

Can You Keep a Secret?

JENNY PAUSACKER

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CHAPTER ONE

It is after midnight and an undersized boy is riding his bike through the empty streets of Richmond. The boy is me.

During the last couple of months I feel as though I've pedalled my way all over the city of Melbourne. It isn't true, though. Actually I've only cycled between Richmond and Kew, where I live. Then again the two suburbs are far apart, in more ways than one.

And I've certainly spent a lot of hours on this bike, riding to and fro with nothing to do but think. In fact, I doubt that I've ever thought so much in my life, though I also never had so much to think about before.

Come to that, I never even spent a lot of time on my own before. At school I always seem to be in a crowd of some sort, out on the footy field or horsing about between classes. Then at home the family is always around, or else there's Charley Haughton who lives up the road and is my best friend.

At least, he was my best friend.

Just as I'm thinking about Charley, a dog comes streaking out from the gap in a picket fence, ears flattened against its skull. It gives one of those dangerous low growls in the back of its throat and leaps for my trouser leg. The front wheel wobbles, the dog crouches back on its haunches for a better aim and I go pedalling furiously to the opposite side of the road.

The dog chases me for a while, yapping and snarling, but eventually it drops behind. If I were Charley, I would stay on the wrong side of the road, just for the heck of it. I'm not Charley, however. Despite everything that's happened to me, I'm still law-abiding Graham Thompson. So, as soon as it's safe, I veer back to where I ought to be, even though there isn't a car or a tram or a horse and cart in sight.

Glancing down at my ankle, I see that the dog has carried away a chunk of my pants as a souvenir. That's fine, because I'm not wearing my smart school uniform tonight, with its striped blazer, smart straw hat and neatly creased trousers. Instead I'm dressed in rags from head to foot - from greasy cap to battered boots.

This is the last time I will be wearing these borrowed clothes and I find myself wondering what will become of them afterwards. Then I find myself wondering what will become of me and I don't want to think about that.

What will I think about, then?

There's a long ride ahead of me. I've made sure of that by taking the roundabout route along Hoddle and Johnston Streets, instead of sailing comfortably down Church Street to the junction. At this hour of night you'd think that I'd want to get home as quickly as possible. But if I ride slowly, then maybe by the time I arrive I'll have some idea of what I've been doing. The only trouble is that it's all too big, it's too hard to take in.

All right then, Graham, begin at the beginning - wherever that is.

CHAPTER TWO

When I was little, my mother used to recite a poem to me, which went something like this:

*For want of a nail, the shoe was lost,
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost,
For want of a horse, the rider was lost,
For want of a battle, the kingdom was lost,
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.*

In the same sort of way, when I look back as far as I can, it turns out that I wouldn't be cycling through Richmond now if Charley hadn't made me miss the tram to school several months ago. Charley would enjoy that - he likes to think that he's at the bottom of everything that goes on - and I only hope that I'll be able to tell him about it some day.

Charley enjoyed making me late, too. It was an on-going battle between the two of us. Most of the time I won, because I was more determined, but Charley always got a kick out of trying. He would forget his hat or his prep, he would strike up an argument with some fellow along the way, he would dawdle as slowly as he could manage. And I would hurry him up again, check his bag before we set out and drag him firmly away from the arguments. We were actually climbing aboard the tram that morning when Charley glanced over his shoulder and jumped down again.

"What's the matter?" I called crossly.

“Some poor old bloke’s lost his broolly.”

It was true. I could see a huge black umbrella bouncing awkwardly down the street, as the wind tossed and dropped it. In my best boy scout fashion I leapt from the moving tram and gave chase. We followed the umbrella for half a block, whooping wildly and then Charley made a pounce and we carried it back to the old man in triumph.

After he had thanked us several times, Charley turned to me with a wicked glint in his eye.

“Well, that’s your good deed for the day, Gray. What a shame you’ll be late for school because of it.”

That was Charley for you. I’m sure that he really wanted to help the old man, but I’m also sure he knew all along that it would make us late. Still, there was no point in kicking up a fuss about it now. When we finally sneaked into the school grounds, ducking down while we passed the classroom windows, I followed Charley meekly to his secret hide-out in the basement, pretending that I enjoyed playing truant.

As soon as the door swung shut behind us, Charley pulled out a packet of cigarettes. He tapped it lightly, the way they do in the movies and a white cylinder shot out and nosedived into an oily puddle.

Charley watched thoughtfully as the black liquid soaked into the white paper. “You can have that one,” he decided. “A nice grey ciggie for little Gray.”

“No, thanks,” I said politely and he scooped up the cigarette and jumped me, thrusting it at my face.

We wrestled together for a while but, with his longer reach, Charley soon had me boxed into a corner. The mangled cigarette was inching towards my mouth again when I let out a yell and knocked his hand away. Bearing down on his wrist, I twisted his arm smartly behind his back.

“Pax?” I gasped.

Charley flopped back, limp and defeated. We had been fighting each other since we were five years old, however, so I waited until he tried a surprise attempt to wrench away and then I steadily increased the pressure.

“Pax?”

“Oh, all right, pax, then.”

We stood there, breathing heavily and grinning at each other.

“Honestly, you’re a stupid clot,” I told him. “Suppose someone had heard us? You can’t afford to get another black mark against you at the moment.”

“Ah, what the hell,” said Charley airily. “I’m the black sheep of my family, anyhow - black marks never show on me. Besides, my father’s always donating money to the school, so they won’t throw me out in a hurry. Here, have a proper cigarette, Gray.”

“I told you, I don’t want one. My father says smoking stunts your growth.”

Charley blew a white cloud in my face to show me what he thought of that, then used my blazer pocket as an ashtray.

"Your growth was stunted long ago, old pal. In the cradle, I reckon," he said as he went over to a pile of rickety crates and began to ferret through them.

I blinked at him through the smoke. "My grandfather grew eight inches when he was sixteen and I'm only thirteen now."

"That's right, you keep on hoping," said Charley kindly. "Oh good, my comics are still here. I was afraid someone might've nicked them. I bags the *Magnet* and Billy Burner. Do you want *Chums* or *Boy's Own Paper*?"

"*Chums*, please."

I caught the rolled up comic and settled myself on a nearby crate, squinting down in the dim light. The first story was about a boy who uncovered a Bolshevik plot, but I flipped on impatiently till I found "Wings Against the Storm", the serial about the Great War.

I had grown up on my father's stories about the war and I always read everything about it that I could lay my hands on. Alan Gaunt, the hero of "Wings Against the Storm", was a daredevil fighter pilot who spent his time battling the Hun and uncovering the plots of the suave traitor, Francis Felkington Frapp. He also happened to be my latest idol.

As I hunched over the tiny print, I imagined myself soaring above the clouds and shooting down plane after enemy plane. It was the biggest regret of my life that I wasn't born until 1918, when the war had already ended. Naturally I didn't want the country to be plunged into another war, just for my benefit - but all the same I knew I would've made an excellent fighter pilot.

Pilots don't need to be tall, you see; they only need to be quick and cunning. But in peace time a fellow really has to have long legs or broad shoulders, if he wants to make a name for himself. Unless I added on a few inches pretty speedily, I could see that I'd never make the main football team or carry off a prize for running ...

Just then Charley gave a shout of laughter. "Here, Gray, listen to what Billy Bunter's done this week."

While he read out the end of the story, I glared at him secretly. Charley was tall enough and strong enough to do all the things I could never do, except that, being Charley, he thought school spirit was a complete waste of time. The whole business was most unfair, I thought, glancing down at my watch.

"Help! First period's nearly over. We better get out of here."

"What's the rush?" said Charley, looking up from the *Magnet* with annoying calm. "My next class is just around the corner. There's even time for another cigarette."

"That's all right for you. I've got Latin with the Turtle, halfway across the school. He'll flay me alive if I'm late."

With an exasperated glance at Charley, I clattered up the stairs, at such a fast clip that I ran straight into Haines. He looked down his long thin nose at me, while his long thin hand smoothed the back of his sleek black hair. I shuffled my feet and cursed my bad luck. Of all the prefects who could've caught me, Haines was definitely the worst.

"Where have you been, Thompson?" he asked at last, in a friendly voice that sent shivers down my spine.

Frantically I tried to remember what I was supposed to have been doing. "Stinks lab, please, Haines," I mumbled.

"And where are you off to?"

"Latin, Haines."

He studied me for a moment, enjoying his game of cat and mouse. "Taking the long way round, aren't you?" he drawled.

"Yes, Haines."

I stared at the golden scrolls on his blazer pocket, willing him to let me go, but when I glanced up his nostrils were widening delicately.

"So I'd be quite wrong if I thought you'd been down in the basement, having a quiet smoke-o?"

"Yes, Haines. I mean, I haven't been smoking, Haines."

As the seconds ticked past I realised that even if Haines didn't give me a detention I would still be late for the Turtle's class. I was sunk either way and Haines knew it too. He's as bad as Francis Felkington Frapp, I thought angrily and my fingers itched to tug out the lining of my pocket and spill cigarette ash all over his glossy shoes.

"You know we regard smoking as a serious crime in this school, Thompson. A very serious crime. But of course you haven't been smoking, have you?" He was almost laughing out loud as he added, "So you'd better cut along to class, on the double."

Pelting away down the corridor, I wished I had been able to defy Haines, like Alan Gaunt always defied Francis Felkington Frapp. It seemed a lot harder, though, when your enemy was a prefect and you were just a squib from the lower forms. I concentrated on being thankful that Charley hadn't come marching up from the basement in the middle of everything.

I didn't see Charley again until lunchtime. In fact, I didn't even expect to see him then. He was in the form above mine, so we didn't usually have much to do with each other at school. However, when I went into the bog, a hefty boy named Blakely was pounding on one of the doors and yelling, "I know you're in there, Haughton."

"Not so, Comrade Blakely," called Charley in a heavy foreign accent. "Zis is Dimitri Bomski, ze sinister Russian spy, come to blow ze school sky-high and turn all you boyskis into Bolshies."

“Very funny, I don’t think,” grumbled Blakely. “I can see the smoke, you clot. You’ll catch it if any of the prefects come along - and other fellows might want to use the bog, you know.”

“Zis smoke is from my bomb, you ignorant capitalistic swine,” Charley mocked and Blakely frowned heavily.

“How much does your father have to fork out to keep you here?” he asked after a moment’s thought. “I’m not sure that it’s worth it, even for a new gym. You do lower the tone of the place.”

The door of the cubicle swung open and Charley strolled out. He took a last drag on his cigarette and handed it to me with a flourish.

“Step inside, Blakely. I’ve fumigated it for you. You’ll hardly even notice your usual stink.”

Blakely’s face was a slab of scarlet. He grabbed at Charley’s collar and they were grappling together as they burst through the door into the quadrangle. I stood there, watching the blue smoke twist up from between my fingers. Charley was a terrible responsibility sometimes. It would be a good idea to go and break up the fight, but I knew that Blakely wouldn’t be pleased to have a junior boy interfering in his business.

Then I felt a warning itch at the back of my neck and I turned around to find Haines watching me.

“Well, well, well. So your pal Haughton has succeeded in dragging you down to his level at last. Refresh my memory for me, Thompson, haven’t I warned you already today about this sort of behaviour?”

I hesitated, wishing I was as courageous as Alan Gaunt. And then all at once everything slotted into place. I didn’t actually have to defy Haines. I could just let him believe the cigarette was really mine. After all, what could be more heroic than taking the blame, in order to save your best friend?

“Don’t go on smoking while I’m talking to you, damn your insolence,” Haines rapped out. “Where’s the rest of the packet? Hand them over at once.”

I stubbed out the cigarette and said humbly, “Please, Haines, that’s all I’ve got. I pinched them from my father’s cigarette box this morning. Honestly, Haines.”

He looked at me sadly. “I let you off once today and you betrayed my trust. It’s six of the best if I report you this time. What do you think, Thompson: do you deserve to be punished for this offence?”

I swallowed. Haines’s canings were famous throughout the school. Still, a British officer never shirked his duty and neither would I.

“Yes, Haines,” I said, chin high.

Of course, if I had told Haines that I thought I should get off scot-free, he would only have been twice as angry. Nonetheless, I felt very proud of myself.

“What’s the hurry, Gray?”

“None of your business.”

“Come on, you can let your old chum in on the lark.”

“Not this time,” I told him grimly.

Charley stumped off, muttering something about meeting me at the tram stop if I was lucky and I turned away to the prefects’ room, shoulders squared. I would take this punishment to save Charley from a worse one - and Charley would never know. I was impressed by my own heroism.

It was a pity that I had to wait while two other boys went in, because it gave me plenty of time to think about what I was in for. I’ve always wanted to know whether I’d confess under torture. Whenever I come across descriptions of racks and thumbscrews and boiling oil, I get a hollow feeling at the pit of my stomach, but somehow I can’t stop myself from reading every word. I remember every word as well, so by the time that Haines called me in I was convinced I was going to be martyred on the spot.

Actually, the caning itself was almost an anticlimax. In a way, you see, I wasn’t really there. I was locked in a medieval dungeon, or confronting the Spanish Inquisition - at any rate I was doing something far more dramatic than bending over a wooden chair and staring down at a threadbare carpet.

Mind you, when the cane hissed through the air, I had to clamp my teeth together to stop myself from yelling aloud. And the six cuts seemed to take an awfully long time. But it was worth it all to see the look of disappointment on Haines’s face when I finally straightened up.

“You’ve done your worst, Francis Felkington Frapp and my spirit remains unbroken,” I murmured as I strode, stiff-legged, across the quadrangle. “You can never win, for I have justice on my side.”

Alan Gaunt’s final speech from this week’s *Chums* seemed to sum up everything I was thinking at that moment. I felt a total and absolute faith in myself. I had been put to the test and I had come out triumphant. Words like “honour” and “courage” and “sacrifice” floated around in my head like a golden mist. It was a shock to look up and find Charley in front of me, arms folded across his chest.

“Well, if it isn’t the knight in shining armour. You’re looking a bit saddle-sore, I must say.”

I stared at him wordlessly. The golden mist dissolved and immediately my buttocks began to smart. Charley shook his head slowly.

“Blakely told me what you’d done, as if it was a huge joke. Honestly, Gray, you can be a thumping great twit at times. I hope you don’t expect me to be pleased about this. You should’ve told them ...”

I hadn’t expected Charley to overwhelm me with thanks, but I hadn’t expected this total ingratitude either. Obviously justice wasn’t on my side after all, because this was about as unjust as I could imagine. Fixing my eyes on the distance, I walked carefully around Charley and headed for the tram stop.

I hoped Charley would tactfully wait for the next tram, but I should’ve known that Charley wouldn’t be tactful. He shouldered his way into the same compartment as me and proceeded to chat away to Blakely as if they were the best of chums.

“Heard the latest about the boarders? The new cook served up tomato sauce with their shepherd’s pie and the headmaster’s missus nearly had a fit. She banned tomato sauce years ago, because she claims that it heats the blood. What do you think, Blakely? Shall we share a bottle of it before the next school dance?”

“You’ve got a filthy mind, Houghton,” said Blakely, smothering a grin.

“Oh, I’ve learned a lot from the good old school. So would you, if you didn’t sleep right through the chaplain’s sermons. ‘Boys, I am going to tell you today about the evils of self-abuse.’”

All down the tram heads turned as Charley’s voice boomed out. Blakely’s grin vanished and his face slowly turned as red as tomato sauce.

“Can it, Houghton,” he muttered in agony.

I could’ve told him this was the wrong way to go about it. The only way to shut Charley up was to ignore him - and even that didn’t always work. At any rate, it was too late for Blakely now. Charley was bending over him solicitously, examining his blushes.

“What’s the matter, old sport? Can’t be the language - I know you’re a man of the world. Aha, I’ve got it! There’s some jane that you fancy and you’re afraid she’s listening in. Never mind, I’ll go and plead your case with her. The jane with the black curls, is it?”

Poor old Blakely squirmed and blushed even harder, which only confirmed Charley’s guess. Patting him kindly on the head, he ran down to hang on the strap by the girl’s seat and soon they were deep in conversation, with Blakely watching miserably. It would be a long time before he’d try to score off Charley again. I could almost have felt sorry for him, except that I was too busy feeling sorry for myself.

Every jolt and jar of the tram set my backside aching even harder. As we chugged up a hill of huge grey mansions I realised gloomily that, even though I had survived the actual caning, I still had to go on living with the pain afterwards. No one ever seemed to mention that sort of thing in the stories about torture. Somehow you got the impression that, as long as you faced it like a man, it wouldn’t really hurt.

When the tram clanged to a halt at the top of the hill, I needed all my concentration to lower myself carefully onto the stop. Charley took a firm grip on my elbow and I didn't even have the strength to brush him away.

"Blakely has unexpectedly good taste in janes," he told me with a grin. "What a shame for him that she's going to the next dance with me. Shall I ask her if she's got a friend?"

I supposed that this was an apology of some kind, but I wasn't ready to accept it just yet.

"I bet she has dozens of friends," I snapped and Charley raised his eyebrows.

"Still in a bad mood, are we? Will I get my head bitten off if I ask whether you want to walk to the junction or catch the other tram?"

He had a point there. I wondered which of the two alternatives was likely to hurt more. On the whole, it seemed like a good idea to keep moving, in the hope that my muscles wouldn't seize up altogether. I limped off down the road, pretending not to care whether Charley followed or not, though I was secretly relieved when he fell into step beside me.

"Dad's got something brewing at present," he said after a while. "He's in and out till all hours of the night and then he shuts himself into his study and only comes out to take mysterious phone calls. I lurked around a bit to see if I could find out what was going on, but no dice."

I knew this would be a problem for Charley, who is the most curious person alive. Of course he could always have asked Mr Haughton about it directly but things between Charley and his father were never as straightforward as that.

"Maybe you could ask your mother," I suggested but Charley shook his head.

"She isn't talking either, which is even more suspicious. At first I thought the government must've asked the old man to come up with a master plan to end the Depression, But I suppose he's just taking over another dozen or so bankrupt companies. Everyone seems to be getting poorer and poorer these days, except for my dad, who always manages to get richer and richer." He tried an unsuccessful drop-kick with his schoolbag and went on, "I think I'll tell him I've become a commo. That might make him sit up and take notice."

I sighed tolerantly. Charley is two years older than me and I have always wished I had an older brother. Somehow, though, Charley has never quite fitted the part. If anything, I think of him as my younger brother.

"You're awfully down on your father," I told him. "I can't see what you've got against him. There's nothing wrong with being rich, after all and apart from that he's decent enough."

"Oh yes, he's terribly decent," said Charley. "And I'm not, which is why I'm such a disappointment to him. All the same, I can't stand the way he never tells us what he's

doing. We're just there to be trotted out whenever he needs to display a son and heir or a charming wife."

On any other day I would've said something about that. But my backside was throbbing fiercely and I simply didn't feel up to the job of sorting Charley out. Besides, in an odd sort of way I didn't really feel that it was my place. I was lucky enough to get on tremendously well with my father. Since Charley was less fortunate, my advice probably wouldn't be much use to him.

So I walked on in silence, feeling the weals from Haines's cane at every step.

CHAPTER THREE

The moon bowls out from behind a silver-edged cloud. "For want of a nail, the shoe was lost," I say out loud, looking up at it.

If I hadn't missed that tram, I wouldn't have got a caning. If I hadn't had a sore backside, I wouldn't have climbed a tree to peer through the window of a church hall. And if I hadn't done that, I would never have been locked in a cupboard by Communists and struck at by baton-wielding fascists. I would never have ended up by smashing that plate glass window, smashing my comfortable life in the process.

"And all for the want of a horseshoe nail."

Charley has a lot to answer for, I decide, as my bike jolts over a stone and nearly throws me off. Then I recover my balance and think again. Is it really fair to blame Charley for everything? Shouldn't I be blaming Alan Gaunt as well?

Oh, I know Alan Gaunt's just a chap in a story. I believed in him, though. At least, I believed that if you tried hard enough and for long enough, it was possible to become a hero. So I tried as hard as I could and I did what I thought was right. And now I don't believe in heroes anymore.

I thrust my feet down on the pedals, as if I'm trying to push myself away from all my old ideas and a man limps out of the shadows just ahead of me. As I screech to a halt, I can see that he is shabby and unshaven and desperately weary, his boot soles flapping with every step and I'm very glad that I didn't actually hit him.

He has come to a sudden stop as well and he's obviously finding it hard to get going again. All the same, he looks at me with a grin and says, "Nice night for it."

"Too right," I say in my Richmond voice, grinning back. We stand in a friendly silence for a moment, both knowing better than to ask the other what he's doing on the streets so late at night. Then the shabby man says, "Hooroo, mate," and trudges on across the road.

"Hooroo," I call after him as I ride away, thinking about Les.

Because it isn't entirely true to say that I don't believe in heroes any more. Les, who I met yesterday, is a hero by anyone's standards. He fights for what he believes in, he outwits his enemies, he endures all kinds of pain and suffering - just like Alan Gaunt. Les is also a thief and a commo, which I still find rather confusing.

The fact is, heroes are supposed to be on the right side and villains on the wrong side. That's is a nice simple idea, but if I'd been thinking properly, I could've seen what was wrong with it from the very start. Just as Les is more like Alan Gaunt than anyone I have ever met, so Haines is more like the villainous Francis Felkington Frapp. And yet everyone would agree that Haines and I are on the same side. We live on the same side of the river, at any rate.

My bootlace is flapping wildly, so I lean the bike against a lamppost and sit down in the gutter to do it up. As I tug on the bow, I keep on puzzling about this business of sides. Finally I admit to myself that, up until now, I have always assumed that anyone I like is on the right side, while anyone I don't like is on the wrong side.

But of course it isn't really like that at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

Calling goodbye to Charley, I trudged up the front path. My little sister rushed to meet me at the door.

“Gray, Gray, look,” she yelled. “John Chinaman gave me a speech, a specially early one. His brother makes them.”

“A peach, Margaret. It’s called a peach. And no one makes them - they grow on trees.”

I hadn’t thought of John Chinaman for years. He was a figure from my childhood, like Father Christmas. It was strange to think that he was still coming to our front door, carrying his flat basket spread with samples of fruit and vegetables.

John Chinaman gave me cherries, even when my mother said they were too expensive. And once I was allowed to offer his old horse an apple. I can still remember the way its giant lips wrapped around my finger. I refused to wash my hand for a whole day, which shows you what little idiots kids can be.

Margaret came dashing back with her next prize. “Read me, read me.”

“I can’t read you, silly. You’re not a book.”

She danced with annoyance, shouting, “Read me, read me,” and beating me with the book. The spine thudded against my buttocks and I yelped out loud.

“Clumsy brat! Get away from me.”

Margaret stepped back immediately, her plump bottom lip trembling. She turned and trailed down the hall, her book dangling lower and lower until it hit the polished floor with a thud.

I felt impatient with her and sorry for her, all at once. When she came to a stop, jamming her knuckles into her eyes, I went and knelt down beside her, ignoring the protests from my muscles.

“Margie. Margeurite.”

She lifted one fist, then shoved it into place again.

“Margaretta, want to play a game?”

“No!”

“Are you sure? Oh well, you can’t play this game with your hands across your face, so I suppose I’ll have to play it by myself. Now, I’m going to hold out my hand and -”

A pink flash and Margie’s hand was opening in front of me. “I’m ready,” she informed me and I started to draw teasing circles on her palm while we chanted together.

Can you keep a secret?

I don’t believe you can.

You mustn’t laugh,

You mustn’t cry,

But ...

At this point in the game, your fingers race right down the arm to tickle the armpit and at the same time you shout out, “Do the best you can.” Except that Margaret always gets it wrong and shouts, “Tickle right up your arm.”

She had cheered up, however, so the game had served its purpose. We played three or four more rounds of “Can you keep a secret?” and then I limped upstairs to do a double dose of Latin homework, my punishment from the Turtle for being late.

The walk home didn’t seem to have done me much good and in the end I had to write standing up at my dressing-table. I wished I could ask my mother for some ointment but that would have meant telling my parents the story of the caning and I wasn’t too keen to do that.

For one thing, from the moment Charley first glared at me, I had started to wonder whether I had been more stupid than heroic. The code of the school said you didn’t sneak on your friends - but I could have told Haines it wasn’t my cigarette, without actually saying that it was Charley’s.

For another thing, my father wasn’t going to be at all pleased to learn that I’d got six of the best for smoking, when he disapproved of it so strongly. And I couldn’t sneak on Charley to him, either, because he had a tendency to disapprove of Charley too. Then again, if I could manage to act normally, my father would never need to know. But how was I going to get through the evening without giving myself away?

I still hadn't worked out the answer to this problem when Margaret came to call me for dinner. My parents were already seated at the oval walnut dining table. My mother - when I try to picture her, I see folds of pink silk, a long rope of pearls, light brown curls, a loving smile. I'm not sure what else to say about her.

My father is easy to describe. He is tall and, even when he is sitting down, his shoulders are as straight as they used to be on the parade ground. Every hair on his head obeys him, sleeked back from his forehead or lining up precisely in a trim moustache. In a way he is so handsome that he is almost anonymous. With his regular features and ash-blond hair, he might be any officer from a recruiting poster.

At the same time, I would know him anywhere.

As I settled myself carefully, my mother chatted on brightly about a ball committee that Mrs Haughton had asked her to join.

"The plan is to decorate the hall in shades of mauve, with pink and mauve bouquets for the debutantes, which should be delightful. We must make a suitable donation, Roger."

My father's eyebrows drew together. "Marjorie, there's a depression on," he pointed out. "We're supposed to be cutting down on unnecessary expenses."

"Oh, but this is to raise money for unemployment relief," she said quickly. "The mayor's wife is the head of the committee."

"Well, of course that's another matter," my father agreed. All the same, as he served out the chops, he explained to us how the Premier, Mr Hogan, had said that everyone in the country ought to make some kind of sacrifice, as their part in ending the Depression.

"He says, and I agree, that it's the only way to restore financial stability. For pity's sake, it's nearly a year since Sir Otto Niemeyer came out from England to tell us that we could only pay our war debts if we economised - if we cut wages and pensions and social services. It's plain commonsense. Even you would know, Marjorie, that if you haven't paid for your last hat, you can't go out and buy a new one. I'm amazed that our so-called leaders have taken so long to do the same bit of simple arithmetic."

My mother was carefully tipping a trickle of peas between mounds of pumpkin and potato. Passing the plate to Margaret, she looked up and smiled at my father.

"You describe it all so clearly, Roger. I'm surprised you've never thought of going into politics yourself."

My father drew himself up until his shoulders were even straighter than before. I shifted about in my chair and glanced at my mother enviously, wishing I'd thought of saying that.

"No, Marjorie," he answered. "I'm afraid I just don't believe that the politicians have all the answers. Working as a solicitor means that I see a broad range of Australians every day and I feel I can serve my country best where I am."

“Slicitor,” Margaret repeated experimentally and went back to making patterns with her vegetables.

I frowned at her, warning her not to interrupt. I admired the way that my father could talk like an editorial from the *Argus*, even if I didn’t understand everything he said. As I turned back towards him, my mother caught my eye and held up a stained napkin. Without thinking, I jumped up to go to the sideboard and found myself letting out an abrupt grunt of pain.

My father’s officer eyes flicked across me. I took a clean napkin from the drawer and tried to walk back as normally as possible, but I felt sure that he had seen my limp and knew exactly what had caused it. I couldn’t believe my luck when he set his glass down and went on explaining his point to my mother.

“And the politicians who aren’t narrow-minded are downright dangerous. Take the bombastic Mr Lang, for example. Nothing but a puppet whose strings are pulled by Mr Garden and his associates. It’s men like him who give politics a bad name.”

Actually, I felt that politics had got a bad name because it was so complicated and boring. I liked it when my father talked about sacrifice and his duty to the country, but when he started in on Mr Hogan and Mr Lang and the rest, I usually drifted away into dreams of being a fighter pilot.

Right at that moment, however, I didn’t feel much like a fighter pilot. In fact, I felt more like one of those privates with two left feet that my father had drilled into shape in his army days. So instead of dreaming, I perched myself on the edge of the chair and cleared my throat. Maybe if I could say something intelligent, my father would be so impressed that he’d forget to wonder what was the matter with me.

“I know who Mr Lang is, Dad. He’s the Premier of New South Wales, the one who thinks we shouldn’t pay back the money England lent us while we were fighting the war. But who’s Mr Garden and how does he pull Lang’s strings?”

My father paused impressively and said, “Jock Garden is a prominent Communist, Graham.”

“Oh, a Bolshie. Hang on, do you mean that Mr Lang’s a commo too? How come they made him Premier then?”

“Well, Lang would deny that he’s a Red, of course.” My father’s eyelid dropped in a friendly wink as he added, “But let’s just say that his views and Jock Garden’s are remarkably similar.”

I’m doing pretty well at this, I thought proudly. What’s more, I was actually finding the conversation more interesting than I’d expected. I knew from reading *Chums* that the Bolshies were the enemy and the idea that the Premier of New South Wales might be a secret Bolshie sent shivers of excitement down my spine.

“So what would you do to stop Mr Lang, Dad?” I asked eagerly. I really wanted to know the answer, so I was disappointed when my father’s face tightened. He looked

back at me as blankly as the young soldier who stared out of the silver frame on Granny's mantelpiece. After a few seconds I was forced to look away.

"I'm sure Mr Lang will bring about his own downfall in time," my father murmured as I sawed diligently at my chop. "It's obvious that Labor's policies are bound to fail. They spend money as fast as they raise it, which only results in more people with less. No, sacrifice is our only hope."

I could tell from his tone that the topic was now closed - except that to my surprise my mother said breathlessly, "Some of those poor men don't have anything left to sacrifice, you know."

"Which 'poor men' are you talking about, Marjorie?"

"The ones that come to the door, selling - oh, everything. I've been offered holy pictures, pins, plants, soap, stockings, darning wool and writing tablets, all in the last few months." As she worked her way through the list, my mother's voice had grown stronger, until finally she burst out, "And the stories they tell - oh, Roger, there's real suffering going on, right now."

I heard two sharp clicks as my father laid his knife and fork down neatly. "Of course there is. And there are also real confidence tricksters who'd do anything to avoid an honest day's work. Up in New South Wales at the unemployment camp near Casino, they called for a hundred men to go sleeper-cutting. Out of the thousand men there, one volunteered for the work. *One.*"

A pause and then my mother said in a rush, "I know men like that exist. But the people I've talked to are decent honest souls. If you could only hear them for yourself, Roger ..."

I looked up at last. My mother's eyes were shining with a special radiance, just like a film star, and with sudden horror I realised that the shine came from unshed tears. She was tugging at her pearls so violently that I thought the string might break and I tensed in my chair, ready to race after them as they went bowling across the polished floor.

Then my muscles relaxed again as my father leaned forward, telling her soothingly that she mustn't upset herself.

"If only we still had two maids - but there, that's one of the sacrifices we've had to make. So you should send Margaret to tell these chaps to go away, or Alice when she's not helping Cook. And otherwise -" He gave an unexpected grin. "Well, I suppose you'll go on giving these wretched fellows handouts from the housekeeping money, whether I like it or not."

"Wretched fellows," echoed Margaret and then we were all laughing and looking at each other and laughing again.

I felt like the happiest boy on earth. Here I was with a father who talked to us about the things that were important to him, just like Charley wished that Mr Haughton would. What's more, my parents had just come as close to a row as I had ever seen them and

yet they'd been able to pull back in time. Even better still, I had managed to keep the secret of my caning all through dinner.

And to top it off, here came Alice with an apple pie, instead of the usual stewed fruit and custard. It was definitely my lucky day.

I slipped away straight after dinner, with the excuse of extra homework. After I'd finished the Latin translations for the Turtle, I got into bed, intending to read for a while, but my eyelids grew heavier and heavier until I reached out to turn off the light.

And then I was bolt upright, staring about wildly. There were black shapes all around me and a grey square floating between them and a thin beam of light drilling at my eyes. I shook my head and focused properly and realised that I was in my bedroom, with the streetlight shining through the curtains.

What had I been dreaming about? I was in the bog at school - that was it. The walls had melted away somehow and the bogeyman reached in to grab at me with its clawed hands. There was a hot ache in my backside where it had gripped and held and I glanced round nervously, still trapped between dream and waking.

But there were no bogeymen in the room and after a few seconds more I remembered Haines's caning. Grinning to myself, I tugged the blankets over my head and waited to sink back into sleep. My eyes wouldn't close, however and finally I decided that I needed a glass of water. Better still, a slice of cold apple pie.

There was a light in the hall, so it wasn't as late as I'd thought. I hesitated on the landing for a moment, getting used to the house at night. Shadows leapt out at me, then ran away when I turned my head to catch sight of them. In the heavy silence even the smallest noises seemed very sharp and distinct and the click of the telephone receiver sounded like the crack of doom. I missed the first few words in my fright.

"Yes, that's why I left it to the witching hour," my father was saying, out of sight in the hall below. "Everyone's fast asleep by now."

Except me, I thought miserably. I stood there paralysed, unable to move for fear that the floorboards might creak underfoot. I'd escaped a ticking off from my father once today and once was enough. On the other hand I didn't feel comfortable about staying. I was listening in on a private conversation, which was a rotten thing to do.

"I've checked everything thoroughly," my father went on, while I was still making up my mind. "One of my men has run off programmes for us all to take home, so that no one will question that we've been attending a genuine smoke social. And guards will be posted all round the hall, from seven thirty onwards ... Yes, that's been taken care of. I'll see you there on Friday. Goodbye for now."

As the receiver rattled into its metal cradle, I took a long stride backwards and swung around the door of my bedroom. The apple pie would just have to wait. Taking a sip of dusty water from the glass at my bedside, I crawled back under the blankets to puzzle over what I had heard.

Guards around the hall. A smoke social that wasn't a smoke social. What on earth was my father up to? Nervously I started to rub my cold feet together, thrashing around as if I could kick away my next thought, except that it came anyway.

Was my father a spy?

Next minute I was laughing out loud in the darkness, smothering the noise in my pillow. My dad a Bolshie? After all that he'd been saying tonight, he'd need to be the world's best actor as well.

Just the same, he was up to something and there were other men involved in it with him. I could guess who one of them was - Charley's father, who was getting mysterious phone calls at strange hours. My father did a fair bit of work for Mr Haughton and they spent a lot of time together outside business hours too. If one of them was involved in some kind of secret activity, it made sense that the other would also be in it.

But hold on - Australia wasn't at war or anything, so what was the reason for all the secrecy?

Then I gasped with delight as I saw the whole thing. I'd asked my father what he would do to stop Mr Lang and he'd gone unaccountably silent ... because he and Mr Haughton and some other chaps were making plans to do exactly that!

At first the whole idea seemed too good to be true - too much like a story from *Chums* or *Boy's Own Paper*. Then again, I believed all those stories, didn't I? So why wouldn't I believe that I could actually stumble into one in real life? Gradually, as I turned the evidence over in my mind, I began to think it was really possible that I - ordinary old Graham Thompson, too short to make the footy team - was standing on the edge of an honest-to-goodness adventure.

The sheets were warm again and I snuggled down, carefully easing my behind into place. I felt almost grateful to Haines now. Without the ache in my backside, I would be fast asleep, missing out on my chance for adventure.

Come to think of it, without the ache in my backside, I wouldn't have listened to my father jawing about politics, in which case I might never have known that the Bolshies were such a danger right here in Australia. I knew now, however and I made up my mind to do my best to help with the cause.

As my brain began to fog with sleep, I remembered that I had the answer to Charley's questions about his father. I chuckled drowsily. It wasn't often that I was one up on Charley and I decided to hug the secret to myself for a while, so I could make the most of it.

CHAPTER FIVE

I come out of my thoughts to find that I'm sailing across the intersection of two main roads. Hastily I glance around but the only sign of life is a single tail-light disappearing into the distance. With the streets so empty, I'm making better time than usual. It won't take me as long as I thought to get home.

As I congratulate myself, my front wheel wobbles. When I look down at the road I can't see any potholes and yet, even while I'm studying the smooth surface, my bike veers again. Maybe I need a rest. After all, I've been through a lot in the last twenty-four hours and on very little sleep too.

Scrambling off the bike, I discover that my hands are shaking. I'm tired, I repeat firmly, trying to believe that's all it is. But, like someone picking at a scab, I find myself going back over my memories.

I find myself thinking about my parents.

I have to get the past straight in my mind, if I'm ever going to work out what I think in the present. That's why I'm trying to remember this whole story exactly as it happened. But I've changed a lot in the last few months and sometimes I find it hard to understand the way I used to be.

Right now, for example, I can't help replaying the conversation I had with Dotty Pearse - only this afternoon, though it seems like weeks ago. We were trudging across a strip of wasteland on our way to Dudley Flats when she gave me one of her sharp looks and said, "So what are your mum and dad like?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," I sighed impatiently but Dotty can be fairly persistent and in the end I decided to give it a go. "Well, my mother's frightfully pretty," I told her. "She

likes nice clothes and she's very soft-hearted. My father was in the war. He's never afraid and he always knows exactly what to do."

"Sounds like the kind of storybook I hate," Dotty commented. "Don't they never lose their tempers or pick their noses or nothing?"

"Well, hardly. Why should they?"

"Cause it might make them more interesting. You got to admit, Gray, they don't sound like a barrel of laughs. What do they do all day - admire themselves in the mirror?"

"Obviously I'm not explaining properly," I said stiffly. "Truly, Dotty, they're the best parents a chap could have."

Dotty gave me an indulgent smile. I didn't understand what it meant at the time, but now, as I stand in the streets of Richmond and clutch at my bike with hands that are still shaking, I think I'm beginning to get her point.

We never talked much about our families at school - it wasn't the done thing. So I was never forced to question my childhood belief that my father was a hero and my mother was the beautiful heroine. It's only since I met Dotty's family that I've started to realise...

Oh, who am I kidding? If I'd wanted to, I could've realised ages ago that my family was less than perfect. Think about that night you were just remembering, Graham. You were scared to tell your father about the caning, your mother was scared to stand up to him and argue with him and both of you spent a lot of time buttering him up and trying to stay in his good books.

So maybe Dotty's right and my view of my family is too like a storybook to be true. Maybe my mother and father aren't as different from Charley's as I thought. How am I supposed to know? Rightly or wrongly, I saw them as the hero and heroine of my story and, to tell the truth, I still wish they could be.

Even after everything that's happened.

Suddenly I decide that I don't feel like a rest after all. I'd rather be cycling along and telling myself the next episode of my adventure. It's one of my favourite parts and I still think I handled it fairly well.

I swing onto my bike and ride away. My muscles protest at first, but soon I am pedalling along automatically while my mind travels back into the past.

CHAPTER SIX

I did a good piece of detective work over the next few days. Sherlock Holmes would've been proud of me. First I found out how many church halls there were in our neighbourhood. Then, while my parents drank their evening sherry and listened to the news on the wireless, I rang all the halls and asked to confirm the Friday night booking for a smoke social. I had to remember to deepen my voice so I sounded like one of the organisers and at the same time I had to keep watch to make sure no one overheard me. It wasn't as easy as it might sound.

I ended up with a bad case of the jitters and *two* smoke socials. I lay awake half the night trying to decide between them and the next afternoon I decided I would have to search my father's study.

I knew that my mother was giving instructions to the gardener, with Margaret at her side, and that Alice and Cook were busy in the kitchen. All the same my heart was thudding so hard that I was scared it might come loose in my chest. I lifted one pile of papers, replaced it carefully, riffled the edges of another and admitted that half the trouble was that I didn't have a clue what I was looking for.

After all, given his undercover work on the phone, my father was hardly likely to have left a note smack in the middle of his desk to say, "NB: THE SECRET MEETING IS AT ST SOMEONE'S HALL." I had hoped for ... a receipt? A diary? But all I found were business papers and financial statements with figures dancing from column to column.

There was one exciting moment when I spotted a hastily scribbled note on the desk calendar, beginning with the word "Haughton". My eyes nearly crossed from staring at my father's dashing scrawl, but all I could make out in the end was "Riverview

Enterprises = Australian Allied General Holdings". This was comical, because the initials spelt AAGH, but it was clearly about business, not adventures or secret meetings.

With a last longing glance at the wall safe - now if only I could open that, I was sure I could get somewhere - I padded stealthily out of the study. I'd have to choose between the two halls by tossing a coin, after all. Sherlock Holmes probably wouldn't have approved but then again, I always felt that Holmes had a lot of luck on his cases.

The following day I tracked down a chap called Fenton who owed me a few favours. His parents went out almost every night, so he was my best bet for an alibi. Even so, he was such a rabbit that, if my mother did ring his house for some reason, he might still manage to muff the whole thing. And I wasn't sure that he believed my story about a secret meeting with a Jane. For all my careful planning, I could easily end up in trouble. It was worth it, though, to find out what was going on.

I felt quite exhausted by the time I finally sat in the darkness, wedged between two massive branches and peering through a curtain of leaves. There were forty-three men seated in the hall - I had counted them several times, for the want of anything better to do. They were watching a ham-fisted conjuror, doing card tricks that wouldn't have fooled a five year old, and I was starting to suspect that this was just an ordinary smoke social after all. There was certainly a lot of smoke, because most of the men were puffing on cigarettes or cigars, and I wondered whether this explained why I couldn't see my father anywhere.

On the other hand, I could think of several more depressing explanations.

1. *My father's meeting was definitely the other smoke social.*
2. *My father's meeting wasn't in Kew at all, but in some other suburb. (Why hadn't I thought of that before?)*
3. *(Worst of all.) This was the right meeting and the secret business was going on right now, the card tricks being just a disguise. In that case, since I couldn't lip-read, I would go home none the wiser. (Except that, in that case, where were my father and Mr Haughton?)*

Bored and restless, I hunted about in my overcoat pocket for an apple, the last of my supplies. Just then, to my delight, the conjuror dropped his pack of cards on the floor. In celebration I tossed up the apple before I bit into it. Unfortunately it struck against a twig, bounced back and crashed to the ground. At the same moment I remembered the one fact which had kept me hopeful about this hall.

There did seem to be guards at the front and back.

And here they came, five big broad-shouldered fellows. They cast about through the bushes and then gathered at the foot of my tree. I drew up my legs and hugged the trunk like a koala, trying to dodge the torch beams. But I must've been sighted all the

same, because first I heard rustlings and scrapings and then my branch began to shake. One of the guards was climbing the tree.

Of course, I had no reason to be afraid of the guards. If my calculations were right, we were all on the same side in the fight against the Bolshies. At the time, however, I didn't stop to think about that. I just swung around to the opposite side of the trunk and began to drop from branch to branch, like Mowgli the jungle boy.

All my senses were twice as sharp as usual. I traced the open scabs of bark under my hands; I sensed the positions of the five guards; I listened to the distant hum of a hearty singalong from the hall. And I knew in advance when the climber was going to make a grab for me. Just before his fingers closed on my coat-tail, I relaxed all my muscles and let myself fall.

I landed on my hands and knees but immediately I was up and running. Hurling myself at the paling fence, I got a toehold and swung my other leg across. This beats football any day, I was thinking to myself, when iron hands closed on me and I overbalanced.

"Great Scott, they've sent a nipper," said someone in disgust.

I was breathing grass and planning an honourable surrender, when a knee thudded into the small of my back. Instantly I decided I'd better go on trying to escape. I kicked out wildly, thrust away from the ground, flailed my arms and finally, to my shame, sank my teeth into a big hand. It tasted of soap.

There was a shout of outrage and I was hauled to my feet. My arm was wrenched halfway out of its socket and pinned behind my back. "You'd better keep your filthy commo mouth shut," a voice breathed into my ear.

"I say, you've got it all wrong," I gasped. "I'm on your side, honestly I am."

The voice laughed. "That's what all you red ragers say - I'm on the side of the working people of Australia. Believe me, sonny, I've fought Australia's enemies before. As far as I'm concerned, you're one of them."

"On my word of honour -"

"Take my advice and don't provoke us any more. It'd be a pleasure to knock some sense into you, but the big-wigs want to see you first. Get a move on, Bolshie."

Half dragged, half stumbling, I was urged back towards the hall. A sudden shove from behind sent me thudding against the weatherboard walls. With the last of my breath I forced a cry out of my lungs.

"Daddy!"

Then the arms yanked me back again. A hand smothered my mouth. As I was shunted into the tiny foyer, a door swung open and I twisted my head around to see whether my cry had been answered.

Mr Haughton's bushy eyebrows lifted slowly. "By Jove, it's Graham Thompson," he observed.

My misery vanished at once in a blaze of joy. I shifted in my captor's grip, trying to stand to attention as Mr Haughton strolled towards me.

"What are you doing here, young feller-me-lad?"

"You know this little - this young gentleman?" asked one of the guards.

"Afraid so, Wilkinson. You can cut along now - I'll take care of this. Well done, all of you."

"Sir."

As the guards saluted and left, I stared in outrage at Mr Haughton. "You don't know what they did," I spluttered. "They hit me, they pushed me into a wall, they -"

"Treated you like a little spy, just as you deserved."

In the harsh light of the unshaded globe, Mr Haughton's face bristled with shadows. Strong black hair sprang from his ears and nostrils and beyond his thrusting eyebrows more wiry hair wrestled with its coating of Californian Poppy. To offset all this hair he was clean-shaven, one of the few moustache-less men I'd ever seen and the hard line of his mouth gleamed against his shaded jaws.

He was Charley's father and I'd known him for years, but at that moment I found him almost frightening. What's more, he had a point. I *had* been spying on them, after all, even though I was doing so from the best of motives.

"I'm sorry, sir. I realise they were just doing their duty."

"Spoken like a man." Mr Haughton slapped his thigh in delight. "Very well then, if you're not a spy, what in the devil's name are you up to?"

"I made a mistake, I can see that now. But I thought - I thought you were planning to do something about the Bolshies, sir and I wanted to help."

The shadows engulfed Mr Haughton's face as he bent forward to pull a cigar from his inside coat pocket. "And why should you think that?" he murmured. "Your father's been taking you into his confidence, has he?"

I shuffled my feet, trying to work out whether I could avoid telling him the whole story. Then I squared my shoulders and prepared to confess.

"I overheard father talking to you on the telephone, sir. Only by accident - I wasn't eavesdropping. And I worked out the rest from there."

"Very smart of you," Mr Haughton spat the end of his cigar onto the floor and rolled his thumb across his lighter. The flame flickered across eyes as blank as slate. "Tell me, just for interest's sake, how *did* you work it out?"

At last I had the chance to show myself in a better light. My detective work had definitely been more successful than my spy work. I began a brief military-style report and Mr Haughton listened with flattering interest, putting in a nod here and a question there.

Finally he puffed out a tremendous cloud of smoke and said, "Well, Roger's pretty much in the clear, I'd say. He hasn't been letting the side down after all."

“Dad never knew a thing about what I was doing,” I cried out, too late. “I just happened to wake up in the night and he couldn’t help that. But I promise I’ll forget everything, on my word of -”

“After all the trouble you had in finding it out? Seems a shame.” Mr Haughton knocked a curl of cigar ash onto the floor and went on, “No, Graham, there’s no need to worry. You’re a bright lad and a brave one. I only wish I had a son like you.”

“Charley’s very brave, sir.”

“And you’re loyal too,” Mr Haughton mused. “I like that. I notice my son isn’t with you tonight, though. Why would that be?”

The glowing tip of his cigar thrust forward to underline the question and I backed away. Why wasn’t Charley here, indeed? At first I’d put off telling him the story so that I could enjoy my secret knowledge. Then somehow I’d reached the point where Charley would’ve stared and asked me why I’d kept such prime news to myself for so long. All in all, it had seemed simpler to stay silent.

But, in a way, there were other, hidden reasons as well. Charley was hot-headed, he rushed into things. He wasn’t reliable. He was terribly down on his father too, so there was a danger that he might’ve let something slip and alerted the Bolshies - not on purpose, just to annoy Mr Haughton.

All of this was true and yet it wasn’t a pleasant way to think about your best friend. I started to stammer out some kind of explanation but Mr Haughton cut me off with a gusty sigh.

“I’m afraid I have to agree with you, anyway. Poor old Charley wouldn’t be half the recruit to the cause that you’ll be.”

I was about to spring to Charley’s defence when I realised what Mr Haughton had just said. “You mean that, sir?” I breathed. “You’ll really take me on?”

“Steady on, old chap. Don’t you want to know what you’re volunteering for?”

“No, sir. I mean, yes, sir.”

“Then here’s the very man to explain it all. I’m just the figurehead here, you know - Roger’s the one who deals with the nuts and bolts.”

“Hello, Father,” I said politely.

At the sight of his calm handsome face I had almost run to meet him but just in time I’d reminded myself that I wasn’t Margaret’s age anymore. My father must have been pleased to see me too, because he reached down and ruffled my hair.

“Well, well,” he said with a smile. “It’ll be good to have another member of the old firm in on the action. Now we don’t have much time, so I’m going to have to ask you to do some pretty concentrated listening.”

We sat down on two dusty chairs at the side of the foyer. I balanced on the very edge of the seat, to show that I was paying attention and my father looked at me sternly.

“First of all, Graham, I want to stress that we stand for unswerving loyalty to the Throne, all for the British Empire and sane and honourable representative government throughout Australia.”

Of course, I thought impatiently. But you don't need secret meetings for that. I could hear the same thing from the platform on any school speech day.

“So why do we have to meet under the guise of - ah, a smoke social?” asked my father, obviously reading my mind. “Because, unfortunately, some of our fellow Australians don't share these patriotic views. Right at this moment there are Communists, socialists and other dissidents working away in every area of society.”

I nodded hard. My father hitched his chair closer and leaned forward confidentially. “The members of our organisation, the League of National Security, come from families who've fought the Empire's battles since it was an Empire. We find it hard to sit back and watch the commos take over. So, Graham, we've set up what you might call a secret army.”

The soft hairs down my arms stood to attention as my skin tingled. “A secret army.” It sounded like a phrase from the poems we had to learn at school. “The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold/And his cohorts were gleaming with purple and gold,” I repeated softly to myself.

The words decked the grubby hall with banners and fitted the men inside with shining breastplates and my father held out a sword of promise towards me. I wished I could kneel before him, like a page boy from one of the historical stories in the *Boy's Own Paper*. My father's eyes were bright with adventure too and his voice vibrated with urgency as he went on.

“All over Victoria thousands of men are waiting in readiness. And important public figures - Mr Haughton and many others - are working night and day to further our plans.”

“What sort of plans?”

“We're preparing for the League of National Security to take over the country - if there's an industrial crisis, that is.”

My father's capable hands divided the air into subsections as he described Plan A and Plan B and Plan C. There was a trained militia. There were members of the League ready to look after food supplies and public services. There was a National Policy, in case the League had to continue in government.

He kept talking more and more forcibly but I didn't need to be convinced. From the moment my father had said the words “secret army”, I'd seen why he'd laughed at the idea of going into politics. Who in his right mind would tamely stand for election when he could march into power at the head of the League of National Security?

As I sighed happily, light came streaming through the door and with it a buzz of voices. Mr Haughton strode into the foyer.

“Well then, what do you say, young Graham? Will you join us?”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “Oh yes.”

They bound a scarf around my eyes and steered me into the hall with a hand at either elbow. I kept my head high and my spine soldierly, although I had an uncomfortable feeling that my next step would send me plummeting through a hole in the floorboards. To hearten myself I kept murmuring under my breath, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me ...” and after a while I began to feel more confident. It was as though all my heroes were watching me - Alan Gaunt, Sherlock Holmes, King Charles I and his Cavaliers, my father.

Then I began to sense the pressure of other eyes. I tried to remember the faces of the men I’d watched through the window but all I could see were featureless ghosts. Though my body remained stiff and straight, inside my heart was groaning.

Don’t make me. Please. I’m only a boy.

I clamped my jaw tight on the shameful words, biting my lip harder and harder, until my night fears were sent scuttling by the sound of my father’s voice.

“Repeat the oath of secrecy after me.”

Steadying myself, I joined in obediently. “I do swear by Almighty God that I will not reveal to anyone whatsoever anything that now may be communicated to me.”

As my father led me through the oath, my voice grew stronger and my chest lifted with pride. The darkness was no longer full of fear: I felt as if I was standing before the altar of an echoing cathedral, making my vows to abide by the constitution of the League of National Security. When my father’s voice slowed and deepened, I shivered in response.

“I take this oath without any reservation or equivocation, either mental or otherwise. So help me, God.”

On the final words our voices blended together like a peal of bells and my brain was clanging with solemn echoes as the blindfold was lifted from my eyes. For a moment I was still alone in the darkness, with shadowy figures all around me. Then the light blazed out and I stood there blinking while my father shook my hand, beaming proudly and the other men came forward to congratulate me.

“By Jove, we’ve got a new mascot.”

“A chip off the old block, hey?”

“What a lark! And we thought you were a Bolshie.”

“I can hardly blame you, sir,” I laughed.

The guard’s keen eyes twinkled as he gave me a mock salute and disappeared into the crowd. I tried to smile and answer modestly, but when I glanced back at my father I thought my ribs would crack with pride.

I was in on the adventure now and no mistake, I was one of them, a man among men. If only Charley could see me now!

CHAPTER SEVEN

I freewheel down a dip in the road, smiling as I remember my hour of glory. Everything became more confusing later on but at least I did a good job as a boy detective. And I still think that a secret army is a jolly exciting idea.

My mouth opens in a jaw-cracking yawn and Richmond blurs before my watering eyes. I slow down, dragging my boot sole along the ground. Now that I feel more relaxed and pleased with myself, maybe I'll be able to rest after all.

I watch for a suitable stopping place and finally decide on a bench beside an official-looking building. Parking my bike, I stretch out on the wooden seat. Immediately my eyelids drop down like heavy metal shutters. I try to force them open again but it's too hard, so I let myself drift away towards sleep.

Then the bogeyman bends over me and pats my face with its claw of a hand. Am I awake or asleep? Must be awake, because I've jackknifed down to the far end of the bench. The bogeyman is stretching its long arms after me.

"A liddle boy, " it mumbles. "Poor liddle boy, sleeping on a bench in the cold, cold night. "

A sweet-sour whiff follows me on the air and I almost collapse with relief as the figure from my nightmares turns into a harmless old drunk.

"Sat down for a breather and must've nodded off but I better be pushing on now, " I say hastily.

The old man trails after me, trying to tell me the story of his life. I nod and smile, even though I can't understand much of what he's saying. When I swing onto my bike, he stands in the gutter and waves to me for half a block. The last time I turn to wave back, I see him making a beeline for the bench.

My heart is still pounding lightly - from the shock, I assume. Oh, I was scared by the first few drunks I saw around Richmond, but then I'd never seen anyone the worse for alcohol before. People probably do get drunk in Kew, of course, but it happens indoors instead of out in the streets. At any rate, I'm used to drunks by now and I hardly even notice them.

Except that somehow I get the sense that, if I could've followed what the old man was trying to say, it would've made me feel sad. As I cycle on, I find myself feeling sad anyway. I try to raise my spirits by thinking about the secret army again, but it doesn't work. For one thing, I've got to move on to the next stage of my adventure. I can't go on thinking about boy detectives and secret meetings forever.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They gave me a special mission, something only a boy could do. “And dangerous,” my father warned me, to my delight. I was to disguise myself and hang around the Friday night street corner meetings in Richmond to find out what the comms were saying. If I was lucky, I might even be able to worm my way into the headquarters of the Unemployed Workers’ Movement.

“You’ll report directly to your father,” Mr Houghton said. “He can hand any important information on to me and I’ll see that it goes straight to the top brass of the League. In the meantime, we’ll need to get you kitted out. Sir Daniel Rose is the man to help you there, just as long as you don’t take his ideas too seriously.”

I shook my head vigorously, more to wake myself up than because I had any particular interest in anyone’s ideas. My father patted me on the shoulder.

“All right, Graham, you’d better cut along. But remember, not a word about the League in front of your mother or Margaret.”

I walked away from the hall, astonished to find that my feet were still making contact with the ground. Excitement roared through my body and I felt that I could have gone soaring above the city, dipping my wings as I reached the silver band of river that divided sedate Kew from grimy unknown Richmond.

When I got home, I chatted kindly to my mother for a while, making up to her for being cut out of the fun. Then I slipped upstairs, in order to gloat over my secret in private. It was a lucky thing that I hadn’t said anything to Charley. I would keep the

League's secret till my dying day, whereas Charley would've blabbed everything to the first friendly Bolshie he came across. *Can he keep a secret? I don't believe he can ...*

I was still smiling as I fell asleep.

At first sight I was not particularly impressed with Sir Daniel Rose. He was a slight, self-effacing man with a faint stammer, early-silver hair and a pair of pince-nez glasses balanced precariously on the bridge of his nose. All the same I sat and waited patiently while he grappled with a series of polite questions about my family and then went on to tell me about his scheme for helping unemployed boys by sending them to work in the country.

"Worst thing about this Depression, in my opinion, is the effect it's having on our youth. Nothing to do, you know, but hang around on street corners and listen to Bolshie propaganda. While all the time the bush is waiting for them, holding out a chance for, ah, healthy and productive labour."

"Absolutely, sir," I said. He seemed to be talking to himself, rather than to me, but it was best to be on the safe side.

"Of course I always give the lads a new set of garments before they go up bush," he continued earnestly. "My secretary has sorted through the clothes they leave behind. He'll show you to the dressing-room, so you can, ah, try them on."

The secretary was lean and dark and six feet tall. His name was Burke and I instantly decided that he must've been descended from Burke and Hare, the famous grave robbers. He obviously took an immediate dislike to me too, because he loped away down the corridor so speedily that I had to break into a jog to keep up with him.

"I'm afraid these clothes may be a trifle large, but since Sir Daniel told me you were thirteen, I presumed you'd be -"

"Thank you," I said coldly and he bowed and left.

"My father's six foot two," I muttered as I climbed into patched pants. "My grandfather had a growth spurt when he was sixteen," I reminded myself as I pulled on a tattered shirt and a frayed jersey. "You aren't the only tall person in the world," I informed the absent Burke as I fumbled into a sagging coat.

I turned to and fro, studying the bunched cloth at my waist and the long sleeves dripping over my hands. I looked like a particularly miserable clown. The rough wool rasped my skin and I was already starting to feel disagreeably greasy.

"Here are some smaller garments for you."

I spun around, positive that I'd heard a sneer tucked away behind the word "smaller". Burke studied our twin reflections in the oval mirror for a moment, then handed over the

clothes and wiped his fingers on a fold of white handkerchief. He glided from the room with the faintest of smiles, leaving me to feel utterly ridiculous.

I tugged angrily at shirts and trousers. When I finally faced myself in the mirror again, I seemed more like a scruffy red-faced kid than an apprentice hero. The whole adventure was turning sour on me already.

“Oh, that’s tophole.”

Sir Daniel was peering at me through his silly glasses. With a sigh I straightened up and presented myself for inspection. He roamed around, unbuttoning my collar, adjusting my cap and changing the way I stood with a deft push here and there. I watched, fascinated, as I started to look like someone else. It took me five minutes to remember that, in the ordinary way, I dislike being touched.

“Hmm, new bootlaces, can’t have that.” Sir Daniel dropped to his knees and hauled away busily. “Attention to detail, most important. You approve of your father’s ideas, I take it?”

I stared ahead, my face set. “What ideas do you mean, Sir Daniel?”

“Very good, my boy, very good. You’re not giving anything away,” said Sir Daniel, snapping the laces between his hands. “But your father sounded me out early in the piece, you know. Capital fellow, I’ve worked with him often, one of our best solicitors.” The bootlace snapped again. “Couldn’t agree with him this time, though. High treason, if you, ah, carry it through to its logical conclusion.”

I bit my lip, feeling confused. Sir Daniel seemed to know about the League, but according to my oath I shouldn’t discuss it with him, since he wasn’t a member. Come to that, I didn’t want to discuss it with him, not while he was using words like “treason”.

My silence didn’t seem to bother him, however. As he frayed and knotted the bootlaces, he went on cheerfully, “I said to him, ‘Thompson, what would you call it if the commos seized power for the, ah, good of the nation?’ ‘Treason,’ he told me. ‘Exactly,’ I said.”

He dropped the laces into my palm and beamed at me. I decided that it was time to make a stand.

“Surely, sir, if one side’s in the right and the other side’s wrong ...” I began, but he cut me off with a smile.

“Precisely the Bolshies’ argument,” he said in triumph. “They say they’re right, so they can do as they please. Your lot says you’re right, so you can do as *you* please. Suspect all extreme views, my boy. Truth, in my, ah, opinion, is to be found somewhere around the happy medium.”

“Think of the war, though,” I persisted. “In the ordinary way, it’d be wrong to go round killing people. But when there’s a war on, things are different. Maybe it’s the same with my father’s ideas. In some circumstances they might be treason, but right now it’s the best thing to do.”

He nodded until his glasses fell off and swung on their silk ribbon. "Not bad at all. Plan to follow your father into the law, by any chance? You've got the legal mind, no doubt about it."

To tell the truth, I'd never really thought about what I'd do when I grew up - apart from wanting to grow tall enough to make the footy team, that is. Sir Daniel sounded as if he meant what he said, though and I immediately saw myself making headlines by my stirring addresses to the jury. Grasping my lapels, I glanced in the mirror but a ragged urchin stared mockingly back at me and reminded me of the job at hand.

"My father said you'd get some boys from Richmond to talk to me. Are they here yet?"

"Young Ted and Jimmy? Ready and waiting. Your father stressed that this was, ah, a secret mission, so I've told them you need a spot of advice for a school play. That should do the trick, hey?"

"Thank you, sir."

No doubt about it, there was a sharp mind at work behind Sir Daniel's waffly manner. Presumably these boys weren't commos, but still I could hardly tell them outright that I planned to go to Richmond as a spy. After all, I wouldn't be too keen on helping a Richmond boy to come and spy around our school, even if I agreed with his reasons for doing so. The whole business was more complicated than I'd realised and I was grateful to Sir Daniel for providing me with a suitable story.

I hurried into my school clothes again and Sir Daniel directed me to the room where the two boys were waiting. They glanced up at me with identical suspicious frowns, but apart from that they didn't look at all alike. Jimmy was small and wiry, with bright terrier eyes watching from beneath a thick red fringe. Ted was dark and silent, his hands deep in his pockets and his thoughts hidden behind an expressionless face.

"All right, let's get it over with," he said abruptly. "Read us your lines, mate."

I almost looked round for a non-existent script before I remembered that the school play was just an excuse.

"To tell the truth," I said with a flash of inspiration, "the whole thing was written by one of the swots in the Sixth and I'm not frightfully happy with my part. How about I tell you what I'm supposed to do and then you tell me how a Richmond fellow would really behave?"

"No sweat," agreed Jimmy. "Trust one of them posh bastards to get it all arse about - present company excepted, of course."

I repeated Jimmy's words in my mind, trying to get the accent right. This was going to be an interesting exercise. Fortunately I had quite a good ear for languages - but on the other hand I was actually a hopeless actor. I hoped that I would be up to the challenge.

"Come on, spit it out," said Ted impatiently.

I gathered my wits together and flung myself into a description of a street corner meeting with people heckling a speaker on a soapbox.

"I'm supposed to say things like 'what a lot of rot' and 'oh, I say, what utter garbage'."

"Well, you're right about one thing," Jimmy sniggered. "This cobber of yours has never been within cooe of Richmond. To start with, we got to get you to talk different - that right, Ted?"

"I reckon."

"But how, mate? How?"

"We say things and he says them after us," Ted shrugged. "Unless you got a better idea, that is."

By the end of half an hour I was spitting my sentences through clenched teeth, while Jimmy kept on laughing and Ted kept on shaking his head scornfully. Then, just when I could feel my voice beginning to change, Ted snapped, "Besides, you're standing all wrong," and they set to work on that.

"Slouch, you great jackass, slouch! You're supposed to be a street corner lair, not an effing soldier."

I stiffened indignantly and Jimmy swung on my shoulders to force them down. "Put your hands in your pockets and your weight on your hips," he chanted for the fifth time.

"Now if I push past you, like so -"

Ted jostled me unexpectedly and I glared at him.

"I beg your pardon."

Then I noticed that my words had automatically come out in a lazy drawl. I checked Ted's expression, hoping to find approval and he stared back flatly.

"Dead hopeless. Say 'I beg your pardon' down our way and you'll be mincemeat in ten seconds. 'Mind who you're shoving' - that's the ticket. It's a basic rule - a Richmond lad never walks away from a fight."

I nodded humbly and filed the fact away with all the others. I felt top-heavy with information and I was longing to get away and sort through it on my own, so I was glad when Sir Daniel poked his head around the door.

"Time's almost up. How's he getting on?"

"Could be worse. Better than when he started, anyhow."

"He'd need to be," Jimmy commented. "Still, a bunch of toffs'll never notice the difference."

"Would he, ah, pass muster down Richmond way?"

"Funny question to be asking. What's all this about?"

Ted was scowling even more darkly and Jimmy kicked him on the ankle. "Come off it, cobber," he said. "We knew there had to be some reason why they got us along here. Just remember, Sir Dan's sending us up bush where we can earn a bit of money. You don't get something for nothing, not in this world."

"I hope you don't feel you've been forced into this, Ted," said Sir Daniel in his gentle voice. "I can assure you that Graham won't be doing anything you'd disapprove of."

"Oh yeah? Maybe him and me ought to have a little chat about what I do and don't approve of."

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Jesus wept. Ask no questions and you'll be told no bleeding lies. It's done now, anyway, so there's no point belly-aching about it."

Ted stared suddenly down at the patterned carpet. His hands were clenched at his side, but as I watched, his fists slowly uncurled. "I s'pose you're right," he muttered.

"No two ways about that."

Winking across at me, Jimmy nudged Ted to the door. There was a clink of coins as they passed Sir Daniel and Ted's shoulders slumped even lower. I fidgeted unhappily. In his own way Ted had been as bossy and superior as Jimmy, but I'd wanted to impress him and I hated to see him looking so defeated. I hesitated for a moment and then the words came.

"Hooroo, cobbers. Much obliged."

As I'd hoped, Jimmy chuckled and even Ted's tight face relaxed in a grin.

"Front seats at this play of yours, then?" he asked.

"No sweat."

While Sir Daniel saw the two boys to the door, I wandered past the low table crowded with silver-framed photographs, the oil paintings of bush scenes, the gilt clock in its glass case, the heavy brocade curtains. Suddenly I turned and kicked at a footstool, wishing that I could've told Ted the truth. When I swore my oath of secrecy to the League, I'd imagined myself refusing to say a word to my enemies. But I didn't see Ted as the enemy - in fact, I would've liked to have him as a friend, if that had been possible. All the same, in the process of sticking to my oath, I'd made Ted feel like a traitor, although I honestly couldn't see what else I could've done.

Sir Daniel breezed back in, rubbing his hands. "Splendid fellows, aren't they?" he said. "Burke keeps telling me that I'm wasting my time on this scheme. He'd rather see me making a few more speeches or laying a few more foundation stones. I can't seem to convince him that we're all responsible for each other on this earth."

So Burke didn't really have it in for me at all, I thought as we walked down the hall. He was just generally opposed to Sir Daniel's scheme for helping unemployed boys. I should've felt better about Burke after that but, if anything, I disliked him even more.

We paused on the front steps for a moment. The wind lifted Sir Daniel's white hair and he gazed down the street as if his funny glasses could show him everything that was going on in the city.

"I do hope I'll be able to hear the tale of your, ah, exploits one day."

"I promise I'll tell you, sir - that is, if I'm allowed."

“I understand,” he told me gravely. As he turned away, he added over his shoulder, “Oh and by the bye, it’s a lucky thing you’re the height you are. Those young chaps don’t get the sort of tucker your mother feeds you. If you’d been a great strapping chap, I’d have had to say the show was off.”

He faded back into the doorway and I ran down the steps, feeling like a different boy than the one who’d arrived. Then I’d been impatient with all the fiddling around, impatient to be up and at them. Now I could see how important it was to do your homework.

All the way home I practised my Richmond accent under my breath. I was going to be a master of disguise, just like Sherlock Holmes and what’s more, my height would be a real help to me. Whistling cheerfully, I stowed my set of rags in the garden shed and went to report to my father.

After I’d brought him up to date, I hesitated briefly and added, “By the way, Sir Daniel told me that if the commos did what we’re doing, we’d think it was treason.”

My father leaned back, clasping his hands behind his head. “And what did you say to that?” he asked.

“I told him that there were different rules in wartime. After all, if we’re a secret army, that means there’s a secret war going on, doesn’t it?” From my father’s smile I knew this was the right answer, which made me bold enough to ask another question. “What does Sir Daniel do, anyway? Is he some kind of charity worker?”

My father went on smiling at a private joke. “Not exactly, Graham. He’s a judge, one of the best in Australia. Magnificent war record too.”

“Oh,” I said in surprise, trying to imagine bullets whizzing past those stupid glasses. Actually, when I thought about it, I could believe that someone like Sir Daniel would get the best from his men. “He’s a pretty decent old stick.”

“It’s a shame he wouldn’t come down on our side,” my father nodded. “Still, I’m glad he didn’t win you round to his way of thinking. If you can stick up for yourself against Dan Rose, the Bolshies certainly won’t stand a chance.”

“Dad!”

“Hold your horses, old chap. I can’t see you turning into a raving Red, of course. But you’ll have to listen to a lot of their rot, you know, and the blighters can sound pretty convincing at times. After all, that’s their business - persuading honest working men to turn against their employers.”

I clamped my mouth shut, to show that I wouldn’t even argue with this ridiculous idea and my father laughed.

“A word to the wise, Graham, before we make our plans. I’ve arranged for you to change in and out of your Richmond clobber at a house in the next street. It’s the home of one of the League members and he’ll make sure you don’t run across anyone while you’re there. Mr Haughton wants you to start tomorrow, if you feel up to it. Friday’s the

big night for street corner meetings, so you can scout around and check out the lie of the land. The League of National Security's youngest intelligence officer - how does that sound to you?"

He sketched a salute, looking at me proudly across the desk. And I haven't even done anything yet, I thought. Imagine how pleased he was going to be when I single-handedly captured the whole of the Unemployed Workers' Movement! It seemed the least I could do to repay my father's faith in me.

CHAPTER NINE

I steer along one-handed as I turn up my collar against the chilly wind. Somewhere along the way I've lost my gloves and by now my fingers are almost frozen stiff. You wouldn't think I'd worry about a little detail like cold hands, when I've survived being roughed up by the commos and the police - and by my own side too, come to that. Then again, that's all in the past. My fingers are cold now.

Worse still, I feel cold inside, as if I'd swallowed a whole block from an ice chest. I glance around at the silent streets, searching for an explanation, but I can only see rows of sprawling factories and rows of squashed up houses. It all looks very ordinary and I feel very ordinary and I suppose that's the problem.

When I signed up with the League of National Security, I sort of imagined that in the future boys would read about me in the history books, just like I read about Simpson and his donkey or all the other heroes. Why did I never notice that a thousand chaps might go off to the Great War but you would only ever hear one story about it? The other nine hundred and ninety-nine were probably really brave too; it's just that there isn't room in the history books for everybody.

People will write about Sir Daniel Rose. They may even remember Percy Laidler (who's rather like Sir Daniel in a funny kind of way, even though he's on the other side). But no one will remember my father or Danny Pearse or Les or Mr Haughton - they'll just remember the League and the Unemployed Workers' Movement. As for Dotty and me, I don't see that we have the faintest chance of making it into history. We all fit into the category of the other nine hundred and ninety-nine.

I pedal on with an effort. In the daytime there's always something to look at but now the cottages and factories seem small and insignificant under the stretch of pearly moonlit sky. I feel small too. The world's a bigger place than I thought - and so far I've only been to Richmond and back.

My tyre skids across something squishy and I veer sharply toward a lamppost. My fingers are too numb to wrench the handlebars around, so I leap off sideways like a bareback rider and lower the bike carefully to the ground.

I stamp up and down the footpath, tucking my hands in my armpits to warm them. After a while my fingers start to prickle painfully as the blood returns. Suddenly I feel ashamed of all that guff about wanting to see my name in the history books. The truth is, I still have to work it all out for myself, whether anyone else is interested or not.

With a sigh I heave up the bike again. Then I button my coat and loop my scarf around my hands like mittens, before I ride on.

CHAPTER TEN

For my first trip to Richmond my father offered to drive me to a convenient corner but I shook my head and told him that people would stare at the sight of a ragged boy unloading his bike from a shiny car. Besides, I added silently, heroes make their own way. They never accept lifts for the first half of their missions.

Mind you, I regretted my decision after five minutes on the old rattletrap. It was part of my disguise, of course - I could hardly ride into Richmond on the brand new bike I'd got for my birthday. But I wished that they could've found me a better bike than this.

Even as I was complaining to myself, the old bike swerved to the left again and tried to climb the curb. An elderly couple looked down their noses at me.

"What's the matter with you?" I muttered angrily.

Then I saw myself through their eyes - a scruffy urchin riding his rusty bike past the solemnly bowing trees and dignified white houses of Kew. I laughed out loud and a man walking three fox terriers jumped at the sound.

I cycled on, past the red brick castle from which the Catholic archbishop looked out across Melbourne, past the scrub and gum trees that led to the river. The road dipped and the city spread out before me like a blue-grey maze. Orange clouds hung on the horizon and green clouds of treetops edged the sluggish river.

"Watch out, Richmond!" I yelled. "Here I come."

Then I lifted my feet from the pedals and freewheeled around the curves of the road, down to the bridge that would take me to the other side of the Yarra. The old bike was

getting crankier by the minute and I'd been sworn at by the drivers of a van, two cars and a cable tram, before I decided to turn off the main road and make my way along the side streets. Darkness was gathering more thickly there and I took a while to notice that I was at the tail end of a procession of women and children, all following a horse and cart.

"The Rosella man," they whispered to any newcomers. "Sugar for the jam."

Then a tall skinny girl stepped into the spotlight of a streetlamp.

"Watch it, love," yelled the driver, slowing.

She looked up at him, hands on hips. "Give us a lift, mister?"

"Sorry, no can do. Company policy."

"Ah, come on, be a devil."

I listened carefully to their backchat, memorizing words and phrases. As the driver laughed and whipped up his horses, I saw three black monkey-shapes drop from the swinging tailgate of the cart. The women swarmed forward with their aprons outstretched. When my front wheel bumped and crunched on the road, I finally realised what was going on.

Drawing level, I called to the driver, "Scuse me, mister, they opened the back of your cart and ripped the sacks while you was stopped. The sugar's falling out."

"Thanks for the warning, mate," he nodded. Then he narrowed his eyes and added, "Except you got it wrong. That old tailgate swings open by itself, all the time."

"Nah, it was the kids. They -"

"Get off. What are ya, a bosses' nark or something?"

"Go boil your head," I shouted, pedalling away furiously. The streets opened and gulped me down and by the time the rage cleared from my eyes, I was hopelessly lost.

Everything was ugly. Mean little houses, streets upon streets of them, their tin roofs pinched to a point, the chimney clamped down dead centre. Endless factories, some of them huge brick mansions, others sheets of tin that hung from wooden frames, all rattling and thumping and burping yellow smoke at the sky.

Signs everywhere. Bold white lettering outside the factories said firmly, "No vacancies". Pathetic scratches on cardboard in the house windows murmured, "Laundry taken in", "Board and lodging", "Dressmaking".

Smells everywhere. The heavy, bitter smell of leather; the sudden reek of tips and dumps; chemical fumes that made me catch my breath; sad wafts of boiling cabbage; and, underlying everything, the cloying smell from huge vats of jams and sauces.

Once I thought I spotted a church, but the stately building was topped with a giant drum and twisted pipes instead of a cross. All the same, the spired factory seemed like the only solid thing in the entire suburb and I was sorry to leave it behind.

Whenever I passed a group of people, I slowed down and listened in, trying to pick up some clue about where I was.

“Hello, how’s things?”

“Up to mud.”

“Doing anything?”

“No, still looking.”

“Same here. Let’s go down to the corner, then.”

I followed the two men, hoping to find a street corner meeting, but they only joined a group that was lounging round outside a hotel door. For heaven’s sake, I thought impatiently, why don’t they at least go in and have a drink? While I was watching them, a grimy toddler lunged in front of my wheel and snatched an apple core from the gutter. I swerved to avoid her and shook my head in disgust.

Then I was cycling past a vast blackness that might have been a park, except that it was pitted with holes and covered with scorched grass, its fence a zigzag of gaps and dangling palings. Red flames leered in the distance and I could hear the sound of hoarse laughter.

I stuck my head down and cycled faster, with despair close behind me. Why hadn’t I brought a map? I could’ve folded it up and hidden it in my boot, or something. Instead, I had failed dismally. I was never going to find even the smallest of street corner meetings. In fact, I’d have a great deal of difficulty finding my way home again.

The rattletrap took advantage of my misery and threw me off. As I scrambled to my feet, too depressed to curse, I glanced up and found myself in the shadow of the Richmond Town Hall.

Which meant that I was near the corner of Bridge Road. Which meant that my reputation as the League’s junior intelligence officer was safe for the moment.

Chaining up my bike, I headed towards the shops. After the small dark lanes, I was doubly impressed by the blaze of light from the plate glass windows and the banners hung from cast-iron verandahs. Buskers sang or played the violin or tap-danced and at first sight the whole street looked like a glittering circus.

But the people! They were patched and darned and tattered, their coats sagging and their pant seats shiny with wear. Their hair hung in rats’ tails, their skin was pasty and they all seemed to be either very fat or very thin.

“Commos,” I whispered softly to myself. For a moment I hesitated on the dark corner, longing to scurry back to the comfortable security of Kew. Then I stepped out into the bustle.

An old woman, her cheeks rouged with broken veins, tottered straight at me. I dodged aside, only to cannon into a young man who glared at me from eyes half hidden by the pale wedges of his cheeks. I dodged again and landed fair and square on a woman's foot. Her shapeless coat covered a pillowy middle-aged body but her face was as young as a girl's. While I puzzled at the contrast, she cuffed me over the ear.

It was a stroke of luck, really, I decided as I trudged away with my head ringing. I'd been just about to say, "Frightfully sorry," in my best public school voice, which would've been a bad mistake. To get into my part, I loitered outside a greengrocer's shop and eavesdropped on two small boys.

"Old Spaghetti give you any specs?"

"Yeah - look."

"Lucky old you."

I peered over their shoulders at the tiniest, spottiest apples I'd ever seen, four of them fitting into a cupped pair of grubby hands. I wondered where the luck came in.

"What are you staring at, then?"

Instant stage fright. I called silently on Ted and Jimmy, then growled, "Want to make something of it?"

The boy jutted his bottom lip. "Wouldn't waste my time," he said as he marched away with dignity, leaving me to feel like a bully - although a successful one.

While I was deciding what to do next, I heard a voice lift above the roar of the traffic. On a nearby corner people were gathered together in a knot. I nodded with satisfaction and went to elbow my way through a gap.

"For example, only a few weeks ago our beloved council found out that unemployed wretches were coming to the library and actually reading the books. Did they panic?" asked the voice seriously. "Nah, they just had the books disinfected."

I was caught between a swell of waistcoat and a grey serge knee, so I couldn't see the speaker. It didn't sound promising, though. "Unemployed wretches" - that was the kind of thing my father might say but I was looking for a commo.

"So what's your mob going to do for us, Danny Pearse?" the waistcoat bellowed in my ear.

"Come along to our joint and find out. You can catch up with your mates, read, play cards - maybe even make a plan or two."

So this Danny Pearse was involved in some kind of charity work, which was a disappointment. All the same I was curious enough to edge past the grey serge knee and lean round a battered felt hat so I could see him properly.

He was standing on a crate but even so he didn't exactly tower over the crowd. Nonetheless, his compact body seemed to hold enough energy for half-a-dozen men. When he talked about the dances held in his group's hall, his arm tenderly encircled an invisible partner. When he described their boxing shows, he squared up to

an invisible opponent. People were chuckling all around me and I found that I was grinning too.

Danny Pearce smiled back at us. "Yeah, we're a load of laughs, comrades," he agreed. "But we share our troubles as well. Supposing we hear about a family that's being evicted - well, you all know how we can help out there."

"Too right, Danny," roared the crowd.

I was nodding along wisely before I realised that I hadn't the faintest idea of what he meant. I could tell that he was sincere, though. His lively black eyes seemed to fix on each of us in turn. His thick black hair grew wilder and wilder as he acted out every word he spoke. You could see he was as honest as the day was long. You knew that he wanted to help.

"And you don't have to be out of a job to join the Unemployed Workers' Movement," he went on earnestly. "We're all in the same bleeding boat, y'know 'Make sacrifices,' our Premier tells us and then our captains of industry let the harvests rot and pour milk down the drain, so that prices can go up while we go hungry. Human sacrifices - that's what they really want. A few months ago a bloke called Menzies said, 'Rather than that Australia should fail to pay her honest debt to the bondholders, I would prefer to see every man, woman and child in Australia die of starvation in the next six months.' How do you like that, comrades?"

I was still smiling at the pompous voice he'd used to imitate Menzies, when the penny finally dropped. During the last five minutes I'd been amused and indignant and almost ready to march - behind a member of the Unemployed Workers' Movement.

My father was right. You had to watch these commos.

By the time I walked away an hour later, I felt as if my brain was full to overflowing. Dancing and darting, crouching and commanding, Danny had reeled off facts and figures about the unemployed in Richmond - in Melbourne - in Victoria - in Australia - in the world. In between he told stories, cracked jokes and argued hecklers into silence. I had to admit that he would've left any member of our school debating society for dead.

I'd memorised as much as I could, though it wasn't easy. I wished that I could've taken notes but of course I might just as well have worn a huge placard saying SPY. At least I had a handbill with the time and place of an Unemployed Workers' Movement meeting. I stowed it away carefully and knelt down to unfasten my bike chain.

Hands closed round my shoulders and my forehead bumped the asphalt. "Keep your mouth shut and turn out your pockets," a voice whispered above my head.

Instinctively I kicked out and someone sat on me, knocking the breath from my lungs. I lay there, winded, while fingers scrabbled through my pockets.

“He’s stony, Franky. Jesus, you told me -”

“And I still do,” said the whispery voice. “Take a look at them nice red rosy cheeks. He’s been eating well, Blue. There’s money in it somewhere and it’s only fair he should share it around.”

The fingers pried on, pulling at my shirt and scrunching up handfuls of my coat lining. I lifted myself slightly and wheezed, “He’s right. I got no money.”

Franky checked my pockets one last time and said sadly, “Empty as a boozers’ bottle. The kid’s telling the truth. Just our luck, Blue.”

“We could take his boots, Franky. And the mangle.”

“Wouldn’t be fair, mate. The kid’s probably got a paper round or something. Besides, those boots are pretty ancient. Maybe he’s not flush after all, in spite of the rosy cheeks.”

Silence for a moment and then Blue said, “So what do we do now? I can’t keep sitting on him all night.”

I was glad to hear it but I could understand their problem. To help them out, I croaked, “You could make me face the wall and count to a hundred.”

“Not bad,” agreed Franky. “All right, you do that, mate - or else.”

It wasn’t the most terrifying threat in the world, so I waited till Blue eased his weight off me, then leapt up to collar them. But my foot caught in the spokes of the rattletrap. I fell flat on my face again and by the time I picked myself up, Franky and Blue were disappearing round the corner.

I gave the bike a sharp kick to relieve my feelings before I set off homewards, feeling like a bit of a fool. I played the scene over and over in my mind and every time I came to the same conclusion. I wasn’t bad with my fists - if you’re small, you need to learn how to defend yourself - but I simply hadn’t had a chance to fight back.

By the time I was toiling up the hill towards Kew, however, I’d almost forgiven Franky and Blue. After all, I was behind enemy lines. It would’ve been a let down, in a way, to have done nothing but memorise speeches.

One thing still puzzled me, though. Why had the two boys picked me out of the crowd? Did people with money really have different faces from poor people?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I continue to freewheel on down Hoddle Street. It's straight and broad and familiar to me from family drives, so I don't need to watch the road as I go. I can travel through the landscape of my thoughts, popping out to get my bearings in the real world every now and then.

Except that suddenly there's a ginger streak in front of me. I jam on my brakes and the skinny cat leaps for the footpath, yowling wildly. I stare after it, totally disoriented. The angles of the buildings are all wrong and I can't believe I've ever seen this ramshackle cafe before.

I'm lost and I don't want to admit it, so I get off my bike to see whether the cat's hurt. It seems all right - in fact it's purring like a drum roll and butting its head against a pile of old clothes. Then the pile shifts and I realise that it's a man, bent double as he forages inside the rubbish bins.

"Just hang on a minute, pussy." He jumps at the sound of my footsteps and spins around, holding out a dripping handful. "No problems, mate. There's always good pickings here, more than enough for two and a cat," he says in a rusty voice. "Go on, bog in."

I glance at his cupped hands and then wish I hadn't. Cold chips flop between carrot chunks and gleaming meat fat, while coffee grounds are scattered over the lot like poppy seeds.

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry."

He looks at me with disbelief and plunges his arm into the bin again. As I walk away, he yells after me, "I used to be a clerk in an office, y'know. It's bloody degrading to think that a man's willing to work and can't get it."

I look around me, shivering. The missing piece drops back into the jigsaw and all at once I know exactly where I am. Funny, I must've passed this little cafe a score of times without ever really noticing it. Still, on our family drives I'm usually thinking about what I'll do at the beach, rather than looking around at Collingwood and Richmond.

Onto my bike and off I go again. For some reason I find myself remembering the question I asked Dotty on the way to Dudley Flats.

"What's communism about, anyway?"

She looked at me scornfully, as if I should've known - and I probably should've, too. I'd sat through enough lectures from Danny and Mr Hart by then and I'd heard the opposite point of view from my father and Mr Haughton. All the same, I'd never really grasped the basic ideas.

"It's about sharing," she told me. "Capitalists reckon they should be allowed to grab as much as they can lay their hands on but we reckon everything ought to be shared out fairly. "

"What do you mean by 'fairly', though? If someone works harder, isn't it fair that they get a bigger share?"

"Fair, my arse. The capitalists push us into doing their hard work for them, mate. Then they cream off the profits by selling the things we make. "

"Hold on, Dotty. You're talking about working with your hands, but I'm talking about working with your brain. It's like at school - the boys who swot win the prizes and the boys who train make the team. "

"Some schools don't even have prizes, y'know. You might as well say that you can go into your dad's line of business and I can go into mine, so that proves we're equal." Dotty flashed her triangular grin and added, "Mind you, even supposing my dad had a line of business, instead of being unemployed, they probably wouldn't let girls in. It's always loaded, one way or another. Even among your lot, I bet they pick the big strong boys for the teams. "

I felt as though I'd knocked my elbow against something sharp but I blinked and persisted.

"Look, there has to be some kind of competition and rewards and so on. Otherwise nobody would ever bother to do anything."

Dotty shrugged. "You can argue about it till you're blue in the face, Gray. I'll still think the world'd be a better place if we shared things around."

And that was that, for Dotty at least. As for me, I'm still thinking about it as I cycle down the road. I don't want that man to have to eat out of rubbish bins. At the same

time I don't want him to come and take half of my dinner. Does that make me a capitalist or a Communist?

You'd think I'd have made up my mind by this time but I haven't. The thing is, you can drive past a cafe twenty times and never notice it and you can hear hundreds of conversations and never understand them.

That's why I'm sorting through everything, all over again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

My father and I had worked out a complicated story about a boy scout group, so my mother wasn't surprised when I was late home. At the sight of my stumbling walk and drooping eyelids, however, she packed me straight off to bed. I didn't get a chance to speak to my father and to tell the truth I wasn't sorry. After all I'd been through, I couldn't have strung two words together.

The bedroom was bright with sunshine by the time I woke next morning. My legs were still aching but I felt extremely pleased with myself. Downstairs my mother was retailing the gossip from her bridge party, Margaret was making puddles with her boiled egg and my father was reading out snippets from the newspaper editorial. He glanced up at me as I took my seat and we nodded imperceptibly.

Even when he finally strolled out into the garden, I dallied for a few minutes before following him, enjoying the sense of secret undercurrents below the surface of our family life. We bent our heads over the rose bushes and I recounted Danny Pearce's speech in a low voice. Halfway through, my father held up his hand.

"Spare me the rest of it! I'll end up believing there's no such thing as a dole cheat if you go on this way. Seriously, though, Graham, we can read those statistics in any of their rotten pamphlets. There's no need to learn them all by heart."

I stuck my chin out indignantly. It was a bit late to tell me that now, after I'd gone to so much trouble.

"I thought you wanted to know what the commos were saying. What *are* you looking for, then?"

“Ssh,” said my father hastily. “Keep your voice down, or the others will overhear us. Listen, old chap, you’re on the right track, no doubt about that. You just need to concentrate more on the sort of things the League wants to know.”

“Yes, but what sort of things are they, exactly?”

My father flipped at the rose leaves, checking their undersides for aphids. “Just keep your eye out for anything unusual. The Richmond UWM are known troublemakers. That’s why we need a man on the spot to warn us about any new trouble they might be making.”

I scuffed doubtfully at the grass edge. It all sounded rather vague to me. Surely the League had sent me to Richmond as part of some overall plan - or were they just trying to get me out of the way? I would’ve liked to demand an explanation, except that I wasn’t quite sure how to go about it. While I was still brooding, my father rested his hand on my shoulder.

“Believe me, Graham, you’re doing a very important job. Intelligence work isn’t easy, you know. You can scout around for days before you come up with one useful fact. Just remember - that single fact could change the whole course of the League’s policy.”

That made me feel better, though I still wasn’t entirely convinced that I’d recognise vital information if I fell over it. The trouble was that everything about Richmond seemed unusual to me. I’d just have to hope that I got the hang of it after a while.

Franky showed up at the first Unemployed Workers’ Movement meeting that I attended. I didn’t recognize him, of course, but he soon made himself known by kicking at my chair, prodding me in the ribs and hissing threats from the side of his mouth. In spite of all this, it wasn’t long before I realised that I worried him more than he worried me and in fact he cornered me after the meeting and begged me not to tell Danny Pearse what he and Blue had done.

“Danny’d kill me if he knew. He’s got a real down on nicking from your own. I never would’ve done it, except that Blue was going off his brain with the toothache, so I promised him we’d get the money for a dentist by hook or by crook. Do us a favour and keep your trap shut, mate, and I’ll do the same for you some day.”

“No sweat,” I said off-handedly, savouring my revenge. All the same I thought it was pretty rich for Danny Pearse to take such a high-minded line on stealing. I didn’t know much about communism but my father had often said that the Reds wanted to take away everyone’s property, so that no one would own anything any more.

Over the next few weeks I had the chance to learn a lot more about what the Reds thought. There was a lot of talk about how the Richmond councillors kept half the unemployment relief for themselves. Danny kept telling us that in Russia no man or

woman willing to work went without the necessities. And a man came from the Carlton branch to give us a special lecture on what we should be doing.

Mr Hart was small and shabby and intense. He brandished a huge slab of notes and spoke as fast as a machine gun. I found him pretty difficult to follow and I was drifting off into my fighter pilot dreams when I heard a name I knew.

“And then you have Jack Lang, Left Social Fascist and strikebreaker, promising wage increases and approving wage reductions. He woos the masses with anti-Communist talk in the hope of becoming Prime Minister of Australia. Do we want to follow in his footsteps? No, comrades, we do not. We bring the new gospel of peace, the true brotherhood of man. We are the true knights of labour, who by vigil and fasting ...”

I stared at him in puzzlement. How could Jack Lang be Mr Hart's enemy when he was my father's enemy as well? I was still staring when Danny Pearse reached abruptly for a glass of water and sent Mr Hart's notes flying.

This was a chance for me to look keen. I jumped up to help and heard Danny hiss, “Go light on the Left Social Fascists and fancy talk, Isaac. The bread and butter argument - that's what hungry men and women need.”

I grinned to myself as I slid back into my seat. Danny must've realised that the audience was dozing off, so he'd bumped Mr Hart's elbow on purpose. I only wished that our headmaster would do the same thing to some of the guest speakers on school speech days.

While Mr Hart got his papers in order, Danny stepped forward and told a story about how the Richmond UWM had organised a strike among the unemployed.

“There we all were, lining up at the relief depot for a handout of stale bread and stinking meat. It's not much fun to be put on display so that everyone who walks past can nudge each other and whisper, ‘Looks like Joe Blow's out of a job this week.’ But the Unemployed Workers' Movement knows that a man's got his pride and we came up with the idea of a black ban on the relief depot. We risked starving for our principles but we won the fight and now you can get the value of your susso from the local shops, instead of taking whatever the authorities choose to dole out. Best of all, we changed the laws for the whole of Victoria, not just for ourselves here in Richmond. And all because we stuck to our motto - ‘Not mine for me, but us for ours’.”

As usual, Danny acted out all the parts in turn - cringing in a queue, whispering behind his hand, drawing himself up to fight, spreading his arms wide to the hall. I found the whole story quite stirring, like David defeating the giant Goliath with his slingshot - though when I tried to tell my father about it afterwards, he just shook his head and warned me again about the Bolshies.

I wasn't in any danger of being sucked in by the Reds, however. I didn't listen when Mr Hart quoted Marx, any more than I listened when my father complained about the

politicians. I liked Danny, that was all. You could respect a chap, even if he was your enemy. In the latest *Chums* Francis Felkington Frapp escaped to Germany in the Air Commander's own plane and Alan Gaunt said, "Traitor though he is, you have to admit that he's an ingenious blighter - and a brave one."

But it was Alan Gaunt's duty to capture Frapp, however much he admired him, just as it was my duty to learn as much as I could about Danny's activities. So I hung around after the meetings and made myself useful by stacking chairs and tidying the hall. Danny noticed me, of course - he noticed everything that was going on - and after my third meeting he called me over and gave me a stack of leaflets to hand out in the streets.

"Look everyone straight in the eye and thrust the leaflet towards them. You'll find most people will take it without thinking and with a bit of luck they might even read it."

"What's it about, then?"

"We're having a big march through the city in August, a show of strength for the unemployed. Reckon you'll be there?"

"Too right," I said fervently.

After my first expedition, I'd worked out a much quicker route, up Church Street and along Bridge Road. All the same, by the end of the month I had the strongest leg muscles in Melbourne and I could've cycled to Richmond in my sleep. It was still exciting to sit in the Unemployed Workers' Movement hall and know that all the time I was really working for the League of National Security. Just the same, I often wondered whether I was really getting anywhere.

"For heaven's sake, Graham, you're doing splendidly," my father assured me. "Take this list of names you're putting together, for example. It'll be worth its weight in gold if the League needs to arrest all known commos."

"Hold on, Dad. Not everyone in the Unemployed Workers' Movement is a commo, you know. Old Mrs Kearney yells out 'Red ragger' every time Danny gets carried away. She's against the Richmond Council but she's against the commos too."

"Just make the list, Graham. You can leave it to us to sort out the finer points."

I wasn't so sure about that. After all, what did my father and Mr Haughton know about the way things worked in Richmond?

"I keep trying to tell you that the commos are a sort of inner group. I can make a guess at some of the members but I don't know what they talk about or anything. There's a limit to what I can do in one night a week."

"Don't worry, we aren't expecting miracles from you. Remember that you're only one of the thousands of men working for the League all over Victoria."

I knew that men were being trained in baton drill and at rifle ranges. My father had also confided to me that the League was patrolling the Dandenongs and the coast, pulling down abandoned farm buildings, so the Bolshies couldn't use them as outposts.

All the same, to my mind the work I was doing was a lot more dangerous. Still, my father had called me “one of the men”, so I decided not to go on arguing.

I had my troubles with Charley too. He wasn't at all pleased about me disappearing every Friday night and he kept coming up with new suggestions about what we could do instead.

“Cut the boring old scouts and come to the pictures at the State. I promise you won't regret it. The first show's about gangsters *and* cowboys and the second's called *The Cat Creeps*.”

I was tempted for a moment but my life was far more dramatic than any film. Unfortunately there was no way I could explain that to Charley. It was lonely work, fighting for a secret cause.

“I wish you'd stop going on at me, Charley. The thing is, Dad knows the fellow who's running the troop. He wants me there as a good influence.”

“Ha! I bet I need your good influence more than they do.” Before I could stop him, he dropped to his knees and pawed at my trouser leg. “Save me, Gray! Without your moral guidance I'll go to the pack completely on wine, women and school songs.”

I glanced round quickly, to make sure no one was watching. “It's simply not on, you know. I've given my word.”

“Oh, your word of honour as a gentleman. Great Scott, Gray, you should've told me that. I'd never, ever ask you to do something as shocking as to break your word.”

I hated it when he made fun of things that were important to me. My hand shot out instinctively to punch him on the arm, but Charley was ready for me and we tussled our way up the street, jabbing and lunging. Finally I grabbed at his collar and pushed him up against a gatepost.

“Pax?”

“Pax it is, you raving twit.” He straightened his tie carefully, watching me from the corner of his eye. “But you'd better watch out. I'll thrash you next time, after I've picked up a few tips from *The Cat Creeps*.”

I smiled back, realising that Charley had forgiven me. As I came whistling down the hall, my mother hurriedly thrust her purse deep into her handbag. I remembered the shabby fellow I'd bumped into at the gate and guessed that she'd been giving away the housekeeping money again.

“Oh, it's you, dear,” she said, relaxing. “Mr Haughton rang and asked to see you. You have to go to the study window. Yes, I thought it sounded a little odd too, but he explained that Charley's jealous of your involvement with the scouts. Such a shame. An outside interest would do him the world of good.”

I found it difficult to meet my mother's eyes. Did she have any suspicions about the League? Were we all acting a part for each other's benefit? They were uncomfortable thoughts and I was grateful when Margaret skidded in, waving a sheet of paper.

"Gray, Gray, I drew a drawing."

"You what?"

"I draw a drawing?"

"Well, come on and show me quickly. I have to go out."

"To Charley's house," she nodded.

"Sort of."

While I admired the wild crayon loops, I decided that my mother was probably quite unsuspecting, after all. The fact was, women had no place in this sort of thing. None of the heroes in *Chums* ever had to stop and explain their missions to their little sisters, for example. Come to think of it, I didn't even know whether Alan Gaunt had a family.

I slipped out quietly and strolled up the street. The Haughtons' house was on a grander scale than ours, its sweeping drive lined by a sprawl of rhododendron bushes. When Charley and I were smaller, we'd played at Tarzan or jungle explorers inside their leafy caves and even now I would be able to keep under cover all the way to the study.

I slithered behind the rhododendrons and wriggled along with my back to the fence. As the tough stems flicked at my cheeks, I thought ruefully that there was a lot of skulking about in this job. Too much for my liking, at times.

Seconds later, Mr Haughton was swinging open the study windows. "Good news, old son," he boomed. "You'll be pleased to know that you've been mentioned in dispatches."

"Beg your pardon, sir?"

He prodded a letter with his stubby finger. "Word from the top. Our leader says, 'You have an unparalleled opportunity here and the lad himself sounds both brave and resourceful.' Can't tell you his name, of course, but I can assure you that he's very much in the public eye - and an excellent judge of men."

"Thank you, sir."

Mr Haughton placed the letter reverently in his wall safe and settled himself behind his vast walnut desk.

"You're probably wondering why I sent for you directly. Fact is, I think we're on to something big at last. Your father's a reliable second-in-command, but this time I needed to make absolutely sure that you were briefed correctly." He levered himself up until he loomed over me like a shaggy bear. "Do you understand, Graham?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good," he grunted, dropping back into his seat. "Then let me start with a story. At the beginning of this year, the League learned that there were to be demonstrations of the unemployed all over Australia - obviously the cover for a Bolshie takeover. Word had it that the unemployed from the Mildura camp planned to head south and march into Melbourne. Luckily the country areas are solidly behind the League, so dozens of units were set up throughout the Mallee, some organizing in secret and others openly

evacuating houses, digging trenches in the main street, setting guards on supplies. It was a magnificent effort, old sport. And what happened?"

I thought for a moment. Of course I never read the papers myself, but I was positive my father would've mentioned such a glorious victory over the Reds.

"Nothing, sir?"

"Nothing at all," he roared back. "We looked like a proper pack of charleys, all dressed up and nowhere to go. Mind you, the commo is as cunning as a rat and it's my belief that these false alarms are part of a plan to wear us down. Unfortunately, they've had their effect on some of the armchair soldiers in our Melbourne divisions, to the point where they're thinking of packing it in."

"But they can't do that. The League's terribly important. We've got to go on, sir."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Graham." Mr Haughton bunched his big fists side by side on the desk top and looked at them sternly. "You see, some of us believe we know when the Bolshies will strike next - at the demonstration advertised in those pamphlets you gave us."

My cheeks felt hot and I realised that I was blushing with pride. All those hours in Richmond had been of some use to the League after all.

"As you can imagine, my boy, we need every scrap of information we can get. Over the next week I want you to work like you've never worked before. Keep an eye out for stockpiles of illegal arms, paid Russian agitators, secret plans to seize power - the works."

All my excitement drained away in an instant. After months of hoping for a more definite task, I'd finally got it - and I wished that I hadn't.

"But I've already told you everything I know, sir. Danny Pearse is hoping for a good turnout from Richmond and I think he'll probably get it. As for guns and foreigners and so on - honestly, I haven't come across anything like that."

Mr Haughton sighed heavily. "Graham, we have it on the highest authority that there are six hundred Bolshie agitators in Australia, paid by the Russians. I think you'll agree that some of them are bound to turn up in Richmond. Just look sharp and double your efforts and let me know the minute anything turns up."

"Yes, sir."

It was all very well for Mr Haughton to say "Look sharp" but I was already doing the best I could. I would've been only too happy to hide in cupboards and listen to secret meetings, if I'd only known which cupboards to hide in and when. I stared at the floor, feeling sorry for myself. When I finally looked up, Mr Haughton was puffing on a cigar and gazing dreamily at the ceiling.

"It's a time of crisis, Graham," he announced, his voice plumping and patting the words. "We'll get no help from the self-serving politicians. The ordinary decent citizen is going to have to take matters into his own hands. I can tell you, old chap, I've envied our

chums in New South Wales. Oh, we've got a Labor government here in Victoria, but they're a fairly decent crowd. Now if we were up against that Red, Jack Lang, we'd really see some action. We've got the men, we've got the weapons - all we need is the chance to use them."

Jack Lang must be quite an interesting sort of fellow, I thought. He'd got Mr Haughton and my father calling him a Red, while Mr Hart called him a fascist. I wanted to ask Mr Haughton to explain but he'd been addressing me like a public meeting of one and I felt a bit conspicuous. On the whole I preferred to be safely tucked away in the crowds around Danny Pearse.

"Off you go to do your duty, then, like a good friend of Ellen's."

"A what, sir?"

"Not bad, hey? It's a code word that you can drop into the conversation if you think you've met a fellow sympathiser. Friend of LNS, don't you know. I doubt if you'll have much use for it down Richmond way, though."

He beamed at me and slapped me heartily on the shoulder, enjoying his joke. Smiling back weakly, I let myself out through the French windows and crunched across the gravel of the drive, my eyes blurred with exhaustion. Charley had to take a step forward before I even noticed him.

"Oh, I say, it's you."

"You sound surprised, Gray. Funny, that. Margaret said you'd come up here to see me."

"Spot on. I was just -"

"It's all right. Don't bother to think up a lie for me. There are quite enough stupid lies and secrets around this place already."

His face was as stiff as marble. Horrified, I put out a hand and Charley skittered backwards.

"Well, you've seen me now, anyhow. And you can go to hell next, for all I care."

The final words were almost a scream and he sped away across the grass like a loosed arrow.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I'm yawning again. I've got to have a rest or I'll ride my bike straight into the Yarra. I look around and find another bench, checking carefully this time to make sure no drunks are about to stake a claim to it. When I stretch myself out, it's like lying on quicksand - I'm sucked down into sleep straight away.

I wake just as suddenly to find someone on the far end of the bench. He's tall and skinny, swamped by the longest grey overcoat I've ever seen, and he's sitting with his back ramrod-straight and one foot tucked neatly behind the other.

"Hope I didn't startle you, nipper."

"No worries, there's room for two. I got to get a move on, anyhow."

While I struggle up, my foot knocks against a cardboard placard. I glance down as I hand it back to the man and its heavily inked letters say RETURNED SOLDIER.

"Blimey, mister, were you in the Great War?"

"What do you reckon? Yeah, I was at Gallipoli, along with all the other Aussie heroes."

"What was it like?"

"I'd think twice about that question if I was you, mate. At this time of night, I might even tell you the truth."

"So what? That's what I want to hear."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"All right then, you asked for it, sport. First you got to imagine yourself wading through choppy water, all set to line up in formation on the beach, except that even

before you get there, you can see men lying around in bloody heaps and hear the bullets singing past your ears like wasps. Maybe you end up in one of the heaps yourself but let's just say you make it up the cliff. Now imagine that you're going in to attack and one of your mates has just copped a bullet in the guts. He's yelling for help and you're crawling straight on, 'cause there isn't a bloody thing you can do for him. You dream about him at nights though, him and all the others you left behind. You dream about the men you've killed, too, from the ones whose bellies you slit open with your bayonet to the ones you shot and never even saw."

His voice is level and he hardly moves a muscle in his stubbled face, but his eyes are bulging and there are two white dots at the corners of his mouth.

"My dad was at Gallipoli too and he never told me anything like that," I say uncertainly.

"Maybe he's cracking hardy, kid, or maybe he's one of the lucky ones. 'Cause next you got to imagine that you're back home again. Your health's not so hot, so you decide to take up the government's offer of a bit of land. You're struggling away when along comes the Depression and all of a sudden you can't even give your wheat away. Never mind, though. You've served your country like a man, so you're entitled to sling a placard round your neck while you play your accordion in the street, which earns you an extra tanner or two every now and then. All the same, y'know, there're times when you actually go so far as to wonder whether the war was all it's cracked up to be."

"But you have to feel - I mean, aren't you proud of what you did?"

"Ah, get away."

He shakes his fist at me and I back towards my bike, scared that he's going to come after me. Then I realise that he's groping behind the seat to pull out first his accordion and secondly a pair of crutches. I feel like an absolute idiot. He hasn't been sitting with one foot tucked behind the other, at all. He's only got one leg.

I want to stay and tell him how sorry I am, except that I can't see why he'd be the least bit interested. All I can do for him is to let him believe that he can still frighten a kid away. So I jump onto my bike and pedal off, with my stomach churning madly.

Charley's uncle was gassed during the war and in the middle of one Christmas dinner he started to stare at the wall and repeat over and over, "I wish I'd died." That's the real reason why I never let Charley in on my plans, because he's never felt the same way as me about wars and armies. He might've put a damper on my fun and I didn't want him to.

I've made a lot of mistakes about Charley in my time. But maybe, if I can sort out the rest of this mess, I'll finally be able to tell him so.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I was kneeling on a huge piece of red material spread out across the floor, carefully filling in the letters of the word REVOLUTION.

“You’re doing a good job there,” said Danny from behind me. “Listen, sport, where do you live?”

I nearly dropped the paintbrush in dismay. No one had ever asked me that before and by now I’d completely forgotten my prepared answer. Luckily, I instinctively thought of Ted.

“What’s it to you, then?”

Danny’s shoulders rose in a comical shrug. “Nothing, matey. You seem pretty committed to the cause, that’s all. It’d be good if we could call on you when we need some extra help.”

“Besides, most honest blokes don’t object to telling people their address,” growled another voice. “Come to think of it, why don’t we ever see you round these parts, except when there’s a meeting on? Are you some kind of hermit or what?”

I forced myself to turn slowly and face Herb. He was a big burly man, always two paces behind Danny, and I was sure that he was one of the inner group of commos.

“All right, I s’pose I’ve got to tell you. I live in Collingwood, near the bridge. They’re pretty down on the Reds at home, so I came over to the Richmond UWM in the hopes that they won’t find out what I’m doing.”

“Well, I’ll be blowed,” Herb said admiringly. “Hey, Joe, guess what the nipper just told us. Would you believe that they’re coming from miles around to join up with us?”

A number of men drifted over to hear the story and we laughed and joked together for a while. By the time I returned to the banner, my hand was steady again and I could even be amused at the irony of it all. Here I was setting out to prove myself to the League of National Security - and ending up as a hero of the Unemployed Workers' Movement.

Actually, I quite enjoyed having a fuss made of me. Danny let me use the precious pot of gold leaf on my banner and Herb boasted about the number of leaflets I'd handed to the mobs spilling from the factory gates. Franky shot me a few jealous looks but I have to admit that I enjoyed that too.

Of course I never forgot my real purpose in being there. I carried mugs of tea to every quietly chatting group, hoping to overhear talk about seizing power. I watched every newcomer closely, checking for Russian accents. I lingered near the door every time Danny and Herb went into one of the smaller rooms and I dropped hints to everyone about guns and fighting.

My father and I had cooked up another story to satisfy my mother and there was no Charley to ask difficult questions now. I was able to spend every night of the week on the job and I intended to make the most of it. As long as I was in Richmond, I was caught up in the bustle of preparing for the demonstration. Then, as I cycled home through streets chilled by the wintry moon, I would find my excitement dropping away.

At first I would try to convince myself that the big breakthrough would come tomorrow, but soon it would take all my effort just to keep moving. My eyelids drooped and my feet missed the pedals so often that my shins were crisscrossed with scrapes. By the end of the week I almost hated the sight of the hill rising towards home.

Finally I gathered up my courage and went barging into the shed, where my father was making a wooden horse for Margaret. Once I was there, however, I could only stand and pull at the long curls of wood shavings.

"What's the long face about, Graham?"

"I have to get a report to Mr Haughton. I'd take it myself, except that Charley hasn't spoken to me for a week - and -"

"Never mind, old chap. He'll come around."

I didn't believe him. Besides, Charley wasn't even my biggest worry. My father took a second look at me and sat me down on the bench.

"I haven't liked to mention this before, Gray, but I've always felt a bit uneasy about your friendship with Charley. He's a bright lad but I can't admire his open disrespect for his father. Maybe you'll be better off spending time with the boys of your own age at school."

I stared back blankly. My father was wrong on every count. Charley and I never spent time together at school. What's more, I was beginning to understand how he felt

about Mr Haughton, because I found him pretty overwhelming myself. And I knew that I wasn't going to be better off without Charley's friendship.

All the same, I didn't want to be sidetracked into defending Charley, when I had other things on my mind.

"The point is, Dad, I've got another problem with this report."

He nodded and waited. I shredded some more wood shavings and then suddenly blurted out, "I haven't come up with a single thing. Mr Haughton seemed pretty positive that this demonstration would turn into something bigger but I can't find a scrap of proof. No guns, no spies, no nothing."

"I don't know quite what to say," murmured my father, picking up his chisel and setting it down again. "Haughton makes the decisions in this neck of the woods and he's usually very reliable. Are you sure the Richmond mob couldn't be arming themselves without your knowledge?"

"Honestly, Dad, I'm right in the thick of things now. If I haven't been given a gun, then I don't know who has. I've been talking about revolution till I'm blue in the face and Danny just says it can't happen unless the masses are ready for it."

"Very well then, Graham. If they're not armed, they're not and that's all there is to it. I'll explain everything to Albert Haughton, so don't you worry about it."

I hadn't realised how tightly my muscles were clenched until they suddenly relaxed. I flopped back on the bench, smiling foolishly at my father. At least he believed me, though I still doubted that Mr Haughton would.

"Do you think it'll make a lot of difference to the League if there isn't a big showdown at the demonstration?"

"Well, it'd be a shame, in a way. Not that I want to see violence in our streets - far from it. But the unemployed are like dry timber waiting for a spark. I'd sleep easier if we could get a chance to, well, burn a few firebreaks."

I liked the picture of my father as an intrepid fire-fighter but at the same time I couldn't quite see Danny Pearse as the spark that would set off the raging destruction of a bushfire.

I arrived late at the Trades Hall and the crowd was already surging forward. Somehow I'd imagined that the march would be like the Richmond meetings, multiplied by ten or perhaps twenty. But this swirling torrent of bodies filled the streets for as far as I could see. Red banners billowed overhead and my ears rang with shouts and chants and the penetrating wail of a pipe band.

"Bloody good turnout, hey?" called Franky. "Over three thousand, they reckon. Danny's up the front somewhere - you coming?"

“Too right.”

Franky ducked and dodged like an expert and I hung onto his coat-tails for a while. Then I worked out that it was like a football match without the tackling, after which I was able to make my own way through the crowd.

I waved to a bunch of children in flourbag smocks who were beating the rhythm of the chants on their tin lunch boxes. I averted my eyes from the four-letter words on one of the placards. I listened to the slogans that were chorused from every side - “Down with unemployment”, “Down with capitalism”, “Employed and unemployed unite”.

Finally I caught up with Franky again under the banner of the Brunswick Unemployed Workers’ Movement. “Stop the fascist warmongers”, they were shouting here. Franky joined in enthusiastically but I felt a sudden resistance. I knew it was stupid, though. I’d attended Bolshie meetings and handed out Bolshie leaflets, so I might as well top it off by chanting Bolshie slogans.

“Stop the –“

My first word was a squeak and the second was a growl. I cleared my throat and waited until the chant began once more.

“Stop the fascist warmongers!”

The yell vibrated through my whole body and my resistance blew away on the wind. I shouted again, louder than I’d ever shouted before, and a thousand voices shouted along with me, shaking the tall buildings to their foundation stones. A man beside me winked cheerfully, while another gave me the thumbs up sign. I marched and shouted and marched, shuffling my feet impatiently when the procession slowed to a halt.

“Let’s take a look see and find out what’s going on.”

Franky dug me in the ribs and I blinked at him dazedly. I’d been so busy keeping step with the rest that I’d completely forgotten my plans. My father wanted a big showdown at the demonstration, so I intended to do my best to provoke it. I wasn’t quite sure how I would manage it but I was sure I’d think of something.

Crouching down, I followed Franky down an aisle lined by the pipe band’s muscular legs. When we scrambled up again, the street was suddenly and startlingly empty, except for a bunch of men facing a police line.

“If we want to go down bloody Bourke Street, then that’s where we’ll bloody go,” Herb was shouting.

“Not unless you want a fight on your hands, matey. We got our orders. It’s Russell Street for you lot.”

The policeman’s hand dropped to his baton as Herb strode forward but Danny was already grabbing at his arm.

“Easy does it, Herb. Remember what we decided. Cooperation with the authorities and no violence.”

The other men were jostling past him to stand beside Herb, however. This was my chance. Excitement lifted me up until my feet hardly seemed to touch the ground and I screamed out, "Herb!"

The burly man swung around. "What's the matter, nipper?"

"Nothing. Just show 'em, Herb."

"Right you are."

But in the twenty seconds' grace while Herb turned away, Danny had shunted the others along, summoned up the pipe band and set the march moving again - along Russell Street. With a last scowl at the police line, Herb hurried after him.

I stumbled up the sharp rise of Russell Street, the city a painful blur around me. I could hardly believe my bad luck. There I was, trying to provoke a fight and I'd actually stopped one. It'd serve me right if I was drummed out of the League. When Franky tugged at my sleeve and made me look back, the whole length of the march seemed to rear up at me, like a dragon I'd failed to slay.

"Not that way, Gray. Have a squiz over here. See, a bunch of sheilas with a banner saying 'Workers' Red Cross Unit'. *Red Cross* - get it?"

"Not half bad," I sighed. "Oh, sorry, Danny."

"No worries, kid. You can tread on my toes any day of the week, after what you did back there. You really saved our bacon."

And don't I know it, I told him silently. Go ahead, rub it in.

"Never mind, I won't make you blush by singing your praises," said Danny, his hands folding like a choir boy. "I just wanted to say that we're always on the look-out for people who support the Communist struggle. I've had my eye on you for some time, so if you're interested ..."

"Danny Pearse, we need you over here."

"I'll get back to you, right?"

Before I could really take it in, Franky was upon me, his thin face drooping with envy. "What did he say? Lucky bastard, you're really in his good books, aren't you?"

"Ah, we just had a bit of a chat."

I strolled on, leaving Franky to follow me this time. I can keep a secret, I sang to myself. Hundreds of secrets, in fact. I can keep commo secrets and the League's secrets and family secrets - all kinds of secrets.

I felt light-headed with relief. I hadn't done too brilliantly as a spy and I was a miserable failure at provoking the march to violence. But now I could redeem myself. Admitted into one of the secret commo groups - surely this would be a triumph for the League. Surely my father would be pleased.

He wasn't, though. He stared out the window, refusing to meet my eyes and looking positively dejected.

"Can't you see what a marvellous opportunity this is?" I protested. "It's what I've been working towards for all these months. Honestly, I can't back out now."

"I don't think you realise the dangers involved, Graham. To start with, the commos'll undoubtedly want to know your home address, so that they can call on you when they want to stop an eviction."

"No they won't, Dad. I've already explained why I can't say where I live. Besides, I could always tell them I don't believe in that eviction stuff."

"Yes and blow your cover on the spot. The eviction fight just happens to be one of the Bolshies' best weapons. They can pose as the defenders of the tenants who are being thrown out of their homes, while all the time their real aim is to drive another wedge between the classes."

"So it'd be a terrific help to our cause if I could find out more about the commos' eviction strategies," I suggested.

"Yes, it would," said my father heavily. "I know dozens of landlords who started by being generous, until their sympathies were worn away by all this anarchy and lawlessness. For my part, I'd like to see the League intervene in the eviction issue. The trouble is, Graham, I'm not even sure that there'll be a League for much longer."

"What do you mean?"

"Yesterday was a terrible blow to us. Once again the League was waiting on full standby, all for nothing. I hate to see our competitors win out but we can't keep going like this, I'm afraid. It may be better to disband the League before it simply fizzles out." He lifted his head and looked straight into my eyes at last. "Right now I feel as though I've wasted a lot of time and effort on training a team for a match that won't even come off."

A pulse fluttered in my throat and I started to count up my own wasted hours. Then I rebelled. Why were we giving in so easily?

"You still believe in the League, don't you, Dad?"

"Yes, I do and so do many others. That's not the point, though, Graham. It's the men at the top who give the orders. We only carry them out."

"Oh, for heaven's sake! There must be times when you can do things off your own bat."

"You don't understand. The League of National Security is a secret army, remember, and the first thing a soldier learns is to obey orders. Without discipline we'd get nowhere, absolutely nowhere."

I flung myself back resentfully in my chair. Since I'd never been a soldier, I couldn't argue with this. Still, the conversation was making me more and more irritable, although

it seemed to be putting my father in a better mood. His jaw was set firmly again and he gave me a serene smile.

“I’m glad we’ve had this talk, Graham and I’ll pass on your news to Albert Haughton. Who knows, he may allow you to keep going to Richmond, even though you certainly can’t join this commo group. And don’t forget, we really appreciate all your help.”

“Thanks, Dad,” and I made my escape.

I drifted through the rest of the day like a sleep-walker, caught in a private nightmare. Next Thursday the Richmond commos would be busily discussing all the things that the League wanted to know - and I wouldn’t be there to hear them. It didn’t make sense but it was true.

After dinner I excused myself and hurried upstairs. I pulled my stack of comics from under the bed and settled against the pillows to work steadily through all the episodes of “Wings Against the Storm”. I didn’t stop reading for a second, until my mother tapped on the door and told me to turn out my light. By the time I snuggled down under the blankets, I was thinking of Alan Gaunt, instead of the League.

In the morning I felt calm and rested. Charley made a big show of turning away as I walked up to the tram stop but I just propped myself nonchalantly against a fence and hummed, “Can you keep a secret?” That was when it dawned upon me that all this time my brain had been busy with a new scheme.

I was going to Richmond on Thursday, whatever Mr Haughton and my father said. I would return victorious with every last detail of the Bolshies’ secret plans and the League would just have to admit that I was right and they were wrong.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I'm still humming cheerfully as I glide downhill towards the river, so I don't really notice the light spilling across the footpath until I'm almost in the middle of it. And by that time I'm almost in the middle of the bunch of boys lounging near the open doorway.

I recognise them at once, even though I've never seen any of them before. They're street corner lairs, just like the pushes in Richmond who hang around leering at girls or shouting rude comments at the church-goers. Franky warned me early on to cross the road if I saw one of the pushes heading my way.

Well, it's too late for that now, because one of the boys is grabbing the handlebars of my bike. I tumble off. As I pick myself up, two others move forward to flick my cap away and tug my shirt-tail out of my pants. I dive after the cap and the first boy plants his foot on it, letting the bike crash into the gutter.

"Want to fight me for it, then?"

A Richmond lad never walks away from a fight - but hold on, I'm not really a Richmond lad, am I? All the same, as Danny might say, there are two choices: I can get bashed up or I can get bashed up. At least if I start the fight, I may feel better about myself afterwards.

So I grit my teeth and sock the boy in the midriff, as hard as I can. His stomach muscles are as tough as leather and he barely draws a breath before he belts me back against the wall. There's a swirl of light and dark streaks before my eyes but I can see

that he's grinning as he moves in to finish me off. He lines up his punch lazily and when his fist drives forward, I duck.

He lets out an indignant yell and sucks at his knuckles. Then they all turn to grab me, except that I'm yards away already, hauling my bike upright. I hop frantically for a moment, while my foot finds the pedal, but seconds later I'm cycling away. They chase me for half a block, cursing like mad, before they give up and go back to whatever they were doing.

It was a lucky escape and no mistake. I ride on, wondering shakily how else I could've handled it. Someone like Danny or Percy Laidler might've talked his way out of the situation, I suppose. Dotty or Charley might've thought up some clever trick. And my father - well, I always would've said that he'd knock the lair out with a straight right to the jaw but now I'm not so sure.

I was a bit shocked by the way he talked about obeying orders, you see. Oh, I know that mostly you have to toe the line. Someone like Charley, who breaks the rules for the heck of it, can cause no end of trouble. All the same, Alan Gaunt captured Francis Felkington Frapp because he followed him into the German headquarters, even though his commanding officer had told him to stay out of it. I thought my father was like that, too. I thought he would want to keep the League going, no matter what Mr Haughton said.

Mind you, I haven't done too well at acting on my own. I blundered back into Richmond, in the same way that I blundered through the fight just then. I can't see that I'll get all that much smarter in the future, either, so I'll just have to hope that I get taller and stronger.

Although, of course, my father's tall and strong and he doesn't have all the answers, any more than I do.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I strode up the hill after school on Thursday, rehearsing my lines under my breath. It felt strange to be making up a cover story without my father's help. Still, I was positive that I was doing the right thing by going to Richmond again. The League had lost heart temporarily but I would restore their faith in our cause.

Coming out of my daydream, I noticed an old lady across the road. She was pressing a coin into the hand of a small scruffy kid with a bike that was even more beaten up than my old rattletrap. My two lives hardly ever crossed over but this skinny urchin could've been any one of the hundreds crowding the Richmond streets. I took it as a good omen. The kid's visit to Kew had paid off and hopefully so would my visit to Richmond. Smiling to myself, I went into the house.

"Listen, Mum," I called. "I forgot to tell you that I'll have to skip dinner tonight."

My mother glanced up from the iris stems she was arranging in a tall vase. Her smooth forehead creased in a frown.

"Oh, not again, Graham. I thought your father said that was over and done with. It isn't good for your health, darling. You're still looking tired and peaky."

"This'll be the last time, I promise. The scoutmaster rang the school and asked if I could tie off some loose ends for him. I may be a bit late home, so don't get in a flap."

On an impulse I leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Graham, if you were worried about something, you'd tell me, wouldn't you?"

"Of course, Mum."

She pushed the irises round for a bit and then turned decisively. "I think you'd better wait while I ring your father's office, to make sure he approves of this. No, don't scowl at me, Gray. It won't take a minute."

"All right," I said with a sigh.

By the time she lifted the receiver, I'd tiptoed across the polished floor to the sitting-room window. I scrambled out, ran for my bike and pedalled up the hill as if a pack of bloodhounds were on my trail.

Luckily it wasn't far to the house where I left my Richmond clothes. Dashing into the shed, I set a world record in clothes-changing and scuttled back down the drive. Just as I was about to swing onto the old rattletrap, a man beckoned to me from the verandah.

"What on earth are you doing here today?" he hissed. "You missed the gardener by about ten seconds. He's an old codger but even he would've noticed a boy walking into the shed in school uniform and walking out as a little ragamuffin."

"Frightfully sorry, sir," I whispered back. "Something came up unexpectedly. I was sure Mr Houghton'd ring you about it."

Right on cue, the phone shrilled from inside the house and the man's accusing stare softened.

"I suppose that's him now. Come on in. He may have some last minute instructions for you."

I nodded seriously and, as soon as he turned his back, I leapt onto the bike and sped away down the hill, cursing my family under my breath. If my father was really keen to stop me, he might even try to follow me in his car, which meant I'd have to make my way to Richmond through the maze of side streets. It was a dashed nuisance - I was cutting it fine already.

But I couldn't admit defeat, because then I would've sacrificed my friendship with Charley for nothing. Mind you, a lot of my favourite heroes had to pay the price for serving their country. Alan Gaunt's best friend had called him a traitor when he left the air force, because he didn't know that Gaunt was actually on a secret mission to Germany. Just the same, I'd always imagined myself explaining everything to Charley in the end and I knew he wouldn't be impressed unless I'd pulled off some stupendous coup.

Come to that, I wouldn't be particularly impressed with myself unless I achieved something pretty soon.

Finally I reached the UWM headquarters, without catching sight of my father's Austin. I crept into the back row of the meeting and immediately launched into a coughing fit. A young bloke twisted round to glare at me and a blue-jacketed Chinese man leaned across and offered me a peppermint. I sucked on it gratefully until the tickle was gone and my breathing had slowed to normal. Then I started to look around for signs of treachery and sedition.

Out at the front Mr Hart was prosing on about Karl Marx, the chap who got communism going. He was pretty fired up, his hands sweeping wildly through the air, but the Turtle could get pretty fired up about Cicero too and that never made me pay any more attention to his Latin lessons. I leaned back and waited for the real plotting to begin.

“So our first and most important task as Communists is the abolition of private property,” declaimed Mr Hart and the young bloke jumped up to interrupt him.

“Hang about, Isaac. I may be unemployed, but at least I still own the clothes on my back. You won’t catch me signing up with your lot if I got to walk around naked.”

Mr Hart frowned over his glasses at the guffaws but Danny was grinning too.

“Don’t worry, Simmy. That’s not what we mean by property. Just think about them factory owners in their big Kew mansions. Did they slave for every silver spoon and roast dinner, the way we slave for our tin mugs and watery stews? Of course they bloody didn’t! A heap of people work together in the factories and a handful of people make off with the profits. Fact is, those profits ought to be shared out equally among everybody.”

“In other words,” Mr Hart instructed, “the labour of the many becomes the capital of the few. We want to see that capital converted into common property, the property of all members of society, and that’s why we’re called Communists.”

On they went, with me fidgeting in the back row. Time was ticking away fast and, apart from this waffle about capital and property, I’d heard nothing you couldn’t hear on any street corner in Richmond. Gradually a dreadful suspicion began to grow in my mind. What if this special meeting - the meeting I’d risked so much to attend - was nothing more than a lesson on Communism?

No wonder I’d found myself thinking about the Turtle! I was slipping steadily into a deep gloom but I roused myself when Danny took the floor again.

“The Depression hits the little people hard, but it doesn’t make a blind bit of difference to the capitalists. They belly-ache about how we all got to tighten our belts and then they go out and buy up another Richmond street on the cheap. Ever wonder why we’re being evicted left, right and centre? It’s so the blood-sucking capitalists can build their next set of factories on the sites where we used to live. Of course we can’t prove it, ’cause they’re allowed to set up dummy companies to do the buying, so that no one can make the connections. No two ways about it, the capitalists own the law, along with everything else.”

A tight silence gripped the room. All around me people were leaning forward and scowling angrily. I was the only person still slouched down in his chair. Danny had gone through his usual performance - clutching his belly, tugging on his belt, acting a little person and a vampire by turns - but this time I couldn’t raise a flicker of reaction. It’s all talk, I thought miserably. All just a lot of hot air.

“So what can we do, Danny?” a woman called out. “Seems like the cards are really stacked against us, if the capitalists control everything.”

“Well, you can turn up again next week, for one thing, and listen to Isaac explaining the full Communist program. And just to keep you going till then, let me point out that the capitalists may have the money and power, but us workers - employed and unemployed alike - have got the numbers. If we band together, we can put a stop to private property, not to mention the envy, the injustice, the crimes and the wars it causes.”

I groaned inwardly. So the comms’ plans were on next week’s agenda. Mind you, Mr Hart would probably manage to make them sound dry as dust too. It seemed pretty clear that if the Reds had a master plan like the League’s, they talked about it somewhere else altogether.

Looking up, I found everyone shutting their notebooks or turning to talk to their neighbours. I pushed myself up and headed towards Danny for one final effort.

“Well, what did you make of it, nipper? Keep up all right?”

“Yeah, it explained a lot.”

I fixed him with an earnest gaze, willing him to continue, but he turned back to Herb and the narrow-faced man standing behind him.

“So how’s May feeling now, Joe? She seemed real crook, last time I was over.”

They went on talking about their wives’ health, their sons’ or daughters’ new babies, how their younger kids were doing at school. I wanted to scream at them to drop the pretence and talk about their Bolshie plots. Maybe I could push between them, saying, “By the way, how’re you going to start the revolution, Danny? And Herb or Joe, could either of you let me know the exact date on which you aim to overthrow the government?”

It was a stupid idea but I couldn’t come up with a more sensible one. My brain was numb and, worse still, I’d started to feel that Joe was looking oddly at me and that the little kid in the corner was here for the express purpose of staring me down. Finally I couldn’t fool myself any longer. I’d failed, as absolutely and completely as a boy could fail.

Defeated, I turned and walked away, my feet dragging. As my hand closed round the doorknob, something both hard and soft crashed against the back of my knees. I flung up my hands and hurtled forward. Through the thunder in my head, I heard a shrill yell.

“Don’t let him escape. He’s a blooming spy.”

The floorboards bounced and Herb grumbled, “Let go, you bloody idiot,” as he tried to disentangle the kid. The small arms just squeezed tighter, however and the kid snorted a muffled “No” against my knees.

“Come on,” coaxed Herb. “I got a grip on him now. You don’t reckon he can get away from me, do you?”

After a thoughtful silence the arms slid away, only to be replaced by Herb’s heavy hand on my coat collar. I put on my best soldier face as Danny lounged forward, lifting his eyebrows at the kid.

“Jesus, we’ve had enough of your games already. You read too many trashy comics and that’s a fact. You’re not taking all of this seriously, are you, Herb?”

“I’m not saying I am and I’m not saying I’m not. Young Gray’s been a good worker for the cause so far but the word ‘spy’ is floating around and it could be dicey for us if it happens to be true.”

Danny jiggled impatiently. “Rightio, cobber, what you got to say for yourself?”

“Don’t you dare ask him,” screeched the kid, red-faced with rage. “It’s me you ought to ask. Me that followed him from Kew tonight and seen him in his snob school clothes. Me that proved he was a spy.”

I watched calmly while the three men frowned at one another. After all, I’d always known that I might be captured by the enemy. The trick was to hold your tongue until you found out exactly what the other chaps were thinking - and never to look guilty.

It was an added bonus to have been accused by such a scruffy little urchin. I ran my eye over the baggy shorts, the grubby knees, the cloth cap three sizes too large. No, I definitely found it hard to take the kid seriously enough to be frightened.

Next minute a sharp kick landed on my ankle.

“It’s true and you know it. Go on, admit you’re a spy.”

The kid lunged at me and Herb swung us apart with a force that left me dangling on tiptoe from my collar. Even in this ridiculous position, though, I felt supremely confident. Looking across the kid’s head at Danny, I said with strangled politeness, “Utter rot, sir. It’s just as you said - the little chap’s playing some game or other.”

The final words stuck to the roof of my mouth as I realised that something had gone badly wrong. The room was swelling before my eyes like a balloon near to bursting point, while everyone stood and gaped at me. There was no time to search for my mistake. I pushed at my buttons, shrugged off my coat and ran.

The night was gloriously blue and wide. It was still whispering to me of escape and freedom as Herb pounced and the stone doorstep rose up to hit me in the midriff. I lay in the dirt, clutching at my stomach and groaning at the picture that formed in my mind.

The kid outside my house this afternoon. The kid that the old lady gave a coin to. The kid.

Well, at least things were beginning to make sense. When Herb hauled me back into the hall, demanding to know where I came from, I took a last gulp of air and answered directly, “Kew, sir.”

“Thanks for nothing, mate. We could work that out from the posh way you spoke just then. Let’s have another bash at it. Who sent you here - the fascists?”

“No one sent me, sir.” My eyes slid up to Herb’s face and I saw that I’d have to make it more convincing. “I’m here of my own accord, because it’s wrong for people to starve when there’s really plenty for all of us. I wanted to help, sir.”

“Well spoken,” said Danny with his sunburst smile.

For a moment I actually thought I’d tricked him. I felt triumphant and, at the same time, oddly disappointed. Then his elastic face twisted the smile into a puzzled frown.

“Only that’s the problem, isn’t it? You’re a bloody sight too well-spoken, Gray. You got to admit, we’re bound to wonder about a bloke who talks like a gentleman and dresses like one of us.”

The kid shrugged. “Don’t you know nothing? That’s just the sort of thing spies do.”

Suddenly I was trembling with rage. “You’re not giving me a chance to explain. I came here in these clothes because a chap at school bet me that I couldn’t go to Richmond and listen to the Bolshies. But I came back because I wanted to and I had to go on wearing this rig-out so people wouldn’t think I was up to no good - which is pretty ironic, really.”

Somehow I’d begun to believe my own story. I stared around defiantly, daring them to doubt me. To my surprise, Danny ignored me and turned to the kid.

“Your go now. What put you on to this bloke in the first place?”

“It was John Lee Hok. He reckoned he’d come across this kid’s double, when he was selling his vegies in Kew. I thought it sounded dead suspicious - and so it was.”

A bolt slammed in the door. “If John Chinaman recognised him, that’ll do me,” growled Joe. “Let’s rough him up a bit and teach him a lesson.”

He strode towards me, his narrow face tightening around the threat, but I felt too shaken even to duck. John Chinaman. The man who gave me the peppermint in the meeting was John Chinaman, which meant that John Chinaman was a commo. All at once I hated the Reds more intensely than ever before, for making their way into my childhood memories.

“Hold it, Joe,” Danny was saying. “We aren’t famous for bashing kids yet. Besides, what’s the point? We’re not doing anything against the law. And now we know who he is, he can hardly come nosing around here again. No need to make a big song and dance out of it.”

The kid gazed at him disbelievingly and wailed, “Aren’t you even glad I caught him, then?”

“To tell you the truth, it’s just one more thing for us to worry about.”

I hung my head and kicked at the floor as miserably as the kid. I tried to remind myself that I was fighting the good fight for the League of National Security, but I wished I was still being treated as a threat, not just a nuisance.

Joe and Herb were studying Danny equally glumly. "So we send him packing and that's that?" asked Herb.

"You got any better ideas, apart from laying into the kid, that is? Suppose he really is spying for some fascist organisation - well, he's done his dash now. And if we've misjudged you, Gray, then why don't you try spreading the word among your own class? Plenty of nobs can see the justice of our cause too, y'know."

"The bloke can't help himself," Joe remarked to the ceiling. "Young Gray tells us the fishiest story this side of the bay and Danny still wants to treat him as a budding revolutionary."

Personally, I thought this was why Danny was so remarkable. I was about to twist around and thank him for his faith in me, when Herb's big hand tightened on my collar.

"There's one other thing we can do, if Gray's a nark," he said. "We can get a bit of information about the mob he's working for, in return for what he's passed on about us."

I felt as though I'd turned to ice, until I found that in fact I was covered in a thick slick of sweat. I'd been prepared for Joe to come down hard but I'd thought that Herb liked me. Then I thought again and realised that gave him a very good reason to turn against me.

So the moment that I'd imagined for years had finally arrived. I was going to find out how I'd stand up under torture.

The knock at the door made all of us jump.

"Who's there?"

"Police. Open up."

Instantly Herb and Joe closed in on me. My hands were tied and a huge handkerchief choked me. I was propelled towards the back of the room. Next minute I tumbled head first into a cupboard and the kid sat on my feet.

At first I just lay there in the darkness, limp with relief. Anything was better than waiting for Herb to start work on me. Before long, however, I remembered the policeman on the other side of the door. I tested all my limbs one by one, but unfortunately I could only move my head and there was a solid brick wall behind me. With a sigh I settled down to listen in on the conversation.

"I'm telling you that we paid the rent every week, bang on the knocker," Joe was shouting.

"So you say, and the owner says you never paid for June and half of July. Which of you am I supposed to believe? If you could show me the receipts - well, that'd be evidence."

“Gerry Murphy, you’re talking like a lackey of the capitalists. It’s August, remember. Wouldn’t we be out on our ears already, if the owner was telling the truth? The law comes down particularly heavy on the Unemployed Workers’ Movement - and well you know it.”

Now Danny was treating a policeman like a budding revolutionary. I was sure Joe would be fuming again but instead he muttered “Blood oath,” and when the policeman answered, he had dropped his official tones.

“Have a heart, Danny, I’m only doing my job. I tell you straight, I was meant to give you the heave-ho tonight, grabbing all the files I could find while I was at it. As it is, you got till four o’clock tomorrow to track down them receipts. Can’t say fairer than that, can I?”

“Only doing his job!” rumbled Herb. “Bloody marvellous job you got, licking the council’s boots.”

“Lay off him, Herb,” Danny cut in. “One bloke on his tod can’t change the whole world. Gerry’s doing what he can for us, aren’t you, Ger?”

“Just don’t expect a bleeding miracle,” the policeman warned but there was a round of friendly jokes before he left. Then silence and the slam of the bolt, after which they all started to shout at once.

“Shut your traps,” Danny roared.

“Jesus, Danny, it’s a total disaster,” groaned Herb. “Les took the UWM’s books with him when he had to make a run for it. He’ll be a hundred miles away by now, if he’s got any sense. The council must’ve put two and two together, for once, and realised we don’t have a snowflake’s chance in hell of coming up with those receipts. We’re sunk.”

“Nah, there’s more ways than one to skin a cat. Give me twenty-four hours and I reckon I can fake the receipts.”

“And I’ll get on to one of Isaac Hart’s tame lawyers as well,” said Danny. “Maybe the owner’s just trying to pull a swiftie on us. Anyhow, it wouldn’t be the end of the world if we had to move.”

“Oh yeah? The council will only make sure we never get another place in Richmond for love or money. Not to worry, we can always set up in the middle of Bridge Road,” said Herb sarcastically.

In the pause that followed, they finally noticed the regular drumming on the cupboard door. The kid shot out immediately, leaving Herb to hoist me up. As soon as I tried to stand, the blood rushed to my toes in an agony of pins and needles. I sank down on the floor, wishing desperately that my hands were free, so I could at least massage my feet.

“Better not say anything more while he’s here,” Joe cautioned and the kid gave a sneering laugh.

“No need to bother about that. We heard every word from the cupboard, clear as a bell. He knows about Les nicking off and how you’re going to forge the receipts and -”

“That settles it. We’re keeping him under wraps till tomorrow, at least. Right, Danny?”

“Ah well, it’s only overnight. I’ll take him home and Bridie can keep an eye on him.”

“Listen, Dad –“

“Now, about our other problem -”

“*Listen*, Dad. I’m trying to tell you, I know where Les is.”

I hadn’t been paying much attention to the conversation, because I was too busy feeling sorry for myself. At last I’d actually hidden in a cupboard and listened to secrets, like all the heroes in the *Boy’s Own Paper*, but it had only landed me in worse trouble. Even while I brooded over the unfairness of life, however, I realised that I’d just heard something strange. I looked up at Danny and the kid, facing each other in the middle of the hall and for a long moment I could do nothing but stare.

Danny was shaking his head. “First you catch a spy and now you’re the only one who knows where Les is. You got to lay off those bleeding comics, with all their boss-class propaganda about one lone bloke saving the world single-handed. The whole point about communism is the workers uniting for the good of everyone, not some hero making off with all the glory. Les is up bush and that’s -”

“Fair enough, I got the message. You don’t want to find him and you don’t care if the fascists know everything about us. Next spy I run across, I’ll tell him to go right ahead, ’cause I’m just a kid, so I can run errands and that but I better not stick my nose into anything important, just in case the grown-ups don’t like it and -”

“Oh, will you shut your trap, Dotty?”

One expressive face glared into another while I sat unnoticed on the floor, in a muddle of conflicting emotions. When I listened to what the kid was saying, I felt a decided surge of fellow feeling. The adult world was a pretty confusing place, no doubt about it. But then, when I saw the cloth cap pushed back and two long plaits streaking down the baggy shirt front, I groaned into my gag with rage. It seemed that I’d been successfully tailed halfway across Melbourne by a little pipsqueak of a girl ...

And that was how I first met Dotty Pearse.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Something comes flapping out of a side street and wraps itself around my front wheel. I scramble off and find that I'm tugging at a shredded page of Chums. This is quite a coincidence, given that I've just been thinking about Dotty and her comics. Then again, bits of paper are always blowing around the streets of Collingwood and Richmond but I don't usually bother to notice them.

I check to see if Alan Gaunt's name is on any of the scraps in my hand. It isn't, though. I suppose that'd be too much of a coincidence. So I climb back onto the bike and ride on, still thinking about Dotty.

On our way to Dudley Flats, she made me fill her in on all the episodes of "Wings Against the Storm" that she'd missed. She didn't have the money to buy every issue of Chums, of course, but she scrounged them wherever she could. While I racked my brain for more details, I could see her lips moving in time with mine. She was obviously memorising every word, so that she could repeat the story to herself later on.

You'd think it would've brought us closer together, having an interest like that in common, but actually I was outraged to think that a commo kid could have Alan Gaunt as her hero too. I tried to point out, as tactfully as possible, that she ought to be siding with Francis Felkington Frapp and she just sniffed at me.

"Frapp's the villain, Gray, in case you hadn't noticed. He's selling out to the German imperialists who started the war in the first place. And besides, he doesn't get to do as many interesting things as Alan Gaunt."

I tried to argue with her at the time but now, as the bridge across the Yarra comes into view, I want to go back and tell her she was right. All right, Dotty was a Red and I was in the League. Still, we were both reading about Alan Gaunt because we both wanted a bit more adventure in our lives.

Though, come to think of it, maybe it was the other way around. Maybe we both wanted a bit more adventure in our lives because we were reading about Alan Gaunt.

Who knows? Not me, that's for sure. I'm only a mile or two from home, so I've been thinking about all of this for nearly two hours and I still don't understand what I've been doing. It's a lot of thinking: no wonder my brain feels a bit ragged round the edges. And yet, when I reach the bridge, I dismount and lean on the railings to watch the scatter of moon glints on the brown water - and to think a bit more.

Dotty and I aren't the only ones who want adventure, I decide. My father and Mr Haughton are grown men, but you could say that the League's a secret club for them, just like when Charley and I used to call ourselves the Terrible Two and make up special codes and rules and passwords. I still wonder whether, deep in their hearts, they ever really thought the League would do anything, or whether it was just a big game.

The Unemployed Workers' Movement isn't a game, though. How could it be, when most of its members don't know where their next meal's coming from? Dotty's just a kid, so she can manage to get a bit of fun out of it, but for the rest of them it's deadly earnest.

Of course, that's why I can't be completely sure that the League's only a game. As it turned out, my father and Mr Haughton had something to protect, as well.

Now I'm getting close to the things that I still don't want to think about. I swing away from the railing and deliberately face the steep hill that will take me to Kew. Instantly I feel weak with exhaustion, but I grab on to the rattletrap and start to push it up the road. You're not home yet, Graham. And there's more of your story to come.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Danny wound a scarf loosely around my gag and then I was steered along small, narrow streets that grew smaller and narrower with every turn. Dotty and Danny argued across me for most of the way.

“Jesus, you and Herb and Joe are stupid! There you were, rushing around like maniacs to gather up all the membership lists and leaflets and everything, just in case you really are turned out tomorrow. And all the time you *know* Les is at Dudley Flats.”

“Listen, Dot, just give me one good reason why Les’d be in an unemployed camp over Footscray way. He’s been on the wallaby track before, y’know. No way would he rot away in some tin shanty on a dump, when he could be out in the bush.”

“That’s not fair, Dad. I can’t read Les’s mind, can I? Maybe he’s got friends in Footscray. Maybe he’s sick. I don’t know. All I know is that -”

“Yeah, yeah. You told me a hundred times already. Your mate Harry told you that Jack Dobbs told Mrs Scarfe at the corner store that he knew a bloke who’d run across Les. Gossip, Dotty, that’s all it is. If Les was still in town, you can bet your life he’d have let us know, one way or another.”

“It’s because I’m a girl,” said Dotty bitterly. “Pat and Sean were in on things when they were my age, but you won’t hardly let me do anything. Then I finally prove I could be useful and you won’t even listen to me.”

“If it’s any consolation, kid, I wouldn’t listen to Jack Dobbs either - and he’s six foot and weighs twelve stone,” Danny said with a grin. “Fact is, the story won’t wash,

whoever's telling it. You're not going to talk me into a wild goose chase, Dotty, and that's flat."

"All right then, see if I care," she said and marched on ahead.

I plodded grimly after her, muttering "Right foot, left foot" to keep myself going. For some reason I kept remembering a story the Turtle had told us, about a chap in the Greek myths who'd gone into a labyrinth and run across a monster. Over the last few months I'd gradually come to think of Danny and the rest as reasonable sorts of people. But now that I'd been captured, I was forced to remind myself that they were Reds, after all. Anything might happen to me.

My foot jarred against a stone and I lurched forward. Danny scooped me up and propped me against a wall. "Nearly there," he reassured me as he went to talk with someone on the corner.

After a while I felt strong enough to take a look around. A group of little kids were telling ghost stories in the gutter but I felt too jumpy to listen. So I turned away and came face to face with a lumbering shadow. It was vaguely human in shape, except that somehow its proportions were all askew.

The monster at the heart of the labyrinth, I thought wildly. My rational mind started to explain that it was just a boy, walking on stilts made from string and two tin cans. Then a black wheel whirled out of nowhere and struck me down.

Voices were wrangling over my head.

"You're really going to cop it now, Kevin. Mum told you to watch it with that hoop of yours."

"It wasn't my fault. The stupid dag wasn't looking."

"The dag happens to be a mate of our dad, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Ah, Jesus. You all right then, cobber? Hey, Mary, he looks pretty crook. We better do something."

They hauled me up and shoved me down a dark corridor. I blundered into half a dozen pieces of furniture and finally sank down on a slippery horsehair couch. My eyes closed immediately but I opened them again in alarm at the sound of a heavy clang. It was Dotty, slamming the door of the wood stove.

"That's all the firewood we got, Mum."

"Then you won't have to carry any more in, will you?"

Mrs Pearse rattled her words out at top speed. All the same, her voice had a calming lilt to it and I decided I felt safe enough to glance around at the room.

The walls were sheets of tin punched with patterns and on them hung old calendars, country scenes in chunky wooden frames and commo posters. A worn carpet dotted

with smudged flowers poked out from under a rag rug and the table was covered with newspaper, cut into scallops around the edges. A cracked leather armchair, a dresser crowded with cups and jugs and the black stove with its lazily puffing kettle all fought it out for the rest of the available space.

There were also six people packed into the tiny kitchen. Dotty and Danny were easy to identify, even from knee level, because they were dancing about and trying to explain the evening's events. I recognized Kevin from the bicycle wheel he was still clutching and I knew that the blue skirt belonged to the older sister, Mary. So the bustling black skirt must be Mrs Pearse - she certainly couldn't be the grey-skirted person slumped at the table.

"Kevin, put that dratted hoop out in the backyard. Mary, I reckon Mrs Reilly could use another cuppa." Pots and pans thumped on the stove top. "Dot and Dan, not another word till you've got some food into you."

I lifted my head, interested to see the woman who could silence Dotty and Danny. She was unexpectedly small, swamped by a huge apron with smudges of every colour down its front. Two more black smudges shadowed her bright eyes and her dark red hair stood out at all angles around her head. She moved as quickly as she talked, dealing out plates of food, checking on Kevin and Mary over her shoulder and then dropping down to pat the hand of the sad grey woman.

"There, there, Mrs Reilly. Just remember, you've got a lot of good friends in this neighbourhood."

As if a button had been pressed, the woman started to speak in a monotone, her eyes fixed on the newspaper tablecloth.

"Did I ever tell you about the last time we was evicted, Bridie? It was when the baby first got sick, so I was rushing between home and the hospital all the time. Anyhow, this particular night I turn the corner and run straight into a huge pile of all our furniture in the middle of the street. The clothesline's draped across the lot, with six pair of patched knickers still pegged on it for the world to see. It was a shock and no mistake. Still, we cast around and found ourselves another place and now they want to throw us out of this one too. If they'd only give us time, Bridie, we could pay. But I reckon they'd rather see us die in the streets."

Danny pushed his plate away. "No need to do that, Mrs R. Just get word to me when the bailiffs arrive and the UWM'll be on your doorstep before they even look at your clothesline."

Mrs Reilly stared back with unseeing eyes and Bridie Pearse gave her hand another brisk pat.

"You're worn out, that's the trouble. Taking food from your own mouth to feed your hubby and kids, I'll be bound. Here, have a nice cuppa with two - no, three sugars. That'll set you up no end."

With every sip of tea, Mrs Reilly's shoulders straightened a little. Finally she set the cup carefully down on its saucer and stood up, smoothing her faded skirts.

"I don't know what came over me, making an exhibition of myself like that. It's the waiting that gets you down - knowing the warrant for the eviction's out but not knowing exactly when the bailiffs'll come. Oh well, I suppose it'll be all the same a hundred years from now. Thank you kindly for your help, Bridie, and you too, Danny."

As she walked away down the passage, I thanked her in my turn. I'd been starting to worry about the way I'd collapsed in the street, the way I was lying here barely able to move. But now I knew I hadn't cracked under the strain after all. I was just tired and hungry and worn out by the waiting, like Mrs Reilly.

Bridie Pearse stormed back into the kitchen. "Well, at least we can do something about the eviction, though the Lord knows that'll only solve one of her problems. Now, what about your friend on the couch? I suppose you want me to feed him as well."

"He's not exactly a friend - more like an enemy," said Danny, whipping the scarf from my face.

At the sight of my gag the Pearses gasped in unison, except for Dotty who was busily polishing her plate with a stub of bread. Even from this distance, however, I could see the smug gleam in her eyes.

"So we're kidnapers now, are we, Danny Pearse?"

"Jesus wept, Bridie, you're right at that! Don't worry, though. We got as much on him as he has on us. I doubt if he'll be pressing charges."

"Anyhow, you can't kidnap a spy," Dotty put in.

"True dinks, Dot? Is that a spy?"

Kevin clattered over to take a closer look. I tried to hitch myself up and glare back at him but I felt myself toppling into a dark tunnel. Bridie's voice echoed in my ears.

"Undo that knot, Kevin. Dan, help me to lift him up. Mary, dish out some food. No, Dotty, I don't want to know what it's all about until the poor lad's had a bite to eat."

The room was still circling about me as I perched on an upturned packing case and started to pick at a slab of pie, more vegetables than meat. Somewhere in the distance Dotty complained that feeding a spy was a waste of good tucker. Danny began to tell the story of the evening and Bridie rattled dishes while she packed Kevin and Mary off to bed. I chewed on stolidly and, mouthful by mouthful, I found the world settling into place around me.

To check that my eyes were focusing properly, I started to study the newspaper tablecloth. In the column beside my plate, I read about a Melbourne tea merchant who'd hit a man for saying something rude about the Union Jack. When the case got to court, the tea merchant had let it slip that he belonged to a secret organization that'd trained him to use a baton. The newspaper really went to town about the "welter of feverish but furtive activities of these bodies in fashioning their terrorism".

I frowned and shifted my plate. The heading at the top of the page said *The Workers' Weekly*. So the commos actually had their own newspaper, just like the *Age* or the *Argus*. With growing alarm, I read on.

“When the all set sign is given, probably when a strike has started or a determined show of resistance by the unemployed is in progress, the seething cauldron of hate and lust for maiming will be released on the workers.”

I pushed my plate back to squash the words and then I found myself moving it aside to read the article again. Obviously the whole thing was about the League of National Security, which was a worry in itself, because the Reds weren't supposed to know about us. But worse than that, *The Workers' Weekly* had put such a horrible slant on the facts. “Feverish but furtive activities”, “seething cauldron of hate”, “lust for maiming” - they made the League sound like a pack of cowardly bullies.

It was all the tea merchant's fault, I thought crossly. He wasn't obeying orders. He couldn't keep a secret.

“That's the lot you're spying for, isn't it, enemy?” said Dotty as she plonked a cup of tea at my elbow.

“But it's all twisted around!”

“Well, you should know. How about telling me the real story, then?”

“I mean, it's all twisted around to call me an enemy,” I said hastily. “I'm on your side.”

“You and whose army?” Dotty jeered and we were still glaring at each other when Bridie bustled in.

“Cut along to bed now and I warn you, you're spending the night under lock and key. Yes, both of you, Dot. If I know you, you've got some bright idea about traipsing off to Dudley Flats after Les. Well, I tell you flat, you'll go to school as usual and after that you'll be busy handing out the leaflets I'm sitting up tonight to write.”

“But Mum -“

“Up the stairs, quick sticks.” She chased Dotty to the door, then stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. “As for you, young whosamajig, we'll send you home tomorrow evening. After that - well, we'll mind our own business and leave you to mind yours. Fair enough?”

I nodded sleepily and out of my swimming brain jolted the memory of what I should be saying.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs Pearse.”

“Merciful Jesus, a polite enemy! Now, Danny says he can't make you out, so I won't bother to guess whether you're really a spy. But when you get home, you just sit down and have a good long think about what you been doing, right?”

My head cleared, then fogged again. “Are you a Communist?” I blurted out.

Bridie's quick hands were already rolling the newspapers into logs and tossing them into a basket by the stove, but she looked up with a chuckle.

“Bless you, of course I am. Can’t you see the two horns and the tail?”

I tried to open my eyes, failed and tried again. Grey light was seeping into the room and Dotty stood on tiptoe at the end of my mattress, easing the window open by half-inches. On a reflex I grabbed at her ankle and she fell on top of me with a muffled squeak.

“Leave me alone, enemy.”

“Not until you tell me where you’re going.”

“Where do you think? And pipe down, or you’ll wake the whole world.”

“Your mother told you not to go to Dudley Flats, you know.”

“Oh yeah, spying for her now, are you?”

“Besides, you can’t go all the way to Footscray on your own. You’re just a girl.”

“Not with my cap on,” Dotty pointed out.

At that moment we both spotted the cap lying on the mattress between us. We grabbed a corner each and fought over it in hissing whispers.

“I’m coming with you.” Tug.

“No, you’re not.” Tug.

“Am so.” Tug.

“Oh, all right.”

Dotty let go suddenly and I rolled backwards, clutching the cap to my chest.

“Mum must’ve forgotten how we used to play tiggy-on-the-roof. She made a big mistake, locking me in here,” she whispered as she slid through the window.

Tucking the cap into my pocket, I scrambled out after her and edged my way along the flat roof. Dotty bent down and swung from the guttering, neat as an acrobat. I lowered myself alongside her and we dropped together.

The ground rushed up and belted the breath from my lungs. When I’d recovered enough to look at Dotty, I found her giggling soundlessly.

“You just missed it!”

Looming over me was a huge pram, its rusted sides caked with dirt and streaked with coal dust. It was easy to see the picture in Dotty’s mind - me wedged there with my arms and legs kicking, the giant pram’s giant baby.

I tried to give her a crushing look but my mouth twitched into a grin. We dusted ourselves down and eased open the gate, giggling softly as we went.

The laneway was a jumble of fences. Some were made of rotting grey palings, some were patched with corrugated iron and some had gates that were collapsing grids of boards held up by an iron bolt. It was all pretty different from the clipped hedges and white gateposts of Kew, where anything as ordinary as a wooden fence would’ve instantly been covered with ivy, at the very least.

Dotty glowered at me and held out her hand. I passed her the cap, smiling to keep our new friendly mood alive, as I said, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"For you to push off, of course."

"You're the one who knows the area. I'll follow you."

"Ah, come off it. You're going to scuttle home to your precious fascists now. I had to decide to let you escape with me, 'cause otherwise you would've kicked up a row and put paid to my chances of reaching Les in time. That's tactics, though. You got to lose a battle every now and then, if you want to win the war. But just remember, I know where you live, so if you make trouble for us, there'll be hell to pay."

She flung away so sharply that a plait flicked me in passing. I stared after her in astonishment. Of course she was absolutely right. I should be hurrying straight home, but somehow I'd taken it for granted that I was going to Footscray with Dotty.

On the corner she paused to stuff her plaits under her cap, gave a strangled yelp and ran. I pelted after her, imagining all kinds of disasters, only to find her crouched in the gutter beside a pair of rickety crates.

"Honestly, Dotty, I thought something terrible had -"

"Ah, shut your gob and give us a hand. Finding wood is one of my jobs. I can't pass up a chance like this."

"Why don't you just get proper wood from the wood-yard?"

"It costs proper money," Dotty said without rancour.

She thumped one of the crates, splintering the boards and we were packing the pieces into the other crate when a door closed softly behind us. We whirled around. Down the steps swayed two tall stacks of boxes, piled with blankets and canisters, a bunch of forks and a floppy rag doll.

"Howzat!" called Dotty as she caught a tumbling kettle and tucked it into the waiting handcart. "Where are you off to, Mr Miller?"

"Shirl's brother Bert, over Northcote way," answered a muffled voice.

I lifted off the topmost box and a face peered out at me. Mr Miller looked so tired that I wondered how he was still standing. His mouth drooped, his eyelids drooped, his cheeks sagged wearily and even his ears wilted against his skull.

"You're cutting it fine for a flit," Dotty commented. "It's almost daylight."

"You can thank this blooming cart for that," said Mrs Miller from behind the second stack of boxes. "Halfway there, it dives into a pothole and spills its guts. Then the blooming wheel drops off at Bert's front gate, so we hammer it on again, with all the neighbours yelling, 'Thank you kindly' out their windows. We trudge back for the second load and Fred drops the blooming key. To even it up, I drop the blooming matches and we spend the next quarter of an hour groping around in the pitch dark till we find them. What a business!"

While she talked, she busily stacked the boxes into the small handcart, stepping back to admire her work.

“At least the landlord’ll get no pickings out of us, eh, Fred? Well, best get moving.”

“I’ll just give the key to young Dot. The Pearses could use the rest of them packing cases.”

The cart trundled off and Fred Miller fished about in his pocket, his eyes still fixed on the house front.

“Fair breaks my heart to leave. I was born two streets from here, y’know. And now the old bloke next door reckons that someone’s buying up the whole row, so they can build another factory.” He drooped even lower. “Just tell me this, Dot. When there’s factories all over Richmond, where will the poor bloody workers live?”

“In Kew, cobber. We’ll be bussed back over the river in a Rolls every day. Seriously though, Mr M, will you be all right?”

His hands were twisting together, but he said firmly, “Oh, we’ll manage. We’re better off than some. Hooroo then, Dotty.”

“Hooroo, Mr Miller.”

We let ourselves into the house and found six more packing cases. I must be the most useful enemy Dotty’s ever had, I thought wryly as we made our way back down the road with a tower of timber wobbling between us. We edged through the gate into the Pearses’ backyard and I took a deep breath.

“I’m coming with you, Dotty. You simply can’t go haring off to Footscray on your own. You’d better say yes, or else I’ll yell like blazes and then neither of us’ll be going anywhere.”

She studied me closely, a frown line deepening between her eyebrows. “What’s your game, enemy? I can’t see why the likes of you’d want to help the likes of me. Or have I got you wrong after all?”

“I bet there’ll be times when you’re jolly glad you’ve got a boy to protect you.” She still looked doubtful, so I produced my trump card. “And I give you my word that I’ll never tell anyone about Les.”

Dotty spat sideways. “That’s what a spy’s word’s worth.”

“Oh, is it now?” I said hotly. “Well, I can prove I keep my promises. Did I say a thing about the League, even when Herb nearly tortured me? Did I?”

“No.” The frown line vanished and a smile flowered on her grubby face. “But you’ve told me now.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I'm out of breath, so I lean on my handlebars and look back at the city. From up here on the hill, Richmond is a grid of sparkling lights against the velvety black night. If you could find an even higher hill, Kew would probably look just the same. But I've been in both suburbs and I know they're not the same at all.

As I continue to shunt the rattletrap up the twists and bends of the road, I try to imagine what Kew looked like to Dotty's eyes. There are some big houses in Richmond, of course, just as there are some smaller houses in Kew. Still, I doubt if she'd ever have seen so many wide streets and flowering trees and sloping lawns in her entire life.

It always took me a while to adjust, too, whenever I came back from Richmond. For the first hour or so, everything used to seem terribly bright and clean and polished. Our house looked like a museum, huge rooms crowded with carved furniture and when I went to change out of my school uniform, I'd feel almost embarrassed by the long rows of crisp shirts in my cupboard. And Margaret's cheeks would be impossibly rosy, compared to the skinny sallow little kids on the Richmond footpaths.

Everyone in Richmond always looked so grimy. For a long while I assumed this was because poor people were lazy, just like my father said. At the same time I usually ran a hot bath when I got home, so I could scrub the factory grit from my skin. I never made the connection, though, not until I stayed with the Pearses and discovered that all their water came from one cold tap in the backyard.

I learned a lot of things from Dotty on our way to Dudley Flats. For example, she listed all the food her family lived on - bread and dripping, watery soup, suet pudding, mince and vegetable pie, fried scones with golden syrup or slices of bread soaked in water and baked with raisins and spices for seconds. A lot of starch and no chops or roasts or fruit, except for the blackberries they hiked miles to pick. It was no wonder that everyone in Richmond was either very fat or very skinny.

It costs money to look clean; it costs money to look healthy; it costs money to look neat. Dotty's jumpers aren't even hand-me-downs - they're made from wool that's been unpicked and reknitted. She mends the holes in her boots with cardboard and if she has to dress up, she borrows from the kid next door, whose mother gets paid in cast-off clothes for her cleaning job. Whenever Danny goes for a job, he wears three layers of pullovers to make him look bigger and stronger. And Bridie does all their washing in a kerosene tin on the kitchen stove.

"All right, Dad," I say out loud to the night. "You reckon Australia'll get through the Depression if we all sacrifice something. But what are the Pearses supposed to sacrifice? You already call them 'the great unwashed', just because they've only got a tin bath they fill up in the kitchen once a week. You want to have it both ways and you can't. Honestly, Dad, I don't think you really understand what it's like to be broke. I don't suppose I understand properly, either, but at least I understand more than you. "

Brave words, I think to myself as I plod up the hill. Fighting words, indeed. I wonder whether I'll ever say them to his face.

CHAPTER TWENTY

When I read about the tea merchant who betrayed the League's secrets, I'd felt smugly superior. But now I'd done exactly the same thing myself. Oh, I'd only mentioned half of the League's name and the fact that I belonged to it, which wasn't much, not when you could read about secret armies in the commo newspapers. That was no excuse, though. I'd made my vows to the League and now I'd broken them.

I held my breath, waiting for Dotty to let fly with more questions, but instead she said briskly, "Looks like we both got something on each other, hey? You can sing out and wake my family and I can tell them that you're definitely a spy. Seeing we're even, I s'pose you may as well come to Footscray, after all. For starters, you can tell me how to get there."

"Dotty Pearse! Do you mean to tell me that you don't even know where Footscray is?"

"Of course I don't, ya great galah. Richmond's a big place. I never needed to go anywhere else, not until I started trailing you. Anyhow, I was going to ask people the way to Footscray, same as I'm asking you."

"Yes, and they would've told you that Footscray's right on the opposite side of the city. If you'd done things your way, you never would've been back in time. I told you that you'd be glad I'm coming with you. I've got two pounds in my boot, so we'll be able to go by train."

"Thank you, Gray." Dotty grabbed at her baggy shorts and gave me a curtsy and a cheeky grin. "They taught us that at school, when the governor's wife came to tell us

what lucky kids we were. Now we better get cracking. Mary'll be out any minute now, to go to her job at the jam factory."

We hurried through the early morning streets to the Richmond station. I rescued a pound note from under the insole of my boot and paid for our tickets. The station platform was long and bare and we huddled together in a high-backed seat, escaping from the wind.

"So why were the Millers moving in the middle of the night?" I asked to distract myself from the cold.

"They were flitting - nicking off without paying the rent, ya dingbat."

"But ... that's dishonest."

"Better to hang around and get evicted like the Reillys, you reckon? Listen, Mr Miller hasn't had a job in two years. He used to walk into the city every night to get the papers first thing and once he reckoned he saw five hundred men turn up for the one job. Anyhow, a few months back he started to get these screaming fits and they put him into Mont Park for a bit. He's been pretty quiet ever since but then the landlord started sending thugs around at all hours to chivvy them out of the house. Mrs M obviously decided they'd better do a flit and a good thing too, if you ask me."

"I'm just trying to point out that -"

"Point away, cobber. It's a free country. Just don't expect me to listen to your garbage."

I was still frowning at her when she grabbed my arm. For a moment I thought she was actually going to apologise, until I realised that she was staring down the platform.

"That bloke over there - he's a copper!"

"How do you know? He's not in uniform or anything."

"Come off it, Gray. My dad's a Red, remember. I knew every copper in Richmond by the time I could walk."

"Well, you don't need to worry about the police now. We're not doing anything wrong." Then my mouth dropped open. "Oh, hang on! Maybe he's looking for me. I suppose I'm a missing person, come to think of it. I'm sorry, Dotty. It looks like I've made a mess of your plans after all."

"Don't give up so easy, mate. Just you scoot around to the far side of the seat and wait till the train pulls in. You mustn't go running towards it - walk natural, so he doesn't spot you. I'll go and chiack him a bit, to keep his mind off you while we're waiting. Then I'll hop into one of the front carriages and meet with you when we change trains in the city. Got that?"

Without a backward glance, she skipped away towards the policeman. I ducked behind the seat and pressed myself flat against the solid wood. A man nearby stopped rolling his cigarette to study me curiously and I relaxed into the slouch of a street corner lair, although my pulse was still racing and my heart still hammered at my ribs.

Why was I hiding, anyway? Why wasn't I rushing over to the policeman to give myself up? My parents must've been worried sick and I'd hardly given them a second thought. The problem was, I'd never disobeyed my father like this before and I had no idea of what he was likely to do to me. I was going to Dudley Flats in the hope of finding out something that'd make my trip to Richmond worthwhile - but I had to admit that I also wanted to keep away from my father as long as possible.

The train jolted down the line and the man nearby bent to pick up his kitbag. He knocked the burning end of his rollie into his trouser cuff and started to shake his leg frantically. With a flash of inspiration I strolled over and hoisted the bag.

"I'll give you a hand with this."

"Thanks, matey."

We climbed onto the train together. No policemen came running after us, so once the train started to move, I felt bold enough to lean out, just in time to see the policeman reach out and collar Dotty. Though she kicked and struggled, he just laughed heartily.

The door was swinging wildly but I couldn't bring myself to slam it. Dotty broke away and came racing towards me. Bracing myself, I stretched out and grabbed her hand. We teetered on the edge for a moment and then the kitbag man caught us by the scruffs of our necks and hauled us inside.

"That's a pretty dangerous game, nippers. Don't let me catch you at it again."

"No way," said Dotty fervently. "Once is enough."

We stumbled into one of the compartments and sank down, breathless. Dotty recovered first, of course.

"That stupid bastard thought he'd have a bit of fun with me - teaching me a lesson, he called it. We tricked him though, didn't we, Gray? This is a real adventure and no mistake."

I grunted something and turned to look out the window. As I peered down into backyards crowded with washing or gazed out at the parklands around the river, I slowly realised there was another reason why I'd insisted on coming to Footscray. Why should a commo brat get all the fun, while I trotted meekly home with my tail between my legs? Dotty was right - this was a real adventure.

Finally the train chugged to a halt in the crisscross of rails around Flinders Street Station. Dotty looked up in alarm.

"Why're we stopping here, Gray? Do you reckon they're going to search the train for you?"

"No, it just means that another train has to leave the station before we can pull in. All the same, that policeman might've telephoned the city police, I suppose. They could be waiting for us here as well."

I stuck my head out of the window and looked around. There was only one set of tracks between us and freedom. Before I could stop to think, I flung open the door. We

leapt out, scurried across the tracks and flattened ourselves against the stone wall. Seconds later, a train roared past.

“Blimey, that was close,” sighed Dotty, uncovering her ears.

“You’re right,” I apologised. “I shouldn’t have made you do it. After all, I’m supposed to be looking after you.”

“Ah, don’t give yourself airs. I can take care of myself, y’know. Save your breath for climbing up this wall.”

We scrambled up to street level and stared wide-eyed at the city. People bustled to and fro, heading for shops or offices. Motorists honked impatiently at horse-drawn carts and from a nearby corner a voice called, “Hot pies or frankfurts, hot and steaming.” I felt suddenly starving and raced over to buy two pies.

“This is beaut,” said Dotty, blowing on the hot gravy. “Listen, why don’t we wander round for a bit? If there’re coppers in the station, they might lose interest and push off after a while. Besides, I never been in the city before. I had an ordinary old cough on the day of the march but my mum told the neighbours to keep an eye on me, so I couldn’t even sneak in on my own. Bloody mean, she is sometimes.”

“I think she’s very nice.”

“Yeah, she is. But she can still be bloody mean when she wants.”

“Help, that reminds me. I’d better find a telephone, so I can let my mother know I’m all right.”

I wasn’t looking forward to that conversation. In fact, I felt as though a cold hand was clutching at my stomach. To cheer myself up, I remembered that in the ordinary way I would’ve been putting on my school clothes by now. On top of all my other crimes I was about to play truant, so I might as well enjoy it.

Not that it was hard to enjoy a day off in the city. We strolled along at a leisurely pace, gazing into every shop in turn. I bought two apple turnovers and the latest copy of *Chums* and threw a penny into the cap of an old man who was juggling oranges in front of a display of ruffled evening gowns. By my side Dotty chattered constantly.

“We’re pretty skint most of the time, but there’s plenty of ways to earn a bit extra. Sometimes Dad goes rabbiting down by the Yarra and me and Kev hunt for rowing boats. You sing out ‘Hoo, hoo, hooee’ and if no one answers you row the boat back to Princes Bridge. You get the fun of it, see and then the hiring bloke gives you a tanner as well. Other times I scout around for wood or Collingwood coke - they’re offcuts from the boot factory that you burn, if you got nothing else, but they make a terrible stink. Or I collect up bits of brass to sell and you can return dead marines to the bottle yard for a tanner a dozen. We all do our bit but Mary’s the only one with a regular job and Rosella’ll probably give her the order of the boot, soon as she’s over age. Then we could be in strife.”

She craned her neck to see the top of a tall building and almost overbalanced. I caught hold of her elbow and she steadied herself, still prattling away.

“Most girls my age’d be stuck at home all the time, looking after the littlies and helping round the house. The more broke you are, the more housework there is. Kev’s only a year younger than me, though, which is a bit of luck. And then the Unemployed Workers’ Movement decided last year that they’d got to get more women involved, ’cause it’s a bourgeois illusion that women’s place is in the home. So Mum told Dad to practise what he preaches and now he helps around the house and makes Kevin do his bit. Pat and Sean, my married brothers - they nearly had a fit the first time they seen Dad washing up.”

She grinned at the memory and I smiled back uneasily. Fancy not even having servants to do your washing up. My parents often said, “You don’t know how lucky you are,” but I always thought it was just the kind of thing that parents were supposed to say. Now I decided they were right.

Oddly enough, though, Dotty seemed to think that she was a lucky sort of person too. I wanted to ask her about that, but she’d already pushed on ahead.

“That bloke on the soapbox - it’s Mr Hart,” she called. “Let’s see how he’s doing.”

Before I could catch up with her, she had slipped between two broad-shouldered young men in well-cut suits who stood on the edge of Mr Hart’s audience. I perched on a fire hydrant to listen in and soon decided that Mr Hart must’ve picked up a few tips from Danny, because his speech-making had improved no end. So I was quite surprised when the young men started to nudge each other and comment in loud high voices.

“Open sedition, wouldn’t you say, Freddy?”

“I’d call it commy rot, Bimbo. Not tommyrot, but commy rot.”

“Oh, that’s jolly good. Now listen, I think someone should show this Red how decent men feel about his kind of nonsense.”

“I’m with you, old sport. Haven’t seen much action lately.”

They waded into the crowd, yelling “Go back to Russia” at the top of their lungs and I jumped up to follow them. As I wriggled past elbows and umbrellas and shopping bags, I caught glimpses of what was happening ahead of me. Mr Hart standing his ground. Bimbo stumbling over an outstretched foot. Dotty leaping forward. Freddy raising a short heavy stick.

A baton.

In the tackle of my life I grabbed at Freddy’s arm just before the baton whirled down on Mr Hart. Freddy swung on me, his blue eyes blazing and shouted, “Who the hell do you think you are?”

Suddenly I realised I had an answer to that - an answer which would stop Freddy and Bimbo in their tracks. “I’m a friend of -”

But the words wouldn’t come out. I couldn’t say, “I’m a friend of Ellen’s.”

“Dotty’s,” I yelled. “I’m a friend of Dotty’s.”

“Dotty Pearse!” echoed Mr Hart from behind me. “Quick - this way.”

I dropped to my knees and scooted past Freddy’s ankles. Dotty was still squaring up to Bimbo but every time he went to hit her, two young women planted themselves firmly in his path. I dragged her away and gave her a push to start her running.

As I pelted down the street, I kept looking back to see whether Freddy and Bimbo were gaining on us. Then I swung round and found my nose inches from the stiff shirtfront of a city gentleman. I flung myself sideways and rolled into the gutter, calling, “Keep going, Dot.” She raced over to me, just the same, and hauled me to my feet. We stood and stared as Bimbo loped straight past us.

“Of course,” Dotty gasped. “He’s after Mr Hart, not us.”

We forced ourselves into a run again. Several yards ahead Bimbo cut a path through the idling shoppers, his eyes fixed on the opposite pavement where Mr Hart had slowed to a jerky walk.

“We better get over to him.”

“Wait for a break in the traffic.”

But when had Dotty Pearse ever waited for anything? I hesitated on the curb, telling myself that I’d be more sensible this time. Then Freddy’s hand fell on my shoulder and I was out on the road in a flash. I dodged past horses’ hooves, winced away from the clang of a cable tram, shouted my apologies to a skidding cyclist and stumbled to safety. I wanted to sink down on the pavement and rest for an hour or so but I knew I had to start running again.

By the time Mr Hart called to me from a doorway, I’d almost forgotten how to stop. We pushed and pulled each other up a narrow flight of stairs and jostled into a bright room. A plump little man looked up in surprise and nodded towards a curtain behind him. We fumbled our way into a small kitchen, just as Freddy and Bimbo burst in.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?”

“I’ll say. You’ve got some Reds hiding in here. Produce them, on the double.”

“Dear me,” said the little man mildly. “I wish you’d asked me to produce streamers from your sleeve or an egg from your top pocket. And what’s that in your ear? Goodness me, it’s the Queen of Hearts. Best thing I can do in the red line, I’m afraid.”

Dotty stifled a giggle and I peered over her shoulder through the gap in the curtain. Freddy and Bimbo were dusting loops of coloured streamers off their coats and backing away from the little magician.

“Wrong place, old chum,” said Freddy decisively. “Better try the ground floor.”

Their feet clattered down the stairs and the magician pulled the curtain aside.

“Your friends didn’t seem to like my tricks, I’m afraid. Now, Isaac, I think you’d better have a rest while the youngsters fill me in on the details. Fancy taking up cross country running at your age! You ought to be more careful.”

“Sometimes the careful thing is to run,” wheezed Mr Hart and the little man chuckled as he steered us back into the shop.

“I suppose you’re wondering where Isaac’s brought you. I’m Percy Laidler, magician and teacher of magicians, and this is my magic shop. So tell me, what’s been going on?”

Dotty hopped up onto the counter immediately and began the story, leaving me free to explore the shop. I prodded at collapsible wands, found the hidden pockets in cloaks, fiddled with mysterious rings and decided that Percy Laidler’s best trick was making Freddy and Bimbo disappear. I knew I was supposed to be on the same side as them but the truth was, I’d really enjoyed the foolish looks on their faces.

Then Dotty’s voice rose angrily and I turned round, to hear her say, “Don’t you start now, Perce. I tell you, I got proof Les is at Dudley Flats.”

“It’s an interesting idea. Under the circumstances, he might want to create the illusion that he’d disappeared.”

“Under what circumstances?” I put in. “Do you realise I actually don’t have a clue why we’re haring round after him?”

“That’s ’cause it’s a longish sort of story.”

Percy Laidler spun two chairs around to face Dotty. “We’ll take the weight off our feet and then you can fire away.”

“All right, here goes,” said Dotty, drawing herself up importantly. “Les was the secretary or something for the Unemployed Workers’ Movement - a bonzer bloke, one in a million. Somehow he gets hold of a stack of the ballot cards the council use to decide who gets to do relief work, so he decides to start up his own private relief scheme. He’s real careful, just adds two men on to the team every week, in the hopes that no one’ll notice. It’s not much but it’s something.

“Of course the cards run out in the end and blokes are still rolling up to his door, desperate for work. Les is almost at his wits’ end. Finally he breaks into the council offices and nicks another pile of ballot cards. But next night, when he’s coming home from a meeting, he spots some coppers hanging round his place. He takes off straight away, with the UWM books still on him. And that’s how come we’re looking for him now.”

I stared at her incredulously. “Hang on a minute, Dotty. You mean to say this chap’s on the run because he’s a thief?”

“In your mind, maybe.” She slid off the counter with a thump. “If you ask me, your lot are the real thieves, with your nice big houses bought by ripping off the likes of Les. Why don’t you go home to *your* thieves and leave me to go on looking for mine?”

Percy stopped her just before she reached the door. “Dotty, go and cheer up Isaac for a minute and then I’ll draw you that map of Dudley Flats.”

“That’s blackmail,” she informed him as she pushed through the curtain. I watched her go, scowling with exasperation.

“I only asked her a question, you know. There was no reason for her to fly off the handle like that. Mind you, I do think that this Les chap was going too far. You can’t break into people’s offices, even if you feel it’s in a good cause.”

“You’re an unlikely pair, aren’t you?” Percy commented. “How did you come to be travelling together?”

Right at that moment, I wasn’t exactly sure myself.

“Well, I can’t tell you why I went to Richmond in the first place,” I warned him, but the rest of the story slipped out as smoothly as silken ribbons, while the little magician listened attentively.

“So you don’t agree with Dotty’s ideas but all the same you want to make sure she gets to Dudley Flats in one piece. What an honourable little cuss you are, Gray.”

“That’s like Sir Daniel Rose,” I said excitedly and then of course I had to explain. “He’s a man who ... well, he didn’t agree with ... with us, but he helped me because ... oh hell! It’s impossible to explain properly without giving something away.”

“Never mind, I know who Daniel Rose is, anyway. I suspect he’s one of the few people in Australia who quite literally believes in democracy.”

“You sound as though you like him. Does that mean - are you a commo, like the rest of them?”

Percy Laidler balanced a small box thoughtfully on his palm. With a quick flick of the wrist, he turned it from blue to yellow. “I suppose it depends on the way you see things, Gray.”

“Oh really, sir! A fellow either is a commo, or else he isn’t.”

“You reckon? Then how would you classify anarchists, Trotskyites, Rationalists, humanists, the anti-war movement, Douglas Social Creditites, trade unionists, the Labor Party and the like?”

“I don’t know, sir. I’ve only heard of the Labor Party - oh and the unions, of course.”

“Well, our friends Freddy and Bimbo would lump all those people together as Bolshies. Isaac Hart, on the other hand, would tell you that the only true Communists are the thousand or so members of the Communist Party of Australia. And others will call you a Red if you criticise anything at all about the present system. What about you, Gray? What do you mean when you ask me if I’m a commo?”

I felt as though a very good conjuror was asking me to guess which cup covered the penny. “You’re making it all sound more complicated than it really is.”

“Not at all,” said Percy, with a flourish that changed the little box to blue again. “After all, the anti-communists are just as varied. You’ll find groups like Daniel Rose’s to help the unemployed, new political parties to control the unemployed and secret armies to

shoot the unemployed. It's all very complicated indeed. And the biggest joke is that people sometimes agree more with their enemies than with their so-called allies."

"You're right there, at any rate. Mr Hart and my father both hate Jack Lang like poison, which doesn't seem to make much sense."

"Ah, but you see, Lang's not on the same side as either of them. The trouble is, most people like to believe that there are only two sides - goodies and baddies, my side and your side. Actually, there are probably as many sides as there are people." He tossed the little box over to me. "Here, have a go for yourself."

First I tapped it too hard and then I tapped it too softly. After that I tapped it in all the wrong places for a while, until I finally found the precise and gentle tap that sent the thin walls sliding in and out to change the colours.

I looked up at Percy with a shy smile and he took the box back. "I'll show you what I can do, when I'm in practise. Yes, got it!"

He tossed the box from hand to hand. Blue box, yellow box, blue box, yellow box. As I watched admiringly, I said, "So you believe there's some good in all points of view?"

"Good heavens, no," said Percy, dropping the box in astonishment. "I certainly do my best to understand all points of view. In fact, people often come to this shop for a political second opinion, like a doctor's second opinion on a medical matter. But I've got my own principles, of course. I helped set up the Communist Party, even though I didn't join it. And I don't believe there's the slightest bit of truth in the capitalists' idea that all the wealth and power and privilege should be gathered into the hands of a few people."

"You're playing tricks with words now," I burst out angrily. "First you say there's no goodies and baddies and now you're trying to tell me money and power are bad. Well, I'm not ashamed of my father, just because he's rich, any more than I'm ashamed of Dotty, just because she's poor. So there!"

"Maybe you and Dot aren't as different as I thought at first," said Percy with a grin. "Want to go storming out yourself, Gray, or do you want to stop and use the phone? Dotty said you were looking for one."

I couldn't make up my mind whether I wanted to argue with Percy or ask him to explain his ideas again. Either way, I didn't really feel up to ringing my parents right then. Still, the phone was at my elbow and it seemed mean to leave them in suspense. When Percy tactfully excused himself to talk to Mr Hart, I took a deep breath and lifted the receiver.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

I'm still struggling up the dark hill. No houses around me now and there won't be until I reach the top. A sharp wind cuts at me and I feel as though a pack of wolves might lope out of the long grass any minute now. There's some light, because the moon's still rolling through the sky overhead, but that only adds to the general eeriness.

I feel scared, for about the thousandth time since this whole business started. I'm becoming quite an expert on all the different ways of being scared. Take the flash of panic every time I cycled up to the UWM hall, for example. That was a useful kind of fear, like the surge of fear just before you begin an exam or a race. But my terror on the way to the Pearses' house was the total opposite - it paralysed me to the point where I couldn't think straight.

I used to bite my nails in an agony of suspense over every episode of "Wings Against the Storm", while Alan Gaunt remained cool as a cucumber through the wildest adventures. Now I know that's quite true to life. While I was facing Herb and Joe or fighting the street corner lairs, I was hardly frightened at all. It's afterwards that your knees turn to jelly.

And my fear of this dark hill is different again. This is the way I felt, back when I was a little kid, about the bogeyman who lived in the loo and roared every time I pulled the chain. I knew the bogeyman wasn't real, just as I know that the rustle under the trees isn't really wolves preparing to pounce, but your most unreasonable fears are the hardest ones to shake.

So I need to think about something else - and quickly. Percy Laidler, then. He wasn't telling me anything I didn't know when he said you couldn't divide the world neatly into

sides. I like Danny Pearse but he's on the other side. I don't like Mr Haughto, but he's on my side. I know that things aren't as neat as they ought to be.

So why did Percy upset me so much? I suppose he made me feel I had to stop and choose sides all over again. There's no point in doing that, though. However much I like the Pearses, I don't see how I could be on their side. I'm not poor and starving: I live in my father's house and I eat the food he provides. Even if I don't believe that he's right about everything, I can't turn against him, can I? I have to stay on his side.

Except that, come to think of it, Percy was saying that there are more than two sides. In a sense, that offers me a way out. I needn't follow Danny or my father - I can work out my own position. But that idea frightens me more than anything else has. It's all too big for me. How am I supposed to know what's the right thing to do?

I stick my head down and grimly shunt the rattletrap along, past the dark trees and rustling grasses, towards the high towers of Raheen, the archbishop's mansion, which marks the borderline of Kew.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

I thought my mother would burst into tears the minute I spoke. Instead, she said crisply, "Graham, tell me at once exactly where you are."

"I don't know," I said, taken aback. "I'm in a shop in the city, but I don't know the address."

"Then you'd better find out, so your father can come and get you. Really, if I'd known what you two were up to ... but we'll talk about that later. Right now I just want to know that those dreadful people haven't harmed you at all."

I puzzled away for a moment before I realised who she was talking about. "Honestly, Mum, they're quite decent, really. They had their own reasons for holding me overnight and -"

"Graham, why are you defending them? If you can't talk freely, just try to give me some kind of clue. I promise we'll find you, wherever you are."

"It's not like that, Mum. I'm fine, truly I am. There's something I have to do, though, before I come home. Please don't worry about me. I've got enough money and I know how to -"

And that was when she burst into tears. I replaced the receiver carefully and turned to find Dotty studying me.

"You hung up without saying goodbye," she observed. "Well, Perce talked me into giving you a second chance. Ready to push off now?"

The plump little magician was waiting in the doorway. "Here, take this as a souvenir," he said, holding out the little box.

I eyed it longingly. The chaps at school would be no end impressed by that trick - and I would think of Percy Laidler every time I used it.

“Thanks all the same, sir, but no.”

I wondered whether that would wipe the smile from his face but he was still beaming as he waved to us from the top of the stairs. We made our way back to Flinders Street Station, keeping a watch out for Freddy and Bimbo and Dotty ran ahead to check for a police trap. When she gave me the thumbs up sign, I hurried in to buy the tickets and within half an hour we were heading towards Footscray.

I hunched up in a corner, wondering why my mother had called the UWM “dreadful people” when she was always so sympathetic to the unemployed men who came to our door. Then again, the main thing in her mind at present would be the fact that I was missing and she probably didn’t give two hoots about commos or secret armies. Most people didn’t - they just got on with the business of living their lives.

I wished I could just live my life too but I was already in too deep for that. The problem was, I couldn’t work out who to believe: Danny or my father, Mr Haughton or Mr Hart, Sir Daniel or Percy Laidler. Sometimes they put a different slant on things and sometimes even the facts of the matter were different.

“Dotty, will you tell me something about the Richmond UWM?” I asked suddenly.

“Like fun I will. You’ll just take it straight back to your precious fascists.”

I hesitated. “What if I said I wouldn’t pass on any information you give me?”

“I wouldn’t half mind checking out a few things myself,” said Dotty, looking tempted. “All right, it’s a deal. Anything we say from now on, we keep under our hats. What did you want to know?”

“Whether any of your lot are being paid by the Russians.”

“Don’t make me laugh. We’d be a darned sight more flush, if we was being paid by anybody - or hasn’t that ever occurred to you? My turn now. Tell me how many people there are in your League.”

“I’m not sure about the League itself, but my father told me there’s about a hundred and thirty thousand men in all the organisations that are fighting the commos.”

“Fair cow! That’s a hundred and thirty men for every one of us. We’ve really got you scared, haven’t we? Mind you, people treat figures like balloons: they blow them up and let them down. My dad said there was at least three thousand people on the march in the city but the papers wrote it up as six hundred.”

It looked as though I wasn’t going to be able to clear up my confusions by checking the facts, after all. “So you can’t really trust anyone to tell you the truth?” I said despondently.

“No, you just got to use your brains and work it out for yourself. There was a time when everyone thought the world was flat but they was wrong. It’s not a question of numbers, it’s a question of what’s right.”

Just as I was about to sink into gloom, I found myself laughing at her. "You do talk a lot, don't you?"

"That's what everyone says," Dotty scowled. "I just want to *know*, that's all. Oh yeah and then I want to pass it on."

We got out at Footscray Station and followed the route marked on Percy's map, with Dotty firing off a series of questions about my life as we went. It felt strange to be talking about maids and cooks, smooth lawns and children's parties, school sports days and seaside holidays, while all the time we trudged through a desert where huge structures of metal beams hung like mirages above the ruined grass.

I decided I needed to ask some questions of my own in self-defence, so I asked her what communism was all about. Soon we were arguing so hotly that we almost walked straight past the unemployed camp. Dudley Flats had begun as a rubbish dump and that's what it still looked like. Only when you took a second glance could you see that the packing cases were piled into shacks; the mounds of hessian covered humpies; the rusty petrol cans were hammered flat and nailed together for homes; the crumbling water tank had a door cut in the side; and cardboard and planks and corrugated iron were all cobbled into makeshift huts.

Even Dotty was taken aback for a moment. "Jesus, how're we ever going to find Les in among this lot?"

"We'll start with a spot of reconnaissance. There may be a supervisor somewhere."

"It's not a bleeding holiday camp," she pointed out, but she followed me obediently down the path.

From time to time I stopped to say, "Know a bloke by the name of Les?" However, I found it increasingly hard to interrupt the women who limped past, heaving kerosene cans that brimmed with water. And it was even harder to speak to the men who stared blank-faced from the doorways.

"We're not getting anywhere," Dotty told me finally. Flinging back her head, she yelled, "Les! Les Hudson! Cooee, Les!"

I was starting to explain to her why this would never work, when a curtain made of hessian bags flapped open and a skinny giant crawled out.

"You looking for Les, then?"

"Are you deaf, or something? That's what I just said, didn't I? Know where he is?"

"In here."

The giant jerked his thumb at some sheets of rusty tin. Dotty gave a whoop and went scampering off and I followed more slowly.

"Got this place from a mate who was leaving," the giant told me proudly, looping up the hessian curtain. "They aren't all as solid as this, not by a long chalk."

If this was a solid hut, I hated to think what the others were like. The tin sheets grated together in the wind and smoke from the burning rubbish drifted in through every

crack. Blinking through the gloom, I saw that the small room was furnished with packing cases and piles of sacking. A young man lay on the sacks with his leg in plaster.

“Bloody hell, Les, what’ve you done to yourself?”

“Tried to jump the rattler, didn’t I, Dot? Lucky for me that Josh was around, or the train might’ve sliced my leg right off. He knew the cops was after me, so he lugged me down here, got a friendly doctor out on the quiet and he’s been looking after me like a mum ever since. Haven’t you, Josh?”

“Not exactly like a mum,” protested the giant.

“Just joshing you, mate. With a name like yours, you’re bound to be joshed every once in a while.”

The giant’s long face squinted with puzzlement for a moment and then he slapped his knee. “That’s another joke. You’re a great one for jokes, y’know, Les.”

Dotty gave Josh an impatient look and pushed forward. “Listen, we’ve come for the UWM account books. Still got them on you, then?”

“Nah, I packed them up neatly and posted them to the Richmond Council, with a card saying ‘Happy Birthday’. What do you reckon, kid? I been worried about them too, but I was out to it for over a week. Ever since then I been doing my best to find someone who’d take them back to Richmond for me.”

“Well, we’re here now, me and Gray. So I reckon we should -”

“Nice to meet you, Gray,” said Les firmly, holding out his hand. “It isn’t everyone who can manage to keep up with old Demon Dot here.”

As his fingers gripped mine, I was tugged into unwilling sympathy. Closer up, I could see the deep lines that showed through his heavy stubble and I realised that he wasn’t just joking for the fun of it. He was joking to hide the pain of his injuries, like a soldier wounded in battle.

Dotty was scowling at us from the sidelines and Les grinned up at her. “You won’t believe in the books till you’ve laid eyes on them, will you?” He started to swivel round, but stopped himself halfway with a grimace. “Oops, it’s my rheumatism, plays up something awful in the cold.”

Immediately Josh lumbered forward to pull two battered ledgers from under the sacking pillow. He glanced at Les for permission and handed the books over to Dotty.

“Happy now? How about telling us what’s going on.”

“They’re trying to get rid of the UWM again, Les. We got till four o’clock to prove we paid the rent for June and July, otherwise we get kicked out. Four o’clock! Blimey, it took us a fair while to walk here from the station. How’re we going to make it back in time, Gray?”

Dotty looked at me trustingly and I did my best to come up with an answer, but my mind was a blank. Then Josh thumped his forehead.

“Jesus, I’d forget my own head if it wasn’t screwed on. I got a bike and so’s the bloke in the next hut. We can dink you to the station. How about that?”

“Beauty, Josh. Well, what are we waiting for?” As she ducked through the hessian, Dotty paused to say over her shoulder, “So when’ll you be back in Richmond, Les?”

“Come off it, Dot,” Les said gently. “I can’t show my face around the traps now. Soon as I’m on my feet again, I’ll head up bush, just like I planned in the first place.”

In the silence a fly buzzed loudly and Josh swiped at it with his big hand.

“Yeah, I knew that,” said Dotty at last. “I was only joshing you. Good luck then, Les. Look after yourself.”

“Same to you, kid.”

Josh was still fussing about, setting a billy of water and a bucket at Les’s side, and I stood at the end of the bed and searched for the words I wanted to say. But all I could manage in the end was, “Nice to meet you, Les.”

After a few minutes of clinging to Josh’s belt, I was convinced he preferred to ride at potholes, rather than round them. Still, he handled the old bike like a cowboy with a bucking bronco and we reached Footscray Station without a single tumble, to find a train due in five minutes. As we leaned out to wave goodbye, Josh mumbled, “Tell your mob I’ll see young Les right,” and stretched up to pat Dotty on the head.

Then the city began to gallop past. I fell into my seat and heaved a sigh of relief. We’d come through our adventure with flying colours and pretty soon I’d be back in safe familiar places, among people who didn’t ask awkward questions all the time. That reminded me of Dotty and I looked round to find her small face slippery with tears. She jutted her chin at me, trying to bluff it out.

“You were right,” I said after a pause. “Les is a bonzer bloke.”

“Told you so! I’m not really crying, y’know. It’s just that I might never see him again, ever. He was nicer to me than any of my brothers and he was only trying to help people and it’s *not fair!*”

I’d only ever seen Dotty dressed in her boy’s shorts and cloth cap, so I’d come to treat her as a chum, like Charley. But now she was bawling as openly as Margaret and I didn’t know what to do. I was almost ready to pull the emergency cord when she knuckled away the tear stains and yawned hugely.

“I’m pooped. Wake me up when we hit the city.”

She curled up on the opposite seat and fell asleep at once. After I leave Richmond, I’ll never see Dotty again, ever, I thought to myself. The idea made me so uncomfortable that I even preferred to tackle the problem of Les.

He reminded me of Charley, with his endless string of wisecracks, and he reminded me of Danny, standing up for his principles against all odds. Perhaps that was why I'd taken such an immediate liking to him. No, it was more than that. Les was a real hero, a sort of Robin Hood, robbing the rich to give to the poor.

Jolting drowsily with the train, I tried to imagine what my father would say to that. He'd call me a traitor and maybe he would be right. Maybe I should be turning Les over to the police, instead of wishing I had him as an older brother. I did my best to harden my heart, but it still seemed wrong that Les should be lying there, grounded and helpless, on the hard mud floor of a creaking shack.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

As soon as I reach the top of the hill, I jump on my bike and pedal like mad. I'm nearly out of the dark woods, just about to reach the safety of the archbishop's walls, when the rattletrap jolts underneath me. Next minute I'm bumping along on a flat tyre.

I climb off and wheel the bike down to the streetlight outside Raheen. Unbuckling the leather pouch that holds my repair kit, I take out the tyre lever and set to work. I ease the inner tube out of its heavy rim and blow air into it. Normally I'd dunk the tube in a bucket of water at this stage, so the trail of bubbles would show me where the hole is, but now I'll just have to improvise. -

I hold the tube close to my face and rotate it slowly, waiting to feel the thin stream of air on my cheeks. I turn and turn and turn and yet there's still no sign of the puncture. I spin the tube faster and faster. I squeeze it like a snake, trying to force the air out. I jerk it this way and that, cursing wildly.

Then I realise this isn't doing me any good. I loosen my grip and take three long, deep breaths before I try again.

Finally I locate the hole. I roughen the surface around it with a sharp-edged piece of tin, so the rubber solution will take properly. When I reach for the pouch, it tilts and spills across the footpath but I tell myself calmly that this'll make it easier to find the right-sized patch.

After sorting through the patches, I select one and peel off the backing. The patch sticks to my finger. I shake it off. It sticks to my shoe. I let out a yell and grind it into the gravel.

All of a sudden the night is very quiet around me. I glance about, feeling embarrassed, but no one has seen my display of temper. With trembling hands, I squeeze out the rubber solution, peel another patch and clamp it over the hole.

“There, Graham,” I say as I sit by the roadside, holding the patch in place while the solution dries. “You can do it, when you try. It’s all right. Everything’s all right.”

It occurs to me that I could’ve simply wheeled the bike home. After all, I don’t have far to go now. Then again, this is the last time I’ll ever ride the old rattletrap and I wouldn’t want to hand it on to its next owner with a flat tyre. Not the old rattletrap.

Standing up with a sigh, I cover the rubber solution with French chalk, to make sure the inner tube doesn’t stick to the tyre. I lever the tyre into place again and congratulate myself on a job well done. As I ride off, the rattletrap jolts underneath me.

Straight away, I know exactly what’s gone wrong. I must’ve levered too sharply, causing the tyre to pinch the tube and make another hole. It’s a nuisance but it’s nothing to cry about.

So why are the tears streaming down my face? Why am I hurling the bike away and crawling under the nearest bush? Why am I bent double, gasping out sobs so loud that I’m scared I’ll wake the whole of Kew?

That’s easy. It’s because I’ve reached the last part of my story.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Bridie Pearse came running from the office at the back of the empty UWM hall. At the sight of us, her smile slipped. “Oh, it’s you, Dotty.”

“Yeah, with the books and everything. Don’t bother to say thanks. I’ve only saved our skins, that’s all.”

“Sorry, kid. We’ve had a day and a half of it, already. First the coppers came around, asking about Gray here and then Mrs Reilly’s kid was sent home from the hospital all unexpected. Danny spent half the morning arguing with the estate agent, but he’s dead-set on evicting the Reillys, sick kid or no sick kid. So the Unemployed Workers’ Movement’s down there in full force and I was supposed to be making our excuses about the books to Gerry Murphy. Thank heavens one thing’s turned out all right, at least.”

She swept Dotty up and planted loud kisses on both cheeks. Dotty wriggled away at once but she looked pleased.

“Wait a minute, Mum. This isn’t exactly the first time we’ve tried to stop an eviction. How come you’re in such a state?”

“It’s your dad. The stuff about the kid really got to him. He’s going to do his block, I can tell.”

Dotty whistled softly and they exchanged troubled looks. I cleared my throat. “Excuse me, but from what I’ve seen, Danny gets angry all the time. So why -”

“Nah, you got it all wrong, Gray. Dad can tear strips off the government and be laughing and joking a second later. But when he gets really mad, which isn’t often -”

“Anything can happen,” Bridie finished. “Drat you, Dotty. I thought I’d feel better for talking about it and now you got me even more edgy. I’d slip out and see what’s happening for myself, except that I can’t really leave you to deal with Gerry Murphy. And speaking of the coppers, you better get rid of young Gray before Gerry arrives, or we’ll be in trouble all over again.”

“You can’t boot Gray out now, Mum. He’s on our side, honest. Why else would he’ve gone all the way to Dudley Flats with me - and paid for my train ticket too?”

I opened my mouth to protest and then shut it again. Everything I’d done over the past twenty-four hours had been perfectly logical, in its own way. Still, if you put them all together, they did add up to some pretty strange behaviour for a member of the League of National Security.

“Besides, we’re clearing out, anyhow,” Dotty went on. “We’ll head down to Reillys’ and keep an eye on Dad for you. Don’t worry, Gray’ll look after me. He’s getting real good at it, aren’t you, Gray?”

While Bridie was still frowning doubtfully, Dotty pushed me out of the hall. The rattletrap was still chained to the railings, just as I’d left it the night before and I ran over to unlock it.

“That’s a piece of luck. I thought I was going to have to dink you on Mum’s bike. Well, here we go again.”

It took most of my concentration to keep Dotty in sight as she veered and swooped through the streets of Richmond but in a small corner of my brain I noted that I had really stepped over the line this time. I had absolutely no excuses for following Dotty to the eviction. I was doing it purely and simply because I had to know what happened next.

“On that basis you could stay in Richmond forever,” I warned myself as I swung round a corner.

“Yes, but how could I leave without finding out about Mrs Reilly?” I asked as I swerved to avoid a friendly dog.

Then I stopped arguing with myself altogether when I caught sight of two men pelting towards us. One had stripes of blood down his face and the other’s coat flapped in two halves behind him.

“Clear out while you can,” they yelled. “It’s murder down there.”

“Looks like we got the right place, Gray,” said Dotty calmly.

She hopped off the bike and vanished into the next street while I was still gaping. I remembered that I was supposed to be looking after her, so I pulled myself out of my daze and hurried round the corner into chaos.

A woman whirled a mop handle onto a bailiff’s shoulders. A man was bent double as he strained to push away a baton. A policeman’s hat rocked to and fro in the gutter and beside it a small boy spat a tooth into his palm, as thoughtfully as if he was alone.

Strangest of all, above the heads of the crowd chairs and tables rocked this way and that, now surging towards the Reillys' house, now being dragged back towards a nearby cart.

Obviously a full-scale battle was being fought over the Reillys' furniture. I could see Dotty ahead of me, ploughing towards the heart of the battle. It wasn't a bad idea, considering that we were looking for Danny. I plunged after her and lost my footing almost at once. When I hauled myself up, I found I was clinging to the shoulder of a man who stood as still as stone, both hands clamped to his eye.

"Terribly sorry, sir," I gasped but within seconds, I was elbowing and shoving and kicking my way through the crowd without a word of apology, as I hunted about for Dotty. I'd just caught sight of her on the far side of a wall of bodies when a baton whistled past my nose. I ducked instinctively and scuttled on in a crouch.

Below elbow-level the fight was less punishing and the shouts of the mob sank to a dull roar. I was making good progress until, all at once, I choked on the fear of stumbling and being trampled underfoot. In a panic I struggled up to the air and came face to face with Franky.

"Thought I might run across you, Gray. Who do you reckon's winning this time?"

"No one, by the looks of things. Listen, Franky, what's that slogan everyone's yelling?"

"Remember Bankstown and Newtown' - the big eviction fights up in Sydney. Don't you know nothing?"

"Not really." A sharp elbow knocked me sideways and reminded me of what I was supposed to be doing. "You seen Danny around?"

"He's over by the steps."

There was another surge towards the cart, sweeping Franky away and opening a gap into which I flung myself. For a while I burrowed hopelessly at a solid row of backs and then, sudden as the stopper from a ginger beer bottle, I popped out into an empty space in front of the house.

"Call off your men, Danny Pearse."

A red-faced man was backing up the steps, while beside him two policemen handled their batons longingly. Opposite them, Danny strained against the leash of Herb's arm. Every muscle in his face was pulled tight and his eyes were as blank as ice.

"Call off your bailiffs first, you fascist pig," he screamed. "Pack of murderers, turning out a sick kiddy. May you burn in hell for this."

With a violent heave he broke away from Herb. At the same moment Dotty darted between one of the policeman's legs, tangling with Danny's feet as he leapt for the estate agent's throat. They went down in a heap, the batons tracking them all the way, until the policeman shouted, "Hold on, it's a girl."

"So what?" Dotty screeched. "You lot'll hit anything that moves."

Now she'd lost her temper, as well as Danny, and she'd riled the policeman into the bargain. His baton was already twitching up again and I could see it was time for someone with a bit of sense to step in.

Every detail of the scene registered sharply on my brain. A silver button hung by a thread from the policeman's sleeve and the end of his baton was chipped and furry. His cheeks puffed out like red apples as he swung back his arm. Dotty had lost her cap again and one long plait flicked me in the eye while I hefted her sideways.

And the baton landed.

Somewhere in the distance I could hear Danny's voice, edged with laughter. "It's a bit of a joke, really. Gray was the last person they'd've walloped, if only they'd known who he was. Still, he was obviously too busy rescuing my Dot to worry about saving his own skin."

"Unless he was putting on a big act to convince us he isn't a spy," Joe said doggedly.

"A bloody brave sort of act, if you ask me," said Herb. "I reckon he's in."

"If I'm in 'cause of getting the books, then you got to let Gray in too. He did just as much as me."

"Pipe down, Dotty. We'll take a vote and see how it goes." There was a pause and then Danny said, "Never mind, Joe. I'll keep a watch on him for your sake, till it's all over."

Till what was over?

It was a mistake to try thinking about anything. Another axe of pain crashed down on my skull, scattering brain cells in all directions. I leaned against the wall and watched bursts of yellow light jab into the blackness behind my eyes. After a while a small elbow nudged my ribs. Dotty handed me a cup of tea and sat back on her heels to watch me breathe the steam gratefully.

"Would you believe Joe wanted to send you packing. But I stuck up for you, Gray. You done all the hard yakka, so it's only fair that you should be in on the fun."

"What's your idea of fun?" I asked cautiously.

"Well, we got the Reillys' stuff off the bailiff's cart and onto the UWM cart, so at least they haven't lost everything. But they're out on the street just the same and everyone's pretty steamed up. We're going to do something that'll make all the estate agents in Richmond sit up and take notice - like smashing all their windows at the same time."

I steadied my head between my hands. "Dotty, I can't do that!"

"Hey, no problems. We won't be doing anything till about nine o'clock and you'll feel heaps better by then. Why don't you try and get a bit of shut-eye?"

I didn't need to be reassured that I could go on the raid - I needed to explain to Dotty that it was impossible. While she bundled one coat into a pillow and tucked another around my knees, I stammered out, "Dotty, I don't want ... I just can't ..." But the pain nipped off the ends of my sentences and I drifted away between its yellow flashes, into an uneasy doze.

When I woke, there were only a few quietly chatting groups left in the hall. Dotty was curled like a cat on a pile of coats nearby, a copy of *Chums* dangling from her fingers. I sat up and gingerly tested my head. There was only an ordinary ache now, though my mouth felt dry and parched.

I scouted around and discovered a trestle with a huge teapot and some plates of curling sandwiches. Before I settled down with my supper, I slid the comic from under Dotty's hand, grinning when I realised it was the one I'd bought in the city. There was a new Alan Gaunt serial on the first page and what's more, Francis Felkington Frapp seemed to be up to his old tricks. I should've been excited but I couldn't help wondering why Alan Gaunt had let Frapp escape, if he was just going to track him down again. It was almost as if he enjoyed having Frapp for an enemy, which seemed pretty stupid, really.

Without even reading to the end, I chucked the comic away. As I munched through the sandwiches, I decided that I might as well go on this last adventure. Why not, after all? I couldn't kid myself any longer that I was here to help the League, not since I'd promised Dotty I wouldn't repeat anything she said.

I suppose I'd really made up my mind when I told Freddy and Bimbo, "I'm a friend of Dotty's." It had just taken me a while to realize exactly what that meant.

I danced down the hopscotch square after Dotty, jarring a leftover twinge in my temples. As I balanced on one foot, I sneaked a glance to where Danny and Herb lounged on the corner. Nearby, the gold lettering of a window gleamed temptingly in the streetlight. My hand closed around the lump of blue metal in my pocket and I imagined the tinkle of falling glass echoing out all over Richmond.

"Gray, it's the sign! Herb's taken his cap off. Here we go."

With a childish giggle Dotty squealed, "You're he," and we scampered across the street as if we were playing chasey, past the shopfront and into a narrow laneway beside it. I heard a clang like a cymbal, a deep note with shivers running off it. Dotty nodded with satisfaction, looking down at the stone in her hand.

"This is for the Reillys."

"And mine's for the Millers."

The side window and the glass pane in the door splintered in unison. While we stood and admired the sharp-edged stars, Danny and Herb hurtled round the corner.

“We better split up now,” panted Herb. “Less likely to get caught that way.”

“Do whatever you want, mate. I’m going in.”

“Like hell you are. We voted against it, remember?”

“Too bad,” shrugged Danny. “This mob handles the row of houses opposite us and I need to know who’s trying to buy them up, so I’ll take the risk. The rest of you better stay out of it, though. Take care of Dotty for me, Herb.”

“All right, Danny Pearse. You’re on your own.”

Herb pounded away down the lane, dragging Dotty after him. Danny calmly flung his coat over the window’s jagged edge and hoisted himself up. I stood among the slivers of glass, watching him with interest.

Even when he’d disappeared, I found that I was still standing there. My heart began to race as I realised I was planning to follow him inside. It was the craziest idea I’d had in this crazy adventure and I told myself sternly to get out while I could but for some reason I was longing to know what Danny had found.

Finally I gave up and scrambled through the window. Inside the office Danny had switched on a lamp and was staring ruefully at rows of wooden cabinets.

“This place has me beat, nipper. Never seen so many files all at once. It’s dead confusing.”

“Perhaps I could take a look, sir. I know my way round my father’s office and this place seems to have much the same layout.” I scanned the labels on the drawers and said importantly, “We need a heading for your area, to begin with and now the street name and numbers. Yes, here we are. ‘Riverview Enterprises’ - that’s who bought the Millers’ house and they own five other houses in your block as well.”

“Good on you, Gray. Trouble is, it sounds like one of those dummy companies. We’ll never be able to track down the people who’re really behind it.”

“Don’t give up yet. There’s files on all the owners, too. Mind you, Riverview Enterprises has a pretty thin file. Oh, I can see why. It says here, ‘See Australian Allied General Holdings’.”

I pulled the top drawer towards my chest and thumbed through the files, smiling to myself at the way the initials spelt AAGH. Then the world fell in pieces around me.

“Grab the file and bring it along, Gray,” Danny was saying. “We better skedaddle, before someone notices that whopping great hole out the front. Come on, upsadaisy - anyone’d think you wanted to get caught. Here, give us the paperwork, just in case we run into the coppers.”

I shook my head wordlessly and shoved the folder down my sweater. With a shrug Danny bundled me through the window and jumped into the lane beside me.

“All right, shift your stumps.”

As I turned to follow him, my foot slithered along the drainway, jolting me heavily. All my memories jarred loose at once.

I had hoped for ... a receipt? A diary? But all I found on my father's desk was business papers and financial statements with figures dancing from column to column. (*Fred Miller's hands were twisting together but he said firmly, "Oh, we'll manage. We're better off than some."*) There was one exciting moment when I spotted a hastily scribbled note on the desk calendar, beginning with the word "Haughton". (*Mrs Reilly started to speak in a monotone. "If they'd give us time, Bridie, we could pay. But I reckon they'd rather see us die in the streets."*) My eyes nearly crossed from staring at my father's dashing scrawl but (*a grimy toddler lunged in front of my wheel and snatched an apple core from the gutter*) all I could make out in the end was (*Les lay, grounded and helpless, on the hard mud floor of a creaking shack*) "Riverview Enterprises = Australian Allied General Holdings".

Can you keep a secret?
I don't believe you can.
You mustn't laugh...
You mustn't cry...
But do the best you can.

I hate secrets. I hate secrets. I hate secrets.

When I started to take notice of my surroundings again, we were heading towards the ruined park near the Richmond Town Hall.

"Coppers won't dare to poke their noses in here," Danny panted, putting on an extra burst of speed.

I stumbled after him, still caught up in my own thoughts. Did I know, somewhere deep down, what I was going to find in that file? Is that why I was dead-set on getting into the estate agent's office? No, surely that was impossible. How could I have guessed that my father was acting as solicitor for the company that was buying up Danny's street? Unless it was worse than that and the note on his desk calendar meant that he actually owned shares in the company.

Not that I really cared. Either way, I felt just as bad.

A circle of gnarled faces looked up at us, grotesque in the shifting firelight and a voice growled, "Come to give us a lecture, Danny Pearse?"

"Not tonight, mate. Just want a word in peace with the nipper here."

"You come to the right place, cobber. We like it nice and quiet."

I shied away from their mumbled laughter and sat down beside Danny. As the fire warmed my back, I started to shiver uncontrollably.

"What's the matter, Gray? You look like you lost a shilling and found sixpence."

Can you keep a secret?

"There's something I have to tell you, sir. Dotty promised that she wouldn't let on but she shouldn't have to keep my secrets for me. I *was* spying for a secret army, just as she guessed, and I probably ought to tell you all their plans, but somehow I can't quite bring myself to do that. Even though I won't be a part of the League any more."

"I wouldn't worry about our Dotty, y'know. I reckon she got a kick out of having a spy of her own, like a special pet or something. Too smart for her own good, that kid is at times. I don't know what we're going to do with her." Without changing his dreamy tone, Danny added, "So how about that file, then?"

I don't believe you can.

"I thought I wanted to read it for myself, but it doesn't matter." I handed over the folder, warm and damp with my sweat. "I don't know exactly what it says in there but I can tell you that one of the main chaps in the company is a Mr Albert Haughton who lives -"

"Hold on a minute. How do you know all this?"

You mustn't laugh ...

"Yeah, of course," Danny said, without pausing. "I clean forgot you was a nob. Friend of the family, I dare say. All right, give us that address and we'll call it quits."

He scribbled on the folder with a stubby pencil and stretched luxuriously, preparing to spring into action at any minute. I turned away and stared into the night. The stars blinked down unconcernedly and somewhere in the distance a few flashes of light suggested that there might still be a city around us.

You mustn't cry ...

"What will I do now?" I asked blankly.

"You'll get on home to your poor old mum and dad, that's what."

He bounced to his feet and held out a friendly hand. I clung to its warm grip for a moment, saying bitterly, "I wish you were my father."

"Nah, you don't mean that, matey. Just think, you'd be stuck with Dotty for a sister - though maybe you wouldn't feel the same as Kev about that. Listen, if it helps to know, I reckon people like you have got a hard row to hoe in some ways. Like the Bible says, it's easier for a camel to get through a needle's eye than for a rich man to get through the gates of heaven."

I must've looked at him in surprise, because he flashed his triangular grin at me.

"Yeah, I know Marx says religion's the drug of the masses and I agree with him, too. I was brought up by the priests, though, and some of it's bound to stick. I don't reckon that line's such a bad one, either." He smiled to himself and weighed the folder in his hand. "Well, I don't suppose we'll be running across each other again, Gray. Look after yourself and it was nice knowing you."

"Same here, Danny."

As I went into the darkness, Danny was already saying persuasively, "Now you'll mind this file for me overnight, won't you, Dusty? I don't want the coppers catching me red-handed, so as to speak."

The ragged men cackled together at the joke but the sound was swallowed up by the furious roar of my own thoughts. It'd taken me a while but I was catching on at last. I'd been every kind of fool. The Unemployed Workers' Movement was just as strong in Carlton and Brunswick and both of those suburbs were pretty close to Kew but my father and Mr Haughton had specifically sent me to Richmond. Why? Because their rotten property was here, that's why. No one had ever cared about the League at all. They'd just been protecting their rotten investments against the eviction fights. Using me.

But hang on, surely my father believed in the League. Mr Haughton might only care about money but my father was different. He would never - and then Percy Laidler's voice cut in to finish the sentence - "form secret armies to shoot the unemployed".

Once I started to run, I couldn't stop. Not when my ankle twisted on a tussock, not when the air began to rasp at my throat like sandpaper, not until I crashed against a railing and hung there, gasping my heart out.

Dotty had to cough twice to get my attention.

"I brought your bike along. It was pretty rugged, steering two of them at once, but I managed. Glad I guessed where Dad'd head for, though."

Moonlight polished the rows of little houses. The curtains were carefully looped across the windows, the doorsteps were worn down by scrubbing and plants struggled bravely from the stony soil. As I looked around, my heart swelled painfully in my chest.

"When I first came here, I thought the place and the people were so ugly. Even last night, while I was listening to Mrs Reilly, I could still believe I felt as hungry and miserable as she did. I've been pretty slow about everything, Dotty, in one way or another."

"You're a real worryguts, aren't you? Cheer up, it isn't easy to -"

"Not easy? My whole life's been so easy, you wouldn't believe it."

“Then stop beating yourself over the head,” she snapped. “I thought I’d say something nice, just for a change, but I’ll save my breath.”

“Well, what would you do if you were me?” I demanded, hardly listening to her. “If you knew what went on in places like this and the people around you hadn’t a clue?”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. I wouldn’t fancy trying to sell Joe on the idea that you was an all right bloke at times. It even makes me uncomfortable, if I think about it too hard. I reckon life was simpler when I thought all you capitalists was natural ratbags.”

Why was it so easy to talk to Dotty? I could rant and rave and she’d just turn round and give me a straight answer in return. Charley and I had never talked about fathers or money or what we really believed - although, when I thought about it, that wasn’t for want of trying on Charley’s part. I just hadn’t understood the way he felt about school and Mr Haughton and all sorts of things. Not until now.

“Anyhow,” Dotty went on, “I checked with Dad and Marx reckons some of the bourgeoisie’ll see the light and join up with the workers. So there’s hope for you yet.”

“Thanks a lot. I’m not actually planning to turn Bolshie, you know. Sir Daniel told me to suspect all extreme views.”

“Done a great job so far, haven’t you?”

“It’d be nice ...” My voice wobbled and I had to start again. “It’d be nice if people talked about something other than politics, for a change.”

“Like what, for instance?”

Oh, why not? I might as well tell her everything. “Like how a boy might feel if his father did something he simply couldn’t agree with.”

“He’d still be your dad, wouldn’t he, even if he wasn’t blooming perfect?”

When I wanted sympathy, I got Marx. When a stiff dose of Marx might’ve been bracing, she gave me sympathy. I stared ahead, willing her to drop the whole subject, but she was still watching me with interest.

“The thing you found out about your dad - does it change everything, right back to when you was a baby?”

In a way it did, if it meant I had to say my father wasn’t perfect. I sighed softly. “Honestly, Dotty, I don’t know.”

We walked along in silence for a while, thinking our separate thoughts. Then Dotty stopped on a corner and stuck out her hand.

“Well, this is it, Gray. I’d best be turning back or they’ll get in a stew. Good luck with everything and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

We shook hands solemnly in the moonlight and she scrambled onto her bike. “It was a bonzer adventure,” she called over her shoulder as she pedalled away. I watched her flick in and out of the streetlights, until finally she merged with the distance. Then I set off on the long ride back to Kew.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

I crawl out from under the bush, flexing my arms and legs. This time it only takes me a few minutes to mend the tyre and after that I'm ready to start the last lap of my journey. There'll be the dickens of a row when I get home but with any luck my parents will be so pleased to see me that they'll let me off lightly.

At the thought of their welcome, I push on faster. All at once I feel like a little child, waking in the middle of the night and calling out, "Mummy, kiss it better. Daddy, make the bogeyman go away." Then I remember that this time my father is the bogeyman.

A cold wind fingers the back of my neck and shadows reach from the gardens. Hastily I try to distract myself by picturing my return visit to the Pearses' house, my arms full of useful presents. What will I be wearing, though? I can hardly put on my rags for the occasion but then again, I can't see myself strolling through the Richmond streets in my school blazer. And besides, I've already given the Pearses the only present they're likely to accept from me - my secrets.

Biting down on my lip, I finally admit that there's no way back to Richmond for me now. Still, Charley and I might drop into Percy Laidler's magic shop one day. I could work with Sir Daniel too, helping people in need and when I become famous, I'll tell the reporters that I owe it all to my early experiences in Richmond. Dotty might even read about it in the papers and write to me ...

I coast along, smiling to myself as I test out an even better daydream. I confront my father, man to man, with the whole story of Australian Allied General Holdings. He looks at me, shocked and says, "Graham, I never realised. I won't have anything more to do with a scheme that brings suffering to the unfortunate."

Then my smile shrinks into nothingness. I didn't understand until I saw things for myself, so why should my father be any different? And, even if I could persuade him to take another look at the Millers and the Reillys, what about Danny Pearse? I can't see my father accepting even the mildest of Danny's ideas, not in a million years. Maybe I should keep that part of my adventure to myself - except that then I'd be creating a whole new set of secrets.

No, I've got to tell him everything, even though I haven't the faintest idea how he'll react. Forget about spying and secret armies, rescuing Dotty and fighting street corner lairs. Talking to my father may be the bravest thing I ever do in my life. I search desperately for a memory of his face but I can only find a soldier in a silver frame or the dark shadow of the bogeyman.

Oh, Alan Gaunt, help me. Help me, Les. I miss you. I miss all my heroes.

You mustn't laugh ...

You mustn't cry ...

I just wanted an adventure. That's why I joined the League and that's why I went to Dudley Flats. Why can't things be simple again? Why can't there be goodies and baddies?

But I'm too tired to answer any of these questions. I let the rattletrap take over and the big white houses flip past like the falling cards in a magician's trick as I hurtle down the hill towards home. Braking at the junction, I throw back my head and call to the empty streets, "What will I do now?"

Do the best you can.

Author's Note

All the people in this book are my own invention, except for Percy Laidler, and I interpreted the facts about him in my own way, too. However the League of National

Security and the Unemployed Workers' Movement really existed and many of the events in *Can You Keep a Secret?* are drawn from newspapers or histories of the

time. For example, ballot cards were in fact stolen from the office of the Richmond Council and extra men did turn up on the relief works but Les is my own explanation for what happened. I have also taken one major liberty with the timing: the eviction fight actually took place two days before the smashing of the estate agents' windows.

If you want to know more about the background to the novel, Michael Cathcart's *Defending the National Tuckshop: the Secret Army Intrigue of 1931* (McPhee Gribble / Penguin, 1988) is an excellent account of the League of National Security; Janet McCalman's *Struggletown* (Melbourne University Press, 1984) is a comprehensive history of Richmond; and there is no better place to start learning about the 1930s Depression than Wendy Lowenstein's book of interviews, *Weevils in the Flour* (Hyland House, 1978). One of the people she interviewed tells us about the outcome of the action against the estate agents:

The evictions were instigated by the estate agents on behalf of the owners. They never let you know who owned the houses and we didn't know how to find out for ourselves, so we decided to take on the Richmond estate agents. On the Friday we met at a certain place and divided up into groups of two people to each estate agent. It was late shopping night and at a quarter to nine there were two of us outside each of nine estate agents in Richmond. One chap in each group had a watch and they were all synchronized. At a quarter to nine, "Bang!" We wrecked every estate agent's window in Richmond with lumps of blue metal. There was hell to pay the next day. The papers were full of it. Even Mr Sidney Myer came out with a statement that it wasn't right that people could be evicted because they were out of work and the Government should do something. Well, the Government announced the rent subsidy of eight shillings a week. If you had an

eviction order you could apply for this money. This took the sting out of the eviction fights.

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