looking for me nine months ago. I mean, it seems kind of strange, after all this time.'

Blake bit her lip. *I could tell her I was desperate to see her. Only one problem. It wouldn't be true.*

'I was planning to finish my studies last year,' she began. 'Except that one day Dad sat me down and said, "Okay, now you've had your fun. It's time for you to come and work with me." I knew I didn't want a job at Interco - but Dad's kind of hard to resist, once he gets an idea in his head. So I ran. I thought that if I could find you, maybe you could tell me what to do.'

'That's my job as a mum, eh?' Maureen said with a twisted grin and Blake blushed.

'Sorry, it was stupid. I -'

'Nah, you were right,' her mum said unexpectedly. 'I can give you some motherly advice, no problem. Dell had a point when she reckoned you had to face things - but it sounds like your father's the one you need to face, not me. Go back to the city, kid. Have a talk to him. After you've sorted it all out, you can come and see the rest of your family again. If you still want to.'

Blake's stomach started churning like a washing machine. *Talk to Dad? I don't think so. That's the worst idea I ever heard.*

Way scarier than facing a bushfire - or climbing up a brick wall - or getting

lost on a mountain or all those other things I've done recently.

So scary that I reckon Mum could be right.

As she stared at Maureen, Kevin came dodging round the side of the road train. 'There's a V-6 Commodore roaring up the highway,' he panted. 'You better make up your mind in the next twenty seconds, Blake.'

Maureen opened her arms wide and Blake walked into them. They hugged for twenty seconds. Then the icy hand shoved hard and Blake turned and ran. She snatched up her pack. Kissed Dell and Win. Jumped onto the running board and flung herself into the cabin of the road train.

The engine coughed and chugged. The road train shuddered and jolted and roared off down the highway. Blake hung out of the window, watching the lights of a V-6 Commodore come closer and closer. Waving at three shadows who were waving back at her.

After a while the shadows were swallowed up by the night. Blake settled down and felt for the seat belt.

'Get ready for a long haul,' Kevin said with a grin. 'We won't be stopping for a few hundred kays now. If your mates want to follow us that far, they're welcome. I don't think they'll give you much trouble, out in the middle of nowhere with a mob of truckies all around them.'

Blake wriggled round and checked the side mirror. As the Commodore's headlights dropped away, she grinned back and said, 'Yeah, I reckon they've figured that out.'

Then she clasped her hands behind her head and watched the road, stretching ahead into the darkness. Thinking about Maureen. Thinking about Theia. Thinking about Debbie and Auntie Vi and the rest of her new family. And, most of all, thinking about Ash and Lewis.

Ash reckons he's going to face his father, on account of Debbie, and Lewis definitely faced his father tonight. Looks like I gotta face my father too.

What a joke. I've travelled all round Australia and I'm going to end up exactly where I started.

The stars made patterns on the black night sky. The road train rumbled along the highway, leaving the sea behind and heading down towards the centre. Kevin put on a tape of slow sad Country and Western music and Blake curled up in her seat, thinking sad dreamy thoughts.

I never even got to put my foot into mother land. But I'll be back, Maureen. I promise I'll be back real soon.

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