

THE BLAKE MYSTERIES: 9

TRUTH OR DARE

JENNY PAUSACKER

For Maryann Ballantyne, Margaret Barca, Belina Bolliger, Clare Coney and Rachel Slattery, with thanks for seeing Blake through.

CHAPTER ONE

A stripe of blue sea in the distance. A fuzz of gum trees. A huge bridge, like a steel rainbow. A big green sign at the side of the highway that said 'Baybeach 1 km'.

And a girl, jumping down from the cabin of a huge semi-trailer. Small and sturdy, wearing faded jeans and a t-shirt with a land rights flag on it. Hair the colour of pale sand. Eyes the colour of the sea in winter.

'Sure you want to get out here, Blake?' the driver called. 'I could take you all the way to the big smoke, real easy.'

The girl grinned. 'I know Kev told you to look after me,' she shouted back, 'but you've done enough. I could use a rest before I hit the city - and this seems like a good place for a rest.'

'It should be,' the truckie commented. 'Half the old folk from down south come here when they retire. Okay, if you're sure. I'll chuck your pack out. And good luck, mate.'

Blake caught the pack and waved while the semi chugged off. She looked back at the line of jagged green hills behind her. Peered down at the river that flowed under the bridge, brown water swirling and bubbling between brown rocks. Closed her eyes and sniffed the salty smell of the sea.

I've come a long way in the last few days. From the top of Australia down to the centre. From the centre across to the north coast. From travelling round on my own to finding that I've got this big new family.

No wonder I need time to think.

She watched the swirls of light on the river and thought about Kevin. The lean guy with kind eyes and river-brown skin who'd driven her down to the centre in his road

train. The guy who'd married her mother six weeks ago.

Now she had two fathers, as well as two mothers. Maureen Nagalarramba, the mother who'd given birth to her. Theia Williams, the mother who'd adopted her straight after she was born. Kevin, her new stepfather, and -

No. Sorry. I'm not ready to think about my other father, not yet.

Blake hitched up her backpack and went darting across the highway. She skidded down a steep slope, hanging onto the steel legs of the bridge. Scrambled over the rocks and knelt to scoop up some water. The river looked thick and brown, like honey on the move, but the water in her hands was clear and cool with a silvery sparkle. She smiled and wriggled her fingers, to make it ripple.

Then, all of a sudden, she felt a cold pain in her heart, as though an icy hand was clutching it and squeezing it. Tears in her eyes. Sadness filling her head, like a heavy black cloud. Blake shivered.

I thought I'd got used to that icy hand by now. I can handle the way it taps me on the shoulder, to warn me when I need to pay attention or when there's danger around.

But it's never done anything like this before.

She took a deep breath and pushed the sadness out of her head. When she looked down, the water had trickled away between her fingers. She cupped her hands and dipped them into the river again.

Jumped and spilled water all over herself, as a voice yelled, 'Hey, stop! Don't drink that!'

Blake spun round and saw two kids racing towards her. A tall fair guy in the lead, with a small dark guy pounding along behind him.

'What's the problem?' she called. 'The water looks okay. I mean, there aren't any factories and stuff round here, not like in the city.'

'Maybe not,' the smaller guy puffed. 'But there's people round here - and people always mean trouble for the environment. That river's full of lead.'

'Lead, as in pencils?' Blake asked and the tall guy shook his head.

'No, the sort of lead you find in silver and zinc mines. They reckon it probably washed out from an old mine and leaked into the river. The council's supposed to be putting signs up, except they haven't got around to it yet, because they only just figured out what's happening.'

The small guy snorted. 'Oh, sure. Actually, people have been trying to warn them for weeks - your mates Mr Gray and Dr Misson, for example. But the council wouldn't listen, till that old bloke nearly died from lead poisoning.'

Blake's eyes widened. She whipped a hanky out of her pocket and started to rub at the wet patch on her jeans. Then stopped when she realised the small guy was laughing.

'Relax,' he told her. 'That's not enough to poison you. The people in Baybeach are

having problems because they've been drinking that stuff for months. I keep telling Reece he ought to drink rainwater, like us.'

'Like you? So where do you live? Up in the trees or something?'

'Jahlion lives in Feral City,' Reece said with a grin. 'Over there in the hills, with all the other eco-freaks and weirdos. I met him when I came hunting for the old mine.'

'Me. I was looking for the ghost that's supposed to hang out in the rainforest,' Jahlion said, grinning back. 'But I found Reece instead. Nothing weird about him - he's so straight you could use him as a ruler. Like, he's the school captain and the football captain and the captain of the debating team, plus he's won half a million scholarships and prizes. Not my type at all.'

'Hey, I don't go for grungy drop-outs who like trees and rivers better than people,' Reece teased. 'Still, we managed to become mates, didn't we, Jah?'

Blake took a closer look at the two guys. Jahlion was right - they *were* pretty different. Reece was tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in a grey school shirt and jeans that looked as though they'd been ironed five minutes ago. Square jaw, straight nose, tanned skin and steady blue eyes.

Beside him, Jahlion seemed like a gypsy kid. Skinny and wiry, with wide dark eyes and a narrow brown face. Ragged black shirt and loose cotton pants, dyed in rainbow stripes. A silver ring in one ear, another ring in his eyebrow and green and silver threads plaited into his black curls.

'Gotta get back to Feral City now,' he said, punching Reece lightly on the arm. 'It's my turn to cook dinner. See you tomorrow afternoon, okay? We can have another shot at looking for the mine - and the ghost.'

As he swung away and started to climb the bank, Blake let out a long soft sigh. *Ghosts. Poisoned rivers. Fights between the council and some doctor type. I thought I was coming here for a rest.*

Oh well, this time I'm definitely not going to get involved. I need to sort out my own problems first.

Reece told Blake he'd show her the way into Baybeach. He collected his skateboard from behind one of the metal girders and they set off together, across the bridge and along the road.

'You know our names,' he said as they turned the first corner. 'But I don't know your name yet. What is it?'

Blake shrugged. *Good question. My mother Maureen called me Alice, when I was born. Then my other mother Theia named me Athena, after the Greek goddess of wisdom - only I reckon she made a mistake, because I haven't turned out real wise.*

'I call myself Blake,' she said and Reece raised his eyebrows.

'Just Blake? Nothing else? Don't you have a second name?'

'Um, my dad's name is Frank Williams,' she admitted. 'I suppose that's part of the reason I picked the name Blake. It was kind of a joke, because there's this poet called William Blake who lived in England, about two hundred years ago. Blake Williams, William Blake - get it?'

'Yeah, yeah. So what sort of poems did this Blake guy write?'

She thought for a moment. 'Well, my favourite Blake poem starts like this.

*Can I see another's woe
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another's grief
And not seek for kind relief?*

It sounds a bit old-fashioned but I reckon he meant -'

'Hey, I know what he means,' Reece cut in. 'He's saying that, if you see someone hurting, you feel like you've got to help them. It's a nice idea - only it's harder than it sounds. Like, me and Jahlion just spent the entire afternoon arguing about the best way to help Baybeach. Jah wants to organise a big meeting, to push the council into cleaning up the river. But he doesn't understand the way this town works. For one thing, the council can't do much about the river till they find that mine.'

Blake started to laugh. 'Get real, Reece. How can anyone lose a mine? Who does it belong to, anyway?'

'BSC,' he told her. 'The Baybeach Sugar Company. They own most of the land along the river, including the old silver mine.'

'There you go. If BSC owns the mine, they can tell you how to find it. End of problem.'

'Sorry, it's not that simple. The thing is, BSC used to be the Baybeach *Silver* Company back in the 1940s but they switched to growing sugar cane, when the silver ran out. So the mine's been out of action for more than fifty years. The bush has grown back, the miners are all dead and gone and no-one knows exactly where the mine is.'

'Maybe you should ask the ghost,' Blake joked.

He smiled and said, 'Yeah, that's what Jahlion reckons. Personally, I don't believe in ghosts - but he's a crazy guy and he has a lot of crazy ideas.'

'Like this idea about a public meeting?'

'Actually, that was Mr Gray's idea in the first place,' Reece said, turning serious. 'He could've got away with it too. Mr Gray was the most popular teacher at Baybeach Secondary College, so people would've listened to him. But Jahlion's just one of the feerals and no-one in Baybeach takes any notice of them.'

'They'd take notice of you, though, wouldn't they?' Blake suggested. 'I mean, you're the school captain and the footy captain and all, not some scruffy feral.'

Reece stared straight ahead, pretending he hadn't heard. 'Besides, things have changed over the past week,' he went on. 'The council finally hired a consultant, to work out where the lead's coming from. But BSC doesn't want anyone to track down the old mine before the end of the month - and funnily enough, the consultant isn't having much luck so far.'

He flicked the wheels on his skateboard and scowled at them as they spun. Blake reached over and poked him in the ribs.

'Slow down,' she commanded. 'You're not making sense. How come BSC can boss the council around?'

'BSC's a big deal in Baybeach,' Reece said bitterly. 'Half the people in town work for them, so the council basically does what BSC tells them to.'

'Yeah, but *all* the people in the town are drinking poisoned water right now,' Blake pointed out. 'That's pretty serious. I would've thought the council and BSC would be desperate to fix things. Why are they moving so slowly?'

'Well, the government's planning to pass a law at the end of this month, saying companies aren't responsible for any damage to people or the land, if it happened over fifty years ago. Once the law comes in, BSC won't have to pay the bills for everyone who got lead poisoning - and they won't have to clean up the river either. That is, unless somebody finds the mine in the next two weeks.'

Blake snapped her fingers. 'Okay, I get it. That's why you and Jahlion were out there in the bush. You were looking for the old mine, right?'

'Right,' Reece agreed. 'We didn't find it, though. We're running out of time and Jah keeps telling me we'll never do it on our own. But I can't call a public meeting. I just can't.' He sighed and added, 'If only I could talk to Mr Gray. He was, like, my hero. He always stood up for the things he believed in, even when everyone else was against him.'

'He *was* your hero? Sounds like he's not around any more. What happened? Did he leave town or something?'

Silence for a moment and then Reece said, 'No, Mr Gray's still here. But he's over at Baybeach Hospital right now. Someone bashed him ten days ago. He's in a coma.'

CHAPTER TWO

Blake sucked her breath in sharply. 'Oh wow, that's terrible,' she said. 'Mr Gray was one of the people who kept hassling the council about the lead in the river, wasn't he? Do you reckon that's why -?'

'Dunno,' Reece muttered. 'I hope not. If I thought BSC actually hired some thugs to beat him to a pulp, I'd ... I'm not sure what I'd do.'

'You'd call that meeting, like Mr Gray wanted,' she said straight away. 'Or are you scared of BSC, same as everyone else?'

'Not really,' he said, turning his head away. 'It's just that - well, my father's the manager at BSC.'

'Oh,' Blake said in a small voice. 'I see. That makes a difference.'

A huge difference. I know exactly how Reece feels. After all, I'm supposed to be in the big city right now, facing my father. But I'm here in Baybeach instead, listening to Reece talk about his father.

'So what would your dad do if you got up on a platform and told everyone how BSC's been stuffing them around?' she asked. 'Would he yell at you or hit you or what?'

To her surprise. Reece laughed. 'No, nothing like that. Dad's a great guy, one of the best. He started out as a foreman at BSC and worked his way up to the top job but he always made sure he spent time with us every weekend. That's why I'm a good footy player, because Dad used to coach me non-stop.'

Blake frowned. 'What's the problem, then? I mean, your dad sounds pretty nice. If you decide to organise that meeting, I bet he could handle it.'

'You don't get it, do you?' Reece groaned. 'Dad *is* nice. He's done heaps for me, so I don't want to hurt him. And he'd be hurt, for sure, if I went round criticising BSC in public.'

'Hmm. Maybe you could sit him down and explain what BSC's been doing wrong. He might even change his mind, if you told him how you feel.'

Reece laughed again - but it was a sad sort of laugh this time. 'Oh sure, Blake. I wish. He's a terrific dad but he still thinks of me as a kid. He'd just tell me I'll understand these things better when I grow up.'

'Yeah, right,' Blake sighed. "That's what they all say.'

That's what my father said, when I tried to tell him I didn't want to work for Interco, the big multinational company that he heads up. And that's why I ran away from home, because I was scared he'd talk me round if I stayed.

They walked on in silence for a while. Down streets of small white houses, with neat lawns and well-swept paths and tropical plants with shiny leaves that looked like they'd just been washed and polished. Around a corner and into the main street lined with shops and a big new mall and a little old town hall.

Blake wanted to ask more questions about Reece's dad. But she didn't get a chance, because people kept smiling at Reece and telling him he played a great game last Saturday and asking how his family was.

'You're a real hero around here, aren't you?' she said with a grin. 'The most popular guy in Baybeach.'

He shrugged. 'Hey, it's easy to be a hero in a town this size. Just wait till I go off to uni in the big city. No-one'll even notice me there.'

Then an old woman waved to him from the next block. Reece said, 'That's my year 4 teacher. I better go and say hello.'

He hopped onto his skateboard and went weaving down the footpath. Little kids ran along beside him. Girls gazed after him. A boy in boardshorts slapped hands in passing and called, 'Go, Reece.'

That guy's unreal. Good-looking, smart, sporty, popular - and modest as well. I usually hate people like that.

But for some reason I kind of like Reece.

Blake checked her watch and headed into the mall. She had enough time to do some shopping before she looked for a place to stay. Plus she had money in her pocket, for the first time in ages. It'd be nice to spend a bit of it, after being broke for so long.

While she'd been travelling around, she'd kept running out of cash, because her father's private detectives, Greg and Thumper, always seemed to know when she used her ATM account. But Kevin had dropped her off at Four Roads, a tiny town in the middle of nowhere, so Blake had scored some money from the ATM there.

Even if Greg and Thumper went charging off to Four Roads, it wouldn't help them much, because the four highways out of Four Roads led to four different states. No way could Greg and Thumper guess which way Blake had gone.

She wandered from shop to shop, buying everything she liked the look of. Postcards. A new t-shirt. A pair of red boardshorts with frangipanis on them. Bottles of water, so she wouldn't have to drink the water from the Baybeach taps. Tropical fruit and a loaf of fresh bread with a cheesy crust.

It was fun. *Like my own private birthday party, where I get to choose the presents.* But after a while Blake started to feel twitchy. People kept staring at her as they went past - and then turning their heads to stare a bit more. When she stared back, she realised that everyone else in the mall was dressed exactly the same.

Long shorts and short hair. Socks and sandals. Shirts tucked neatly into their belts. No bright colours and definitely nothing black. The women's shirts were flowery and the men's shirts were plain. But that was the only difference.

It's like a school uniform or something. I feel as though I'm breaking the rules. Wonder whether I'll be arrested for wearing a land rights t-shirt, instead of a nice flowery shirt.

She scuttled back towards the escalator, to get away from the stares. As she sailed down to the ground floor, she noticed a big empty space in the middle of the mall. A busker, maybe, except that they probably weren't too keen on buskers in Baybeach. And besides, she couldn't hear any music.

Blake stepped off the escalator and edged into the crowd. Dodged past a man in tan shorts. Ducked round a girl in pastel shorts. Peered over the shoulder of an old woman in cream shorts. None of them stared at her this time. They were too busy staring at the man in the centre of the empty space.

He had long white hair, drifting out across his shoulders, and a long white beard that flowed halfway down his chest. A brown face, wrinkled like tree bark, and pale blue eyes. A broad-brimmed hat and an oilskin coat that billowed around him like a wizard's cloak. Blake stopped and smiled, pleased to see someone else who didn't fit in with the crowd.

The old man must've been pleased to see her too, because he came swooping over to grab her arm. 'Lo, I tell you the day of judgment is at hand,' he said in a deep booming voice. 'He that hath an ear, let him hear my warning.'

Blake blinked. 'Yeah, I've got an ear,' she said. 'Two of them, in fact. I've heard your warning, mate. Now I better get moving.'

She tried to pull away but the big hand was gripping her too tightly. *Poor old guy. No-one else in this place is going to listen to him raving.*

'Okay,' she sighed. 'Tell me all about the day of judgment.'

The old man shuffled closer. 'The third angel has sounded his trumpet and a great

star has fallen from heaven,' he told her. 'The name of the star is called Wormwood and it has fallen on the waters of the Earth. Many men will die of the waters, because they were made bitter.'

'A great star?' Blake said. 'You mean an asteroid? I don't think any asteroids have landed on Earth lately. So there's no need to worry. You'll be all right.'

The old man's eyes rolled and his hand began to shake. 'A prophet is never honoured in his own country,' he muttered. 'Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe. Verily, verily, I say unto you: the hour is coming. I must bear witness. Where may I deliver my warning?'

His fingers were digging into Blake's wrist. She looked round for help but the people in the mall just stared and hurried past. *Damn. I was sorry for the old bloke but now I wish I'd left him alone. Fact is, he's a total nutter.*

She was planning a karate move when a voice from behind her said, 'You want to warn someone about something, mate? The town hall's the best place to go. It's closed over the weekend but you can drop in on Monday. They'll listen to you, I promise.'

'Ah! A young Moses, leading his people out of the wilderness. This is wise counsel, my son,' the old man said happily. He let go of Blake and strode off, declaiming, 'Ask and it shall be given. Seek and you shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you.'

Blake turned and looked up at Reece. 'Phew! Thanks for rescuing me. I thought I was going to be stuck here forever.'

'Not a problem,' he said. 'The old bloke seemed pretty upset, so I wanted to help. If he goes to the town hall, the social worker'll look after him. He probably just needs three meals a day and a place to sleep.'

'So he doesn't live around here?'

'Never seen him before and I know everyone in Baybeach,' Reece told her. 'Listen, talking about places to sleep, I came back because I realised you'd be looking for somewhere to stay. There aren't any backpacker hotels in the area - Baybeach isn't a backpacker type of town. But there's a block of holiday flats opposite our house. I could take you there, if you like.'

Blake swung her pack onto her shoulders. *Too much. Reece isn't just good-looking, smart, sporty, popular and modest. He's also kind and thoughtful. Can't believe I still like him.*

'Sounds good to me,' she said, picking up her shopping bags. 'Lead me out of the wilderness, young Moses.'

CHAPTER THREE

'That old guy had a strange way of talking,' Blake commented, as she followed Reece through the back streets of Baybeach. 'Kind of like the characters in *The Time of the Phoenix*, this fantasy series I've been reading.'

'Actually, he was quoting from the Bible,' Reece said. 'I recognised the "seek and you shall find" part and I bet the rest of it came from the Bible too.'

'I don't know much about the Bible,' Blake admitted. 'They used to read bits of it during assembly at Cabrena Ladies College but I usually zoned out. Hey, if you're right, then maybe the old guy wasn't totally crazy. Maybe he was speaking in some sort of code.'

Reece grinned. 'You like mysteries, don't you, Blake? But I don't think the old bloke was being mysterious on purpose. I reckon he's just read the Bible so much that he's started talking that way.'

'That's possible. Still, I'll listen to him more carefully, if I come across him again.' She hitched at her pack and added, 'How much further have we got to go?'

'Not far now. Do you want me to carry your backpack for a bit?'

Good-looking, smart, popular, kind - and polite. What is he, perfect or something?

'No thanks, I can handle it,' she snapped and Reece said cheerfully, 'Sure you can. You look like you could handle just about anything.'

They turned another corner, cut across a park full of tall rustling trees and stopped in front of a gate with a sign saying 'Bella Vista Holiday Flats'.

'That's my house over there,' Reece said, pointing. 'Listen, why don't you come to lunch tomorrow? Mum always cooks this enormous Sunday roast. She'd be rapt to have

someone else to feed.'

Blake nodded. 'Okay, see you then. And thanks again.'

She trudged up the path and almost bumped into the manager of the flats, who was out sweeping the verandah. Paid a deposit, climbed the stairs and walked into a small sunny room. A big armchair, a medium-sized breakfast table and a tiny kitchen. Tourist posters on the walls. And a balcony with a view of the sea.

Bella Vista. That means 'beautiful view' in Italian, doesn't it? I might just sit here and stare at the ocean for the next couple of days.

She dumped her pack and went to lean on the balcony rail, watching the sun slide down towards the sea. After a few minutes, she started to shiver. She pulled on her windcheater but it didn't seem to help.

There was a cold feeling around her heart, like icy fingers clutching and squeezing. A black cloud of sadness inside her head. The same as when she'd been kneeling at the river's edge a few hours ago, just before Jahlion and Reece came along.

Damn. I thought the icy hand must've been warning me not to drink that water - but it can't be warning me about anything this time, can it? Unless this balcony's about to collapse.

Blake kicked the nearest post and yelped when she stubbed her toe. The balcony seemed pretty solid, so she went back inside and wandered round, checking for danger. No-one hiding under the bed. No loose wires in the kitchen. Nothing wrong with the phone.

The phone. All of a sudden she was desperate to ring her mother. Well, one of her mothers, at any rate. Maureen Nagalarramba, the mother who'd given birth to her. Blake had spent the last nine months travelling around and searching for Maureen. Hoping that, once she found her, Maureen would solve all her problems.

But it turned out to be more complicated than she'd expected. For starters, Maureen announced that she'd discovered she was Aboriginal, so Blake had that to think about. Plus Blake accidentally went to a meeting where a guy called Tom Fenner was blaming Aborigines for all the country's problems, which didn't help. Then, just when she and her mum were sorting things out, her father's private detectives had turned up and Blake had to go on the run again.

It was the right move. I know I have to face my father - on my own terms, not because Greg and Thumper dragged me back to the city. Only I wish I could've spent more time with Mum first.

She hunted through her pack, found Maureen's number and dialled. Counted the rings - *five, six, seven, come on, hurry up* - and said, 'Hi, Mum. It's me.'

'About time,' Maureen said. 'I've been worried. Are you okay?'

'Yeah, of course. Didn't Kevin tell you I was fine?'

'He said you were fine two days ago,' her mother snapped. 'But anything could've

happened to you since then.'

Blake glared at the phone. It was typical. She and her mum could never talk for more than two minutes without fighting. Maureen was so stroppy and bossy and sure of herself.

Just like me, come to think of it. Or maybe I'm just like her.

She grinned and said, 'Well, nothing happened, Mum. Besides, I can look after myself.'

'I know that,' her mother growled. 'But I still worry. Now I want to know all about your trip.'

They chatted for the next hour. Blake told Maureen about driving through the centre of Australia in a road train, gazing out at the flat red earth. Maureen told Blake about her cousin Debbie and Auntie Vi and the rest of her new family. They swapped stories and asked questions and laughed at each other's jokes. Started to say goodbye, thought of something else and went on talking.

'Thanks for phoning, Blake,' Maureen said finally. 'I'm sorry if I sounded grumpy at first. The thing is, I haven't had much practice at being a mum. But I'm a real fast learner.'

'Hey, that's cool,' Blake told her. 'I have to learn how to be your daughter too.'

'True. Why don't you ring me tomorrow, then? We can practise a bit more.'

She put the phone down and sat there staring at it, as though it was a magic box with her mother hidden inside. Her heart felt warm again and the black cloud had vanished. *Mum was worried about me. She likes me. She wants me to phone her.*

Oh wow. Maybe I'm not a total loner any more.

Blake went to bed and dreamed about flat red earth, warm under her bare feet. Woke early next morning, bounced out of bed and stalled in the middle of the room. There was no need to hurry. She was on holiday now. Nothing special to do, nowhere special to go. After nine months on the road she'd finally found Maureen, so she didn't have to keep searching any more.

She ate breakfast on the balcony and then strolled across to the park. Tall trees, velvet grass and the sea whispering in the distance. A couple of people walking their dogs. A woman painting in watercolours. And a skateboard rink - two big concrete bowls joined together, with a concrete ramp sticking out halfway between them.

Blake drifted over to watch the skateboarders. They plunged into the first bowl, hit the ramp and flew up into the air, balancing on their boards like surfers. Tilted in mid-air, hurtled down into the second bowl and swirled round in a figure of eight. But that wasn't enough for some of them. They'd rolled a wheelie bin over and tipped it on its side at the

edge of the rink. Now they were trying to speed round the two bowls and jump the bin.

The first guy hit the bin full-on and fell off his board. The next guy nearly made it, except that his wheels bumped the bin and he toppled sideways. Then the third guy went racing round the rink so fast that he took off like a bird, sailing over the bin and landing with a clatter of wheels.

Reece, of course. I might've guessed it. Mr Perfect.

She was just about to yell 'Hi, Reece' when he swung round, stared and went skating down the path. Blake hurried after him, to ask when she was supposed to arrive for lunch. But before she could catch up, he skidded to a halt beside the painter. Scowled and said, 'Oh, great. You're taking a day off already.'

'It's Sunday,' the woman said, looking surprised. 'I get time out at the weekend, same as everyone else. Besides, it's none of your business. Who are you, anyway?'

'Someone who cares about Baybeach,' Reece told her. 'I want to see our river cleaned up. But it'll never happen, if you spend all your time painting stupid pictures.'

The woman frowned. 'Give me a break, kid. The council only called me in a week ago.'

'A week's a long time. Are you sure you're really trying to find that mine?'

'Of course I am,' she said, starting to get as angry as Reece. 'That's my job. What else would I be doing?'

Reece stared at her steadily. 'You could be mucking around and wasting time, because the council told you to go slow. It won't work, though. Me and my mate Jahlion, we're going to find the mine - and then BSC'll have to do something about it.'

He kicked hard and sent his skateboard zooming off. Blake had to jump out of his way, because he didn't seem to see her. 'Hey, Reece,' she called but he didn't hear her either. He just sped down the avenue of trees and disappeared round a corner.

Then Blake jumped again, as something prodded her in the back. She spun round and saw the painter woman, flourishing her brush.

'You know that guy, do you?' she asked. 'What's his problem?'

Blake frowned. 'Hey, Reece is living in a town where the water supply's been poisoned,' she said. 'That sounds like a pretty serious problem to me.'

'Yeah, sure - but yelling at me isn't going to help,' the woman muttered. 'Boy, oh boy! This is my first proper job and it's turning out to be a real hassle.'

She rubbed her forehead, leaving a smudge of green paint on her brown skin. Blake took a second look at her. The woman was tall and sturdy, dressed in jeans and a white shirt. Broad face, pale blue eyes and a mouth that looked as though it would be good at smiling. Although she wasn't smiling right now.

'Relax,' Blake said. 'Reece is a nice guy, really. He only shouted at you because he thought you weren't trying hard enough. Why don't you tell me what you've been doing and I can pass it on to him?'

The woman thought for a moment and nodded. 'Okay, I'll start by introducing myself. I'm Geraldine Barker but everyone calls me Gerry. The Baybeach Council hired me to work out how lead's getting into their water. It's an interesting problem, because you don't come across that sort of thing very often.'

'Why not?' she asked and Gerry's pale eyes started to sparkle.

'Let me tell you a bit about lead,' she said, as if she was giving Blake a real treat. 'The most important thing to know is that lead loves being lead. Some metals go into solution really easily - in other words, their molecules like mixing with other molecules. But lead hangs on tight to its molecules, so it can sit there underground without getting mixed into the water or the soil or whatever. That's what makes it dangerous. Our bodies can't handle lead, because they haven't had any practice. You can eat iron filings for breakfast, if you like, but lead poisons you.'

Blake grinned. 'I'll stick to muesli for breakfast, thanks. But - hang on a minute, if lead doesn't like mixing with other things, how come it ended up in the Baybeach water supply?'

'Good question,' Gerry said, pointing the paint brush at her. 'That's why I decided there has to be an old silver mine round here. Lead and silver and zinc are often found in the same place, see. No-one's interested in lead or zinc, so they dig out the silver and leave the rest behind. These days the mining companies have to fill in the mines when they've finished, but in the old days -'

'They just walked away, leaving a hole in the ground?' Blake guessed.

'Dead right. A huge empty hole full of zinc and lead and puddles of rainwater. Over time - a very long time - the zinc and the leftover bits of silver get together and form a kind of salt that dissolves the lead. The lead mixes into the rainwater, the rainwater seeps out into the river and - oops, you're in trouble.'

She gave Blake a big wide smile. Blake couldn't help smiling back. *Gerry's really keen on her job. I can't believe she's stuffing up on purpose.*

'Okay, I can see why you started looking for a leaky mine,' she said. 'And I suppose the council told you that BSC still owns an old silver mine. But why can't you find the mine, now you know all of that?'

Gerry groaned. 'Have you ever seen an old mining lease? No, of course you haven't - but I've read dozens of them. They didn't have very good area maps back in those days. When a prospector found some silver and a mining company wanted to claim that bit of land, they couldn't just mark it on the map. They had to say things like, "It's five miles, four chains and three rods north-west of the black stump" or "It's on the south-east corner of the Ferguson property".'

'Oh, right. So, if somebody digs up the black stump or the Fergusons move their fences, you can't tell where the mine is any more.'

'Exactly,' Gerry said with a flick of her paint brush. 'In this case, the BSC lease says

that their silver mine is six miles and two rods due south of the big banyan tree. That made sense sixty years ago - but Baybeach has got way bigger since then. If the banyan tree was still around, it'd probably be smack bang in the middle of the mall or something.'

Blake squinted off into the distance, remembering shops and escalators, bustling crowds and wide shiny floors. 'No banyan trees growing in the mall,' she agreed. 'I can swear to that. Looks like you're in serious trouble, Gerry. Basically, you don't have a clue where to start.'

CHAPTER FOUR

'Oh, it's not as bad as that,' Gerry said. 'There's lots of things I can do. I can talk to some of the old folks in Baybeach and ask them about the banyan tree. Then I can check the latitude and longitude on the map and go searching along those lines. And I've already tested the water from the river, so I've got a rough idea of where the lead starts leaking in. I'll find the mine in the end, even if it takes me another month. Your mate Reece doesn't need to worry.'

'Yes, he does,' Blake said and Gerry looked surprised.

'How come? The council's warned everyone about the lead by now. People are drinking water from rain tanks or bottled water. Nobody else is going to get poisoned, so there's no big rush.'

'Oh yeah? According to Reece, the government's going to pass this new law at the end of the month. Companies won't have to clean up the mess they made, if it happened more than fifty years ago. And they won't have to give any money to people who got sick or whatever.'

Gerry's smile vanished completely. 'Damn, I didn't think about that. Reece is right. This is serious. BSC closed their mine fifty-one years ago. If I don't find it within two weeks ...'

She shoved her brush into her back pocket. Picked up her sketch book and started flapping the pages, to dry the paint. Blake looked over her shoulder and blinked at the strong bright colours. Dark trunks, a green roof of leaves and a brilliant blue sea, gleaming between the trees.

'You're a great painter,' she said and Gerry laughed.

'Me? Nah, I'm a great mining consultant but I just paint for fun. My folks come from Baybeach, though, and my nanna got seriously excited when I said I had a job here. So I told her I'd bring back some pictures, to show her what it's like now.' She shut the sketch book, tucked it under her arm and said, 'Okay, I'm off to search round the river again. Tell Reece I'll be working flat out for the next fortnight. We'll see who finds the mine first - him or me!'

Blake waved goodbye and wandered off. Five dog-walkers turned to stare at her and a family picnic nudged each other and pointed. *Because I'm not wearing the Baybeach uniform, I guess.*

As she headed down the path, she heard a rattle and a toot and a roar, as if a train was rumbling towards her. Blake looked around nervously. Then grinned when she spotted a high bank along the edge of the park, with railway tracks glinting in the sunshine.

She stood and watched the train go past. Strolled on between dark tree trunks under a green roof of leaves, feeling as though she'd walked into Gerry's painting. Climbed over some sand dunes and settled down on the beach, hugging her knees and gazing out at the sea.

I feel kind of strange today. Restless. Edgy. Different from usual. Normally I'd be thinking about what Gerry just told me. I'd be wondering how I could help her and Reece.

But right now I just couldn't be bothered.

Blake sat and frowned at the ocean for an hour. Finally she checked her watch, scrambled to her feet and trudged back to the Bella Vista holiday flats. Had a shower and pulled on her land rights t-shirt. Pulled it off and picked up the pale blue t-shirt she'd bought yesterday.

Rats. I'm not sure what to wear. The Baybeach uniform or my usual gear? Wearing the uniform feels like a cop-out. But I'm sick of people staring at me.

She wriggled into the blue t-shirt and added a pair of long white shorts. As she hurried across the road, Reece was hurdling his front gate. 'Hi, I was just coming to collect you,' he called. 'How's things?'

'I spent the morning in the park,' Blake said. 'Saw you there but you didn't see me, because you were too busy arguing with that consultant. I talked to her after you left and when I told her about that new law, she went haring straight off to have another look for the mine. She was really upset, Reece. I reckon she's on your side.'

'Maybe,' he said. 'Or maybe she's a good actor. After all, she has to make it look as though she's doing something. Otherwise everyone would know she was faking it.'

'But Gerry's nice,' Blake protested.

'So? Nice people can do terrible things. Let's wait and see what happens next. Blake. I won't believe she's on the level till she actually finds the mine.'

Blake sighed, remembering Dr Jane Burton, the anthropologist she'd met at the university in the Top End. Dr Burton had seemed pretty nice too - but she'd been prepared to change her ideas around, in order to get money from Interco for her research.

Gerry's just starting out. Maybe she'd be prepared to do anything the council wants, even if she doesn't really like it.

She was still thinking about Gerry and Dr Burton when Reece grabbed her arm. As he hustled her through the gate, the front door swung open and a man strode out.

'You must be Blake,' he rumbled, holding out his hand. 'I'm Ken Paxton, Reece's father. And look, there goes Colin Clancy hooning down the street. G'day, Col. Are you coming to lunch too?'

He shook Blake's hand, thumped Reece on the back and waved to a guy on a skateboard. A small freckled guy, skinny and tense as a greyhound. Mambo t-shirt, baggy pants and short red-gold hair that glittered in the sunshine.

'Hi, Mr Paxton,' he called, slowing down. 'Thanks for the invite but I'm on my way to the park.'

'Well, drop in any time,' Ken Paxton told him. 'If Reece isn't here, we can have another chat about train-spotting.'

'Sure thing,' Col said. 'See you around, Reecey babe.'

'Same to you, Collywobbles.'

It could've been a joke, except that neither of the two guys was smiling. Mr Paxton thought Reece and Col were great mates but Blake wasn't so sure. As a matter of fact, she had a feeling that Reece had been trying to hurry her into the house because he didn't want to talk to Col.

As she watched Col skate off, a heavy hand landed on her shoulder. 'Come on in,' Mr Paxton boomed. 'I hope you're hungry, young lady. You've got a big lunch waiting for you.'

Blake followed him down to the main room. Reece and his father disappeared into the kitchen, so she strolled over to the mantelpiece to check the family photos. Except that they weren't photos of the Paxtons, after all. They were photos of trains. Old trains and new trains. Australian trains and overseas trains. Trains on the move and trains in museums.

'My hobby,' Mr Paxton told her, coming back with a pile of plates. 'I was a train-spotter when I was a kid and I've never stopped. I can name every type of train in Australia, for example. I can tell you every change in the Baybeach timetable since 1950.'

'And he will too, if you're not careful,' a woman said from behind him. 'Don't let him get started, Blake.'

'Exactly right,' said a girl from behind her. 'It'd be kind of nice to have one Sunday lunch where we didn't talk about trains.'

'That's my daughter Tahnya, giving cheek to her dad as usual,' Mr Paxton growled. 'With a bit of help from her mother, who's old enough to know better.'

He pretended to scowl at them and they pretended to look terrified. Blake laughed. They looked like a matching set of cards from the Happy Families game she used to play when she was a kid. Three small round people with bright pink cheeks and bright brown eyes and loads of energy, bustling round the table and getting in each other's way.

Reece is the odd one out. He looks like a big white swan who's hatched a bunch of ducklings by mistake.

'Reece takes after his uncle,' Ken Paxton said, as if he could read her mind. 'My brother's tall, blond and handsome too. Wouldn't ever get into a fight when we were kids, because he was afraid of spoiling his pretty face. That's why I made sure Reece knows how to handle himself. I used to spar with him all the time, to toughen him up and make a man of him.'

He aimed a friendly punch at his son, who dodged sideways and almost collided with a guy who was coming through the kitchen door. 'Blake, meet Brady Connell,' Reece said. 'He's Dad's assistant at BSC.'

Brady Connell had sleek black hair and a pale serious face and a dress-for-success suit that must've cost at least two weeks wages. He sat beside Reece's dad and watched him like a nurse watching a doctor do an operation, trying to guess what Mr Paxton wanted next. Passing him a knife, so he could start carving the roast lamb. Racing back to the kitchen for the pepper. Jumping up again when Tahnya spilt gravy on the tablecloth.

'Calm down, Brady,' Reece said, pushing him back into his chair. 'You're a visitor. You shouldn't be doing all the work.'

Brady glared up at him. He was fairly tall but Reece was even taller. *I get the feeling Brady doesn't like that. Or maybe he just doesn't like Reece.*

'Thanks, mate,' he said with a fake smile. 'That's cool. I wanted to ask your father about his train-spotting, anyway.'

'No train stories,' Tahnya and Mrs Paxton said in unison and Brady shrugged.

'All right then, if we can't talk about trains, can we talk about BSC instead? I got a fax from the directors in the city, Mr Paxton, just after you left on Friday. They want to make sure we're handling this business with the old mine properly. So I faxed back and told them you'd be in touch as soon as possible.'

'Good work, Brady,' Mr Paxton nodded. 'I'll phone them first thing Monday morning

and tell them everything's going according to plan.'

Reece sat up straight and cleared his throat. 'Um, what *are* your plans?' he asked. 'Are you planning to pay compensation to the people who got lead poisoning? Or are you planning to try and wriggle out of it?'

'That's not a very nice way to talk to your dad,' Mr Paxton said sternly. 'All right, it's true that if Gerry Barker can't find the mine before the end of the month, BSC won't have to pay a cent. But the government made that law, not me. I'm not trying to wriggle out of anything.'

He speared a piece of potato and shoved it into his mouth, to show that the conversation was over. But Reece said, 'Wait a minute, Dad. You could still pay those people, no matter what the government says. It'd be the right thing to do. I mean, the lead in the river *is* BSC's fault, isn't it?'

'We don't know that for sure, not yet,' Brady cut in. 'Besides, your father has to be pretty careful about all of this. Ever since Interco took over BSC, we've had to prove we're making a profit every year. If we gave away all our profits. Interco might decide to close BSC down - and then half the people in Baybeach would lose their jobs.'

Mr Paxton beamed at Brady and frowned at his son. Reece frowned back and said, 'So? Okay, Interco *might* close BSC. But if you go ahead, a lot of people will definitely end up sick and broke.'

Blake gulped. *Interco? The big multinational company that my father runs? Don't tell me they've turned up in Baybeach as well.*

There was silence for a few seconds and then Ken Paxton laughed. 'See, Blake?' he said, turning towards her. 'I told you I'd made a man of Reece. He's even standing up to his old father these days. Good for you, son.'

After that, the fight seemed to be over. Mrs Paxton said, 'Well, I'm glad you've sorted that out,' and started telling stories about her aerobics class. While they finished the roast lamb. Mr Paxton boasted about how he was walking to work these days. Then, as Mrs Paxton served the fruit salad, they argued about whether walking or aerobics was better for your health.

They're not as relaxed as they look, though. Everyone keeps glancing at Reece and Mr Paxton, to see whether they're going to start fighting again.

After a while Blake got bored with health talk and asked Reece about the skateboarding rink. 'Good question,' Mr Paxton said straight away. 'Why don't you get Reece to take you over to the park and give you a go on his board? He usually goes for a burn after lunch, to work off all that food.'

Mrs Paxton nodded hard, Tahnya looked relieved and Reece leapt to his feet. Minutes later, they were hurrying down the street.

'Whew!' Reece said. 'Sorry about that, Blake. I didn't mean to land you in the middle of a family row.'

'Not a problem. It was interesting. My family never has rows.' *Well, I fight with Maureen - but Dad just goes silent when he gets mad.* She hesitated for a second, took a deep breath and added, 'By the way, what was that stuff about how Interco owns BSC?'

Reece snorted. 'Listen, there aren't many small companies left these days. They've all been taken over by big multinational companies. That's part of the problem. Interco bought BSC five years ago - but the Interco mob have never been to Baybeach, so they don't really care what happens to the people here.'

Blake shivered. That cold hand was closing around her heart again. Maybe because, although Reece didn't know it, he was talking about her father's company. *I can't get away from Interco, even when I'm supposed to be having some time out.*

Can't get away from my father anywhere.

She glanced sideways and realised that Reece had stopped in the middle of the path. His fists clenched on the top of his skateboard. His mouth pinched into a grim white line. Blake studied him for a few seconds and said, 'You're going to organise that meeting, aren't you?'

'Yeah, I think so,' he said with a sigh. 'Dad'll be mad as fire - but I can't let that stop me. It's like the other Blake said in his poem. If you see people hurting, you gotta do something.'

He stared at the ocean, chest rising and falling in time with the waves. Swung towards Blake and said, 'Listen, I always do a run straight across the park whenever I come here. It's like a ritual, something I've done ever since I was a kid. Would you mind if -?'

She grinned. 'Hey, go for it. I'll wait here and watch.'

Reece gave her a thumbs-up sign and stepped onto his skateboard. Kicked off and sped away down the avenue of trees. The path was striped with sunshine and shadow. As he hurtled along, weaving and curving from side to side, he looked as though he was dancing under a strobe light.

Then, all of a sudden, his legs twisted and his head jerked back. The skateboard went hurtling on but Reece seemed to hang there, suspended in mid-air. He flung his arms out ahead of him and flicked his feet up, as if he was diving off the edge of a pool.

Let out a yell and went crashing to the ground.

CHAPTER FIVE

Blake ran. Feet kicking up gravel. Trees flashing past. Her brain working at top speed. *That wasn't an ordinary sort of fall. Something weird about it. Hope Reece is okay.*

By the time she got there. Reece was sitting up and examining his hands. They were bruised and bleeding. Long ragged scrapes with bits of gravel stuck in them.

'Ouch!' Blake said. 'That looks terrible.'

Reece pulled a face. 'Feels terrible too. Still, it could've been worse. If I'd fallen backwards, I could've ended up with a cracked skull, like Mr Gray.'

Mr Gray? I know that name. But why?

Before she could ask, wheels clattered behind them and Col Clancy came swooping down the path. 'I don't believe it,' he jeered, skidding to a halt. 'The great Reece Paxton, falling off his skateboard like some dumb kid. Thought you were supposed to be the best skateboarder in the park. Just wait till I tell the guys.'

He turned and skated off, laughing. 'That guy's definitely not one of your fans,' Blake commented. 'What did you do to him?'

'We were best mates when we were little,' Reece said, studying his hands. 'Went everywhere and did everything together. Then I started getting top marks in all my classes and Col started failing tests and skipping school. I tried to stay friends, because I felt sorry for him, but now - well, like you said, he's not one of my fans.'

Blake frowned down at him. For such a popular guy, Reece seemed to get hassled a lot. Col hated him for being smart, Brady Connell hated him for being tall and his dad switched between being proud of Reece and going spare at him.

It's not as easy as it looks, being a small-town hero. Half of Baybeach thinks Reece

is wonderful - but the other half wants to cut him down to size.

Something tickled at the back of her brain. An idea that she couldn't quite put into words. She swung round to look at the trees on either side of the path, near the spot where Reece had fallen. Then her eyes widened. A kid was crouched beside one of the trees, scratching at the bark with her fingernails.

'Hey, what are you doing?' Blake called, darting over. 'What've you got there?'

The kid jumped up and backed away. She was tiny, not much bigger than a ten-year-old, although she was obviously older than that. A small heart-shaped face, like a grubby angel. Yellow-green eyes, like a feral cat. A flowery op shop dress, two sizes too large for her, and a pair of old army boots.

She held out her hand and waved it to and fro. When Blake edged closer, she saw a line of light on the air, as faint as sunshine on a spider web.

'Someone tied a fishing line between those two trees,' the kid explained. 'That's why your mate took a tumble.'

Blake nodded. 'Yeah, I wondered about that. So how did *you* know it was there?'

The kid clenched her small fists. 'That's right, go ahead and blame me,' she spat. 'Everyone always blames me for everything. But I didn't do it. I didn't! I didn't!'

She whirled round and ran. Pelting across the grass and dodging between the trees. Tripping over the outstretched legs of a guy who was sprawled on a park bench, smoking a cigarette. He swore at the kid, then caught Blake's eye and ducked his head. But she'd seen his face already. It was Brady Connell.

The idea at the back of her brain itched even harder. All of a sudden Blake remembered who Mr Gray was. Reece's teacher, the guy who'd been asking questions about the lead in the river, right from the start. The guy who'd ended up at Baybeach Hospital in a coma. Someone had beaten up Mr Gray - and now someone had arranged a nasty accident for Reece as well.

Brady? Or Col Clancy? Or that kid?

Nah, forget it. I'm not interested. I don't care.

She turned her back on Brady and the kid. Marched over to Reece, who was struggling to his feet. 'Come on,' she said. 'Looks like we'll have to cancel the skateboarding lesson. I better get you home, so you can do something about those cuts.'

The Paxtons fussed over Reece, picking gravel out of his palms, dabbing antiseptic on the cuts, wrapping his hands in gauze bandages. Then they got into a long family argument about whether he was fit enough to skate over to the river and meet Jahlion. Blake sidled out while they were still arguing.

She spent the rest of the afternoon at the beach, strolling along the shore and thinking about nothing. Finally shadows started to slither down from the sand dunes. She climbed up to the road, bought some takeaway at a cafe and went back to the

holiday flats, to ring her mum again.

They chatted on for half an hour, telling each other what they'd done during the day. It was easier this time. No fights. No hassles. Except right at the end, when Maureen said, 'Listen, you took off from the Top End in a real hurry, so I don't know whether you had time to pay your hotel bill. Want me to do it for you, eh?'

'Don't bother,' Blake snapped. 'I can look after myself, in case you hadn't noticed.'

'Yeah, I've noticed,' her mum said. 'You've been looking after yourself for the last nine months. Doing a good job of it, too. Goodnight, Blake. Talk to you tomorrow.'

Blake dumped the phone and flung herself onto the bed. She clasped her hands behind her head and lay there, scowling at the white ceiling. *Damn. That was stupid. Should've let Mum help me. I've been on my own for too long. I've forgotten how to fit in with other people.*

She stared at the ceiling until her eyes blurred. Fell asleep and dreamed that she was sitting on a boulder in a red desert, frowning at the earth and the sky.

When she woke next morning, Blake still felt tired. She sat on the balcony and flicked through a magazine, pretending to read. Finally she gave up, marched over to her pack and tugged out a wad of money that was hidden in the lining.

Mum guessed right, of course. I didn't pay that hotel bill. Better go and do it now.

She strolled through the park and across to the Baybeach shopping centre. Found a bank and paid for a bank cheque, stuffed it in an Express Post envelope and headed for the post office.

As she dropped the envelope into the box outside, she noticed the old man from the shopping mall, hovering in front of the town hall. He climbed halfway up the steps, tugged at his long white beard and shuffled down again.

Blake turned away, hesitated and turned back. Went over to the old man and said, 'You're going to see the council, right? Need any help?'

His eyes brightened. 'It says in the book, "A little child shall lead you". You will make my path straight before me?'

She grinned. 'A little child? Me? Think again, mate. But I'll take you into the town hall, if that's what you mean. Come on.'

When she tucked her hand under his elbow, she realised he was shaking. Reece reckoned the old man must be sleeping out in the bush somewhere, so he probably hadn't spoken to anyone for weeks. People obviously made him jumpy and yet he'd come back to give his wacky message to the council, all the same.

He may be a fruit loop but he's a brave fruit loop.

She steered him up the steps and into the town hall. A huge foyer with a black and

white marble floor and a grand old staircase. A door labelled 'Library', a door labelled 'Meeting Room' and an information desk at the far end. Blake headed over to the desk and said, 'Listen, this guy wants to tell the council something. Who should he talk to?'

The woman behind the desk looked the old man up and down. He fixed her with his pale blue eyes and said, 'Oh, generation of vipers! I warn you to flee from the wrath to come.'

The woman gulped. 'Um, maybe Warren Munro, our social worker, can help. I'll see if he's free.'

She thumped a button, spoke into the intercom and asked them to wait for a couple of minutes. Blake towed the old man away from the desk, before he could start raving again. Parked him in front of a noticeboard and started to read the notices out loud.

'Look, mate, someone's giving a talk about the history of Baybeach. There's a fair at the local church next weekend and - hey, a meeting tomorrow to discuss the lead in the river, organised by Reece Paxton. That was quick. He must've gone to meet Jahlion, after all. Jah probably stuck the notices up this morning, while Reece was at school.'

She was talking to herself but the old man looked interested. 'Lo, the angel hath opened the bottomless pit,' he told her. 'There arose a fountain of water out of the pit and the rivers of the Earth were made bitter, by reason of the waters of the pit.'

'Yeah, right,' Blake said politely. 'Thanks for telling me.'

It was the wrong answer. The old man groaned and shoved his hands into his long white hair. 'I speak with the tongue of angels but no man listens,' he thundered. 'Who will heed the warning that I give unto you?'

His voice echoed around the high ceiling and up the stairs. The woman at the desk squeaked in alarm. Blake took a step backwards. And a large man with a round red face dropped his burly arm round the old man's shoulders, pinning him to the spot.

I suppose that's Warren Munro. Although he looks more like a footballer than a social worker.

'What's the problem, sport?' Warren asked. 'I'll listen to you, no worries. That's my job. Why don't you start by telling me your name?'

The old man wriggled out of his grip. 'They call me Preacher,' he said with dignity. 'I am a voice crying in the wilderness. Will you hear me and be saved?'

Warren beamed at him and picked a long pointy gum leaf off the collar of his oilskin coat. 'The wilderness, eh? Been sleeping rough, have you? Never mind, we'll soon find you somewhere to doss down. There's nothing around Baybeach but they've got a nice hostel for old blokes in the next city. I'll -'

'No!' Preacher bellowed. 'There is a devil speaking out of your mouth. I ask for bread and you give me a stone. Come, child, we must flee this place.'

He tugged at Blake's hand and spun around, coat swirling. Warren yelled, 'Hang on, sport' and lunged towards him. But at the same moment the library door opened and a

trolley loaded with books trundled between them, heading for the service lift. Warren banged his knee on the trolley and started to swear. The librarian said, 'Oops, sorry, Warren.'

And Blake hauled Preacher into the lift, hitting the top button and watching the doors close behind them.

CHAPTER SIX

The service lift bounced and rattled up to the second floor. It was a lot smaller than an ordinary lift. Every time it bounced, Blake hit her head on the roof and every time it rattled, she bumped into Preacher.

This wasn't one of my smartest ideas. Why the hell did I decide to rescue the old guy, anyway?

Yeah, yeah. I know. Because I felt sorry for him.

When the lift stopped, she shunted Preacher out and looked around. Saw a long corridor with six doors opening off it and a balcony at the top of the stairs.

'We have to get out of here,' she told the old man. 'Only we can't use the lift, because Warren'll be waiting for us, and we can't use the stairs, because they go straight down to the foyer too. That leaves the corridor. We might as well try it, seeing there's nowhere else to go.'

'Lead on, child,' Preacher rumbled. 'The angel has sent you to me. I am in your hands.'

'Oh, terrific,' Blake muttered. 'Wish the angel would tell me what I'm supposed to do next.'

She ducked into an empty room, collected a wastepaper basket and jammed it between the doors of the lift. If the doors couldn't shut, the lift couldn't go down and Warren Munro couldn't come after them. Well, he could climb the stairs, of course, but it would take him a bit longer. With any luck, they'd be out of the town hall by then.

She scooted off at top speed and then glanced back, to make sure Preacher was following. But he wasn't. He had stopped halfway down the corridor, outside one of the

doors. As Blake watched, he reached out towards the handle.

'No!' she yelled. 'Quit that!'

Too late. The door was already swinging open. Blake raced back, read the sign - 'Mayor's Office' - and groaned. Peered over Preacher's shoulder and found herself looking straight at Brady Connell, who was talking to Gerry Barker and a worried-looking man with big black-rimmed glasses and rumpled hair. *The mayor, I guess.*

'We've got lists of all the people in Baybeach who've ever worked for BSC,' Brady was saying. 'If we go through those lists together, Gerry, I'm sure we'll find the names of some old folk who can tell you about the mine.'

Then his jaw dropped as Preacher strode into the room, announcing, 'Lo, there are beasts that walk on the Earth and there are fish that swim in the sea - but the little brown frogs, they live both on land and in water. I say unto you, when the smallest of God's creatures sicken and die, this is a sign from the angel, telling men to turn away from the waters.'

Gerry gasped, Brady sniggered and the mayor stared blankly, as if he'd heard stranger things than that in the last few days. Blake grabbed the back of Preacher's coat and dragged him out of the room. Gave him a shove and hustled him along the corridor.

'You're hopeless,' she scolded. 'This is like babysitting a two-year-old. I can see why your mates nicknamed you Preacher. You just can't help preaching at people, can you?'

'Nay, child,' the old man murmured. 'They called me Preacher long before I began to read the Good Book and speak with the tongue of angels.'

'Well then, they were good at guessing,' Blake snapped. She swung round the corner and skidded to a halt. Glared at the wall and said, 'Look at that. We're stuffed.'

The town hall was an old building, so she'd been hoping to find another staircase out the back. No such luck. There was only a metal door with a solid iron bar running down it, held in place by iron clamps. Blake marched over and kicked it.

'Rats,' she muttered. 'What would your angel say about this?'

'Fear not,' Preacher told her calmly. 'For, lo! the door shall be opened.'

He twisted the clamps, jerked at the iron bar and pulled. Blake blinked at the sudden burst of sunlight. 'Oh wow, you're good with this sort of stuff,' she said. 'Wonder what you used to do before you became a derro?'

She pushed past him and peered out. Yelped and clutched the side of the door. Stared down at the concrete yard below them - a long way below. Nothing between her and the ground, except for a rusty tin platform with rusty tin steps spiralling off it.

Preacher grinned at her and said, 'Behold, a ladder set up on the Earth, for the angels of God to ascend and descend on it.'

'Right,' Blake said. 'The fire escape. Of course. Let's get moving.'

They shuffled down the steps, slow and cautious. When they reached the ground, she turned to the old man and said, 'Sorry, that wasn't much help. You never even got

to talk to the council. What do you want to do next?'

Preacher looked surprised. 'Nay, child, you have been a blessing to me. I have testified to those who hold power in this city and they have heard my warning. Now I may depart in peace and return to the place from whence I came.'

He hobbled round a cluster of wheelie bins, moving unexpectedly fast for such an old guy. Pushed at a loose paling in the fence and disappeared. Blake sighed. Preacher was obviously convinced that Gerry and Brady and the mayor had been impressed by his rave about angels and little brown frogs.

As if. They probably just had a good laugh and then forgot all about it. Still, that's his problem, not mine.

I'm not interested.

Blake went charging through the shopping centre at top speed, as usual. Halfway home, she remembered that she was on holiday, so she didn't need to rush. In the middle of the park, where two paths crossed, there was a funny little building with a round dome and fat white pillars. *A rotunda, I think you call it.* She climbed the steps, propped her back against one of the pillars and settled down to do some serious people-watching.

More mums and babies. More dogs, taking their owners for a walk. More skateboarders, surfing the concrete bowls. Plus a bunch of guys, hanging round beside the path and hassling everybody who walked past. Blake couldn't see them properly, because one of the big elm trees got in the way. She could hear them pretty clearly, though.

One minute they were yelling 'No fat chicks' at a group of girls in school uniform. Next minute they were shouting 'Pair of fags' at two men in tourist t-shirts with cameras round their necks. Some people ignored them. Some people shouted back. And some people went scuttling along the path, heads bent, blushing and looking miserable.

After a while Blake decided she was sick of it. She jumped down from the rotunda, marched across to the elm tree and spotted a park bench, a few metres away. Sat and stared at the guys, as if she was planning to paint their picture. There were three of them. A big lumpy guy who looked as though he was growing too fast. A middle-sized guy with pimples like tiny volcanoes. A small freckled guy, skinny and tense as a greyhound.

Col Clancy. I should've guessed. Apparently, he hates the entire world, not just Reece.

At first the guys didn't seem to notice her, but before long the big guy turned bright red and started to shuffle his feet. He nudged the middle-sized guy and whispered something to him. Then the middle-sized guy nudged Col, who swung round and glared

at Blake.

'Hey, what's your problem?' he called. 'Why are you staring?'

Blake grinned. 'I wanted to get a good look at you,' she explained. 'I heard you dumping on everyone else, so I figured you must be totally perfect. I've never seen three perfect people before.'

The big guy tugged at his tight shirt, the middle-sized guy rubbed his pimples and Col wedged his heels against the elm tree's root, to make himself look taller. 'Don't listen to her,' he told the others. 'She's just a weirdo. Let's go and play Truth or Dare, okay?'

'Nah, can't be bothered,' said the big guy. 'We've done the sickest dares already. Tracky-dakking, mooning, the works.'

'Plus we already asked each other the sickest questions ever,' the middle-sized guy added. 'I'm bored with the Truth part and I'm bored with the Dare part. Forget it, Col.'

They picked up their skateboards and started to wander off. Blake grinned again. Col was obviously the leader of the gang - but he was losing it, fast. He kicked the tree root, shoved his hands into the pockets of his shorts and squinted along the path, as if he was searching for an idea.

'Got it!' he said suddenly. 'We need to try the game on someone new. Reece Paxton, for example.'

Wheels rattled and whirred on the asphalt path. When Blake turned her head, she saw Reece skating towards her. The three guys fanned out, blocking his way, and he skidded to a halt. As he flipped his skateboard up and caught it, Col said, 'G'day, Reecey. Wanna play Truth or Dare?'

'No, thanks,' Reece said. 'For one thing, I'm busy - and for another thing, Truth or Dare's a little kids' game.'

'Not the way we play it,' said the big guy. 'Don't tell me you're chicken, mate. What are you, a fag or something?'

'He's scared, like a girl,' the middle-sized guy chipped in and Col said, 'Yeah, he's scared to tell the truth, aren't you, Reecey babe?'

Reece hesitated for a moment, tall and handsome as ever, towering over the lumpy guy and the spotty guy and the small freckled guy. Blake started to grin for the third time. But somewhere in the middle of the grin, she realised she felt almost sorry for Col and his mates. They were such dorks and Reece was such a hero.

No wonder they keep trying to get at him. Luckily, Reece is smart enough to walk away from their stupid games.

Then her mouth dropped open as Reece said, 'Okay, you're on. Give me a dare, Collywobbles.'

Col scowled. He looked around, nodded and snapped, 'Right. I dare you to stand on the train tracks for five minutes.'

The big guy yelled, 'No way' and the middle-sized guy moaned, 'You're going psycho again, Col.' But Reece spun round and went striding across to the high bank at the edge of the park. Blake leapt to her feet, getting ready to race after him.

Then stopped, as Col said, 'Chill, guys. The next train isn't due till five o'clock, fifteen minutes from now.'

Blake checked her watch and relaxed. She watched Reece climb up the bank and step between the train tracks. He stood there, hands on hips, outlined against the sky. Col and his mates came crowding over and huddled behind her.

They tried a few more cracks - 'Are you Reece's girlfriend? Didn't know fags had girlfriends' - but after a while they gave up and started counting the seconds. Col was muttering, 'One more minute to go,' when the tracks hummed and a whistle blasted.

And the train came rumbling round the bend.

'Reece!' Blake screamed. 'Jump!' But Reece didn't move. She swung towards the other guys and snapped, 'You try. Maybe he couldn't hear me.' Flung herself at the bank and went scrambling up the slope on her hands and knees.

When she looked down, she saw a ring of white scared faces and heard three wobbly voices chorusing, 'Jump, Reece, jump.' When she looked up, she saw Reece standing on the train tracks, still as a statue. After that, she glanced along the tracks - and wished she hadn't.

The train was looming over her, so close that she could've counted the drops of sweat on the driver's forehead. The ground shook and the train wheels made a sound like thunder. Blake froze.

Too late. Too scary. I can't do anything. Can't can't can't.

Then the icy hand shoved her hard in the middle of the back. She staggered forward, slammed into Reece and went tumbling down the other side of the bank in a tangle of arms and legs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'I didn't know,' Col kept saying, over and over. 'I didn't know, Reece, honest I didn't. I swear I didn't know.'

Reece sat up and stared at his hands. More cuts and scrapes, to add to the ones he'd got when he tripped over the fishing line in the park. 'That was close,' he said, ignoring Col. 'Are you all right, Blake?'

Blake nodded. 'Yeah, sure. I landed on top of you, so I'm fine.' *Shaking, weak in the knees and freaked by what almost happened - but fine, all the same.*

'You're lucky to be alive,' the big guy told them. 'Why didn't you run for it, Reece?'

Reece blinked at him. 'I ... I'm not sure. My legs just wouldn't move.'

The big guy looked puzzled but Blake sighed and said, 'I know what you mean.'

It was pretty scary up there. I froze too. If the icy hand hadn't given me a shove, Reece would be history.

When she tuned in again, the middle-sized guy was fronting Col and yelling, 'You're a maniac. Col Clancy. A total psycho. I thought so before and I know it now. You better find yourself some new psycho mates, 'cause you've gone too far this time. I'm not hanging round with you any longer.'

'Me either,' said the big guy and they turned and scuttled off. Col watched them go, frowning and chewing his thumb.

'I didn't mean it,' he muttered. 'I thought it was safe. The timetable must've been changed. I was sure the next train wouldn't come along till five o'clock. You believe me, don't you, Reece?'

Reece shrugged. 'Ah, who cares? It's over now. Just don't ask me to play any of

your crazy games ever again.' He glanced up at Blake and added, 'Listen, I'm still kind of shaky. Would you mind coming home with me?'

They limped across the park, taking turns to lean on each other's shoulders. Blake could feel Reece shivering and she knew that she was shivering as well. For a quiet little seaside town, Baybeach seemed like a pretty dangerous sort of place. In the last few days, Reece's teacher had been bashed, Reece had crashed into a trip-wire and they'd both nearly been totalled by a train.

She couldn't help wondering whether someone was trying to scare Reece. Someone who wanted to make sure he didn't find that mine or talk at that meeting.

No, that's impossible. It doesn't fit together properly. I mean, the bashing was serious but the trip-wire was just a nasty practical joke. And no-one could've guessed that Reece would freeze when he saw the train.

Besides, it's none of my business. I'm supposed to be having a holiday, not worrying about Reece Paxton.

They collected Reece's skateboard and trudged on to the Paxtons' house. Five minutes after they'd walked through the door. Blake decided that she definitely didn't need to worry about Reece, because the Paxtons were experts at worrying. Mrs Paxton made them drink cups of sickly sweet tea 'for shock'. Tahnya wound bandages around Reece's hands, until they looked like big white boxing gloves.

And Mr Paxton kept waving a train timetable and saying, 'But I *told* you the five o'clock train to Baybeach was switched to 4.50 last week. It's the first change in the timetable since 1990. A really interesting piece of information. I told everyone, even Colin Clancy. I know I did.'

He looked round at his family but they all ducked their heads and pretended to be busy. Blake swallowed a laugh. The truth was, Mrs Paxton and Tahnya and Reece thought trains were dead boring. Mr Paxton probably *had* told them about the change in the timetable - but they'd probably just zoned out, the way they always did.

Although it's different for Col Clancy. He doesn't have to live with Mr Paxton, so maybe he actually listened while Mr Paxton was raving on. Maybe he was lying when he swore he didn't know there was a train coming. Maybe he set Reece up on purpose, because ...

But Blake didn't want to think about that. She backed away, mumbling 'Bye, everyone', and sidled out of the room. Scuttled along the corridor, pushed the front door open and jumped as a hand dropped onto her shoulder.

'Hang on,' Reece said, smiling down at her. 'You can't nick off before I get a chance to say thanks. You saved my life, Blake. I owe you, right?'

Blake sat on her balcony and scowled at the sunset. Clouds like piles of fat orange mangoes, bumping into each other and spilling yellow light across the sea. A warm breeze that ruffled her hair and tickled her bare legs. So why did she feel cold inside, especially round her heart? Why did her head feel as though it was full of dark swirling fog?

Hey, I just stepped in front of a train, on purpose. I'm in shock, like Mrs Paxton said. I want ...

I want my mum.

She laughed at herself - but she went and phoned Maureen anyway. After she'd told her mum the whole story. Maureen said, 'Good on you, Blake. You did a great job. What now? Are you planning to find this person who's been trying to get at your mate?'

'No way,' she said quickly. 'Why should I? Reece isn't exactly a mate of mine. I only met him three days ago.'

'Yeah, but you just saved his life. Haven't you heard the old Chinese saying? They reckoned that if you save somebody's life, you're responsible for them forever after.'

'That's stupid,' Blake told her. 'I don't owe Reece anything. As a matter of fact, he owes me. He said so himself.'

'Maybe,' Maureen said. 'Wait and see, Blake. You might feel different in the morning.'

'No, I won't,' she snapped and slammed the phone down. Then she turned the TV on and channel-surfed for the next three hours. Every time she got close to thinking about what her mum had said, she changed channels again. Finally she crawled into bed and dreamed about being lost in the desert.

Running across an endless stretch of red earth, under a cloudless stretch of pale blue sky.

Next morning Blake woke with a jump, as though an icy hand had been shaking her in her sleep. She opened her eyes, sat up and gasped, 'Reece!' It was Tuesday, the day of the big meeting about the lead in the river. If anyone wanted to stop Reece, they'd have to do it today.

Oh, hell. Maureen was right I do feel responsible. Looks like I just volunteered for a job as Reece's bodyguard.

She put on the Baybeach uniform - socks and shorts and a plain shirt, plus a cap to hide her fair hair and sunglasses to hide her eyes. Waited on the verandah till Reece came striding out of his house. Followed him all the way to the gate of Baybeach Secondary College and heaved a sigh of relief. Reece was probably safe while he was in school. She could take some time off.

Blake wandered round the mall, then sat in a cafe and wrote postcards to her mum and Debbie and Auntie Vi. She was planning to spend the afternoon sun-baking on the beach but as she strolled past Baybeach Secondary College, a tall, blond, good-looking guy came striding out.

'Reece!' she yelled and he swung round, startled.

'Blake? What on earth are you doing here?'

'Um, I just happened to be passing,' she mumbled. 'How's things, Reece? Are you feeling okay?'

'Yes, I'm fine, thanks to you,' he said. 'I've got a free afternoon, so I decided to catch up with a couple of people and then search for the mine. Want to come along?'

Blake ducked her head to hide a secret grin. *He thinks I'm lonely, so he's being kind to me. Good. This'll be easier than trying to shadow him all round Baybeach.*

They went back to the Paxtons' place, to pick up Reece's bike and borrow Tahnya's bike for Blake. Then they rode over to the Baybeach Hospital. A nurse told Reece that Mr Gray had finally come out of his coma but he wasn't ready for visitors yet.

So they headed across to the river, where Jahlion was waiting, and spent the next few hours searching for the old mine. Blake jumped every time a leaf rustled or a twig cracked. But there was no-one hiding in the rainforest, ready to attack Reece.

No mine, either. In the end Jahlion said, 'It's too dark now. The only way we'll find the mine is by falling into it. I'm out of here. See you at the meeting tonight.'

After that Blake bought Reece a Big One at O'Burgers, because he didn't want to go home before the meeting. *Fair enough, too. His father would probably yell at him or something.* She walked with Reece over to the town hall, found a seat in the front row and counted the audience as they came in. One hundred and twenty-three people. Not bad for a last-minute meeting in a small town.

Good. I can relax now. No-one can get at Reece while he's on a platform in front of a hundred and twenty-three people.

The principal of Baybeach Secondary College tapped the mike and waited for silence. He told them how two people from his school had been responsible for the campaign to save the river - first Mr Gray and now Reece Paxton. Reece stood up, clutching his notes, and strode confidently towards the mike.

And froze, just like he'd frozen in front of the train.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Blake's heart started pumping at twice its usual rate. *Oh no. I relaxed too soon. Looks like Reece's enemy is going to try again.*

Her eyes scanned the hall, ready for anything. The ceiling collapsing. A hidden trapdoor in the floor. A maniac with a gun. But instead she saw a small round man with pink cheeks and brown eyes, sneaking in through the side door.

It's Ken Paxton, Reece's dad. So that's why he freaked.

Reece stared directly at his father for a moment. Then he stuffed his notes into his pocket, pushed back his blond hair and started to talk. Chatting away, as though everyone in the audience was his best friend. Telling them that the people of Baybeach had to stick together and do something about the lead in their river. Ending with William Blake's words.

*'Can I see another's woe
And not be in sorrow too?'*

After that Mr Gray's friend Dr Misson gave them a lot of facts and figures about lead poisoning and a woman from a greenie group asked them to sign petitions and write to the council and BSC and the government. Reece was the real star, though. Everyone mobbed him afterwards.

Jahlion was hugging him, little kids were asking for his autograph and a gang of girls started taking photos, while Col Clancy stood in the background and glared. Reece was trying to answer fifteen different questions at once when Mr Paxton came pushing

through the crowd.

'Good speech, son,' he said. 'You gave me a lot to think about. I don't always agree with you but you're a brave kid - no, a real man.'

As he thumped Reece on the shoulder, Blake noticed Brady Connell hovering behind them. His mouth was twisted, as though he'd just eaten something sour. Then Mrs Paxton and Tahnya raced over, shouting 'Congratulations', and Brady backed off. Blake sighed and turned away.

No point in hanging around. Reece is fine now. He doesn't need a bodyguard any more.

Back at Bella Vista, she raced to the phone and dialled Maureen's number. 'Sorry I didn't ring you earlier,' she said straight away. 'I've been keeping an eye on Reece. Protecting him, I suppose. How did you guess I was going to do that? Are you psychic or something?'

Maureen chuckled. 'Not me. Auntie Vi reckons you're the one who's got special powers. But I'm your mum, Blake. I think about you all the time - what you were like when you were a baby, what you were like when we ran away and lived in those caravan parks, what you're like now. So it figures that I know a fair bit about you.'

Blake almost dropped the phone. Her heart swelled so hard that her chest hurt. *Oh wow. I was never really sure whether Maureen loved me. I mean, she gave me away, right? Sold me to my dad.*

But she did love me, just the same. I know that now. She thought about me non-stop, even more than I thought about her.

'I like having you as a mum, y'know,' she said in a rush. 'Now, do you want to hear about Reece?'

She told Maureen the entire story, including every word of Reece's speech. Maureen listened and asked questions and made noises in the right places. Then she thought for a minute and said, 'Okay, kid, you've done really well so far. Are you going to finish what you've started, eh?'

'Huh?' Blake said. 'What do you mean? I've done enough for Reece already.'

'Oh sure, you've been his bodyguard,' Maureen agreed. 'But you haven't used your brains to try and solve this mystery. I know you pretty well, remember. When you run across people in trouble, you're normally dead keen to help. Not this time, though. Fact is, you're stalling, Blake. Running scared. Trying not to think about Reece's mystery - or your Aboriginality - or your dad.'

'That's not true,' Blake yelled. 'Stop pushing me. I'll think about Dad when I'm ready. It's not fair. You ran away from me first. You can't blame me if I run away from things

too.'

This time, she really did drop the phone. When she picked it up, the dial tone was beeping sadly at her. She swore and kicked the bedside table. Piled three cushions on top of the phone, in case Maureen tried to ring back. Climbed into bed and pulled the blanket over her head.

And dreamed that she was lost in a huge empty desert of red earth, wandering around aimlessly under a blank blue sky.

Elm tree leaves rustled. Skateboard wheels whizzed and clanged. An ant zigzagged up Blake's bare arm. She lay on her back in the park, staring up at the changing pattern of leaves and light.

I shouldn't have shouted at Mum last night. But she makes me mad, probably because she knows me so well. I'm not used to that - and I'm still not sure I like it.

She slid a grass blade under the ant and tipped it onto the grass. As it scurried off, a plan dropped into her brain, like a letter dropping into a mail box. She could spend the rest of the day asking questions about Reece's accidents - and Mr Gray's bashing - and BSC's lost mine.

Then tonight she could ring Maureen and say (1) 'I'm sorry', (2) 'I'm working on Reece's mystery', and (3) 'I promise I'll think about Dad and the Aboriginal stuff. Soon.'

Blake smiled and stretched. Looked round the park and squeaked in surprise as she spotted two guys, chatting beside the rotunda. So Brady Connell and Col Clancy knew each other? That was interesting. Very interesting. Col Clancy was a total drop-out. Brady Connell wanted to be a big success. They didn't seem to have much in common, except for one thing.

The Paxtons.

Brady loved his job, so he'd do anything to make Mr Paxton happy. Col hated Reece, so he'd do anything to make Reece unhappy. If the two of them had got together, they could easily have come up with a plan to fix Reece and help BSC. They might even be making some more plans right now.

Blake jumped to her feet and ducked behind the nearest elm. She dodged from one tree to the next, until she reached the far side of the rotunda. Flattened herself against the wall and edged along, listening for the sound of voices.

Finally she heard Col say, 'Why are you so interested in Reece Paxton, anyhow?' She shut her eyes and held her breath, so she could concentrate better. But before Brady had time to answer, she heard another voice, further away.

A deep growly voice that said, 'Yeah, Greg. That's Blake, all right.'

Her eyes snapped open. She squinted into the sunshine and saw a big burly

shadow, with a smaller shadow beside it. *Oh no. It's them. My father's private detectives, Greg and Thumper.*

How on earth did they manage to find me here?

No time to think about that now. Blake turned and ran. Sprinting through the park, as though she was trying to break the world record. Weaving between the trees and skidding across the asphalt path. Catching the toe of her runner in a crack.

Tripping and falling, with her leg twisted underneath her.

She lay there, flat on her face, gasping for breath. It was all too much. Her lungs hurt and her ankle hurt and she was tired of running. She was just deciding to give up and go quietly, when a hand reached down and hauled her to her feet.

'Hi, Blake,' Reece said with his friendly smile. 'Thought I might find you here. I was pretty blasted after the meeting last night, so I've taken the day off school. I was wondering whether you'd like a skateboarding lesson.'

'Not now,' she wheezed. 'I'm in trouble, Reece. Those thugs are after me - and I think I just sprained my ankle.'

Reece thought fast. 'Hmm, you can't really fit two people on a skateboard. Still, I reckon I can help.' He spun round and yelled, 'Yo, Col! Col Clancy! Round up the guys and get over here.'

Blake shaded her eyes and stared across the park. Brady had disappeared and Col was back on his skateboard, heading for the concrete bowl. She'd missed her chance to find out what the two of them were talking about, although that wasn't exactly her biggest problem at present.

Here comes my biggest problem right now. Greg and Thumper, catching up fast.

They pounded across the grass towards her. Greg, little and wiry with a lined face and sandy hair, loping like a greyhound. Thumper, a head taller and twice as wide, lumbering after Greg like a bear dressed in a sports singlet and track-pants.

No point in trying to get away from them, not when her ankle was this sore and swollen. Blake sighed and shoved her hands in her pockets and waited for them to grab her. But just before the two detectives reached the path, she heard the sound of skateboard wheels and saw Reece swoop across the asphalt in front of them.

Greg frowned. 'Okay, Thumper, spread out a bit,' he ordered. 'That way, at least one of us'll be able to get past the kid.'

Thumper nodded and leapt sideways, crashing into his partner. Greg swore and pushed him away. While they yelled at each other, Reece did a spectacular turn and came speeding back. Greg and Thumper crouched down and fixed their eyes on him, like gridiron players getting ready to make a play.

The minute Reece went past, Greg stepped onto the path. Then he jumped back onto the grass, because Col Clancy was skating straight at him. 'Thumper!' Greg shouted and the big guy went surging forward. A squeal of wheels, as Reece turned

again, going faster than ever. Thumper glanced at him, glanced back at Greg and panicked. Lost his balance and sat down heavily in the middle of the path.

'Go, Blake,' Reece called. 'I'll meet you at - at the place where I first saw you.'

Blake nodded and turned away. *Smart thinking, Reece. It wouldn't be a good idea to tell Greg and Thumper where I'm going.*

She limped off towards the main road. When she glanced back through the trees, Reece and Col were zooming up and down the path, blocking Greg's way with perfect timing, as though they'd been practising together for years. And three other boys from the concrete bowl were skating round Thumper, so fast that he couldn't break through the circle. Blake grinned and waved.

Great teamwork, guys. Score one for our side.

CHAPTER NINE

It took Blake an hour to get to the bridge, because she had to keep stopping to rest her ankle. On her third rest, she finally worked out how Greg and Thumper must've found her. That bill for the hotel in the Top End. She'd posted the bank cheque right here in Baybeach. If Greg and Thumper had rung the hotel, the manager would've told them about the cheque - and the postmark.

What's the matter with me? I'm usually smarter than that. But I've been acting kind of strangely, ever since I arrived in Baybeach.

She sighed and limped on. Reece caught up with her just before she reached the bridge, riding a bike with his skateboard balanced across the handlebars. 'Thanks for rescuing me,' Blake told him. 'And say thanks to Col and the others as well.'

He shrugged. 'Col owes you, same as I do. He's been in trouble before. If that train had skittled me, he could've ended up in jail. Here, I brought my sister's bike for you. You'll need transport, if you're staying out at Feral City.'

'I am?' Blake said. 'What's Feral City? Oh right, the place where Jahlion lives. How will his friends feel if I rock up without an invitation?'

Reece laughed. 'Don't worry, the ferals are different from the rest of Baybeach. They're big on sharing, so they're happy to take anyone in. Well, almost anyone. Jah's not too keen on this streetkid who's crashing there at the moment, because she snoops and reads people's diaries and goes on shoplifting binges. But as long as you don't do that sort of thing -'

'No way,' Blake said with a grin. 'I bet other people's diaries are even more boring than mine. Feral City sounds like a perfect hide-out. Let's go.'

They cycled along the highway towards a line of jagged green hills. Twenty minutes later they pulled up outside a wooden A-frame house, half-buried in jungle. A girl appeared in the doorway, calling, 'Hi, Reece. Wish I'd heard your speech about the river - but I hate going into town, 'cause it spins me out. You just missed Jah, by the way. He went off to look for the mine, about ten minutes ago.'

'Rats,' Reece said. 'Maybe I can catch up with him if I hurry. Teya, this is Blake. She needs somewhere to crash, because some thugs are after her. See you later, Blake,' and he went racing off down the hill.

Teya looked like a feral princess. She was wearing an old-fashioned nightgown, tie-dyed in shades of green, and a waistcoat studded with tiny mirrors. Silver rings threaded through her dreadlocks and more rings on her fingers, in her ears, above her left eyebrow.

'You got two guys on your tail?' she asked, looking impressed. 'Hassles with the cops, right?'

Blake shook her head. 'Nah, they're a pair of private detectives that my father hired to track me down.'

She limped over to the verandah and waited for Teya to ask more questions. But the feral kid just frowned and said, 'Hey, you've hurt your foot. I can fix that for you, Blake. Come inside.'

Blake grinned to herself. *Reece was right. The ferals are different. Teya couldn't care less about Greg and Thumper. She's much more interested in my sprained ankle.*

She followed Teya into the kitchen, where five kids were sprawled round the table. Four guys and girls wearing the feral uniform - tattoos and piercings, dreadlocks and bare feet and a ragbag of tie-dyed clothes - plus a tiny girl with a face like a grubby angel, in a flowery op shop dress and battered army boots.

That kid from the park who showed me the fishing line that tripped Reece. What's she doing here?

'This is Blake,' Teya was saying. 'And this lot are Elvis and Fern and Jason and Lucy and Big Suze.'

'Big Suze?' Blake burst out, at exactly the same time as the tiny girl yelped, 'Blake? No kidding? You're Blake, the one who watches out for kids in trouble, like a superhero or whatever?'

'Hey, I'm no hero,' she said and the angel-girl gave her a devilish grin.

'Relax,' she told Blake. 'You don't have to watch out for me. I can watch out for myself, no problem.' Then she scowled and added, 'Hang on, how come you know *my* name?'

Blake smiled, remembering the first mystery she'd ever solved, months and months ago in another city. 'You were one of the streetkids who disappeared from that haunted factory,' she said. 'I suppose that's how you heard about me. I'm not as brilliant as you

think I am - but you're not as big as I thought you'd be, either.'

'She's called Big Suze 'cause she's a big hassle,' Elvis muttered and the streetkid glared at him. Blake groaned quietly.

Terrific. Big Suze is obviously the kid who's been causing all that trouble. Now the others'll think she's a friend of mine. I hope they still let me stay.

Luckily, at that moment Teya came gliding over with a bowl of green sludge. 'Comfrey and papaya leaves, mashed together,' she explained. 'If you prop your foot on the verandah rail, I can paste it on your ankle. It'll feel better in about two hours.'

So for the next two hours Blake sat on the verandah, gazing out at the rainforest and the river and the sea. Big Suze plonked down next to her and started listing all the secrets she'd read in Lucy's diary but Blake frowned and said, 'Sorry, I don't want to know.'

After that, the other kids got more friendly. Lucy told her they called themselves tribals, not ferals, 'because we live in a tribe, like the Aborigines'. Jason told her how you could switch from the dole to sickness benefit and back again, if you knew the right doctors. And Fern told her that Reece and Jahlion would never find the old silver mine, unless they made friends with the ghost in the rainforest.

They were a strange bunch but Blake decided she liked them. Funny, I was supposed to be having a holiday in Baybeach but I never really managed to calm down. Now I'm on the run again and I couldn't be more relaxed.

By the time Reece and Jahlion came puffing up the hill, she felt so much better that she bounced out of her chair and went skipping over to meet them. 'Find anything?' she asked and Reece said, 'Not yet - but we're on a roll. We're going to grab some food and then go back and keep looking.'

Blake stared down at the river, tapping her foot. 'Wish I could come,' she sighed. 'I'm in the mood for a bit of adventure.'

'Why not?' Teya said from behind her. 'Look, your ankle's fine now. You can handle it.'

As Blake frowned and wiggled her foot, Big Suze hurdled the verandah rail, yelling, 'Me too, me too, me too.' Jahlion tried to talk her out of coming but Elvis fixed him with a steady stare and said, 'Give us a break, Jah. Just for a few hours.'

'You won't be sorry,' Big Suze promised. 'I've got the world's best sense of direction. Trust me, if anyone can find your stupid mine, I can.'

Huge banyan trees and lush green gum trees. Vines and creepers trailing over everything, like the scribbles in a little kid's drawing. The smell of rotting leaves and the sound of water. As the rainforest closed around them, Blake shivered and rubbed her

arms. A thick roof of leaves blocked out the sunlight but the air was still warm and steamy. So why did she suddenly feel cold?

Oh, hell. The icy hand's drawing patterns down my spine. It left me alone, most of the time I was in Baybeach, but now it's back. Pity about that. Life's much more peaceful without it.

She looked around, wondering what her built-in warning system was trying to tell her. Reece and Jahlion had their heads together, studying the map, and Big Suze was jiggling impatiently beside them.

'Maps are a waste of space,' she growled. 'Bet I find the mine before you do.'

She charged into the bush, branches snapping under her big boots. Blake groaned. *Heading off on her own? Not a real smart idea.* She waited for the icy hand to give her a shove but nothing happened. So she turned to Jahlion and said, 'Do you think we ought go after her?'

He pushed back his dreadlocks and smiled at her. 'Nah, Suze'll be fine. She actually does have a genius sense of direction. Mind you, that won't help her find the mine. You need a proper system, like us. See, Reece divided the map into twenty squares. We've searched twelve of them so far.'

'Unlucky thirteen next,' Blake joked - and a cold finger prodded her in the ribs. She flinched and followed the two guys down a narrow track.

For an hour they worked their way through the rainforest. Poking into tangled bushes, wading across little creeks, speeding up every time they spotted a hollow in the ground. But there weren't any mines in the hollows - or behind the bushes - or at the ends of the creeks. Just mud and mosquitoes and vines that made their skin itch.

Blake splashed through another creek, wishing she had a pair of army boots, like Big Suze. Her foot was starting to hurt again. At first she thought the green sludge must've worn off but then she realised that it was a different sort of pain this time. A cold pain, as though an icy hand was grabbing her ankle and hauling hard.

'Um, sorry,' she called to Jahlion and Reece. 'My foot's sore. I'll have to go back. Don't worry, I've got a good sense of direction too. See you at Feral City.'

The guys argued with her for a bit but in the end she convinced them. They stood side by side and waved while she limped off. Reece like a tall handsome prince in a fairy tale. Jahlion like a gypsy boy out of an old song.

And me? Well, Big Suze thinks I'm a superhero but right now I just feel like a confused mess. Normally, I've got some idea of what the icy hand's on about but this time I don't have a clue.

The chilly grip kept tugging on her ankle, dragging her back to the last creek. Then the cold feeling vanished. *Okay, what next?* Blake squatted down and played with a long pointy gum leaf, like the one Warren Murphy had picked off Preacher's coat. Poked the slippery brown mud, churned up by their feet.

Squeaked in alarm as her finger hit a soft blob of mud with tiny arms and legs.

'Oh,' she said out loud. 'A little brown frog. A *dead* little brown frog.'

'Good,' a voice said from behind her. 'That's exactly what I'm looking for.'

Blake jumped up and whirled round. 'Gerry!' she said with relief. 'You gave me a shock. I thought you were supposed to be searching for the mine - so why are you frog-hunting instead?'

'Because I'm desperate,' the consultant said frankly. 'Everything keeps going wrong. BSC's files seem to have vanished - the council's files aren't much help - and I tracked down an old bloke who used to work at the mine but he wouldn't talk to me. Basically, the little brown frogs are my only real clue.'

'The frogs are a clue?' Blake said, blinking. 'I don't get it, Gerry.'

'You should,' Gerry told her. 'After all, you were the one who brought that old derro to the town hall. Brady Connell and the mayor thought he was off his face but I thought he was kind of interesting. I phoned my nanna - she used to live in Baybeach, remember. She reckons the Aboriginal people from round here have a story about frog spirits that warn you if there's something wrong with the water.'

Blake's eyes widened. 'Oh wow. So Preacher *was* talking sense, in his own weird way. He probably saw some dead frogs when he was pottering round the rainforest and headed off to warn the council about the danger to the river. If that's really true ...'

She stopped and stared at Gerry. A big smile was spreading slowly across the consultant's face. 'Dead right,' she agreed. 'If that's true, then the old silver mine's probably at the far end of this creek. Want to come and have a look?'

CHAPTER TEN

Blake leapt to her feet. Slipped and staggered and sat down in the mud. 'No thanks, Gerry,' she said, rubbing her backside. 'I think I'll stay here for a bit longer. But listen, can you tell me your phone number, so I can give you a call and find out what happens?'

Gerry scribbled the number on one of her consultant's cards. Kicked off her runners and went wading up the stream. Blake watched her disappear round a bend, feeling grumpy and restless.

I would've liked to go with her - except that the icy hand tripped me, on purpose. So I guess I'm supposed to stick around.

She sat beside the creek, listening to the tinkle of the water. The hum of invisible insects. The swish of the creepers, swaying in the breeze. The rainforest was singing to her, like a mother singing to a baby. Blake smiled dreamily, stood up and went drifting off.

Her feet skimmed the ground lightly, as though she were walking in her sleep. She glided between the trees until she came to a tangle of thorny bushes, so thick that she couldn't possibly push through. There was a green cave to the left of the bushes. No, not a cave. A small hut, made from bark and saplings and creepers. Blake was taking a step towards it, when her muscles clenched and her heart missed a beat.

Somebody was standing behind her. Not Gerry this time, somebody else. But Blake didn't want to turn round and see who it was, because she knew that the person wasn't real.

Don't ask me how I know. It's just a feeling. A tingle in the air, shadows moving

somewhere out of sight.

I don't like it.

The icy hand closed on the back of her neck and twisted. It wanted her to look at the ghost but Blake thought that was a bad idea. She pinched herself hard, breaking the dreamy trance. Swung to the left, scuttled past the little hut, pushed through some creepers.

And ran.

Ten minutes later she tripped over a branch and made a grab for the nearest tree. It looked pretty solid but the bark crumbled under her hand. Blake yelled, pitched forward and went sliding down a steep bank. She slammed into a fallen tree trunk and stuck there, wedged between the tree and two tall boulders.

It was a relief, in a way. If the tree hadn't stopped her, she might've gone on running forever. Running away from the ghost. It seemed kind of stupid, because she still didn't believe in ghosts, even though she'd already seen one in an old factory – and in Sunnyport - and maybe in Helena Hartley's house as well.

But I don't want to make a habit of seeing ghosts, just the same. Too freaky. Not my idea of fun.

Her heart was banging so loudly that she didn't hear the voices at first. Two guys, talking quietly on the other side of the boulders. Reece and Jahlion. They must have turned up while she was thinking about the ghost. She was getting ready to yell, 'Hey, help me out of here,' when Reece said, 'Jah, can I tell you something really personal?'

Blake blushed. *Oh no, this is private. I shouldn't be listening.* She wriggled around, hoping to spot a gap in the rocks, so she could crawl off quietly. And saw Big Suze at the top of the bank, hidden behind a tree.

She scowled and flapped her hands, to make the kid go away, but Big Suze just grinned and settled herself more comfortably. Blake sighed. Elvis was right. Big Suze was a big hassle. She obviously liked listening to other people's conversations, as much as she liked reading other people's diaries.

Mind you, I'm trapped here, so I'll have to listen too. But at least I won't enjoy it.

'Okay, mate, what's the problem?' Jahlion was saying.

Silence for a moment and then Reece whispered, 'My dad. He was great after the meeting, congratulating me in front of everyone. In a way, though, it only makes things worse. He's been so nice that I feel as though I should do something in return. Like, for example, maybe I should stop looking for the mine.'

Something clunked against the boulder. Blake jumped and realised that Jahlion must have kicked a stone. 'Oh, Reece,' he said, half crossly and half sadly. 'You can't always do what your folks want. You have to start doing what *you* want, for a change.'

'But I don't know what I want,' Reece said in a low voice.

'A clever guy like you?' Jahlion said. 'I don't believe it. I think you know.'

More silence. Blake squeezed her eyes shut and tried to send Reece a message: 'Go for it, mate. Stand up to your dad.' She was dying to know what Reece had decided to do - but he didn't say another word. Instead, she heard the sound of his runners thudding across the grass, with Jahlion's bare feet pattering along behind.

Blake muttered 'Rats' and opened her eyes. She scrabbled up the muddy slope and rolled over the edge of the bank. Big Suze came dancing towards her, looking pleased with herself.

'Interesting, hey?' she said and Blake glared.

'Embarrassing, actually. You shouldn't eavesdrop, y'know.'

Big Suze stuck her tongue out. 'You did,' she said.

'I couldn't help it. I was stuck there - but you weren't.'

'So? It was a buzz. I like knowing people's secrets.'

Blake shrugged. *Some secret. Everyone knows Reece has hassles with his dad.* She looked Big Suze in the eyes and said firmly, 'Listen, it was no big deal.'

'Sure,' she agreed, 'but I still like knowing. I've found out heaps of stuff today, about Reece and Jah and everyone. I don't usually pass it on but I'll tell you, because you're Blake.'

'Thanks for nothing,' Blake growled. 'You've got the wrong idea about me, kid. I'm not a sneak, like you.'

Big Suze's small face turned bright pink under the dirt. 'Get stuffed,' she screamed. 'I hate you, Blake. I *did* find that old guy's silver mine - but I wouldn't tell you now, not if you paid me.'

And she skidded down the slope and went pelting off into the rainforest.

A full moon sailed up behind the jagged line of the mountains, like an enormous orange balloon. The ferals - *no, tribals* - sat cross-legged on the grass, beating a steady rhythm on skin drums, saucepans or their knees.

'To welcome the moon,' Teya explained to Blake. 'It's a tribal thing. Jahlion usually leads the drumming - only he's depressed tonight, 'cause of Big Suze nicking off without telling us about the mine. You look a bit depressed as well. Blake. What's the matter?'

'I almost saw a ghost in the rainforest,' she said, before she could stop herself. 'But I ran away instead. I have this warning signal, like an icy hand, that tells me when I need to watch out for danger or whatever. It's kind of useful - but I can't handle it. I just want to be ordinary, same as everyone else.'

'Nobody's ordinary,' Teya said, thumping her drum, and Fern sighed and added, 'You're so lucky, Blake. I wish I could see ghosts. It's a pity you ran away ... but maybe you can go back and make friends with the ghost tomorrow.'

Blake shivered. *What a crazy idea. Those tribals will believe anything, as long as it's weird. Ghosts. Drumming to welcome the moon. Green sludge for sprained ankles.*

Although, come to think of it, my ankle feels terrific.

Teya leaned forward and grabbed her wrist. 'You have to accept your powers,' she whispered. 'You're frightened now but once you've finished your shaman's journey, you'll be cool.'

More crazy ideas. Blake jerked her hand away. 'Yeah, sure,' she mumbled. 'Listen, I'm tired. I think I better go to bed.'

She dragged one of the mattresses to the far end of the verandah. Lay down and closed her eyes and tried to go to sleep. But the moonlight was too bright and the drumming was too loud.

And besides, she had a lot of things to think about.

The mine first. There were three people who might know where it was. Big Suze, unless she was just lying to make herself important. Gerry, supposing the mine really was at the far end of Dead Frog Creek. Plus, if Big Suze wasn't lying, then Preacher knew about the mine as well. 'That old guy's silver mine,' Big Suze had said - and Blake was convinced the streetkid was talking about Preacher.

Plus there's that other old bloke who used to work in the mine, the one who wouldn't tell Gerry anything. I can ask Gerry for his name, when I phone her tomorrow.

So, with any luck, they'd be able to find the mine before the end of next week - but that wasn't Blake's only problem. Maureen had dared her to figure out why someone seemed to be attacking Reece, which meant she needed to think about that too.

For starters, she ran through the facts again. Mr Gray and Reece had both warned Baybeach about the lead in the river. And Mr Gray and Reece had both landed in trouble. But Mr Gray had actually been bashed and Reece had only fallen over a trip-wire.

Why? Well, Reece was tall and strong and he played a mean game of football. Maybe the mysterious enemy was too scared to try beating him up. *Come to think of it. I've never met Mr Gray. Better ask Reece what he looks like. If he's little and weedy, that'd explain why the enemy wasn't scared of him.*

Who *was* the mysterious enemy, though? Probably someone connected with BSC or Interco. Someone who wanted to make sure the company didn't have to pay out heaps of money to the people with lead poisoning.

Ken Paxton? No, Blake couldn't believe he'd set a trap for his own son. Gerry, the consultant? No, she wasn't in Baybeach when Mr Gray was attacked. *Or was she? I don't know for sure.* Brady Connell? Yes, Brady could've done it. He was crazy about his job - and Blake got the feeling he was jealous of Reece, as well.

Brady had been hanging round in the park when Reece crashed into the trip-wire. Then Blake had seen him again, talking to Col Clancy. If those two were in it together,

Brady could've told Col to dare Reece into standing on the train tracks. Brady would've known about the change in the timetable, because he was always sucking up to Mr Paxton and listening to him rave about the trains.

Although, come to think of it, Ken Paxton had been talking about train-spotting to Col, as well. And Col was definitely jealous of Reece, even more jealous than Brady. He'd laughed at Reece when he tripped on the wire. He might've tricked Reece into that dare, in order to scare him witless and laugh at him again. After all, he couldn't have guessed that Reece would freeze and almost get himself killed.

Rats. What if I got it all wrong? What if Reece's two accidents were just Col playing stupid practical jokes?

Then there was Big Suze, who kept turning up all over the place. And, last but not least, there were Greg and Thumper. Blake had been sure they'd come to Baybeach because they were looking for her - but they could've been here all along. Greg and Thumper had worked for her father forever. They'd do anything her father told them to do. Her father's company owned BSC and BSC was having problems, so Blake's father could've told Greg and Thumper to fix things.

And Thumper tended to fix things by thumping people.

Oh wow. Too many ideas and not enough facts. I need to go back to Baybeach tomorrow and start asking questions. Need to ring Maureen too. I've got used to talking to her every night - but, of course, the tribals don't have a phone.

She yawned and rolled onto her side and closed her eyes. Then shivered, as an icy hand closed round the back of her neck. Blake sat up and groaned. Apparently, there was one more thing she had to sort out, before the icy hand would let her go to sleep.

Teya's wacky rave about the shaman's journey.

A few weeks ago, back in the big city, a rock star called The Dog had told Blake that she was on a shaman's journey. Dog reckoned it was a really old idea, from the times when people lived in tribes and believed in magic. They used to send their kids out into the desert or the mountains or the forests, so they could learn how to survive on their own. And, after being lonely and scared and hungry for a while, some of the kids had these strange dreams that changed them into a shaman - a magic man or woman.

Well, I've had lots of weird dreams since I ran away from home. I've been hassled by the icy hand and I've seen a few ghosts. But it's not as much fun as Teya and Fern think it is. I don't want to turn into a shaman.

I don't. I don't. I don't.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Blake fell asleep and dreamed that she was stumbling across an endless stretch of red earth, tired and thirsty, searching desperately for a special rock. She woke with a dry mouth, staggered out to the kitchen and drank three glasses of water without stopping. When she turned round, Jahlion was perched on the table, watching her.

'Bad dreams?' he asked. 'Me too. I kept dreaming that the mine was lost for good. Hey, Fern says you met the ghost in the rainforest. I was wondering - do you reckon it could be an Aboriginal ghost?'

'Dunno,' Blake mumbled, filling her glass again. 'Why, Jah?'

'Well, when I moved to Feral City, I read this local history book. It said that, back before World War II, a lot of Aborigines used to work in the BSC mine. People used to treat Aborigines really badly, Blake. I bet they were pretty cruel to the Aboriginal miners. What if the ghost wants the mine to go on leaking, as a kind of revenge on Baybeach?'

Blake frowned and thought about the stories her mum had told her. Maureen's granny, taken away from her home by the Aboriginal Protection Officers. Maureen's mother, packed off to a girls' home in the far north. Maureen herself, sent down south on holiday to a white family, who'd adopted her without even asking for her mother's permission. They'd all been treated badly, for sure.

Although Mum and Auntie Vi and the others don't seem that interested in revenge. They're more interested in making sure things work out better in future.

'Forget the ghost, Jah,' she said. 'I reckon you and Reece should just concentrate on looking for the mine.'

'I'll keep looking,' Jah said gloomily. 'Don't know about Reece, though.'

'How come?' Blake asked in surprise.

'Ah, we had a fight yesterday. That's why I was feeling down last night, because I was worrying about Reece and Big Suze. I mean, Suze lived with us for weeks and yet she still didn't trust us. We failed her. Blake. It makes me wonder whether I want to go on living like this for the rest of my life. Reece keeps telling me you can't change things by dropping out - you gotta get in there and do stuff.' He sighed and added, 'Hey, maybe I'd do more good if I went and got a job with BSC.'

He looked so miserable that Blake wanted to cheer him up. But before she could think of anything useful to say, Teya and Fern wandered into the kitchen, rubbing their eyes.

'Oh good,' she said, remembering. 'I need to borrow some of your clothes, so Greg and Thumper won't recognise me if I run across them in Baybeach.'

Fern offered to pierce her eyebrows and Teya thought she'd look really cruisy in an old satin bra and a sarong. Luckily, Blake managed to talk them out of that. In the end she set off to Baybeach wearing a long tie-dyed shirt and a long rainbow scarf and a big black sunhat.

She cycled down the hill and onto the highway, thinking about Jahlion and Reece. Jahlion looked dead-set tribal. It was weird to hear him talk about working at BSC. Ken Paxton would never give him a job in a million years. Unless, for example, Jahlion could prove he'd helped BSC already, by making sure the mine stayed lost.

Damn. That's possible. Not very possible but a little bit possible. I'll have to put Jahlion on my list too. Like I need another person to check out.

Well, at least she was sure Reece hadn't bashed Mr Gray or set up the trip-wire or known about the change in the train timetable. Although she was worried about Reece, just the same. Why had he and Jahlion been fighting? Blake didn't really think Jahlion was serious about taking a job with BSC - so maybe Jah had got mad because Reece told him he was going to give up and do everything his father wanted.

Hope not. Reece is so cool. A real hero. I don't want to believe he'd let his dad push him around.

She decided to go to the Paxtons' house first, before Reece headed off to school. For one thing, he'd promised to collect her backpack from Bella Vista. For another thing, she could ask him about Mr Gray - and about his father. But when she knocked at the front door, no-one answered. She sighed and turned away.

Yelped and clutched at her chest, as an icy hand squeezed her heart.

Blake panicked. She raced down the side of the house, looking through all the windows. Hammered on the back door, yelling, 'Reece? Are you there?' Charged up the drive and leaned against the garage wall, wondering what to do next. A smell twitched at her nostrils. Something chemical, like burning petrol. She gasped and flung herself at the garage door.

As the door creaked open, a cloud of exhaust fumes came pouring out. Blake could hear a car engine running. She backed away, coughing, and wrapped the rainbow scarf around her mouth and nose. Plunged into the garage and dashed across to the car.

There was a guy in the driver's seat, slumped over the steering wheel. Blake couldn't see him properly but she could guess who it was. Mr Paxton. He must've had a heart attack or something, while he was starting the car. She wrestled with the door, swore loudly and jerked on the handle. The guy came tumbling out and landed at her feet.

Omigod. That's not Mr Paxton. It's Reece.

Blake grabbed Reece's shoulders, to drag him out into the air. But she couldn't shift him, not even by half a centimetre. She peered into the car and realised that his runner was jammed under the accelerator pedal. The petrol fumes were seeping through her scarf and her head was spinning. She needed some fresh air badly - but she couldn't leave Reece.

Then a hand grabbed her shoulder. Not an icy hand, just an ordinary one. It swung her round and gave her a shove.

'Out you go,' someone said. 'I'll take care of Reece.'

Blake staggered out of the garage and collapsed onto the Paxtons' lawn. Petrol fumes in her lungs. Petrol fumes swirling around her brain. After a while, her head cleared and she was able to sit up and look around.

Reece was lying on the grass nearby. His face was as white as a ghost and there was a lump on his forehead, just under the hair. Brady Connell was kneeling beside him, tucking his coat under Reece's head.

'Reece,' he whispered. 'Say something, mate. Tell me you're okay. I know you're not exactly my favourite person but I didn't want *this* to happen.'

Blake stared. *Oh wow, Brady must be seriously worried. He's actually turned his expensive suit jacket into a pillow for Reece.*

'Is he all right?' she croaked and Brady jumped and looked around.

'Well, he's still breathing,' he told her. 'Mrs Paxton got back from her aerobics class while you were out of it, so she's phoning for an ambulance. Hey, here it comes now.'

A siren was screaming, three blocks away. Reece's mother stumbled out of the house, dressed in electric blue leggings and a hot pink lycra body suit. Blake wanted to laugh, until she saw the tears streaming down Mrs Paxton's round face.

'My baby boy,' she sobbed. 'I'm sorry, Reece. I didn't realise those arguments with Ken had upset you so much.'

Blake stared at her. *What's she talking about? Oh, I get it. She thinks Reece did this because he felt bad about his dad.*

'No way,' she said. 'No way known. Reece wouldn't try to kill himself.'

Brady Connell caught hold of her hand and squeezed it hard. 'Blake, you were incredibly brave just then,' he told her. 'But you didn't get a chance to look around, like I

did. You didn't see the rubber hose jammed over the exhaust pipe, running into the car.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

The ambulance arrived a minute later and Brady went off to the hospital with Reece and Mrs Paxton. Blake cycled straight to the shopping mall. She found a phone, fished a card out of her wallet and dialled the number of the motel where Gerry was staying. The minute the consultant answered, she snapped, 'So, what about the mine?'

'No luck,' Gerry said, sounding startled. 'The creek disappeared into this thick wall of thorny bushes. I could get some of the council workers to chainsaw through it - but it'd take them two or three days, so I thought I'd better check my facts first.'

'Damn,' Blake snarled. 'That's not fair. I really wanted to find the mine - soon.'

For Reece. Because it's the only thing I can do to help him right now.

At the other end of the line Gerry cleared her throat and said cautiously, 'Listen, are you feeling all right?'

'Not exactly,' she admitted. 'I just hauled a mate out of a garage filled with exhaust fumes.'

'You *what?* Blake, you must be in shock. Here, why don't you come down to the city with me? You can hang out while I look at the old mining leases. I bet the drive would do you good.'

Shock? Oh right. I do feel kind of strange, same as I felt after I walked in front of the train. Mrs Paxton was rabbiting on about shock then, too.

Blake tried to remember all the things she wanted to do in Baybeach but she felt too tired and shaky to concentrate. 'Okay, Gerry,' she agreed. 'Why not? See you soon.'

Gerry picked her up from the mall and they drove off down the highway.

Blake stared out of the window, looking at sand dunes and huge waves, seeing Reece's pale face and that ugly lump on his forehead. *The lump. Of course. That's why I was so sure Reece hadn't tried to kill himself. Someone must've hit him on the head, bundled him into the car and started the engine.*

But why? It didn't make sense. The meeting was over. Heaps of people all round Baybeach were worked up about BSC and the mine now. So why bother to keep on attacking Reece? She sighed deeply and Gerry glanced sideways at her.

'Want to tell me about it?' she asked.

Blake nearly started to spill out the whole story but just in time, she remembered the way Reece felt about Gerry. *I trust her more than he does - but I can't risk it. Better keep my mouth shut, in case he's right and she really is going slowly on purpose, to help BSC.*

When she shook her head, Gerry shrugged and switched on the tape deck. They sailed down the coast road, with Rabies' latest hits blasting from the speakers. An hour later the city's skyscrapers loomed up ahead. Gerry zipped through the busy streets and found a parking space right outside the Mines Department.

'Come on,' she said. 'I'll show you a genuine seventy-year-old mining lease.'

She checked the computer files and area maps and collected a huge dust-covered book, so old that its leather binding was crumbling away. The permit for the miners' rights had been written with a pen dipped in thick black ink. Like Gerry had told Blake, the silver mine was supposed to be six miles and two rods south of the old banyan tree - which didn't exist any more.

'This is pointless,' Blake grumbled. 'We knew that already. Why did we need to drive seventy kays and get dust up our nostrils?'

'Because I want to check the name on the lease,' Gerry said.

Blake scowled. 'Oh, sure. It's BSC's mine, so the name on the lease will be BSC. I can tell you that without even looking.'

'But you'd be wrong. Okay, BSC ran the mine - but a prospector found it in the first place. Do you know what prospectors do, Blake? They travel round, looking for oil or silver or uranium or whatever. When they find it, they apply for a miners' right and then they sell their information and the miners' right to a company that can mine the stuff.'

Blake had forgotten how much Gerry loved explaining things. She yawned and said, 'Okay, so what's the prospector's name?'

Gerry pointed to the second line. 'Joseph Isaiah Beacon,' she read out - and the icy hand clamped round the back of Blake's neck, pushing her head down towards the ledger.

She stared at the curly letters, half a centimetre away from her nose. 'That's not a B,' she said. 'The pen made a tiny little blot on the paper. It's

actually a D. Joseph Isaiah Deacon.'

Gerry chuckled. 'Funny, one of my aunties is a deacon. She wanted to be a minister but her church won't let women do that. Still, she reckons being a deacon is nearly as good.'

Blake straightened up and blinked at her. 'So a deacon is. like, a religious person?' she said in a rush. 'Someone who preaches in a church or whatever?'

'Yeah, Blake. That's what I just said. Why are you getting so excited?'

She hung onto the bench, to steady herself. 'Gerry, I know him!' she gasped. 'I know who the prospector is. He reckoned he got his nickname way before he started talking like somebody out of the Bible. I bet his mates called him Preacher because his surname was Deacon.'

'Blake, you're a genius,' Gerry said as they piled into the car. 'We ought to celebrate. Want to drop in at my house for half an hour? My nanna makes the best pumpkin scones in the state - and she might be able to tell us a bit about Joseph Isaiah Deacon too.'

Gerry's grandmother looked like a little bird. Round body, skinny legs and a crest of white hair, bushing up from her lined chocolate-brown face. *Oh. So Nanna Barker's Aboriginal. That explains how she knows the old stories about the little brown frogs.*

Gerry gave her a hug and said, 'Nanna, this is Blake. I've just been raving about your pumpkin scones, so I hope they haven't gone stale or something.'

'Don't be cheeky, girl,' said Nanna Barker. 'Everyone knows pumpkin scones taste best straight from the oven. I can whip up a fresh batch in five minutes.'

She bustled round the kitchen, mixing butter and flour and mashed pumpkin, without even bothering to measure them. While she was patting the scones into shape, Gerry said, 'I'm still hunting for that mine, Nanna. Know anything about the old prospectors?'

Nanna Barker sniffed. 'A strange lot, that mob. Vague as violets, my mum used to say. Digging holes all over the place like wombats, till they found a seam of silver. Then they'd get restless and wander off, looking for the next lucky strike.' She laughed and added, 'Mind you, the prospectors always got on well with our people - even married Murri women sometimes. Us Murries like moving around too. Look at my grand-daughter, eh? Racing down to her best friend's wedding in Melbourne, back here to pack and then racing off just in time to start her new job in Baybeach.'

Blake's brain tried to hold onto two thoughts at once. One side of her brain thinking: *Good. Gerry started work a week ago - and Reece's teacher was*

bashed ten days before I arrived in Baybeach, so she didn't have anything to do with it. At the same time, the other side of her brain was remembering Jahlion's theory about the Aboriginal ghost.

'It must've been tough for the Murries who got stuck in Baybeach, digging for silver,' she commented and Nanna Barker swung round, looking surprised.

'Tough? No, girl. My father worked in the BSC mine and he was real proud of it. Everyone knew Murries made good miners, so they were paid good wages too, which wasn't usual in those days. Miners or stockmen, they were the best jobs for Aboriginal people back then.'

Blake chewed at her thumb. *Interesting. So Jahlion guessed wrong. The Aboriginal miners weren't treated badly, after all - which means that the ghost can't be an Aboriginal miner, out for revenge. Mind you, I never actually believed in that theory.*

I reckon I'm looking for a real live troublemaker, not a ghost.

The pumpkin scones were plump and sweet and light as sponge cake. Gerry and Blake ate three each and Nanna Barker packed the rest into a box for them to eat on the road. As they headed out to the car, Blake turned to wave goodbye.

'Nice meeting you, girl,' the old woman called. 'Come back to Gunyah some time.'

'What's Gunyah?' she asked as she scrambled into the car and Gerry said, 'It's the name of our house. When we moved in here, all the houses down the street had brass plates with fancy English names like Windermere and Derwent. Nanna's got a cheeky sense of humour, so she ordered a brass plate with Gunyah on it, because gunyahs are, like, Aboriginal houses. I made one myself once, in our backyard.'

In typical Gerry fashion, she started explaining how to build a gunyah. Starting with a big tree for the side wall. Tying branches with tough creepers for the back wall and the other side. Stitching pieces of bark together to cover the walls and make them stronger. Another big piece of bark as a sloping roof. Creepers hanging over the doorway, like a flywire screen.

Blake grinned. 'I like your nanna's sense of humour,' she said. 'Plus I like the way you know about traditional things - and modern things as well.'

'Hey, it figures,' Gerry said. 'Nanna reckons I get my feeling for mines from the white side of the family and my feeling for the land from the black side. I never actually met my great-grandfather, because Nanna's mother died young and he kind of drifted away from the family after that. But Nanna used to tell stories about Migaloo - that means whitefella, right? He got on really well with the Aboriginal miners, so they called him by an Aboriginal name.'

Blake frowned and turned her head away. Her family had a black side and a white side too but she didn't feel comfortable about it, the way Gerry did. Gerry seemed to have the best of both worlds. Living in a city and learning the

old stories from Nanna Barker. Working as a mining consultant and building gunyahs in her backyard.

She leaned back in her seat, thinking about her dreams of red earth - and her talks on the phone with Maureen - and Nanna Barker's stories about the mine. Suddenly she sat up straight and snapped her fingers.

'Rats!' she said. 'We forgot to ask your Nanna about Joseph Isaiah Deacon.'

'No, we didn't,' Gerry told her. 'Nanna's pretty smart. She guessed why we were interested in prospectors, so she kept us talking, to make sure we didn't get a chance to pin her down. There's a story about Joseph Isaiah Deacon but for some reason, Nanna didn't want to tell us right now. Don't worry, I'll get it out of her in the end.'

On the way back, Blake finally remembered to ask Gerry about the old bloke who used to work in the BSC mine. Gerry wrote down his address and dropped her off at the Baybeach mall. When Blake phoned the hospital, she found out that Reece had gone home already. She unlocked her bike and rode over to the Paxtons' house.

After Mrs Paxton had finished thanking her, which took about ten minutes, she escaped into the lounge room to see Reece. He was lying on the couch with a dozen cushions stacked behind him, staring out at the garage wall. Blake coughed and he turned his head, saying, 'Oh hi, Blake. They tell me you saved my life again.'

'You don't remember?' she asked and Reece said, 'Not a thing. I got up, had breakfast, went out to check my bike tyres - and after that, it's a complete blank. The doctor at the hospital reckons that happens sometimes, when you get a knock on the head. You forget being hit, plus you forget the time just before you got hit.'

'Damn,' Blake growled. 'So you don't know who set you up.'

'If anybody did,' Reece said, looking away.

'Hey, it's obvious that somebody thumped you. Look at that huge lump on your head.'

'Yes ... but I could've banged it on the steering wheel when I passed out.'

She frowned. 'In that case, how did you get into the car?'

'By opening the door and climbing inside, I guess,' Reece muttered.

He twisted his fingers together, so tightly that the knuckles went white. Blake stared at his hands, trying to make sense of what he'd just said. 'Hold on!' she burst out. 'You believe it. You actually believe you tried to gas yourself. Why, Reece?'

'Well, everyone else seems to believe it,' he whispered. 'Apparently, there

was an article about youth suicide in yesterday's paper. They reckon I could've got the idea from that. I knew Mum and Dad were on a health kick - Mum dashing off to early morning aerobics, Dad walking to work with Tahnya - which meant the house'd be empty for a while. Plus I was kind of upset last night ... and I don't remember anything about this morning. So I can't be sure I didn't do it, can I, Blake?'

His hands were shaking and his skin was grey and sweaty. Dark shadows under his eyes and a red-purple bruise on his forehead. Reece didn't look like tall, handsome Mr Popular any more. He looked like a stranger. A small unhappy stranger.

Blake's fists clenched behind her back. *This is the worst thing Reece's enemy has done to him so far. He didn't just knock Reece out. He knocked Reece's belief in himself as well.*

I'll get him for that, just wait and see. I'll track him down and make him tell Reece the truth.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Before she left, Blake remembered to ask about Mr Gray. Reece told her that his teacher was short and plump but pretty strong. It sounded as though he must've been attacked by a really big guy - *like Thumper, for instance* - or a couple of guys working together —*like Brady and Col*.

Reece didn't even bother to find out why she was interested in Mr Gray, which showed how miserable he was. Blake gave him a quick hug and hurried out to check the Paxtons' street directory. She drew a map in biro on the back of her hand, said goodbye to Mrs Paxton and went cycling off to the other side of Baybeach.

As she pedalled along, she thought about the things she'd found out so far. *I'm really into it now. No need for Maureen to push me along any more. Although I'd really like to talk to her about the mystery, all the same, as soon as I can find a phone somewhere quiet.*

Brady Connell was her best bet so far. He could've talked Col into helping him bash Mr Gray. He could've set the trip-wire in the park. He definitely could've hidden the BSC files, to make sure Gerry didn't find the mine. There was only one problem. Brady had helped her to haul Reece out of the garage, so he couldn't be the mysterious enemy who'd tried to gas Reece.

Still, she'd found out a bit more about the enemy. For one thing, he obviously knew the Paxton family fairly well, because he'd known that none of the other Paxtons would be around when he hit Reece on the head.

I'm getting closer all the time. Soon there'll only be one name left on my list.

I hope.

Blake checked the back of her hand, wheeled round a corner and spotted

a sign saying Baybeach Nursing Home. She hopped off her bike and pulled out the crumpled piece of paper that Gerry had given her. Marched over to the reception area and asked if she could speak to Mr Patrick Murphy.

'Who?' said the nurse. 'Oh, Murph. I've never heard anyone call him Mr Murphy. Come along, dear - but I warn you, he's a terrible old crosspatch.'

Murph was a small skinny old man with faded yellow-white hair and deep lines that tugged his mouth down. 'I was just going to have a nap,' he grumbled, when the nurse showed Blake in. 'What do you want?'

'I want to know about the BSC mine,' Blake said straight away.

He thumped the bedside table with his fist, rattling a row of family photos. The photo of a small, skinny, freckle-faced boy fell over and Murph shoved it back into line.

'Not again,' he snarled. 'So they're sending children to pester me now. I'll tell you the same thing I told that girl who came here the other day. Yeah, I worked in the BSC mine - but I'm not going to dob anyone in. People used to be loyal to their bosses, back in the old days, so when the lad asked me to keep my mouth shut, I said, "No worries".'

The lad? Does he mean Brady Connell? Or ...

She took a second look at the photos. Crossed her fingers behind her back for luck and said, 'Hey, no-one sent me here. Your grandson reckoned you might be able to help me with a school project, that's all.'

She held her breath and hoped she'd guessed right. Murph glanced at the photo of Col Clancy and said, 'Well, well. Our Col's got himself a girlfriend at last, has he? You're a bit small but then again, so is our Col. Come on, girlie, what would you like me to tell you?'

I'd like you to tell me where the mine is. But I think I'd better lead up to it gradually.

'Um, do you know any stories about the old prospectors?' she tried and Murph's eyebrows shot up.

'Funny you should ask. I thought I saw one of them in the mall the other day. standing on the exact spot where that old banyan tree used to be.'

Blake clamped her mouth shut, just before she yelled, 'Bingo!' If Murph was talking about Preacher, then he'd accidentally told her how to find the mine. She wanted to race off and phone Gerry straight away but she forced herself to sit still and keep listening.

'Let me see, what was the bloke's name?' Murph was saying. 'Oh yeah, Joe Deacon, only we called him Preacher, because he talked a blue streak. The BSC mine was his first big discovery and he was pleased as punch about it. A strange young chap, he was. Used to sit and yarn with the Abos, instead of coming to the pub with the rest of us. He even -'

Then he stopped suddenly, as the door squeaked open and an angry voice shouted, 'Jesus, it's you! What are you doing here, you fat fag?'

Blake groaned. *No prizes for guessing who that is. I'm not exactly fat and I'm definitely not a gay guy - but Col Clancy only seems to know two ways of insulting people.*

Col leaned over and yanked on her arm, dragging her to her feet. 'Leave my grandad alone,' he snarled. 'Get out or I'll throw you out, I swear.'

Murph chuckled. 'When our Col says "I swear", you know he really means it,' he croaked. 'You better do what he tells you, girlie, unless you're spoiling for a fight. Although, come to think of it, I wouldn't mind watching. Haven't seen a good brawl in ages.'

Blake glared at him. *Murph's Col's grandfather, all right. A pair of troublemakers, the two of them.* She jerked her arm down, getting ready to break Col's grip. Then she changed her mind, went limp and let Col push her out of the room. Sensei, her karate master, always said, 'Avoid fighting if you can. Fight if you can't avoid it.'

I'll try, Sensei. After all, I need to ask Col a few questions as well. It wouldn't be smart to start by spraining his wrist.

Col hustled her down the corridor, so fast that her sunhat fell off and got trampled. He wouldn't even stop and let her pick it up. As she stumbled down the front steps, she gasped, 'What's your problem, Col? Is your grandfather private property or something?'

Col stopped and blinked and went bright red. 'Sorry,' he muttered. 'I guess I lost it for a moment. Grandad's, like, my only real friend. I thought you were trying to turn him against me, by telling him about that stuff I did to Reece.'

'Wrong,' Blake said, rubbing her arms. 'Actually, I wasn't sure you'd done anything to Reece - but I'm sure now.'

He shrugged. 'So I tied that bit of fishing line across the path,' he said sulkily. 'Big deal. Reece deserved it. He's really up himself. I just wanted to prove he wasn't such an ace skateboarder, after all.'

'And what were you trying to prove, when you dared him to stand on the train tracks? You knew the timetable had been changed, didn't you?'

'No way!' Col yelped. 'Reece used to be a mate of mine, when we were little. Okay, we're not mates any more but I wouldn't do anything that dangerous, I swear.'

Blake took a long hard look at him. *Hmm. Col's not the most reliable guy in the world but Murph reckons that when he says, 'I swear', he's telling the truth.*

'I believe you,' she decided. 'Listen, Col, you and Reece could still be mates, y'know. He told me he felt sorry for you, because -'

Col's face turned even redder. 'Sorry for me?' he roared. 'That fag? I was going to lay off him, after that business with the train, but I'll get him for this. Reece Paxton is history now!'

He stormed back into the nursing home. Blake watched him go, kicking at

the pebbles on the drive. *That was stupid, Blake. Really stupid. I was trying to make things better and I made them worse instead.*

She trudged back to the reception desk and asked if she could use the phone. Rang Gerry and told her about the banyan tree in the mall. Gerry sounded really pleased, which cheered her up a bit.

'Of course, Murph's memory mightn't be as good as he thinks it is,' the consultant said, trying to be cautious. 'But we can go back to the rainforest and take a look, as soon as I've checked the survey map. Come straight over to my office in the town hall, Blake. See you soon.'

Blake rode back towards the centre of Baybeach, thinking about Col Clancy. She'd solved one part of the mystery but, unfortunately, it was the least important part. Okay, Col had tied the trip-wire round the trees but he swore he'd never do anything more dangerous. It looked as though Reece had *two* enemies, not one. Col and somebody much more dangerous.

As she crossed the railway line, she noticed a mass of tree tops in the distance. The sun was scorching the back of her neck, so she decided to take a detour through the park. It was cooler under the elm trees, cool as a green leafy cave. Blake smiled, remembering the little green cave she'd seen in the forest, just before the ghost spooked her. A small hut, made from bark and saplings and creepers.

Just like Gerry's gunyah.

Blake squeaked and nearly fell off her bike. She braked and propped the bike against an elm tree, while she thought things through. Someone had built a gunyah in the rainforest. A Murri or someone who'd spent a lot of time yarning with Murries. Joseph Isaiah Deacon, for example.

Oh wow, this is fantastic. I bet that's where Preacher's living now. If Gerry can't find the mine by measuring the distance from the banyan tree, we can always just wait around and watch the gunyah till the old guy comes home.

She reached for the bike, desperate to go and tell Gerry. But as she grabbed the handlebars, the icy hand gave her a sideways shove. The bike went clattering to the ground. Blake jumped backwards, swearing. And a voice from the other side of the elm tree said, 'Blake? Is that you?'

She peered round the tree trunk and saw Brady Connell, sitting on the grass with his hands clasped round his knees. 'Brady!' she said with a big smile and wondered why she was so pleased. Then she remembered the last time she'd seen Brady, at the Paxtons' house when he'd helped her to save Reece. They'd made a good team. It wasn't surprising that she liked him better than before.

Brady obviously felt the same way. As Blake sat down beside him, he

clutched her hand and said, 'Blake, I'm glad you turned up. I couldn't go to work, because I was feeling bad. Really bad.'

'Don't worry,' Blake murmured, remembering what Gerry and Mrs Paxton had told her. 'You're in shock, that's all. You'll be fine once it wears off.'

'No, it's worse than that,' Brady groaned. 'I feel bad because I've done something bad. I need to talk to someone about it. Please, Blake, can I talk to you?'

She blinked. *Something bad? What's he talking about? Not the trip-wire. Not the train timetable. Not the set up in the Paxtons' garage.*

'Okay,' she said, patting his hand. 'Go ahead, Brady. Talk.'

Brady took a deep breath. Stared off through the trees and said, 'At first I thought I was just doing my job. The Baybeach Council hired that consultant but I knew BSC would have big problems if Gerry found the mine before the end of next week. So I shredded BSC's files - and, um, borrowed the council's files - and told that old miner not to talk to Gerry.'

Oh, right. So Brady was the lad who warned Murph off. Should've guessed. Murph called Col Clancy 'our Col', not 'the lad'.

'That wasn't exactly legal,' she commented. 'And it wasn't fair to the people who were poisoned by the lead in the river. Still, I don't see why you're freaking about it, all of a sudden.'

'I'm not,' Brady said. 'I'm freaking because I almost killed Reece.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

'You *what?*' Blake yelled. 'But you helped me pull Reece out of the garage. Why ...? How ...? Oh hell, I suppose I better hear the whole story, even though I bet I'm not going to like it.'

'I told you I'd done something bad,' Brady whispered. 'It all started at that meeting, when Mr Paxton said Reece had made him think. I'd been convinced that Reece was just a greenie loser, like his feral mate Jahlion, but after that I got worried. I mean, if Mr Paxton started listening to Reece, he could blow the whole deal between BSC and Interco. I read this article in the paper and decided to set up a fake suicide, to make everyone believe Reece was a freaked-out kid who couldn't be trusted.'

'Well, it worked,' Blake said in a cold voice. 'Everyone believes you - including Reece. Why did you change your mind and save him at the last minute?'

Brady clutched her hand again. 'No!' he gasped. 'I never meant to kill Reece. I just knocked him out and ran the car engine for a while, so the garage would smell of exhaust fumes. I hid in the park and waited for Mrs Paxton to come home, so I'd have a witness when I pretended to discover Reece. But then you went charging into the garage and I realised something had gone wrong. Reece's foot must've slipped and jammed the accelerator, which meant the car kept on pumping out fumes. If that hadn't happened, it would've been fine.'

Blake scowled and pushed his hand away. 'Fine?' she snapped. 'I don't think so. It was a cruel thing to do, Brady. Cruel and terrible and -'

Tears were dripping down Brady's cheeks. 'I know that now,' he said. 'I

must've been off my face. No job's worth *that*. I'm just glad you got to Reece in time. What should I do, Blake? Should I go to the cops and tell them what really happened?'

She gritted her teeth. *Oh, great. Brady wants to turn me into his own personal judge and jury. I don't like it. Don't know what to say.*

Then an idea flashed into her mind, brilliant as a neon sign at night time. 'Okay, Brady,' she said, 'here's the plan. Go and see Reece. Tell him the whole story. Ask him what he wants you to do. And do it, right?'

Brady gulped. 'T-tell *Reece*?' he stammered. 'That's way worse than telling the cops. But - yes, all right. I get the point. I'll go over there straight away.'

He stood up, straightened his shoulders and went marching towards the Paxtons' house. Blake climbed onto her bike and wobbled off, hoping she'd done the right thing. At least Reece would feel better once he knew the truth - and it would definitely do Brady good to front up to Reece.

It looked as though she'd found both of Reece's enemies, all in one day. If she could track down the mine as well, she'd have a perfect score.

As she pedalled down the main street, people kept turning to stare at her. She was staring back crossly when she remembered that she was still wearing Teya and Fern's tribal gear, minus the sunhat. Blake sighed. She'd told the tribals she just wanted to be ordinary - but she didn't really fit in Baybeach either.

Wonder if I'll ever fit anywhere.

Gerry was out on the town hall steps, pacing up and down. The minute she spotted Blake, she yelled, 'Wait here. I'll go and get the car.' Blake propped the bike against a post and bent over to lock the chain.

And a huge hand landed on her shoulder.

Oops. My mistake. Should've bought a new sunhat, to cover my hair. I'm done for now. I'd know that hand anywhere.

It's Thumper.

The big guy spun her around, still holding on tight. 'Don't run away,' he boomed. 'We got something to tell you.'

He glanced at Greg, who grinned and said, 'You don't make things easy, do you, kid? We've been chasing you for the last twenty-four hours, trying to explain that your dad called us off.'

'What?' Blake squawked. 'You mean you won't be following me round any more?'

Greg shrugged. 'Your mum - well, your other mum, Mrs Williams - when she came back from the Top End, she talked Mr Williams into leaving you alone. She reckons you'll go and see him when you're good and ready, so

there's no point in hassling you.'

'She's right,' Blake agreed. *Thanks, Mum.* Then she blinked and added, 'Hey, did you just say you'd only been in Baybeach for the last twenty-four hours?'

'Want to see our plane tickets?' Greg asked sarcastically and Blake said, 'Yes.' He fished the tickets out of his pocket and handed them over. She checked them and nodded.

Good. Greg and Thumper couldn't have bashed Mr Gray. I'm glad about that. Partly because it means my father didn't order them to do it - and partly because I kind of like Greg and Thumper.

As she passed the tickets back, she said, 'Y'know, in a funny sort of way I'll miss you.'

'Me too,' Thumper rumbled. 'You're an okay kid.'

'Too smart for your own good,' Greg told her. 'You made us work hard for our money, all right. Good luck, Athena - I mean, Blake.'

He held out his hand and she shook it. Thumper gave her a friendly punch, knocking her sideways, and they went striding off, just before Gerry's car pulled up. 'Were those two thugs hassling you?' she asked as Blake got in.

'No,' she said. 'The opposite, really. I'll tell you about it some time - but right now we've got work to do.'

Gerry drove out to the bridge and parked the car beside the highway. While they were scrambling down the bank to the river, Blake saw something moving, out of the corner of her eye. She looked up at the tall steel girders and noticed a small metal platform, just below the railing of the bridge. A small grubby face peered over the edge for half a second and then disappeared.

Interesting. I think I know where Big Suze is hiding. Trust her to hit on a place where she can watch everyone and everything.

Then she forgot about Big Suze, as they plunged into the rainforest. Gerry led the way, survey map in one hand, compass in the other hand. After a while, the creeks and the trees started to look familiar. When Gerry stopped to check the map, Blake tugged her arm and said. 'This way.'

'You're right,' Gerry agreed. 'But how did you know?'

'Because the little green cave's just over here. Look!'

They lifted a curtain of creeper and gazed around at a big tree, a bark hut leaning against it and a tangle of thorny bushes.

'Hey!' Gerry exclaimed. 'I've seen those bushes before. They're the ones at the end of Dead Frog Creek. The little brown frogs, the gunyah, the directions Joseph Isaiah Deacon gave when he claimed the miner's right - all the clues point to the same place. This is it, Blake! The opening to the mine's somewhere inside that wall of bushes.'

"That's nice,' Blake said politely. 'Except that it'll take three days and a chainsaw to cut through the bushes. We don't have that much time.'

'Fear not,' a voice boomed from behind them. 'For, lo, I bring you tidings of great joy.'

Blake looked round. An old man had appeared in front of the gunyah. Long white hair, long white beard, coat billowing like a wizard's cloak. Preacher, turning up at exactly the right moment, just like magic. She shivered.

Omlgod. What if Preacher's the ghost everyone keeps talking about?

But next minute Preacher's coat blew back and Blake saw a big torch swinging from his hand. She giggled with relief. No way would a ghost need to carry an industrial strength torch. As she relaxed, Gerry took a step forward, smiling at the old man and saying, 'Hi. You're Joseph Isaiah Deacon, right?'

'Verily,' he murmured. 'My name is also called Preacher by some and by others I am called Migaloo.'

His voice changed as he said the last word, rolling it deep in his throat. Gerry's eyes widened. 'Migaloo?' she repeated. 'I've been hearing stories about you, ever since I was a kid. So that's what Nanna didn't want to talk about. You're - I think you're my great-grandfather.'

She looked as though she wanted to race over and hug Preacher. *Except that Preacher's not an easy sort of guy to hug.* He bowed his head and said, 'Yea, child, you speak the truth. Your face is the face of one I loved, many long years ago. The angel led me to you. I knew that you would come to wash the waters clean again. Follow me and I will show you the way.'

He turned and walked straight into the thorn bushes. Gerry gasped and raced after him. Laughed and swung back and said, 'It's okay, Blake. There's a path. Quick, before we lose him.'

They scuttled along behind Preacher, twisting to dodge the thorns. ('They're called wait-a-bit bushes,' Gerry explained, 'because, if you're not careful, they grab you and say "Wait-a-bit"'.') Blake tripped on a long snaky root, swerved to miss a thorny branch and bumped into Preacher's back.

'No need for haste, child,' he said kindly. 'Behold, the gates are always open.'

She ducked past his elbow and saw a high wooden frame, rising up from a mound of earth. Water trickled out of the doorway, running down a narrow channel to join a creek on the far side of the wait-a-bit bushes. It was dark inside. Very dark. Preacher switched on his torch and sent a yellow beam tunnelling into the blackness.

'Come, children,' he said and they followed him into the BSC silver mine.

It was like walking into an enormous barrel. The walls were lined with overlapping pieces of timber, solid as a tall fence. But the ground had been pressing down on it for so long that the wood had curved into a half-circle. When something creaked beside her, Blake jumped and backed away.

Help! What if the timber's finally cracked? What if all that dirt starts pouring through the gap?

Gerry chuckled. 'Relax, Blake. Old mines always talk to themselves. While it's creaking, you're safe. It's when everything goes silent that you need to start worrying.'

She gave Blake a gentle push. Preacher led them further down the tunnel until they came to a wide dark pool. Gerry fished a jar out of her anorak pocket, knelt down and filled it with water.

'There,' she said, straightening up. 'I'll take the sample to the city tomorrow and get it tested for lead. We've done it, Blake. Now BSC will have to clean up the river and look after the people in Baybeach. We've won!'

It sounded good but somehow Blake couldn't get excited. Maybe because the icy fingers had folded round her hand and started tugging hard. She checked the mine quickly. No signs of trouble. Just Preacher wiping the jar with his big hanky and booming, 'Well done, good and faithful servants,' his voice loud in the silence.

The silence?

'Run!' Blake yelled. 'Run as fast as you can.'

As she darted past the pool, she saw Gerry's eyes, bright in the torchlight, staring at her with surprise. Heard the earth groan and rumble overhead. A rock smashed the shiny surface of the pool. Gerry screamed. Preacher bellowed, 'Flee, child. Flee from the wrath that is to come.' More rocks fell.

And the torch went out, plunging the mine into darkness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

So dark, like being wrapped up in a black blanket. So dark that Blake kept tripping and almost falling, because she couldn't see her feet. She waved her fingers in front of her face - and hit her nose, because she couldn't see her hand either.

'Gerry!' she shouted. 'Gerry! Preacher! Gerry!'

No answer. Not even an echo. Only the creaking of the timber and a loud steady thud. Blake listened hard, trying to work out where the thud was coming from.

Oh. It's my heart. Beating faster than usual - but that's not surprising.

She groped through the darkness, slipping in puddles and bumping against walls. Finally she saw a square of grey light in the distance. She hurried towards it and stumbled out into the open air. Looked around at the trees and the wait-a-bit bushes, calling, 'Gerry? Preacher?'

No answer.

No-one there.

Blake sank onto the grass, burying her face in her hands. *Have to go and get help. In a minute. As soon as I stop shaking.*

Then she heard a sound from the mine, a sound like shuffling feet. As she looked up, Gerry came staggering through the doorway and collapsed beside her. 'Blake!' she gasped. 'You made it. Is Migaloo here too?'

Blake shook her head and Gerry groaned, 'Oh no, I don't believe it. That was my great-grandfather - and I've lost him, before we even had a chance to talk. I've lost the sample of water too. Migaloo was holding the jar when the roof fell in.'

'Hey, don't give up yet,' Blake said. 'If the roof didn't fall on top of

Preacher, he could still be okay.'

'Not for long,' Gerry said grimly. 'I checked, Blake. There's a solid wall of rock, blocking the mine. The air'll run out soon.'

'Then we better get moving,' she said but Gerry grabbed her wrist.

'No,' she snapped. 'We have to stay. We're needed. I can't explain properly but - well, this is my country and -'

She stopped and frowned and rubbed her forehead. 'It's okay,' Blake said quietly. 'I understand. I feel the same way about the place my people come from. I'm Aboriginal too - or part Aboriginal or whatever you call it.'

Gerry nodded. 'Yeah, I know. Nanna told me, when she phoned this afternoon. I wish she was here now! I'm just a city kid. I don't know how to handle this sort of thing.' Her hand tightened around Blake's wrist and she whispered, 'Please, Blake, help me. Nanna reckons you're one of the clever ones. You can do it. I know you can.'

Blake started to shake again. *It's not fair. Everyone keeps telling me I have these special powers - but I can't just push a button and make them work.*

'Sorry, Gerry,' she muttered. 'I'd like to help, only I don't know what to do. Got any suggestions?'

'Dunno. Um, maybe we could sort of close our eyes and concentrate. I saw something like that in a science fiction movie once.'

They sat there in silence, shoulders pressed together, concentrating hard. After a while Blake twitched and jumped and realised she'd fallen asleep for a few seconds. *Well, it's been a long day. But this isn't exactly the right time for a nap.* She pinched her leg, to keep herself awake. Leaned against Gerry's shoulder and promptly fell asleep again.

She was walking across red earth, under a hazy blue sky. Moving steadily towards the horizon. Smiling as she stopped in front of a tall red rock, shaped by the wind and the weather till it looked like a hand. In her dream, Blake could hear Auntie Vi's voice, saying, '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.'

Oh. I wasn't sure what Auntie Vi meant when she said that before - but I think I get it now. Looks like I've found my mother land at last, even though this is only a dream.

Her eyes flicked open. When she turned her head, Gerry was staring at the mine shaft with a strange, startled look on her face. 'Blake,' she breathed, 'can you hear someone singing?'

'No,' she said, puzzled. 'Can't hear a thing.'

She leaned forward but Gerry pulled her back, saying, 'Don't move. I can only hear it while our shoulders are touching. Oh, it's so sad - but it's beautiful too. A woman's voice, singing in language. My people's language.'

There were tears in her eyes but she was smiling at the same time. As she

sighed happily, Preacher came striding through the wait-a-bit bushes, holding the jar of water carefully in front of him.

'She came to me,' he told them. 'My beloved made a path for my feet and led me out of the darkness. My eyes have seen her one more time, just as I hoped when I returned to this sacred place.'

They spent the night in Gerry's motel room. Gerry in one bed, Blake in the other bed and Preacher on the floor, because he said the mattresses were too soft. He went to sleep straight away but Blake and Gerry sat up, talking in whispers. Blake told Gerry about her dream. Gerry told Blake about the bolt holes that the miners built into the old mines, in case the walls or the roof collapsed.

'Narrow tunnels, just big enough for someone to crawl along. Migaloo would never have been able to find it in the dark. But my great-grandmother's spirit came and saved him. They must've been very happy here, back in the days when Joseph Isaiah Deacon was a hot-shot young prospector who got on well with Murri people and married a Murri woman. Thanks for helping them, Blake.'

Blake frowned. *Yeah, I reckon that dream helped, even if I'm not sure how. Maureen and Auntie Vi'll probably be able to explain it, though. I'll give Mum a ring first thing tomorrow. No - second thing, after I talk to Reece.*

I've sorted out all the bits of his mystery now. He ought to be the first to know.

Gerry got up at dawn and headed off to deliver the sample of mine water to a laboratory in the city. She hustled Preacher out to the car, winking at Blake and saying, 'Nanna'll have a great time feeding him up.' Preacher patted Blake on the head and said, 'Go in peace, child. Thy father's house has many mansions.'

She smiled politely. *Typical Preacher. Like Nanna Barker said, vague as a violet.*

Blake ate a big motel breakfast. Then she scooted across to the town hall, unchained Tahnya's bike and rode over to the Paxtons' house. As she pulled up, Reece came jogging down the front path with his skateboard under his arm.

'Where are you going?' she asked and Reece said, 'To the hospital. Mr Gray's a morning person, so I decided to drop in before school.'

'School?' Blake said, startled. 'Can't you take the day off, after what happened yesterday?'

'No way. Everyone'll be gossiping like mad already. If I don't turn up, they'll believe all the stories - and invent some new ones.'

She stared. 'Funny, I wouldn't have thought you'd care what people said about you.'

Reece frowned and then laughed. 'I'm a small-town hero, Blake. I've got people watching me the entire time, so I have to put on a good show.' He dropped his skateboard, paused and added, 'Listen, what are you doing here, anyway?'

Blake started to grin and didn't stop until the grin almost touched her ears. 'I've got news for you,' she said. 'Good news, Reece. The best.'

While they headed across to the hospital, Blake cycling and Reece on his skateboard, she told him the whole story about Preacher and the mine. Reece was a great audience. He gasped at the scary parts, chuckled at her jokes and kept telling her how brave she was.

'I wish I could've been the one who found the mine,' he said honestly. 'But you did a fantastic job, Blake. I knew you were special, right from the day when I met you at the bridge. That's where I met Jah as well. It's always been an important place for me.'

She blushed and muttered, 'Thanks.' Decided it was time to change the subject and said quickly, 'Hey, by the way, did Brady come to see you?'

'That poor guy? Yeah, we had a big talk. He told me how his father used to push him all the time - like, nothing was ever good enough. I reckon Brady secretly pretends that Dad's his real father. That's why he was prepared to do anything to help BSC.'

Poor guy? Only Reece Paxton could feel sorry for someone who almost topped him. He really is close to perfect, just like I always thought.

They arrived at the hospital and sped down the corridors to Mr Gray's room. Reece's teacher was propped on a stack of pillows, reading the morning paper. A small plump man in his forties, with friendly eyes and an impressive collection of yellow bruises.

Reece made Blake tell her story all over again. But halfway through, he glanced at the clock on the wall and said, 'Sorry, do you mind if I rush off now?'

'Not a problem,' Blake said, meaning it. There was an empty echo at the back of her brain, as though she'd lost something or forgotten something. And for some reason she was convinced that Mr Gray could tell her what it was.

When she finished her story, he smiled and said, 'Thank you, Blake. You've done a lot for Baybeach. I just wish there was something Baybeach could do for you.'

The echo at the back of Blake's brain got louder. 'Oh!' she said. 'Actually, there is. Well, there's something *you* can do for me, at any rate. I got interested in this mystery because Reece was worried that you'd been bashed for criticising BSC - and I just realised I never found out who attacked you. I hate leaving bits of a puzzle unsolved. Could you fill me in, please?'

The teacher wriggled uncomfortably. 'Oh, Blake,' he murmured, 'that's got nothing to do with the BSC mine.'

'Are you sure?' she asked. 'Someone played a dirty trick on Reece too, because he was speaking out against BSC, same as you.'

Mr Gray studied her in silence for a while. Nodded and took a deep breath and said, 'You're a good kid, Blake. I think I ought to trust you. This is what happened. I was walking home through the park late one night, with a friend of mine. We stopped under a tree and kissed - and someone yelled out, "You fat fag". Well, I *am* fat and I *am* a fag, so I just laughed - and next minute three blokes were beating me up. My friend managed to get away and call the cops but by the time they arrived, the three blokes had run off.'

Blake shivered. *Oh no. Looks like Col Clancy finally met a real live fat fag - and he freaked right out.* She cleared her throat and said, 'Um, Mr Gray, I think I know who the guys were.'

'No names,' he said quickly. 'I don't want to do anything about it. I hope you won't think I'm a coward, Blake, but - well, Baybeach is a very small town. Everyone tries to look the same and act the same, which means they get kind of nervous about guys like me. So I decided not to tell the cops the full story.'

'But you can't let those guys get away -' Blake began and then stopped and said, 'Okay, fair enough.'

I don't like it when Baybeach stares at me because of what I'm wearing. I'd feel way worse if they were staring because of who I am.

She wandered over to the window and gazed out at the sea. For some reason, she'd been convinced that the attack on Mr Gray was important - but actually it had nothing to do with the rest of the mystery.

Well, almost nothing. Blake had wondered why Col's mates backed off so fast, when he dared Reece to stand on the train tracks. But they'd probably felt bad after helping to bash Mr Gray, so they'd been grabbing at any excuse to cut loose from Col.

They've got a point too. I thought Col was a bit of a joke but now I've heard Mr Gray's story, he seems a whole lot more dangerous. He really meant it when he said, 'I get mad sometimes'.

So maybe he really meant it when he said, 'Reece Paxton is history'.

'Omigod,' she said, swinging round. 'Mr Gray, I have to go. Reece has these two enemies and I was sure I'd fixed them both. But I think one of them might still be after him.'

Luckily, there was a taxi waiting outside the hospital. Blake jumped in and said, 'Baybeach Secondary College, please.' She watched the houses flicking past and the numbers flicking over on the meter. Paid the driver, jumped out and gasped with relief, as she saw Reece skating through the school gates.

Then she gasped again, as she focused on the front wall of the school. It was covered with graffiti in luminous pink spray paint. The same words, over

and over again.

'Reece Paxton is a fag. True.'

Reece froze. He stared at the graffiti for half a second, kicked the ground and sent his skateboard spinning in a circle. Blake's heart went cold, as if an icy hand had wrapped around it. As she clutched her chest, Reece pushed past her and went skating at top speed down the road.

No, Reece. Bad move. You should've stuck around and made a joke of it.

Then again, like you told me this morning, you care what people say about you.

She whirled round but the taxi was already cruising off. Behind her, someone laughed. When she whirled back, Blake spotted Col Clancy, leaning on the handlebars of his old bike and admiring the graffiti.

'Nice work, hey?' he said with a grin. 'I'm a good writer, aren't I?'

Blake lost her temper. 'Thought you said you wouldn't do anything dangerous to Reece,' she yelled. 'Well, you've done it now. The guy's been seriously stressed this week, what with that meeting - and fights with his dad and Jahlion - and Brady Connell's stupid stunt. You might've pushed him right over the edge. Give me your bike. I have to go and find him.'

She didn't really expect Col to hand his bike over but to her surprise, he offered to take her anywhere she wanted. *I don't often lose my temper - but I must look pretty scary when it happens.* They jolted through the streets of Baybeach, Col pedalling, Blake hanging on and giving directions. Ten minutes later the silver arch of the bridge loomed up ahead of them.

Reece had said the bridge was an important place for him, so Blake was hoping he'd be there. But the bridge was empty, except for a skateboard propped against the railing.

And Brady Connell, talking into a mobile phone.

Cold fingers tightened round Blake's heart. 'What's wrong?' she called out.

Brady shoved the phone into his pocket. 'Blake!' he exclaimed. 'You always seem to turn up when I'm in trouble. I was driving across the bridge, on my way to work, when I saw Reece Paxton climb over the railing. He's sitting on one of the metal girders now -and he says he'll jump if anyone tries to talk to him. It doesn't make sense. I thought he was supposed to be the most popular guy in Baybeach.'

'He is,' Blake told him. 'That's why he freaked when this idiot spray painted his school with a lot of lies.'

'Lies?' Col sniffed. 'Who says I'm lying? Everyone thinks Reece Paxton is so wonderful but he doesn't fool me. I found out that his favourite teacher's a fag, so I got Reece to play Truth or Dare - and he went through with that crazy dare, because he was scared of what I'd ask, if he picked Truth. Then I saw him hug that feral kid at the meeting and I knew, for sure.'

She sighed. 'Come off it. Col. That doesn't mean a thing. You're just

guessing.'

'Sure I am,' he agreed. 'But look at the way Reece reacted. I bet I guessed right.' He smirked and added, 'Hey, my life isn't that great but at least I'm not a fag like Reecey babe.'

'No, you're a sick little puppy,' Blake snapped. 'Reece isn't -'

Then she stopped herself, before she could say, 'Reece isn't gay.' What made her so sure? Okay, Reece was tall and popular and an ace footballer - but gay people came in all shapes and sizes. From super-stunning, like Maureen's cousin Shane, to super-ordinary, like Shane's boyfriend Kenny Malone or Mr Gray.

Mr Gray. He was an adult and yet he couldn't cope with telling the cops he was gay. If Col was right, no way could Reece cope with seeing his big secret spray painted across the front of his school, where everyone in Baybeach could read it.

Oh wow. Maybe Reece had three enemies, all along. Brady and Col - and himself. Everyone thinks he's Mr Perfect but maybe he doesn't feel perfect underneath.

She was still trying to think things through when a cop car pulled up on the grass beside the bridge. As Reece's mum and dad and sister tumbled out of the back seat, three more people came pelting round the corner from the highway. Teya and Jahlion and Fern. Blake groaned quietly.

Oh good. The gang's all here.

Mr Paxton hurried over and grabbed her left elbow. 'Blake, thank goodness!' he gasped. 'What's going on?' At the same moment Jahlion grabbed her right elbow and said, 'Blake, have you seen Big Suze? She broke in last night and trashed our kitchen. Teya saw her hanging round the bridge, so we thought we might find her here.'

But Blake couldn't answer either of them, because the icy hand was squeezing her heart like an orange. *Damn. I should've noticed before. The icy hand always does this to me when Reece is around. Okay, that settles it. Reece has definitely felt miserable for ages - and I seem to have been picking up on his feelings.*

She rubbed her chest and looked around. One of the cops was getting ready to climb down the bank. Mrs Paxton was crying. Mr Paxton was pacing like an animal in a cage. And the three tribal kids were huddled together, gazing at the bridge with round frightened eyes.

Come on, Blake. You have to do something.

Now.

Blake closed her eyes and saw red earth and blue sky shimmering on the darkness. Looked up at a tall red rock shaped like a hand. Whispered, 'Mother land, show me what to do.' Felt the icy hand melt and change into a warm hand, warm as a rock in the desert. She smiled.

Yes, of course. I've been picking up on Reece's feelings by accident, so maybe I can do it on purpose. If the hand helps me.

As she relaxed, the red earth and blue sky disappeared. Instead, Blake could see the bridge's metal girders and the river tumbling over brown boulders, a long way below. The hand seemed to have given her mind a push and sent it reaching out to touch Reece.

Reece - and someone else.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

'Hey, there's two people under the bridge,' Blake said in surprise. 'Reece is hanging onto the girders and then, over on the metal platform - oh, it's Big Suze! Reece is saying, "Go away" and she's saying, "No, it's my bridge". Reece says, "Please go. You shouldn't watch. I'm planning to jump", and Big Suze goes, "So? It's a free country. I can't stop you".'

Beside her. Fern laughed shakily. 'That's Big Suze, all right. She says, "It's a free country" every time she does something mean.'

'And it's exactly like Reece too,' Jahlion said quietly. 'He's always polite, even when he feels terrible.'

The Paxtons nodded hard, agreeing with Jahlion. Mrs Paxton whispered to the cop on the bridge and he turned to wave to the cop climbing down the bank. 'Wait a second,' he hissed. 'They reckon the girl's onto something. Come to think of it, didn't the cops down south use a psychic to find those missing kids?'

The second cop scrambled up to the road. He pushed back his hat, scratched his head and said, 'Okay, kid, show me how it works. Tell us what they're talking about now.'

Blake squeezed her eyes shut and reached out again. She said, 'Big Suze is going, "What's your problem? You got a pretty nice life. Nice family, nice school and a really cool boyfriend". Reece looks even more upset. He says, "How did you know?" and she says, "Ah, I know everyone's secrets. Saw you and Jahlion kissing in the rainforest, didn't I? Jesus wept, are you doing this just 'cause you fancy guys, not girls?'"

Someone gasped. When Blake glanced sideways, she saw Jahlion turning pale and Mr Paxton turning red. *Oops, maybe I shouldn't be repeating*

everything I hear. But I'm new to this. I can't listen and think at the same time, not yet.

'Go on, Blake,' Mrs Paxton breathed, so she closed her eyes and connected with Reece and Big Suze again. Reece was telling the streetkid how he'd spent years hoping he'd wake up one morning and find he was the same as everyone else.

'It was wonderful meeting Jahlion,' he said. 'But terrifying as well. Once I realised I'd fallen in love with him, I knew I could never be the way Baybeach wants me to be. I froze when Col Clancy dared me to stand on the train tracks, because I thought it'd be easier to be dead. And I still think it would be.'

Big Suze wasn't impressed. She kicked the girder and said, 'You reckon you've got it bad? Me, I lived in five different foster homes before I hit the streets. My last foster father beat me every day and that wasn't all he did. But I never tried to top myself. I just ran away again.'

She swung her feet and scowled down at Reece. 'Watch it,' he said, sounding worried. 'You could fall, if you're not careful. You better go back onto the bridge.'

'No way,' Big Suze snapped. 'I'm not scared of heights. Besides, I'm not leaving till you do.'

There was silence for a moment. Silence in the crowd around Blake. Silence between the two kids under the bridge. 'What's happening?' Col Clancy said urgently. 'Keep talking, Blake. You gotta tell us if Reece is going to be okay.'

Blake took a deep breath. 'Reece is leaning out over the river,' she reported. 'He's saying, "But half of Baybeach is waiting on that bridge. I can't go up there, Suze. I just can't." And Big Suze is saying -'

Her throat hurt, as if there was something stuck in it. Blake gulped and hiccupped and burst into tears. She wiped the tears away but her face was wet again within seconds.

Howling like a baby, in front of all these people. How embarrassing.

No-one moved. They just kept standing there, staring at Blake and then staring down at the river. They were still standing and staring when a grubby hand hooked onto the edge of the bridge and Big Suze ducked between the rails.

'Get a move on,' she grumbled, reaching back. 'I told you I'd go first, if it means so much to you.'

She heaved hard. Reece swung himself over the railing and faced the crowd, still hanging onto Big Suze's small hand. Blake blinked hard. *Amazing. Suze didn't say one nice thing to Reece. But she rescued him, just the same.*

Before anyone else could move, Jahlion walked straight over to Reece. 'Don't ever do that again,' he said fiercely, as if the two of them were alone.

'Nothing's that bad, Reece. Nothing.'

Reece was swaying on his feet but he managed to give Jahlion a faint smile. 'Ah, what would you know, Jah?' he said. 'Your parents are a pair of old hippies. You've been a rebel ever since you were in nappies. I always fitted in, up until now.'

The tribal kid shrugged. 'So? Maybe you still *do* fit in, where it counts.'

He gave Reece a gentle push and sent him stumbling over to his parents. Mrs Paxton clutched his hand, sobbing, 'He's right, Reece. It doesn't make any difference. You're still our boy.'

'Am I?' he asked, looking over her shoulder.

For a second or two Blake felt as though the whole world was holding its breath. Then Mr Paxton met Reece's eyes and said gruffly, 'Yes, of course. Johnny Walters, the best full forward the Quokkas ever had, turned out to be gay, remember. If I can cope with that, I can cope with you.'

They stared at each other for a second longer and then his father pulled Reece into a bear hug. All of a sudden, everyone else relaxed. Brady Connell blew his nose loudly. Teya and Fern started dancing in circles. The two cops shook hands and said, 'So are we going to put that mind-reading stuff in our report - or not?' And Col Clancy edged over to Jahlion and muttered, 'Listen, mate, tell Reece I'm sorry.'

Blake scowled. *Oh, sure. Col's sorry now but next minute he'll get mad at someone else. Although, come to think of it, he never saw Mr Gray after he'd bashed him but he's seen what he did to Reece - and to his family and friends. Maybe this time he'll work out a way to do something useful with all that anger.*

Hope so.

She was crossing her fingers for luck when Mrs Paxton swooped down on Big Suze, hugging the streetkid and saying, 'Susan, we can never thank you enough. You'll come home with us, of course - and stay for as long as you like. I always wanted another girl, you know.'

Big Suze wriggled and kicked and then flung her arms round Mrs Paxton's plump waist, holding on tight. Blake grinned and went off to pick Brady's pocket. She thumbed the buttons on his mobile phone and said, 'Mum, it's me. Sorry I haven't rung before but I've been doing what you told me to do. Solving mysteries, a whole heap of them. Dreaming about mother land. I'll be back soon - but first I have to face up to Dad. Can't put it off any longer, right?'

The phone line crackled noisily and then she heard Maureen saying, '...wasn't worried, Blake. Auntie Vi said you were fine and besides, I think I'm getting better at this mother/daughter thing. Call me again, when you get to a proper phone. And - I love you, kid.'

'Love you too,' Blake mumbled and checked to make sure no-one had heard her.

She slid the mobile back into Brady's pocket. Ripped a page from her notebook and scribbled, 'Reece - your sister's bike is outside Baybeach Hospital. Good luck - Blake.' Gave the note to Jahlion, said 'Good luck' to him as well and headed for the highway, glancing back over her shoulder for one last look at Reece and his dad.

As she walked down to the bus stop, she spotted a bus-shaped cloud of dust on the horizon. It seemed like a good omen. *I reckon I'm getting close to the end of my shaman's journey now. Accepting my powers, like Teya said, even if I don't really know how they work yet.*

The bus pulled up in front of her. Blake paid the driver and hurried down to the last seat. She pressed her nose against the back window, watching Baybeach disappear. A stripe of blue sea in the distance. A fuzz of gum trees. And a huge bridge like a steel rainbow.

Reece and his dad managed to sort things out, even though they're different. Maybe - just maybe - there's hope for me and my dad too.

She sighed and whispered, 'Thanks, Baybeach.' Turned round and fixed her eyes on the highway ahead of her, stretching out towards the big city and the final stage of her journey.

Copyright © 1999, 2016 by Jenny Pausacker.

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Jenny Pausacker asserts her moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

Ebook produced in Australia.