

Going Overboard

JENNY PAUSACKER

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For Ika,
who turned it all around,
and thanks to everyone who gave
assistance, encouragement and feedback along the way.

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned
to repeat it.

GEORGE SANTAYANA

PART I

SPINNING THE YARN

One

It all started when Daniel Matheson woke up and found his train carriage balanced on the edge of an escarpment. Gusts of wind collided outside the window, making the train shudder. Birds whirled towards him like leaves caught in the wind. And way down below, at the bottom of the cliff, Daniel saw a big rose-pink map of Australia spread out on a wide brown plain.

The map was a bit lopsided, like one of those charts drawn by the early explorers, but you could tell it was Australia, all the same. It looked so weird that at first Daniel assumed he was still asleep and dreaming. He blinked, to adjust his sense of perspective, and when he looked again, the map of Australia had turned into a blob of streets and red-tiled rooftops, shimmering in the late afternoon sunshine – a bird's eye view of a medium-sized country town.

To his right, the escarpment curved round the plain like a fortress wall, tucking the town into a safe little nest or cutting it off from the rest of the world, depending on the way you wanted to look at it. To the left, Daniel could see some smaller, rounder hills, furry with gum trees, and after that a distant line of light: sun on sea. He recognised the view from the postcard his aunt Caro had sent him, which suggested that he'd be arriving at Lomond pretty soon.

Unless this cliffhanger business meant the train was about to go off the rails and crash straight down to the rocks below.

Daniel looked round. The carriage was empty - Lomond was only one stop away from the end of the line – so he dropped his usual careful non-expression and grinned like a fox, waiting for the moment when they would go over the edge. But at the last possible second, after the train had swung out so far that he was sure its wheels must be travelling across empty air, it gave a little wriggle and began to tack down the side of a sandstone gorge, slow and steady as a skier on the beginner slopes.

He sighed. Too bad. He had kind of liked the idea of spending a minute in freefall, then crashlanding on the rocks and wiping out everything that had gone wrong with his life so far. On the other hand, he'd come here to get away from all that shit, so there was no need for anything as drastic as a kamikaze train crash, right?

Right.

He bent forward and groped under the seat in front of him, searching for the book that had been on his knee before he dozed off - one of his longterm favourites, *The American Civil War* by Winston Churchill. By the time he'd found it and straightened up, the plain and the town and the hills and the sea had gone. All he could see was a square of shadow and, at the centre of the square, a woman in white.

So Daniel was the first person to meet Lucy Dove. She was wearing a white t-shirt, a fringed white vest, big white pants and a wide-brimmed white hat like the ones that cowboys in the Wild West used to wear. Her right hand hoisted a white canvas suitcase and her left hand was shading her eyes, as she peered out of the shadow into the sunlight. Behind her, black letters danced on a long white board. Daniel stared at the letters until they settled down and read LOMOND.

He jumped up, grabbed his bag, wrenched at the door handle, slammed his elbow into the metal wall, dropped his book, threw the bag out of the door and tumbled after it, landing an accidental kick on the book just before it fell into the gap between the train and the platform. It flew into the air and the woman reached out and caught it.

'*The American Civil War*, huh?' she said, handing it back. 'You don't run across many Aussie kids with an interest in American history.'

Her voice was light and quick, with a slight drawl on the 'r' sounds, like the echo of an American accent, and she was either younger or older than Daniel had thought at first. Younger, when he looked at her snub nose and round blue eyes and the small hand holding his book, no rings or nail polish. Older, when she frowned and two comma-shaped lines hooked onto her pale eyebrows

'I'm not interested in history, exactly,' he told her. 'I just like reading about battles. The Civil War's one of my faves.'

'Pretty different from this sleepy little country,' said the woman in white. 'Looks like you'll be here a while, judging by the size of that bag. Me too, Daniel. Maybe we'll meet up again some time. My name's Lucy, okay.'

As he bent to pick up his bag, Daniel found himself wondering how Lucy had known *his* name. A mind reader? Actually, he could believe it. There was something special about her, something that made him want to use the word "charisma" in a sentence for the first time in his life or ... But, halfway through that thought, he focussed on the label dangling from the sausage-bag's handle - 'Daniel Matheson, c/o Caroline Cox, Karma Drive, Happy Valley' - and laughed out loud.

Lucy wasn't a mind reader, after all. She was just good at reading luggage labels.

Someone called his name and he turned to see his aunt Caro coming towards him, with his cousin Serenity trailing a few metres behind. Daniel waved back and made a grab for the nearest post of the signboard, giddy with relief. He had spent the first half of the train trip from Sydney trying to work out what he would do if Caro hadn't got the message he had left on her answerphone, explaining why he'd run away. But she *had* got the message, so everything was fine.

For the next few minutes he was kept busy, being hugged by Caro and trying to grin at Serenity over Caro's shoulder. When he turned back to introduce them to Lucy, the platform was empty. Daniel looked around, wondering where she had gone. The sky overhead was full of pink and orange clouds, woolly as psychedelic sheep. As he smiled up at them, Daniel noticed a small figure on the high wooden bridge that led from one platform to the next - Lucy looking out across the town, her shirt blowing out behind her like a dove's fan of tail feathers. For a moment Daniel almost expected to see her spread white wings and go circling down the thermals but instead she turned and walked away.

'Well?' said his cousin. 'Are we going to stand here all night or can we go home now?'

His aunt sucked her breath in and blew it out in a sigh. 'Oh, Ren! Could you try and act as if you were a *bit* pleased to see Daniel, before you start whinging?'

Serenity shrugged and said, 'Hi, Dan' and went slouching off to the car. Daniel followed behind her, feeling ungrateful. Aunt Caro had probably meant well but Serenity wasn't going to like him any better because her mum had nagged her into it. He got into the back seat, out of their way, angling himself towards the window. There wasn't much to watch while Caro was reversing across the car park but a few seconds later he found himself looking down the full length of Lomond's main street.

A broad strip of grass ran along the middle of the road with the town's war memorial at its centre – a tier of stone steps surrounding a sparkly granite pillar with a bronze soldier waiting patiently on top, leaning on his bronze rifle. Elegantly curved verandahs sheltered the rows of shops, whose wrought iron pillars divided the footpath into sections and turned each section into a miniature stage. There was a sandstone town hall with pillars and porticos and a clock that had stopped at three in the afternoon or morning; a sandstone bank built on the same lines but scaled down slightly; an art deco cinema showing the latest Hollywood movie and an old pub on the corner, called the Royal George.

Daniel had never been to Lomond before but it all seemed oddly familiar. He realised he was chanting something under his breath – "*da-dee towns with da-da-dee dum*" – so he concentrated harder and retrieved the rest of the words from the back of his brain.

*Country towns with your willows and squares,
And farmers bouncing on barrel mares
To public houses of yellow wood
With '1860' over the doors,
And that mysterious race of Hogans
Which always keeps the General Stores ...*

It was some ancient poem that had been used for an ad on telly last year – a beer ad, Daniel thought, although he remembered the poem and the background visuals of a town like Lomond better than he remembered the actual product.

'Country towns,' he breathed and Serenity shifted so abruptly that her seat slammed into his knees.

'Omigod,' she said, without turning. 'Why does everyone who comes here start reciting that stupid poem? It's so not what Lomond's really like.'

Daniel smiled apologetically at the back of her head and looked out the window again. This time he noticed some extra details that changed the whole picture - the cell-block outline of a supermarket at the top end of the street, the Coke ads and the health food shop and the fast food shop between the wrought iron pillars, the big bright video store looming up ahead.

'Fair enough,' he said. 'I guess Lomond might make it into the twentieth century, just in time for the millennium.'

'Not if you mean *this* January, Daniel,' Caro said over her shoulder. 'I know most people talk as if the new millennium starts in 2000 but the *real* millennium won't start till next year. The point is, our calendar didn't begin with the year nought, so two thousand years after we started counting has to be 2001, because –'

Daniel had already heard that lecture from at least half the teachers at his old school, so he was pleased when Serenity cut in. 'Wrong again, Dan,' she said, which wasn't quite as pleasant. 'Look around. This town is, like, totally retro – and *not* in a good way.'

He looked round obediently. They were driving past a café where a bunch of young guys lounged against the wall like extras from a fifties movie starring James Dean or Marlon Brando. A chunky, freckle-faced girl came hurrying along the footpath, spotted the guys and crossed to the opposite side of the street. The guys lifted their heads and whistled, shouted something after her and went on lounging. Daniel watched the girl go past the rundown cinema and into the big video store. He read a poster taped to a passing lamp post, advertising a Country Women's Association bingo evening.

'Not much night life here,' he guessed.

'None,' Serenity said. 'Well, not for girls, anyway.'

Since his cousin hadn't actually walked all over him this time, Daniel decided to take a risk and say something else. The station wagon was approaching a junction where the road split into two – to the left, a bumpy track,

blending into the brown plain, and to the right, a highway marked with a sign post.

'Bayview,' he read out. 'Is that where your place is?'

'No such luck,' said Serenity. 'Bayview's the next big town up the coast. It's got a beach and shops and a couple of okay clubs, that sort of thing. But my mum's such a loser that she had to buy a house in Happy Valley. She thinks it's, like, this amazing hippy colony that's been going since the seventies, full of writers and painters and other bullshit artists, but if you ask me, it's just an outer suburb of Lomond.'

Daniel couldn't think of an answer that didn't involve taking sides with Serenity or Caro, so he kept his mouth shut. Caro didn't say anything either but she gave the steering wheel a vicious spin that propelled them onto the highway. Daniel went sliding across the seat, catching a glimpse of Serenity when he slid to the right and a glimpse of Caro when he slid to the left. It was only six months since he had seen them, back at his parents' house in Sydney, but they'd both changed a lot since then.

Serenity was five centimetres taller than before, which made her ten centimetres taller than him and totally out of reach. Daniel could still remember the babysitter-cousin who used to cuddle him and read him the Narnia books and make magic lands in his bedroom cupboard, out of cushions and an old green curtain and travel posters of fairytale French castles ... but he had a feeling it wouldn't be smart to remind Serenity about that.

Serenity was so cool these days. Her short redbrown hair was tufty as a ginger kitten's fur and her milk chocolate eyes were hidden behind narrow sunglasses shaped like an infinity symbol. She was wearing a tight powder-blue satin top with thin shoulder straps and another set of straps from whatever she was wearing underneath, army shorts and boots and a hat like a lampshade that would've looked dead stupid on anyone else.

But Serenity could never look stupid. Ever.

And Caro had changed as much or even more. In the city she had always dressed in public service suits. As suits went, they had been more downmarket than Daniel's mother's hot pink or electric blue short-skirt-and-cleavage numbers but they'd been suits just the same. Now Caro was wearing a baggy maroon tracksuit and she seemed to have put on twelve kilos in six months, plus her hair had gone grey, unless she'd just stopped dyeing it. 'Letting herself go,' his mother's voice criticised at the back of his brain but Daniel liked his aunt's new image. She looked as wild as a witch in a picture book and as messy and comfortable as a toddler.

Having sorted out his relatives, Daniel turned his attention to the scenery. They had covered thirty kays of flat brown sheep-bitten plain while he'd been studying Caro and Serenity and now the station wagon was nosing into the round furry hills that he had seen out of the train window. The hills were untidier than they had looked from a bird's-eye view - ridges snaking off at all angles, sheer rock faces at random intervals, bark peeling from the smooth grey trunks of the

gum trees and a scratchy carpet of dead gum leaves – but Daniel was prepared to bet he would find some good climbs there. He was glad he had remembered to pack his hiking boots.

‘This is the Danville Range, named after our local explorer,’ Caro said, catching his eye in the rear vision mirror. ‘And here’s Happy Valley.’

The station wagon climbed up a ridge like a giant’s shoulder and went skidding down into the giant’s lap. The hills dropped away, letting in a sudden blaze of sea and sky and the backwash from the sunset. Daniel stared till his eyes watered, trying to separate the silvery blue of the sky from the slippery silver shadows on the waves, the orange clouds from their reflections on the darkening water. In the end he gave up. It didn’t matter, anyway. This was *his* view now. He could come here every night and study sunsets, if he wanted.

Because he lived here now. He’d made it. He had finally got away.

‘Hey!’ Serenity yelled, making him jump. ‘Stop the car, Mum!’

Caro braked automatically and, just as automatically, started to complain that Serenity hadn’t given her enough warning, but Serenity was already hanging out of the window, calling, ‘Brittany! Hey, Britt, is Jude around?’

Daniel turned away from the sea and found himself looking into a junk yard. Towers of old tyres held the paling fence in place and between them, he could see sheets of corrugated iron and coils of barbed wire, stacked into uneven heaps. Railway sleepers were jumbled together like pick-up-sticks, an ancient caravan rested on rusty axles and a hungry-looking German shepherd prowled through knee-high grass. A kid with a face like a dirty cherub was perched on one of the tyre towers, picking at her knee.

‘Nah, Ren,’ she said, flicking the scab into the grass. ‘Jude and Mum, they’re both on roster at the call centre.’

‘Shit, I forgot,’ Serenity said. ‘Tell Jude to come up to our place when she gets back, okay?’

As she dropped back into her seat, Caro said, ‘Watch your language.’

Serenity scowled. ‘Jesus, you’re such a hypocrite,’ she said. ‘I learnt how to swear off you and Dad.’

‘Maybe. But you don’t have to teach a ten-year-old to swear.’

‘Britt doesn’t need teaching. She knows way worse words than me. Be real, Mum. If you wanted to turn Brittany Martin into a sweet little innocent child, you’d have to hire a deprogrammer to kidnap her or something.’

Caro clamped her mouth shut and jerked on the gear stick. Serenity stretched and yawned and turned round to grin at Daniel. He grinned back so broadly that his tongue nearly lolled out like the Martins’ dog.

Oh, excellent. Serenity had actually made eye contact, at last.

The second person to see Lucy was Katie Brewster, although she wouldn't have come across Lucy until much later, if her father hadn't made her take last night's video back to the video rental store.

She had dropped into Dick Brewster's office, to change from one uniform (school) to another (the lavender coverall that she wore for her after-school job at the Lomond District Aged Care Facility). That was supposed to save time but, just as she was leaving, her dad had waved the video at her, reminding her that it had to be returned before six o'clock. Katie couldn't see why that was her job, when she was due at the old folks' home in ten minutes and her dad was just messing around, trying to decide which of the stories for this weekend's edition of the *Lomond Star* was front page material – 'or,' as he had said two minutes ago, 'the least boring.'

On the other hand, Katie didn't have time to argue, so she turned back, grabbed the video and ran. She was crossing the side street that led to the station when she almost collided with a woman walking even faster than her. A woman dressed completely in white, from her enormous hat to her kitten-heel shoes. Katie couldn't imagine arriving at the end of a long train trip looking so uncreased, unstained and generally glamorous. She backed off and let the woman go first, partly out of politeness but partly to get a better look at her.

As they passed the barber's shop, its heavy old-fashioned door swung open. For half a second the mirror window reflected the woman's face – feathery blonde hair, inquisitive blue eyes, determined chin and a general air of confidence. Then the woman moved on and Katie's reflection took her place – freckles, small squashed nose like a Pekingese, eyes as flat and brown as the plains round Lomond, straight brown hair and a general air of being solid and efficient and dependable.

Katie sighed. Yep, that was the Katie Brewster that Lomond saw, for sure – the girl who organised everything for everyone, from collecting stuff for the Guides fundraising sale to being next year's designated head prefect and the *Star's* unpaid reporter. It had been nice, just for half a second, to look into a mirror and see somebody more adventurous, somebody who looked as if she knew exactly where she was heading. There weren't many people in Lomond who looked like that and it was something Katie thought she'd like to learn, so she went on following the woman, trying to see Lomond through her eyes.

She saw the last-minute rush at the supermarket, with the old women counting their money and the young women counting their kids. The old bank with a new sign above its door saying TeleAustral Call Centre. Another bank with a notice in the window telling customers that services had been suspended but the bank would be installing an automatic teller in the pharmacy within three months. Two empty shops and an empty police station. The bus shelter, covered with graffiti that no one bothered to complain about any more, because the nearest cops were in Bayview and besides, there were hardly any buses these days. Old men counting their money outside the Royal George and young men -

including Matt Fahey, who had been in her home class last year - sitting on the steps of the war memorial, counting the days till their next dole cheque.

But maybe (thought Katie) you had to know Lomond before you could see all of that. Maybe the woman in white just saw the country town from that jeans ad – the one with the poem her dad always used to quote before the ad made it too famous. Katie turned away from the war memorial and focused on the woman in white again, just in time to see her disappear into The Caff – or Casa Mia Café, if you went by the words lettered in gold across the window. She was wondering whether she had time to follow the woman inside, when she noticed the three guys lounging beside the door.

Damn. It looked as if she would have to stop playing “Follow the leader”. That was Scott Sterne with his idiot mates, Lockie Conway and Tommo Thompson, and Katie didn’t feel like talking to Scott right now, especially not with Lockie and Tommo around. She ducked behind two women with military-style pushers who were stepping off the curb but, before she had got halfway across the road, she heard a two-part harmony of wolf-whistles from Lockie and Tommo, definitely aimed in her direction.

Scott hadn’t joined in but he hadn’t stopped them either. Katie knew him well enough to know that this was his way of telling her that he had seen her – like, “If you make me look bad by avoiding me in public, I’ll get my revenge by letting Lockie and Tommo hassle you.” She swung back and pretended to notice him for the first time, flourished the video and pointed in the direction of the old folks’ home. Scott nodded and they blew kisses at each other, before she turned away with exaggerated haste and went into the video store.

On her way out, she passed the posters for the December new releases - Julia Roberts in *Stepmom* and Bruce Willis in *Hudson Hawke*. It felt like an advance preview of the argument she and Scott would be having next month about whether to watch the chick flick or the action movie. Katie sighed and hurried on and came face to face with her ghostly reflection in the glass door, which reminded her of the woman in white. If the woman had been going out with a guy for three years but they still couldn’t choose a movie together, would she keep on seeing the guy?

Katie didn’t think so.

As she stared at her reflection, something shifted inside her brain, like a minor earthquake or the stone slab sliding off a vampire’s tomb. When she was realistic about it (which she tried not to be), Katie had to admit that she didn’t really fancy Scott, even if he was the hottest thing in Lomond, and what’s more, she was pretty sure he didn’t fancy her either. The two of them stayed together out of habit and they had only got together in the first place because -

A guy cleared his throat behind her and Katie realised she was blocking the doorway. She stepped into the street and saw Patrick Fahey chalking another blonde joke on the blackboard outside the Royal George. Pat Fahey had always collected jokes and sayings and odd pieces of information, to share with his customers, but a few months ago he had gone public and started sharing them

with everyone who used the main street. That got him into trouble sometimes - like now, for instance, Katie thought with a grin, as she watched Finn Casey, the local taxi driver, stop in the middle of the road and lean over to roll down the passenger window.

'Oh, mate,' he said, jerking his thumb at the blackboard. 'That's pretty sexist, isn't it?'

'Huh?' said Pat. 'Too sexy, you reckon, Finn? Would've said it was suitable for general exhibition myself.'

'Not sexy, Pat. Sexist,' Finn said patiently. 'Demeaning and degrading to women, especially blonde ones.'

Pat relaxed. 'Ah, the women in Lomond can take a joke. It's just a bit of fun - my way of expressing myself, if you know what I mean.'

'Yeah, but you don't need to do that by offending other people, do you, mate?'

Car horns blared behind the taxi, ending the argument. Katie watched Finn drive off, smiling proudly, as if he had just struck a blow for feminism, while at the same time Pat Fahey began to highlight his blonde joke in yellow chalk, frowning with concentration, as if he was defending his right to have a bit of fun. Katie walked on, equally annoyed with both of them. She tried to remember what she had been thinking about, before they'd distracted her, but by the time she arrived at the nursing home, she was busy wondering whether she would look as awesome as the woman in white if she dyed her hair blonde - a complete waste of time, when the answer was obviously "no".

The Lomond District Aged Care Facility was a sandstone mansion that towered over the houses around it. A stone scroll over the front door, chiselled with the words "Sterne House", suggested that there must have been a time when the mansion was full of the wives and daughters of the squattocracy, arranging flowers or writing letters to their relatives in England or playing the piano in the big front room. But these days the inside of the house was all white walls and waxed linoleum, noticeboards layered with timetables and government pamphlets, a smell of lavender airspray covering the smells of old food and older people. Katie went straight to the staff room, where she found the matron staring bemusedly at nine enormous bunches of roses, swathed in glossy cellophane.

'Take a look at this, Katie,' Matron said. 'I've lived in Lomond for five years but I still can't get used to the way word gets around. Sibyl Dove was admitted at 4.30 this afternoon and the flowers started to arrive at five on the dot.'

Katie felt her hand twitch, as if it was reaching for an invisible notebook. This was something her father would want to know about. Sibyl Dove had been unofficially in charge of Lomond for the last forty years.

'Miss Dove's *here*?' she said, as her first step towards collecting information. 'I would've thought she'd go to that fancy nursing home in Bayview.'

'Maybe she would, if she'd been given a choice,' said Matron. 'But she wasn't. One of the neighbours heard a noise and broke in to find her lying on the floor in the front hall of Dove House. Dr Sterne drove over there straight away

and diagnosed a stroke – not surprising at her age. He decided that a good rest would do more for her than jolting round the Bayview road in an ambulance.’

‘Makes sense,’ Katie agreed. ‘Want me to take those flowers to her room?’

When Matron nodded, she took five bunches from the table and two vases from the cupboard, which was the most she could carry at one time. She set off along the corridor, looked round to make sure nobody was watching and detoured into the cupboard under the stairs, where a red phone had been installed for the visitors.

‘Heard about Sibyl Dove?’ she said, the minute her father answered.

‘Is the Pope Catholic?’ said Dick Brewster. ‘We’ve got our front page story now. Find out as much as you can, Girl Wonder, and tell me at home tonight. I don’t need to write the final copy till Friday afternoon, which gives us one more day to see whether Sibyl’s going to kick the bucket.’ His voice changed from brisk to thoughtful as he added, ‘I hope the old girl pulls through. This town won’t be the same without her.’

‘Yeah,’ Katie said. ‘I know.’

She put down the phone, picked up the flowers and hurried off, feeling like a successful spy. That was one of the cool things about being an unofficial reporter for the *Star*, along with knowing heaps of Lomond’s secrets and being the daughter of the third most powerful person in town, after Rob Sterne and Sibyl Dove. Actually, her dad would be the second most powerful person in town, if Miss Dove carked it, although it was hard to imagine Lomond without Miss Dove. As Katie continued on down the corridor, she found herself watching a slideshow of memories that went back as far as she could remember – Miss Dove’s navy blue straw hat in the front row at church; Miss Dove in her old-fashioned navy blue suit and lace trimmed blouse handing out the prizes at school speech nights; Miss Dove in the same suit and a pair of wellies judging the sheep at the Lomond and District Agricultural Show.

Sibyl Dove’s hair had been white for as long as Katie had known her, pulled back into a bun with two George Washington puffs of hair over her ears, and the top of her head was barely level with Dick Brewster’s shoulder. But she was so straight-backed and full of energy that Katie had never thought of her as small or old. So it came a shock when she opened the door, looked around for Miss Dove and saw nothing more than a tiny bump in the stretched white sheets of a hospital bed. Katie tiptoed across the room and deposited the roses on a chest of drawers opposite the bed. She was tiptoeing over to the bathroom to get some water when the door opened again.

‘Miss Dove, your niece is here to see you,’ bellowed one of the nurses.

‘Grandniece,’ croaked the bump in the bed.

The bellow and the croak startled Katie so much that she almost lost her grip on the vases. Then she turned towards the door and got another shock. The woman standing there – Miss Dove’s grandniece – was the woman in white. She gave Katie a friendly smile, went straight to the bedside and sat down on the edge of the bed, being careful not to shake the tiny bundle. A hand with swollen

knuckles and veins as thick as worms crept out from the sheet and came crawling towards her.

'They shout at me because they think I'm deaf, but I'm not,' said Sibyl Bird. 'They think I may be dying too and they're right there. Come closer, Lucy girl. Let me get a proper look at you.'

Katie hurried into the bathroom and filled the vases as quickly as possible. When she came back, Sibyl and Lucy Dove were gazing at each other like twins separated at birth who had unexpectedly come face to face in a crowded street or a supermarket aisle.

'Oh yes, you're the one, all right,' Sibyl said. 'Help me up, will you?'

Lucy glanced across at Katie, asking her for assistance. Between the two of them they hoisted the old woman onto a stack of pillows. Katie looked down at a small skull-face with eyes like milky marbles wedged into the skull's sockets, wrinkled skin sagging away from the bone, white wisps of hair and eyebrows that had shrivelled into a pair of white commas. Sibyl Dove's mouth was the only part of her that had survived intact, as sharply defined as a kewpie doll's smile.

'You'll do,' she said, smiling. 'I knew it, even though I haven't seen you since you were small. How old would you have been when you left Lomond?'

'I'd have been ten, I guess,' Lucy said.

Sibyl sighed. 'Never thought I'd outlive your parents. Wasn't even sure where the three of you had gone. Almost had to leave everything to Norman Kelly or a lost dogs' home. Couldn't have gone for the dogs, though, not really. Blood's blood, no matter what.'

Slow tears trickled down into the creases of her face, although she didn't appear to notice them. Katie backed away, realising that she was eavesdropping on something very private. She couldn't actually bring herself to leave – that was too much to ask of a newspaper editor's daughter – but she went over to the far side of the room and started to arrange the roses, while Lucy Dove leaned forward and took her greataunt's hand.

'I didn't come back for the money,' she said. 'You know that, don't you?'

'No, but you'll take it,' Sibyl said, suddenly fierce. 'There's not as much as there used to be but you can do something with it. Wish I'd done more but - oh well, there you go. Never married or had children, either. "No one good enough," my father said. "No one good enough around here, so I'll have to keep you for myself." Never did find a man who could chase away my daddy's memory. What about you, girl?'

'Me? I'm only twenty-five, Great-aunt Sibyl. Plenty of time left.'

'Call me Sib. "Great-aunt Sibyl" sounds too old and I don't feel old yet.'

The kewpie doll mouth opened and let out a wheezing rattle. Lucy laughed along with her, the kind of easy happy chuckle that Sibyl's lungs couldn't manage any more. Katie was charmed. She would have liked to stay and join in the laughter but just then she caught sight of the clock by Sibyl's bed. Time to go and collect the rest of the roses, before one of the other nurses noticed them and realised they could be used as a passport to Miss Dove's room.

She was crossing the foyer on her way back when someone called, 'Oi, you!' Katie looked across the roses and saw a small bow-legged man with a thatch of grey hair and a bottom lip set in a permanent pout. She knew everyone in Lomond, of course, but it took her a second or two to recognise Norm Kelly, because he was wearing the felt hat and double-breasted suit that (according to Dick Brewster) he had bought in 1968 and only wore for weddings and funerals.

'Here, let me take some of those,' he said, reaching for the roses and letting his hand brush accidentally-on-purpose across Katie's breast.

She stepped back. 'Nah, I'm fine. Can I help you, Mr Kelly?'

'You're one of Dick Brewster's girls – the oldest, aren't you?' Norm said, regretfully clasping both hands behind his back. 'I'm here to see Sib. What room would she be in?'

Katie hesitated. 'I'll get Matron. She can tell you –'

'Ah, no need for that,' he said. 'I don't care if Sib's conscious or away with the pixies. I just want to have a squiz and make sure she's really on her last legs this time.'

Katie remembered that she had never liked Norm Kelly. When he made a move towards the big front room, she stepped in front of him, cutting him off.

'Oh, Miss Dove's awake,' she said cheerfully. 'But her grandniece is with her at present. I'm not sure how Matron'd feel about her having two visitors at once.'

'Her grandniece?' Norm said, looking as disconcerted as Katie could have hoped for. 'What bloody grandniece? Nobody told *me* about this mythical grandniece.'

He shouldered her aside and went straight to the front room. Katie thought about going to get Matron, then decided to stick around and keep an eye on Norm herself. When she followed him into the room, he was scowling in Lucy's general direction, without quite looking at her.

'You're sitting on her bed,' he told Lucy. 'She doesn't like that.'

'I don't like *you* sitting on my bed,' said Sibyl. 'But since you're here, you may as well pull up a chair. Norman, this is my lovely grandniece. Lucy, this is your only other surviving relative in Lomond. The Doves have never been good breeders, I'm afraid. His name's Norman Kelly, Norm for short - and he *is* short, isn't he?'

She wheezed happily at her own joke and Norm scowled back. 'Anyone would think you didn't want me to come,' he grumbled. 'A man ought to be able to visit his sick auntie without having to listen to a load of old codswallop.'

'You never felt the need to visit till I was on my death bed,' Sibyl said bluntly. 'I warn you, Norm, you can't make me change my will. The property's yours but the house and the money go to my girl – and don't waste your time trying to get the will revoked, either. I've got doctors and lawyers lined up from here to the black stump, ready to go into court and swear I was in my right mind.'

'She can keep Dove House,' Norm said, still not looking directly at Lucy. 'It'd be impossible to sell, anyway. But I need the cash for the farm.'

‘So you can pour the rest of the Dove fortune down the gully trap? Sorry, Norman, you can’t turn the clock back by throwing money at it. Your time’s up. Get out of the way and give my girl a go.’

Katie sighed contentedly. Her dad was going to be really pleased when she came home with this story. They wouldn’t run it in the *Star*, of course – Dick Brewster often said that the most important part of an editor’s job was knowing what to leave out – but it always helped to know what was going on behind the scenes. Katie felt fairly certain that everyone else in the room had forgotten she was there but, just in case, she moved the roses around in the second vase, turning them into a screen. From behind the screen, she watched Norm Kelly thumbing his lower lip, like a primary school kid about to make a farting sound.

‘Just think about it, Sib, that’s all I ask,’ he said. ‘You haven’t laid eyes on this little - this sheila for almost twenty years. You don’t know the first thing about her and –’

‘And neither do you,’ Sibyl said in a faint, fading voice that still managed to silence Norm. ‘Unless there’s something you aren’t telling me. Well, Norman? Do you have anything else to say? No? In that case, get out.’

Norm hoisted himself to his feet and looked down at her for a long moment, assessing the alternatives. ‘It’s not right,’ he announced, deciding that he didn’t need to be polite any more. ‘You always had it in for me. A bloody man-hater, that’s what you are, Sib. I should’ve known better than to expect fair treatment from a dried up old maid. It’s not my fault you don’t know your proper place. You’ve always been up yourself, swanning round Lomond as if you were the Queen. Well, go ahead. Put the boot in. Kick a man when he’s down. And I hope you burn in hell.’

‘See you there, Norman Kelly,’ Sibyl said, just before the door slammed shut. She slid her eyes towards Lucy and added, ‘Sorry, my girl. I think you’d better go too. Tired now. One more thing to do. Been putting it off till you came.’

‘Can’t I help?’ Lucy asked.

‘No, dear,’ Sibyl whispered. ‘Don’t want you to watch. Just do what I asked, that’s all I need now. Go on. Out with you.’

Her hand twitched feebly, trying to push Lucy away. Behind the screen of roses, Katie held her breath and silently begged Lucy, on behalf of all the *Star*’s readers, to say something that would explain what her greataunt was on about – like, what *had* Miss Dove asked Lucy to do, while the two of them had been alone in the room? But Lucy just bent forward and kissed the smudge of tears away from the old woman’s cheeks.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘I’m going. Thanks for everything, Sib. I promise I won’t let you down.’

Her footsteps tapped across the polished boards. As the door closed, Katie realised she felt nervous about staying there on her own. She lined up the vases and hurried out, intending to go back to work, but instead she found herself hanging round the foyer, waiting for something to happen. A nurse went into Miss

Dove's room, left straight away and returned with Matron, who came out a few minutes later, looking as close to flustered as Katie had ever seen her.

'Katie Brewster!' she said, sounding relieved. 'You were in Miss Dove's room while her niece was here, weren't you? Unfortunately the receptionist forgot to get the niece's mobile number. She didn't happen to mention where she'd be staying, did she?'

'Sorry, no,' Katie said. 'But she only left a few minutes ago. I could run after her and bring her back, if you like.'

'That'd be a real help,' said Matron. 'Off you go!'

Katie's muscles unclenched as instantaneously as if she had been crouching in the foyer, waiting for the sound of a starter pistol. She burst out through the double doors, raced down the shallow stone steps and then came to a sudden halt, half-hidden behind a massive gatepost. On the other side of the post, Lucy Dove and Norm Kelly were locking eyes like two little kids in a staring match. Lucy cracked first, turning her head away, and Norm chuckled and reached out to stroke her cheek.

'Oh yeah, it's you, all right,' he said. 'Wasn't sure at first but I recognise you now. How about you, Lucy girl? Do you recognise me?'

'I'm ... not sure,' Lucy said.

Her eyes went misty and the lines of her face seemed to blur, making her look like a frightened child. Katie felt unreasonably alarmed. She had only known Lucy for an hour or so – well, "known" might be an exaggeration, given that she'd basically just been stalking the woman in white – but apparently she already relied on her to be strong and confident at all times. This childlike, submissive Lucy Dove was disconcerting. Katie wanted to step in and rescue her and turn her back into the woman in white, who knew exactly where she was going. But she hadn't even managed to catch Lucy's eye before Norm took charge again.

'Listen, girlie, how much do you remember from the time when you used to live here?' he asked, pulling on his lower lip.

'Nothing,' Lucy said in a small voice. 'It's like I'm starting over.'

Norm's lip snapped back into place. 'Good,' he said. 'I mean, it's good that you can waltz in and take a fresh look at Lomond, without a whole lot of garbage in your head. You'll probably see things a lot clearer than bloody Sib. Why don't you come out and have a squiz at my property some time? Who knows, you might even decide to put a bit of family money into it.'

He stared meaningfully at Lucy, who squirmed and ducked her head. 'I guess I might, Uncle Norm,' she said.

Norm Kelly looked pleased. '“Uncle Norm” - that takes me back,' he said, patting Lucy's hand. 'Always called me “uncle”, you did, even though we're only second cousins, really. When you were a little tacker, you used to follow me round all the time, going, “Uncle Norm, give me a piggy back,” “Uncle Norm, show me the cave up in the cliff.” Cute as a button, you were then. Gold curls and frilly pants, dimples in your knees and a smile like an angel.'

Lucy smiled like an angel and retrieved her hand. 'So why do you need money, Uncle Norm?' she asked.

'Ah, things are crook,' Norm said. 'This country's going downhill fast. For as long as anyone can remember, the government's been shoving money at us sheep farmers and telling us we were the backbone of Australia. Now, all of a sudden, there's some sort of policy change in Canberra and a smarmy little city slicker comes out to my property and starts rabbiting on about how I ought to give the sheep away and grow lentils, because some bloody wogs in India are going short this year.'

Katie shifted from one foot to the other, silently telling Norm to shut up. If he kept going on like that, he would make Lucy think Lomond was full of redneck racists, which wasn't true. Her dad always tried to include stuff about Aborigines and Asians in the *Star*, although he didn't get the opportunity as often as he would've liked, because Lomond was basically a pretty Anglo sort of place.

When she leaned sideways and looked round the gatepost, however, Katie discovered that Lucy wasn't listening to Norm. She was too busy drawing patterns in the dust with the edge of her white shoe and studying them with childish concentration. Katie started to worry about Lucy again but, just in time, she realised this might be her only chance to interrupt. She took a deep breath and stepped in between Lucy and Norm.

'Um,' she said, as a way of claiming the space. 'Matron wants to speak to you.'

'How come?' Norm demanded. 'What makes that old leso think she can stick her nose into our family business?'

'Um,' Katie said again, this time as a way of stalling while she tried to work out the best way to put it. 'It's about Miss Dove. I think Matron wants to give you a chance to, y'know, say goodbye.'

'That's sweet of her,' Lucy said, looking up with a friendly smile, 'but I've already said everything I want to say. Just tell Matron I'm staying at Dove House and I'll phone her later.'

Norm Kelly sniggered. 'You're a bit thick, aren't you, girlie? The kid's trying to tell us that Sib's dying – maybe even dead.'

'Oh, I know that,' Lucy said. 'And I still don't need to say goodbye.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Norm. 'I'm going back inside, to make sure the old bitch really has carked it this time. See you at the funeral, Lucy girl.'

He bounded up the steps, taking them two at a time, more like a boy than a man in his fifties. Katie hovered by the gatepost, wondering whether she ought to leave Lucy on her own, but Lucy turned and gave her a dazzlingly confident smile. Katie smiled back and decided that she must've been overreacting before. It was fair enough if Lucy felt awkward around an uncle she hadn't seen for ages. There was no need to make a big deal out of it.

So when Lucy waved her away, Katie went without any further hesitation, although, as she reached the top of the steps, she paused and, on impulse, turned to look back. The sun was sinking down behind a wall of blue-grey clouds,

massed together above the escarpment. While she watched, a window opened in one of the clouds, just wide enough to let a line of compressed sunlight through.

It was the kind of light Katie used to call “miracle light” when she was little, because she had seen it for the first time in a book of Renaissance paintings that she’d found on her father’s shelves. In the paintings, a narrow strip of light – sometimes with a dove travelling along it – scrolled down from the clouds whenever Jesus or God or the saints did something miraculous. The first time she had realised that you could see miracle light in real life too, Katie had been awestruck and she’d never completely given up on waiting for a miracle to follow.

That probably explained why, just for a moment, Katie Brewster thought she saw the line of light reach right down into the street outside the Lomond District Aged Care Facility and touch the thin cotton of Lucy Dove’s shirt, marking it with a rosy stain just above her left breast. She thought she saw a bird too, white wings spread wide like the doves from the old paintings, circling slowly down from the sky, until it merged into the band of sunshine and vanished from sight.

Then she blinked and reminded herself that special effects only worked in movies. As she rubbed her eyes, to get rid of a leftover shimmer, Lucy lifted one hand and smoothed an invisible crease in her shirt, as if she was touching her heart.

‘Thanks for everything,’ she said in her half-American drawl. ‘Have a nice day, okay.’

The last person Lucy Dove would speak to on her first day in Lomond would be Jude Martin.

And after that, Lomond would begin to change.

Two

'Smile,' said the call centre manager as she bustled past and Jude Martin smiled into the mike of her headset, while a phone rang rang rang in her ears. No answer. Time up. Hit the key that shunted that lot of data to the back of the queue and try the next phone number flashing up on the monitor. Ring ring ring. Oh good. Someone home.

'Good evening, Mrs Paton, my name's Jude and I'm calling from TeleAustral on behalf of the Stewart Foundation. How are you? We're currently running a campaign to inform the public about the issue of youth suicide. Have you heard of Australians Against Youth Suicide? It's a non-profit, non-government organisation that ...'

She was halfway through her spiel - tuning out the fifty other voices murmuring around her, trying to pick up on any hint of interest in Mrs Paton's tired cross voice - when she heard another voice, rising above all the rest. A voice Jude knew well, husky as a nightclub singer but with an edge to it.

'Jesus, you old bitch!' the voice shouted. 'Don't be like that. I'm just trying to sell you a fucking pen set, not shove it up your arse ... Yeah, same to you. Get stuffed!'

Jude missed a beat and lost Mrs Paton, who hung up and went back to cooking dinner or whatever. She tapped out another number, more slowly than usual, because she was kneeling on her chair and looking across at Shelley's cubicle. The manager was there already. She and Shelley were arguing - the manager straight-backed and serious, Shelley with her shoulders set at a defiant angle and her hands hacking the air. She yelled, 'Get stuffed yourself' in a voice that bounced off the pastel walls and snatched up her bag and her gold-framed photo of Britt and Shana and Anakin.

A voice in Jude's ear said, 'Yeah? Who is it?'

Shelley came storming towards her, eyes bright, blonde hair bristling and a flick of her hips aimed backwards at the manager.

Jude said, 'Good evening, Mr Antonelli, my name is Jude and I'm calling from ...'

Shelley said, 'I'm out of here. They can stick their crappy job. See you later, okay? No need for you to walk out too.'

The voice in her ear said, 'Nah, this isn't Wayne. I'm just a mate of his, minding the house while he's in Surfers, lucky bastard.'

Jude mouthed, 'See you, Mum.' Out loud, she said, 'Oh, right. Well, you might be interested in the campaign we're currently running to inform the public ...' while she watched Shelley catwalk down the aisle between the cubicles, putting on a show for the rest of the call centre. Proving all over again that the Martins were a family of loudmouth losers, as if the whole of Lomond didn't know that already.

The door slammed. The voice in her ear said, 'Yeah, know what you mean. It's pretty rough, kids topping themselves like that. How much did you say them pen sets cost? Fifty bucks? Not a problem, I'll give you my credit card number.'

Jude's mouth went dry and her fingers scampered across the keyboard like dancing mice. Omigod. Unbelievable. She'd made a sale, when she hadn't even been listening properly.

She stood up and called out, 'Score one for me!' A burst of quiet clapping rippled round the centre and then everyone got back to work, including Jude. You had to keep the calls coming, because you could never tell when you were the one who was being checked and timed. Next number. Ring ring ring. 'Yes' - and from a single word, Jude could tell that this one was going to be suspicious and bossy, just waiting for the chance to start in on a long lecture about wasting her valuable time.

It was exactly the sort of voice that would have set her mum off. But Jude wasn't Shelley, so she smiled at the monitor and said, 'Good evening, Mrs Howatch, my name is Jude and I'm calling from TeleAustral on behalf of the Stewart Foundation,' while the manager drifted past and said casually, 'Everything okay?' and Jude nodded and mouthed, 'Yeah, everything's okay.'

Although it wasn't, of course.

Daniel looked round his new room. The window opened onto a screen of gum leaves and a patch of sea, with a wobbly line of moonlight scrawled across the dark water. Blank walls, an empty bookcase and a bare desk waited for him to take over and make his mark. He pulled *The American Civil War* out of his back pocket and propped it on the nearest shelf.

'There,' he said. 'That's a start.'

Behind him, somebody giggled. 'He talks to himself,' said a girl-voice. 'Dad reckons it's the first sign of madness.'

'You're an imbecile, Maya,' said a boy-voice. 'Can't you recognise a joke when you hear one? If that was true, our dad would be a full-on psycho. He talks to himself all the time.'

Daniel turned round, irritated by the pair of them before he had even seen them. They were posing on either side of his bedroom door, the boy leaning against the wall, the girl with one hand on the door frame and the other hand fluffing her yellow curls - lots of them, so tight and springy that they seemed to be wriggling around her head. She was younger than Serenity, somewhere between thirteen and fifteen at a guess, wearing a skintight yellow top, a skintight green mini and thick-soled black shoes. Her green eyes were spiked with mascara and she had a long narrow nose and a small sulky-baby mouth.

'Hi,' she said. 'I'm Maya and you're Daniel. And cute.'

'Take no notice of her,' the boy said. 'She's not really sex-mad. She just reads too many articles about how to attract guys. I don't know what I did to deserve a sister like her. I mean, she started with Barbie dolls, moved on to the Spice Girls and now she's working at being a *Girl* magazine clone. Dumb or what?'

'Better than talking like I eat encyclopedias for breakfast,' said Maya. 'You're a little shit, Orion. I really, really hate you.'

'Oh, wow,' Orion said. 'I'm really, really scared.'

He pushed himself away from the wall and headed for the bookcase - a short skinny boy in a long baggy t-shirt and long baggy shorts, with white-blond hair and skin so pale and transparent that Daniel almost expected to see the blood pumping through its capillaries. He had the same long narrow nose as Maya and the same rosy blob of a mouth but his eyes were as pale as his hair and restless as a lizard, sliding from the book to Daniel and back again.

'Why are you reading Winston Churchill on the Civil War, instead of someone more up-to-date, like Shelby Foote?' he asked.

'Read him,' said Daniel. 'But Churchill came up with some of the best strategies in World War Two, so it's interesting to get his ideas about someone else's war.' He thought it over and added, 'Have *you* read Shelby Foote? You're a bit young for that, aren't you?'

Orion sighed. 'Don't be ageist. It's bad enough, having all the teachers go, "Orion Casey, you can't possibly understand," without other kids joining in as well. I'm not that young, anyway. I may be small but I'll be fourteen next birthday.'

'Orion's read everything,' Maya explained. 'They had to move him up twice, to keep his brain occupied, so he's a year ahead of me now. He's got an IQ of 155, like anybody cares. Can't decide whether to be a physicist or make loads of money on the stock exchange and retire when he's twenty-five. Me personally, I'm going to study engineering. *Girl* reckons it's a really excellent way to meet guys.'

She swung back and forth in the doorway, smiling at Daniel, who blushed and edged past her. 'Excuse me,' he said, escaping into the corridor. 'I better go and see what Caro and Serenity are doing.'

'We'll come too,' Maya said, falling into step beside him. 'With any luck, Caro'll ask us to stay for tea. We like that, because we get to eat meat for a change.'

'Well, I like the lamb chops,' Orion said over her shoulder. 'Maya likes staring at Serenity. She thinks Serenity's *sooo* awesome - right, Maya? She wants to be like Serenity when she grows up. As if.'

'Shut up, fishface,' Maya said. 'If you're not careful, I'll tell Finn what you said about his latest painting.'

She reached back, grabbed his wrist and twisted. Orion jerked his wrist down, pulling her off-balance, and Maya yelped and kicked him. Daniel shouldered between them and pushed them apart.

'You must be the neighbours,' he decided. 'You're lethal, aren't you?'

'That's right, we live next door,' Maya said. 'And we *are* kind of lethal. Everyone says so. But you're in luck. We like you, don't we, Orion?'

'Yeah, we like him,' Orion agreed. 'Now, come on. Let's see what's for dinner.'

At eight in the evening the big window of the Casa Mia Café was the brightest light in Lomond. Anyone who wanted brighter lights and a bigger city had driven up the coast to Bayview but, as usual, there were half a dozen people in The Caff. A long counter ran across the lefthand side of the space, with a pizza oven, a grill and a vat of frying fat behind it and a takeaway menu on a board overhead. Matt Fahey was sitting on a stool by the counter, talking in a low voice to Frank Carretto, who had inherited The Caff from his father, Big Frankie.

The two of them looked as if they would have nothing in common. Matt was eighteen with a home haircut and baffled blue eyes, wearing a vandalised school jumper and jeans so old that they were soft as silk. Frank was in his late thirties with a square pale face, dark secret eyes under straight dark brows, a level mouth and thick black hair smoothed back in a flat top, not a wisp out of line. His blunt fingers were carefully manicured, his white shirt was spotless and his black pants had a knife-sharp crease. But, despite their differences, Matt was telling Frank his troubles, the way the last two generations of Lomond kids had done.

Meanwhile, Eden Parker was standing on the borderline between the takeaway area and the restaurant area, examining the soft drink bottles in the fridge as carefully as if he was planning a bank robbery. Eden never told anyone his troubles, although he must've had a few. His father, Jeff Parker, had always been famous for being a hard man and his temper wouldn't be any sweeter now

that the Parker farm was going down the tube. But if Eden's dad laid into him from time to time, Eden never let it show on the surface.

'Hey, Scottie,' he called. 'You look like you're cashed up. Shout us a coke, will you, mate?'

He turned to face the restaurant area with its red gingham tablecloths and faded posters of bays in Naples, statues in Rome and jolly brown-faced men dancing in vats of grapes. Scott Sterne, who had been leaning back and surveying The Caff, felt the muscles under his shoulder blades tighten, pulling him upright. Eden was challenging him again. He had issued a lot of challenges lately and Scott had been keeping an eye on him ever since Eden walked into The Caff. Now it was time to do something about it.

'Cokes all round,' he said, without bothering to raise his voice. 'On me, right?'

He tilted his chair to a dangerous angle (making the point that he could afford to sit in the restaurant section) and watched Tommo Thompson and Lockie Conway finish their pizza (making the point that he had paid for it too). Frank Carretto, who had a sixth sense for that sort of thing, poured the cokes into glasses with ice and lemon and served them on a tray, making the gesture look doubly impressive.

Scott took advantage of the coke break to plan his next move. Okay, he had played the money card but Eden had forced him into it, so that counted as a draw, not a win. He would have to take the initiative now, if he wanted to go on being leader of the pack – and he supposed he did, even if Lockie, Tommo, Eden and Matt weren't much of a pack. At least he'd been spared Eden's younger brother Dylan, who was in year 10 with Tommo and Lockie but had multiple allergies and spent most of his time at home wheezing.

For a split second Scott allowed himself to look into an alternate universe, where the guys in Lomond who were around his age had a bit of class and something to contribute, instead of always putting the responsibility right back on him. Then he shrugged and returned to the real world. He glanced at Lockie and Tommo, rounding them up with his eyes, and strolled over to the boundary line, where he propped himself against the wall and leaned towards Eden in a way that could come across as either friendly or invasive, depending on how Eden chose to take it.

'Got the car?' he said.

'Nah, not tonight,' Eden admitted. 'It broke down and Dad won't fix it or let us take his. How about you?'

On second thoughts, Scott realised he had picked the wrong opening line. He could feel something flickering in his gut, as if a tiny pilot light had just ignited a column of flame. It wasn't fair. How was he supposed to act like the fucking Crown Prince of Lomond, when he didn't even have wheels? His dad could totally afford to buy him a decent car, unlike Eden's dad. The bastard was just holding out because he wanted to keep tabs on Scott, using the pathetic excuse that he couldn't *technically* own a car till he turned eighteen.

‘Same as you,’ he told Ethan, half a beat too late. ‘Dad’s in town, talking local politics with Uncle Doug. He’s not using the car but he won’t let me have it either.’

Ethan raised one eyebrow and leaned back against the wall, to show that he’d noted a sign of weakness and was taking time out to gloat. Scott instinctively looked round to check on his troops. Lockie Conway was right behind him, like a good little bodyguard, but Tommo Thompson was still at the table, stuffing his face with pizza crusts. Scott jerked his head, to summon Tommo over, and Matt Fahey picked up on the signal and slid off his stool as well.

And after that – accidentally but effectively – the power was back in Scott’s hands. There was no need to keep trying to psych Eden out. Scott just walked away with the other three following, knowing that Eden couldn’t bear to miss out on the action. He was reaching for the door handle when Frank Carretto called, ‘Wait a minute, Scotty’ and stopped him in his tracks. Scott swore under his breath. If Frank insisted on settling the bill now, it would break the momentum and give Eden time to make another bid for power.

‘What is it?’ he said, reluctantly turning back.

‘No big deal,’ Frank said. ‘Just wanted to ask how your mum was getting on.’

Scott grinned with relief. ‘Ah, she’s a bloody idiot. Dad promised to clean out the spouting but Mum didn’t believe him and, guess what – when she climbed up to do it herself, she fell off the ladder. Serves her right, breaking her arm. But hey, I’ll tell her you asked after her, next time we drive down to the hospital.’

He lifted his hand in salute, dropped a tenner on the counter as a tip and strode out of The Caff.

‘Come on,’ he said, glancing over his shoulder at the others. ‘There must be something happening, somewhere in this fucking dump. Let’s see what we can find.’

The Casey kids talked steadily all through dinner, giving Daniel a chance to look around. His aunt’s house was very different from the sandstone and weatherboard houses that he had seen on the way through Lomond. It jutted out from the hillside, propped on wooden stilts like a Queenslander, with a verandah that covered every aspect of the sea view. One of the original Happy Valley hippies had built it from recycled timber in the early seventies, creating something that, from the outside, looked like a treasure chest studded with random windows.

Inside, the house was basically one enormous room, full of nooks and alcoves, with the bathroom and three bedrooms in a separate corridor. At one end of the main room there was a kitchen with a chunky wooden benchtop, blue-glazed jars and vegetables in hanging baskets. A long table occupied the middle of the room, littered with books and newspapers, wildflowers in a jar, interesting stones, a bowl of fruit and random pages of Serenity’s homework.

At the far end Daniel could see a circle of plump armchairs around the TV, a huge painting on the wall - swirls of murky browns and greens with FINN in jagged yellow letters across the bottom - and Caro's ergonomic computer desk tucked away in a corner. Daniel had been worried about that, because he didn't want to feel as though he had turned his aunt out of her study, but Caro had convinced him that she liked to have people round while she worked. He could see her point, in a way. It was a friendly sort of room, untidy and comfortable, like Caro herself.

Oh, yes. He was going to like it here.

Orion was still working his way through a list of interesting facts that he'd found on the internet, including endless statistics about the *Titanic*, when a woman appeared at the open front door.

'Meat?' she said, looking at their chop bones. 'Oh, Orion! That's so bad for your *chi*.'

'Yeah, but it's great for my iron levels,' Orion said.

He started to reel off statistics about how hard it was to get enough iron on a vegetarian diet. The woman frowned at Orion, caught Daniel studying her and turned the frown onto him instead. She had a long, strong-jawed face with farseeing eyes, like a desert soldier. Daniel suspected that she would've looked good in a sand-coloured uniform but in fact she was wearing a Balinese sarong and a puffy white Indian blouse with drawstrings trailing from its wrists and neck, in between strings of African beads and long strands of her grey-blond hair.

'Well, Orion?' she said. 'Are you going to introduce me to your new friend?'

Orion looked round, puzzled. 'Oh, right,' he said, catching on. 'That's Daniel, Serenity's cousin. And this is Raewyn, my mum.'

Raewyn Casey smiled encouragingly at Daniel and continued to confuse him by drifting over to the table in a swirl of drapery and then taking his hand in such a firm, almost painful grasp that her Indonesian coco shell bracelets slammed together, making a sound like a drum roll.

'Welcome to Happy Valley,' she said. 'You'll find us very different from the people you've met in the city. Up here, we still believe in old-fashioned ideas like feminism, socialism and equality for everyone. Well, some of us do, at any rate,' she amended, when Serenity snorted.

'I'm a feminist,' said Orion. 'It's only logical. Women are half the human race, so it makes sense to use their brain power - the ones who've got brains, anyhow.' He dodged automatically, as Maya aimed a kick at him, and added, 'But, honestly, Raewyn, the socialist thing's totally retro. Russia fell apart and China's stocking up on Coke machines. It's over. Global capitalism won hands down.'

'You don't know what you're talking about, Orion,' his mother said crossly. 'In strict Marxist terms, communism can only come *after* capitalism. Russia and China were actually feudal societies moving into their industrial phase, which means that Karl Marx's theories about sharing the wealth haven't really been tested. Not yet, anyhow.'

Orion argued back. Raewyn quoted the Communist Manifesto at him. ('Man is born free, Orion, but everywhere he - or she, of course - is in chains.') Serenity covered her ears. Maya chanted, 'Boring, boring.' Caro sidled off to make a pot of peppermint tea and Daniel wandered over to the nearest wall to examine an aerial photo, blown up to poster size, which looked like the view he had seen from the train.

'That's the Lomond valley, of course,' a voice said instructively.

Daniel jumped as a hand reached over his shoulder. It was sunburnt and calloused but loaded with half a dozen third world rings, indicating that it belonged to Raewyn, who obviously liked to keep an eye on everyone. She seemed to have the same overload of energy as Daniel's mother, although he couldn't tell whether Raewyn had chosen to use her powers for good or evil. He watched her finger squeak across the glass, tracing a line that emerged from the map's contours – a dark green band on the left hand side, which shaded into an olive green arc on the right hand side, drawing a half-circle around the town itself.

'There's the fault line that created this valley,' she told him. 'It runs from the escarpment that the train comes down, right round to the Danville Ranges, where we live. The escarpment's responsible for something called a rain shadow, which explains why this area's dry enough for sheep farming – you won't find many sheep farmers in the rest of northern New South Wales. On the down side, the fault line cuts us off from the sea as well. The coast on either side of Lomond's nothing but cliffs, so, if you want a swim, you'll have to get Caro to drive you up to Bayview.'

Daniel wondered whether he would have to answer a quiz on all of that but apparently Raewyn just enjoyed telling people things. She turned and strode back to the table, without waiting for him to reply. For the next twenty minutes, she complained to Caro about the high price of organic vegetables at the health food shop in Bayview; the racist review of a Vietnamese restaurant in the *Bayview Mirror*; and the girls in her year 12 classes at Bayview/Lomond Secondary who played dumb, because they didn't want to look smarter than the boys.

So Raewyn was a teacher. That would explain her weird combination of hippy and guerrilla fighter. Daniel was sucking his cheeks in, to hide a grin, when the front door blew open and a man eddied into the room. He had smoke-grey hair, a long narrow nose, apple-red patches on his high cheekbones and faded blue eyes that checked out the room and memorised everyone's position within seconds.

'So there you are!' he said, swinging an accusing finger from Raewyn to Orion and Maya. 'I came home to an empty house. Gave me quite a shock, I can tell you. I thought you'd been abducted by aliens but no, you're just lounging around here, having a fine old time.'

'Don't be so childish,' Raewyn snapped. 'You're two hours late, Finn. What did you expect us to do? Sit and watch the front door like faithful dogs, till you walked in?'

'A bit of gratitude would be nice,' Finn Casey said plaintively. 'I've been slaving away all day and then collecting gossip at the pub, to keep you entertained. News flash: Rob Sterne's wife is back in Bayview hospital - he broke her arm this time, not that anyone would say it straight out - and in a completely unexpected turn of events, Sibyl Dove, the uncrowned queen of Lomond, has actually died, just like ordinary people do. What's more, she's already been succeeded by an exceptionally glamorous niece that nobody knew a thing about, until she turned up today. Well, Raewyn, my little ray of sunshine, don't I deserve a kiss for that?'

Raewyn laughed and kissed him, long and hard. When the Casey kids started to make spewing noises in the background, their parents broke the clinch and chased them round the long table and out onto the verandah. They stampeded down the steps, calling 'Thanks for dinner' and 'See you later.' At the last minute Finn turned back and bowed to Daniel.

'No one's bothered to introduce us but I'm assuming you're Caroline's nephew,' he said. 'As for myself, I'm none other than Finn Casey, foremost among Lomond's world-famous taxi drivers and a part-time painter of masterpieces of colour and form that capture the essential spirit of the Australian bush and its -' He broke off, as Raewyn hauled on his hand, and said, 'But I'll tell you more about that later. You're part of the family now, so I'll be seeing you around for a good long time to come.'

Finn was just being polite, Daniel told himself. There was no reason to make a big deal out of what he had said. But even so, something seemed to be making his eyes sting as painfully as the smoke from his parents' endless cigarettes used to do. He blotted his eyes on his sleeve and looked up to find Caro watching him.

'Are you okay, Dan?' she asked. 'We haven't tired you out, have we?'

'No, I'm fine,' he said. 'It's just that - well, everyone's so nice.'

'Why not? Like Finn said, you're part of the family. This is your home now, for as long as you want. You know that, don't you?'

She opened her arms and drew Daniel into a hug. He hooked his chin over her shoulder and gazed round the room. Plump armchairs, blue glaze jars, big windows opening out on the sea, Finn's dreadful painting and Caro's soft cushion chest. He felt safe. Terrifyingly safe.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Yeah, I know that.'

Jude Martin walked out of the TeleAustral Call Centre and looked round. No clapped-out Holden at the side of the road. No Shane. She'd kept hoping that her mum would send her stepdad back to collect her but she wasn't exactly surprised that Shelley had forgotten. It had happened before. She would just go down to the supermarket and call from there.

The first phone only took phone cards and Jude didn't have one. The second phone turned out to be jammed. Some kid having a bit of fun, probably, but it wasn't much fun standing at the edge of a dark empty car park, so she turned and hurried back to the road, thinking fast. There was the George, of course, but she didn't fancy letting everyone in the pub know that Jude Martin was stranded in Lomond on her own. Wait a minute, though - The Caff would still be open and Frank had a red phone there. It was lucky Shane had scored that job fixing Pat Fahey's roof, which had paid their phone bill. Otherwise she would be stuck here, waiting for the last bus.

She sidled from one shadow to the next, cautious as a cat - a small skinny kid, dressed in her best grey pants and black top. (They liked you to look neat at the call centre, even though the customers couldn't see you. The manager said it was good for morale.) Jude had a narrow pale face and a small neat mouth, stringy brown hair and eyes that bothered people, because they saw too much. Jude wished she didn't see so much, sometimes. It would be kind of nice to live in the moment and start all over again every day, the way Shelley did.

Thinking about her mum, Jude almost walked past The Caff. She paused on the opposite side of the road and looked across at the lighted windows. Frank Carretto seemed to be there on his own, which suited Jude just fine. She swung her foot out but at the last minute it wavered and pulled back. Hold on. There were other people in The Caff as well, over at one of the tables or propping up the shadows beside the fridge.

Scott Sterne and his little sidekicks.

That changed things. Scott was the coolest guy in the whole of Bayview/Lomond Secondary - a footy hero, taller than all the teachers, who could have been a male model if that wasn't a faggy thing to do - but he got this funny expression on his face when he looked at Jude and his sidekicks didn't settle for looking, they said stuff as well. Jude didn't want to think about that and she definitely didn't want to listen to it, not tonight, not after the drama at the call centre. She'd had enough of being Lomond's favourite sideshow for one day.

Oh hell. It looked as though she'd have to scrap the idea of calling Shane and go and wait for the bus, after all.

She headed back up the main street and hid in the deepest patch of shadow at the corner of the bus shelter, wishing she knew how long she would have to wait. The bus service between Lomond and Bayview had been through some fairly drastic cutbacks - not enough demand, they said - and the old guy who ran it followed a timetable inside his own head, coming and going when he pleased. It was better than nothing but it wasn't good.

Jude leaned against the wall, folding her arms across her chest, and tried to think of something that would cheer her up. The victory moment back at the call centre didn't seem that great any more, and plus it reminded her of Shelley and she really didn't want to think about her mum right then. She tried Serenity - *my friend, a real friend at last* - but on the bad days Jude was convinced Serenity

only put up with her because she was still new in town and hadn't realised that normal people didn't make friends with Martins.

So in the end she did the trick that turned her brain into a blank computer screen and let her start writing her next essay. It was a brilliant trick. Jude would never have managed to become an A-grade student if she hadn't worked out how to do homework inside her head, no matter where she was. She was so busy figuring out why she thought the end of *Romeo and Juliet* was a total con that she didn't hear the footsteps till they walked right into the bus shelter.

'Hey, guys, it's Jude Martin, all dressed up,' someone said. 'Out on the prowl, are you, Jude?'

Daniel liked being hugged by Caro and he also liked the way that when the hug was over, she changed the subject by leading him across to the photograph on the wall.

'Raewyn showed you this, didn't she?' she said. 'What do you see when you look at it, Dan?'

'An aerial view of Lomond,' he told her. 'Or a slightly bodgy map of Australia, depending on the way I focus.'

'Oh good, you get the double image,' said Caro. 'You'd be surprised how many people can't see it. The bloke who took the photo gave me that copy, because he was so pleased to find someone else who'd made the connection.'

She looked back at the photo with such a fond smile that Daniel started to make some connections of his own. 'Did you and this guy ... I mean, are you ...?' he said, waving his hands to fill in the gaps.

'Neither,' Caro said. 'Although I think we might've, if Jack hadn't had a heart attack and died last month. Don't look like that, Dan. It wasn't a tragedy – well, not for me, at any rate. There's nothing wrong with having a few might-have-beens in your life.'

'I'll take your word for it,' Daniel said doubtfully. 'So, okay, if it wasn't a tragedy for you, who *was* it a tragedy for?'

'For Jack, obviously, and his family – and Lomond too, perhaps. Jack Wheaton grew up here and went off to the city looking for work, the way lots of country kids do. He ended up running his own building company in Sydney but he never lost touch with his home town. So, when people from Melbourne and Sydney and the southern states in general started to move up north after they retired, Jack was in a good position to spot the trend early on. He bought up a lot of land from Sibyl Dove and effectively built a new suburb on the outskirts of Lomond – what they'd call a retirement community these days.'

'And that was the tragedy?' Daniel asked. 'Like, he built a lot of shonky houses and wrecked the atmosphere of the place?'

'No, no,' Caro said, slightly shocked. 'In a way, you could say Jack saved this town single-handed. He – but you don't want to listen to me witter on about

someone you've never met. How about telling me why you had to run away from home, instead?' She waited for a few seconds and added, 'No pressure, of course. If you'd rather not say anything yet, that's fine with me too.'

'Then I won't,' Daniel decided. 'Come on, tell me the rest of the story about how Jack Wheaton saved Lomond.'

Caro gave him a meaningful stare, presumably intended to convey that she would be ready to listen whenever he was ready to talk. Daniel sighed. Since he would have to say something in the end, it might be better to get it over with straight away – but on the other hand, his dad was Caro's brother and it didn't seem fair to make her take sides ...

He was still staring at her, trying to make up his mind, when she laughed and began. 'As you've probably realised, Lomond's a sheep-farming area. Up to the middle of this century, the wool industry brought in more than enough money to keep the farmers pretty comfortable, which was good for the whole town. Then, like most country towns, Lomond started having problems but it managed to hang in there till the early 90s, when the state government amalgamated the Lomond and Bayview city councils, as part of an experiment to see whether larger districts would cost less to run. The two towns were supposed to pool their resources but, because Bayview was bigger and more prosperous, it became the base for all the essential services - the library, the police station, the fire brigade, the hospital and the transport systems. And once the community services in Lomond started to close down, lots of shops started closing as well and whole families started to move away. Lomond would probably be a ghost town by now, if Jack's retirement community hadn't brought the southerners in.'

'Jack still sounds more like a good thing than a tragedy,' Daniel commented. 'What happened? Did people turn against him in the end?'

'Not exactly,' Caro said. 'As a matter of fact, Jack became the mayor of the new Bayview/Lomond council and that gave him the chance to change Lomond's culture, as well as its economy. He'd lived in the city, so he was comfortable with stuff like multiculturalism and feminism, but he still talked the Lomond talk. People would take things from him that they never would've taken from a Happy Valley hippy like me.'

'And the tragedy?' Daniel reminded her. 'I'm still waiting, Caro.'

His aunt gave him a lopsided grin. 'I know, I know. Basically, it sounds like a great big success story, right up to the part about the early heart attack. Maybe I'm just an old misery guts, like Serenity's always saying, but ... but I wish Jack could've stuck around for a bit longer, to give him time to consolidate the changes he made. It'd be so easy for the next mayor to go straight back to the old ways and undo everything that Jack achieved.'

Her voice wobbled slightly on the word "Jack". Daniel found himself wondering whether Caro was really as cool about that might-have-been business as she thought. He was trying to think of a way to distract her, before she burst into tears and embarrassed them both, when the wrong sort of distraction turned up.

'Looking at the map, to see where you are?' said Serenity. 'I could've told you that, Dan. You're at the back of beyond.'

Daniel decided his safest bet would be to pretend that Serenity was joking. He laughed and backed away towards the table, picked up a newspaper and hid behind it. When he looked round the edge of the paper, Caro had started to massage her temples, as if she was assuming she would get a headache in the next few minutes.

'There you go again,' she said. 'Do you have to be so negative all the time?'

'*Me* negative?' Serenity said. 'That's a joke. *I'm* not the one who decided everything was totally fucked up and dropped out of the quote "rat race" unquote.'

'Well, everything *is* fucked up,' said her mother. 'Most of my friends in the city are working twelve hour days, as if they were factory workers in the nineteenth century, not middle class professionals. None of them ever talk about politics or ideas these days, because they're too tired to do much more than stagger home, order some takeaway and watch reality TV. I couldn't live in that world any longer, okay?'

Serenity sighed loudly. 'See? That's exactly what I was saying. Your lot did all those protests and demos a million years ago but now you just want to sit back and whinge.'

'You can't expect one generation to fix everything,' Caro snapped back. 'We thought we ought to leave your lot something to do.'

'For your information, "my lot" isn't interested in all that boring old stuff you keep raving on about. We want –'

'Yes, what *do* you want, Serenity? I'd really like to know.'

When Daniel lowered the newspaper, Serenity was scowling at Caro. Scowls looked good on her. They made her cheeks turn rosy and changed her eyes from milk chocolate to dark.

'I wanted to pass my exams and go to uni and get a decent job and make a success of my life, not hang round on the edges complaining, like some people,' she said. 'Only you had to have a midlife crisis and drag me off to the sticks and ruin everything.'

'This is getting stale,' Caro said. 'We've been here for six months, remember. Your marks in the end-of-year exams were as good as ever and, okay, I'm sorry you miss your old friends but you've got Jude now, haven't you?'

'Jude's fine but we're still getting to know each other. I can't just dag around with her, the way I could with Fi and Toby and Sera Jane. Plus Jude keeps acting like I'm about to dump on her family or something. Don't know why. The Martins are way cooler than having a boring old hippy drop-out for a mum.'

'I haven't dropped out, Serenity. I'm still a community services consultant. I just work from a virtual office now.'

'Yeah, so you can slob around in a tracksuit all day. Face it, Mum, you've given up. But I'm not going to.'

In the silence that followed, Daniel heard a polite voice from the TV murmuring, ‘... latest report on the fighting in Eastern Europe’. He abandoned the newspaper and went to sit in one of the plump armchairs, concentrating so hard that he couldn’t hear what Caro and Serenity said next. The announcer murmured on, while the cameras tracked street skirmishes and uniformed troops. As a file of refugees trailed across the screen, Daniel’s armchair lurched and he looked up to find Serenity leaning on the back of it.

‘Poor things,’ she said. ‘Look, half of them didn’t even get time to pack a suitcase. How can people do stuff like that? The other guys must be total bastards.’

‘Nah, it’s not that simple,’ Daniel told her. ‘They’re neighbours – and neighbours always have history. Last time around, the refugee mob were stomping on the ones in uniform.’

‘Seriously?’ Serenity said, half impressed and half suspicious. ‘How come you know so much about it?’

‘Well, the government was talking about sending Australian soldiers to join the peace-keeping troops at one stage,’ Daniel said. ‘If the war’s part of our lives, we ought to know what’s going on. Besides, there’ll be a next time after this one, unless somebody comes up with a way of sorting it out - something better than nominating the good guys and the bad guys, then handing out guns and ammo.’

‘Huh?’ Serenity said. ‘What do you mean?’

Daniel closed his eyes and thought for a moment. ‘It’s like this,’ he said.

*‘Brothers will fight
and kill each other,
men will know misery;
an axe-age, a sword-age,
shields will be cloven,
a wind-age, a wolf-age,
before the world’s ruin.’*

When he opened his eyes, Serenity was gazing down at him, looking awestruck. ‘Incredible,’ she said. ‘Did you make that up?’

He laughed. ‘I wish. It comes from the *Voluspa*, this Old Norse poem about an end-of-the-world battle between the gods and the ice giants. It was written somewhere in the first century but I reckon it’s still relevant to -’

The chair lurched as Serenity straightened up. ‘The first century?’ she said. ‘Jesus, you sound just like Orion.’

Daniel watched her walk away. Smart move, Matheson, he told himself, as he turned back to the TV. Sounding just like a tiny geek boy – that’s always been a good way to impress girls.

The main street was empty, apart from a huddle of utes and four wheel drives in the car park beside the Royal George, but Scott felt suddenly sure that he would find something to keep the gang happy. If everything else failed, he could always make Matt nick some bottles from his dad's storeroom but hey, they could do better than sitting on the steps of the war memorial drinking vodka from a bottle in a paper bag. He set off down the main street, taking seven-league-boot strides to work off his excess energy, which meant he was the first to arrive at the bus shelter.

'Hey, guys,' he said, peering into the shadows. 'It's Jude Martin, all dressed up. Out on the prowl, are you, Jude?'

'Nah, I've been doing the late shift at the call centre,' Jude said, trying to make it sound as boring as possible.

That strategy didn't work. Scott couldn't have felt less bored. 'Oh right, your mum works there too, doesn't she?' he said. 'Dad reckoned he'd seen her round town lately. They say your mum really goes. What about you, Jude? Are you a goer too?'

Jude just stared off into the distance. It was her best bet, really, because Scott had asked one of those questions where you couldn't say "yes" or "no" or even "mind your own business" without buying into the game. He was planning his next move, taking his own sweet time, when Eden and Matt and Lockie and Tommo crowded into the bus shelter behind him, nudging and snickering. The others gave Tommo a shove that sent him thudding into the wall beside Jude. As she edged away, Tommo pushed himself upright and peered down the front of her shirt.

'I tell you one thing,' he said. 'Shelley Martin has the best tits in Lomond. She's not afraid to show them, either. Come on, Jude, give us a look. Let's see if yours are as good as hers.'

Jude edged further away, which edged her into Scott. He locked an arm round her shoulders and pulled her towards him. When she shrank into herself, trying to escape the pressure of his thigh, the anger in Scott's gut flared up again. The stupid little bitch was just a fucking Martin. According to the rules – the Lomond version, at any rate - she ought to be fucking grateful if one of the Sternes even bothered to look in her direction.

'Jesus,' he said. 'What's your problem? Relax, can't you?'

But Jude wouldn't make it easy for herself. She started to strain against Scott's grip, like an untrained dog tugging on the lead. That brought her nearer to Eden, who lunged forward, wrenching at her shirt. Scott pulled her close and squeezed tight, making a point to Eden and Jude simultaneously.

'Fuck off, Eden,' he said. 'She likes me, not you.'

Eden's face went dark. Scott could see that, even in the shadows. 'Get stuffed, Scotty,' he said. 'We can all share. You'll be nice, won't you, Jude?'

Scott stopped breathing in mid-breath. Up until now he had been playing it by ear, letting the situation develop and waiting to see how it all panned out. But Eden was serious. He knew what he was doing. He really intended to go through

with this. In which case, Scott had to decide, somewhere in the next few seconds, whether he wanted to take the lead or whether he was going to make the other guys back off and leave Jude alone.

He was still thinking it through when Jude Martin clenched her hand into a fist and aimed a punch at his balls. Fortunately, it was a girl-punch with no power behind it, because girls never liked the idea of hurting anyone. Even more fortunately, Scott had great reflexes. He grabbed Jude's wrist before she could do any damage and slammed her arm back against the wall.

'Bitch!' he said, genuinely shocked. 'Now you're for it.'

Jude's eyes went round and hopeless. She slid down the wall, making Scott feel twice as tall and completely unstoppable. He held her in place while Eden lunged again, ripped her shirt open and pulled her bra up. A flash of secret skin in the shadows and the sound of all the guys sucking their breath in at the same time. Scott looked down and saw Jude Martin's bare breast and suddenly this wasn't something he had to go through with, in order to keep up with Eden: it was something he desperately wanted to do. And because he had been the first on the scene – and because he was the pack leader – he only needed to take another step forward, to make sure that he would be the first to do it, as well.

Jude whimpered – the only sound she'd made in a while, which showed how serious she was about getting away from them. Not that it mattered, because there wasn't anybody around who would have come running if she *had* yelled. Basically, they had it made. There was no need to rush. Scott shaped his hand into a cup and watched it glide through the air in slow motion, preparing to clamp over Jude's breast. He had never really fancied Jude Martin before but, now that he was just a few moves away from screwing her, his mind was wrapped so tight round the thought of her that no other thought could get in.

The voice got in, however. It was a woman's voice, with an American accent, so at first Scott thought he was imagining it.

'Hey,' it said, 'what's going on?'

When Scott looked round, Matt and Lockie and Tommo were shuffling to one side of the bus shelter. Behind them, an angel was spreading its white wings – or, rather, a woman in a white shirt was standing there, hands on hips.

'I said: what's going on here?' she repeated.

The guys all turned towards Scott, even Eden. That made sense, because, frankly, he was their best chance of talking their way out of the situation, but it was still sweet to see that "help me" look in Eden's eyes. Scott decided to go for arrogant, to begin with.

'Just having a bit of fun,' he said. 'Nothing to get excited about, unless you want to join in.'

The angel wasn't disconcerted by the implied threat. 'Five guys and one girl?' she said, going for the guts of it. 'I'd need to hear her say she's having fun, before I believed it.'

'I'm *not*,' Jude burst out.

As the angel smiled sorrowfully and wafted towards Jude, Matt Fahey crossed himself and got out of her way. Eden flattened himself against the wall of the bus shelter, as if he was trying to push through it and escape. Lockie muttered to himself, rehearsing his excuses. And Tommo, who had been brought up to believe that it was wrong to hurt a woman (unless she was a Martin), went to pieces, hanging his head and babbling, 'Sorry, miss. Sorry, Jude.'

But Sternes never backed down, not for anyone. Scott wasn't a fool. The angel didn't come from Lomond, so she wouldn't understand the part about Jude being a Martin and therefore fair game, but there were plenty of other points he could make.

'What's it to you, anyway?' he asked. 'Planning to do something about it?'

He found himself laughing at the idea, because there wasn't really anything the angel *could* do to put him in his place. He was very tall. He was Scott Sterne, footy hero, invincible ... although for some reason the angel didn't seem to get it.

'Yeah, sure,' she said. 'I'm planning to buy the kid a coffee and hear her side of the story. Come on, kid.'

She held out her hand and Jude Martin hung onto it like a lifeline, as the angel steered her past Tommo (red with shame) and Scott (white with fury), out of the bus shelter and into the street

'Who do you think you are?' Scott shouted after them. 'Who the hell do you think you are?'

'Me?' the angel said. 'I'm Lucy Dove.'

Scott stared. 'No way. The Doves are history. Old Miss Dove, she's the last of them. Everybody knows that.'

'So everybody's wrong,' said Lucy Dove. 'I've been away but now I'm back. Not before time, by the look of things.'

She walked away, with one white wing folded around Jude Martin. When Scott looked back, Matt had vanished, Lockie was muttering about it not being his fault and Tommo was making a beeline for his bike, which was chained to the post outside his dad's shop on the opposite side of the road. Eden Parker was the only one who stood his ground, giving Scott a long assessing stare.

'Good on you,' he said. 'With a bit of luck, that'll be the end of it. But listen, if that lady really *is* one of the Doves, you may need to do a bit of damage control. The Doves always were a bunch of do-gooders. She might get off on taking Jude Martin's side.'

He nodded and strolled away, leaving the problem in Scott's hands. Scott turned back but, sure enough, while he had been talking to Eden, Lockie and Tommo had disappeared. He felt a sudden urge to sit down in the gutter and howl like a two year old. Okay, he'd won, in the sense that Eden had acknowledged his leadership, but it didn't seem to have done him a whole lot of good. His head ached, his groin ached and, if Eden was right, he could be in even bigger trouble soon - or right this minute, he thought, as a Land Rover pulled into the curb alongside him.

His uncle Doug leaned out of the passenger window, with Rob Sterne, Scott's father, half-visible behind him in the driver's seat. Scott sighed. His dad and his uncle acted like they were best mates but whenever they dropped the act, it became clear that they weren't too keen on each other. That made them a bit of a strain to be around, which wasn't what Scott needed just then.

'Heard the latest?' he said, getting in first. 'There's a new Dove in town. Name of Lucy, American accent, looks like she's in her mid-twenties.'

'Oh yeah, the grandniece,' Rob Sterne said, unimpressed. 'Doug tells me she turned up at the bedside just before the old lady died. A bloody nuisance. Now that Jack Wheaton's carked it, we were sure Dougie could get back onto the council again at the next election, maybe even be the mayor at long last – and with Sibyl Dove passing away as well, it looked like a dead cert. But this Lucy Dove character could just as easily decide to back a complete outsider like that Happy Valley fruitloop who's been talking about running for council – y'know, the one with the weird hippy name.'

'They've all got hippy names in Happy Valley,' Scott pointed out. 'Do you mean Raewyn Casey, the one that teaches art and French at school? Can't see many people in Lomond voting for her.'

Doug Sterne patted his brother on the shoulder and beamed up at Scott. 'Let's not go overboard,' he said, determinedly shifting the mood from pessimism to optimism. 'There's no need to assume that Lucy intends to stay in Lomond. I'll show her round for the next few days, butter her up and send her back where she came from. That should take care of things.'

'Yeah, well,' Scott said. 'Before you decide it's all sewn up, there's something I ought to tell you.'

He had forgotten how good his uncle was at reading tones of voice. Doug Sterne had levered the back door open with one hand and was pushing him towards the back seat with the other hand, while Scott was still deciding which parts of the story he wanted to tell and which ones he'd rather keep to himself.

'No need to let the whole street in on it,' Doug observed. 'Well, Scotty, what's the problem?'

Scott found himself telling the whole story, apart from the porno bits. While he talked, he kept an eye on his father and his uncle to see how they were reacting, although neither of their faces was easy to read. Doug Sterne had probably trained himself to be expressionless. After all, doctors weren't meant to cry when they gave you bad news or smirk while they were writing prescriptions for the pill - although Doug's face would never have given much away, because he looked like a frog in human form with pop-eyes, bulging cheeks and a fleshy pouch padding his throat.

Rob Sterne's face didn't give much away either but that was because he looked like one of the frontier types who used to feature on old cigarette ads. He was handsome in a rugged weatherbeaten way, with a tanned face, fair hair easing back from his forehead and pale blue eyes that looked as though they were used to checking out vast distances. When Scott had finished his story, he

went on gazing into the distance for a few seconds, before turning to grin at his son.

‘You had me going for a moment there, Scotty,’ he said. ‘Lucky it was only a Martin. She’s not going to kick up a dust.’

Doug shook his head so hard that his throat slapped his shirt collar. ‘Not so fast,’ he said. ‘You can’t be too careful these days. Lucy Dove’s been living in the States, remember, and they sue each other for breathing over there. She might try to talk the Martin girl into doing something stupid, like reporting the, um, incident to the Bayview cops. I’ll smooth things over, when I get in touch with Lucy tomorrow, but it might be smart to speak to her straight away, Rob. Don’t worry about me – I can jog home. Good for the heart, you know.’

He bounced out of the Land Rover and touched his Adidases ten times as a warm-up. Scott watched his dad watching Doug jog towards the roundabout, legs kicking galvanically. As Doug turned the corner, Rob’s jaw clenched and his hands tightened on the steering wheel, as if he wanted to start the car and get out of there, leaving everyone else in the lurch. Scott studied him for a few puzzled seconds and then realised, with an equivalent clench of his heart, that his dad was nervous about confronting Lucy Dove, because (another clench) his dad was shy.

That felt like something he had always known, on some level, and yet at the same time it was a revelation. For one thing, it answered a question Scott had been asking himself for ages - how come Doug the Frog was the family politician, when Rob looked way more like the leader type? And for another thing, it made him feel protective towards his father, for the first time he could remember. Rob looked totally in control most of the time but if he was actually shy underneath, there was something that Scott could do for him.

‘Come on, Dad,’ he said. ‘Uncle Doug knows his stuff. We better do what he says. Let’s go and get it over with, okay?’

Jude Martin had never been a big fan of The Caff, although she had wandered in once or twice, back when her mum was working fulltime at the Royal George. Frank had been as polite as he always was to everyone but his mum, Mrs Carretto, had always snapped at Jude like the sarky type of teacher. Some kids said Mrs Carretto snapped at everyone but, judging from a couple of clues that she had picked up, Jude thought it was possible that she copped an extra serve because Shelley had got off with Frank’s father, Big Frank, back in her wild days. If that was true, Jude sympathised with Mrs Carretto. She didn’t like being reminded of Shelley all the time, either. And if Mrs Carretto was just plain sarky, the result was still the same.

Jude Martin didn’t go where she wasn’t wanted: end of story.

Even when Serenity had dragged her back to The Caff, insisting that its coffee and general atmosphere were better than anything else in a hundred kay

radius, Jude still hadn't got the point. Everything at The Caff cost a bit more than at the fast food shop down the road and Jude didn't usually have a bit more to spend. But now, sitting in a circle of candlelight at one of the back tables, she had to admit she felt a lot safer than she would have felt in the neon glare of the fast food shop, where anyone could look through the window like a bug hunter looking into a specimen box.

Here in The Caff, the red and white curtains shut out the rest of the world and the warm smells of coffee and frothed milk and pizza dough wrapped themselves round Jude like a security blanket. Mrs Carretto was patting her hand, feeding her pieces of cake dunked in coffee and chatting away in Italian – long strings of words that lilted like a lullaby. People talked as if getting Alzheimers made you strange and scary but it seemed to have turned Mrs Carretto from a witch into everybody's ideal granma. She had such a comforting effect that Jude didn't even react when she looked up and saw Scott Sterne.

Admittedly, Scott was just a pale blur over by the door but, when she looked over her shoulder, Jude realised Scott's dad had just walked into The Caff as well. That made things even freakier. She shrank back into the shadows and watched him stride across the room and come to a halt in front of Lucy, who was sitting at the counter with Frank Carretto.

'Rob Sterne,' he announced. 'My boy Scott tells me he and his mates had a run-in with you just now. I thought I better come and sort out any misunderstanding.'

'That's big of you,' Lucy said, smiling up at him. 'Jude's had a tough time but it'll help if the guys apologise.'

Rob raised one hand like a traffic cop. 'Whoa!' he said. 'Hold on, lady. Scott doesn't have anything to apologise for. Maybe he got the wrong end of the stick but the Martin kid was asking for it, just the same.'

'Is that what your son told you?' Lucy asked. 'He must be kind of confused. Jude didn't ask five guys to bale her up in the bus shelter.'

'Not in so many words,' Rob agreed. 'But it isn't a matter of what she said - it's what she was doing, hanging round the streets at night. Nice girls don't act like that. Fact is, the Martins are trash. You'll be making a big mistake if you get mixed up with them.'

Jude leaned back and let the words sink in. As a matter of fact, it was a relief to hear that stuff said out loud, instead of dealing with the usual hints and implications. It also seemed appropriate that Rob had been the person who'd put it into words. Shelley had stories to tell about most of the guys in Lomond but whenever Rob's name came up, she just pinched her mouth shut. Jude figured that from primary school onwards, Shelley must've had to live with Rob Sterne acting superior and looking down on her, the way he was looking down at Lucy now.

'No, *you're* making the mistake, Mr Sterne,' Lucy said gently. 'I guess you'll see things differently, once you've had time to think it through. Goodbye for now.'

Rob Sterne scowled. 'Yeah, you're a Dove, all right,' he said. 'You can't fake that kind of born-to-rule act. Sorry, lady, I've got news for you. The Doves are finished here. Starting from today, Sibyl and the rest of you are history. You don't run this town any more.'

He swung away, shoulders hunched like an angry bull. When Jude turned to watch him go, she saw Scott staring at her from the doorway, as if the two of them still had unfinished business. For a second his stare threatened to drag her back into the bus shelter but then she remembered Lucy Dove rescuing her (proving that she was worth something) - although a second later she also remembered Rob Sterne slugging on her (proving that Lomond would never care what she was worth). The double whammy was too much. Jude slumped forward, resting her head on her arms, and listened to the Sternes' footsteps retreating into the street.

'So what makes that guy think he owns Lomond?' Lucy's voice said, somewhere in the middle distance

'His family did, once upon a time,' Frank Carretto pointed out. 'Well, half of Lomond, anyway - the half your family didn't own.'

'Uh-huh,' said Lucy. 'I guess that places Rob and his son. How about the other guys who were harassing Jude? Where do they fit in?'

Frank sighed. 'Scott's mates? Well, Lockie Conway's dad works for Rob Sterne. Matt Fahey's dad runs the pub and Matt's the youngest of four, the only one who was still living at home when his mum took off. Tommo Thompson's dad is the local butcher - he's always on Tommo's case about being overweight. And Eden Parker left school last year to work on his dad's property, which was a waste, because Jeff Parker's about to go broke, kicking and screaming every inch of the way. Scott and his mates act tough when they're in a group but they've all got their own problems.'

'And you know that, because you sit here and listen to them,' Lucy guessed. 'You're Lomond's unofficial social worker, right? Ever think of doing it for a living?'

'Good one,' Frank said, mildly surprised. 'As a matter of fact, I was going to be a priest, only it didn't work out. You could call me Lomond's unofficial confessor, except that I'm not real big on forgiving sins. When I said those boys had problems, I didn't mean -'

At that point Mrs Carretto fired off a louder and more peremptory round of Italian words that stopped Frank in mid-sentence. He listened to her, replied in Italian with a strong Australian accent and hurried over to Jude.

'Mum reckons it's time we stopped talking about the guys and started looking after you,' he said. 'She wants you to stay here for the night. We haven't got a spare room but -'

'Hey, don't stress,' said Lucy, coming to join them. 'They tell me there's dozens of rooms in Greataunt Sib's house. I'd be happy for Jude to sleep over.'

She smiled like a white-uniformed nurse beside the dentist's chair, making Jude feel safe. But, just as she was opening her mouth to say "yes", Mrs Carretto

rose to her feet and aimed her hand at Lucy, with the index finger and the little finger sticking out like devils' horns. Frank sidestepped and put his arm round his mother's shoulders.

'Sorry about that,' he said. 'The Alzheimers makes her nervy these days. She's not usually as relaxed as she was with you, Jude. If you can wait till I've calmed her down, I'll drive the two of you up to Dove House.'

'Not a problem,' said Lucy, tactfully moving out of Mrs Carretto's sightline. 'I could use some fresh air. We'll walk, if that's okay with you, Jude.'

Mrs Carretto insisted on giving Jude her second best rosary before she would let her leave, so they had to hang around till Frank found it, but five minutes later they were circling the roundabout and climbing the long, steep slope of Danville Road. They walked in a friendly but exhausted silence – one step, then one more and another after that, until the hill levelled out and Lucy paused at a pair of iron gates.

'Awesome,' she said, tilting her head back. 'Take a look at that.'

Dove House towered over them, a mansion made of the sandstone from the escarpment, so tall that it blocked out the sky. Its tiled roof was speckled with lichen; its windows were grey with cobwebs; its verandahs were heavy with cast iron lacework, moulded into a pattern of leaves and birds. Behind the iron railings, shaggy bushes and gum trees ran wild in the garden, adding to the shadows that leaked out from the walls. It looked as sombre as the old dark houses in ghost stories or horror movies. Jude shivered but beside her, Lucy clapped her hands and laughed like a kid at a surprise birthday party.

'Hilarious,' she said. 'I love it. And look what the neighbours have left us.'

She danced up the front path, pointed at the two casserole dishes waiting on the front step and produced an envelope containing a big iron key from her shoulder bag. As she unlocked the door and stepped inside, Jude whistled softly. Dove House was so grand that it had an entrance hall with wood panelling and a floor of diamond-shaped tiles, although she couldn't actually see most of the tiles, because they were covered by a heap of rubbish.

'Oh, no!' Lucy wailed. 'I don't believe it! Sib's only been dead a few hours and someone's trashed the place already.'

She clutched Jude's arm with one hand and shaded her eyes with the other, as if the sight of the wreckage was spinning her out. Jude found herself wanting to protect Lucy from the vandals, the way Lucy had protected her from Scott's gang.

'Don't look,' she said. 'Go back outside. I'll give you a yell when I've tidied up.'

Lucy protested but Jude chased her out and got to work. It turned out to be easier than she expected. After she had dragged both halves of a splintered pole out of the mess, the only things left were two velvet curtains that looked as though they had been hanging in front of the long stained glass window at the side of the hall. Then, while she was spreading out the curtains and folding them into neat bundles, she uncovered a chalk drawing on the tiles beneath them.

A drawing of a five-pointed star inside a circle, with a smudged gap on one side of the circle.

A picture took shape in Jude's mind – someone inside the circle doing a Wiccan-style ritual and getting overcome by magic fumes or whatever, staggering out of the circle, grabbing the curtains for support and pulling them down on top of everything. For some reason, that idea scared her more than the idea of kids breaking in to wreck the house. She had to switch on all the lights she could find before she could go down the corridor to the kitchen for a bucket and a mop. After that, she scrubbed at the chalk marks till the tiles squeaked and her arms tingled.

'All done now,' she called. 'You can come back in.'

'You're a hero,' Lucy said, appearing in the doorway with a casserole in each hand. 'Come on, let's explore.'

They rampaged through the house, upstairs and downstairs and out to the back verandah, moving fast enough to stay a few steps ahead of Jude's leftover fears. Most of the rooms had a musty smell and a fine coating of dust, like icing sugar on an old-fashioned sponge cake. It looked as though Sibyl Dove had mostly lived in the smaller lounge room and her bedroom upstairs.

'We'll haul Sib's mattress down to the lounge, so we don't have to worry about ghosts,' Lucy said with a grin. 'You can sleep there and I'll sleep on the couch. Oh wow, and we've got those casseroles and some chocolate biscuits I bought at The Caff. Let's have ourselves a midnight feast.'

For half a second Jude wondered whether having a midnight feast would feel too weird, when one of them had nearly been raped an hour ago and the other one's greataunt had died an hour before that. But half a second later, she decided it was the best thing they could possibly do. She smiled at Lucy, who was rolling up her white sleeves like ... no, not like a nurse, the way she'd thought before. Like something else, something similar but different. Jude activated the search function in her memory, clicked on half a dozen images and decided that Lucy Dove reminded her of that incredibly glamorous actress who had done a famous commercial for – would you believe – Mother's Day.

Mother'sDay?

Her breath caught in her throat. It was like a revelation. Even though Shelley could - and did - tell the story of her birth, from the first contraction to the nineteenth hour of labour, Jude had always been secretly convinced that she was adopted.

Now she knew for sure that Lucy Dove was her secret mother.

Three

To everybody's relief, the next day was comparatively peaceful. Doug Sterne cancelled all his surgery appointments and arrived on the doorstep of Dove House at nine a.m., offering to show Lucy round Lomond. By the middle of Friday morning Lucy had read the inscription on the war memorial, admired the park beside the community hall at the far end of the main street and driven up the coast road to Bayview, where she finalised the arrangements for her great-aunt's funeral, handed over a letter from Sibyl Dove to the family lawyer, who agreed to give her immediate access to Sibyl's bank account, and bought herself an EA Ford.

Now she was sitting in the staff room of Bayview/Lomond Secondary College, looking down into the schoolyard, half in sunlight, the other half shadowed by the towers of holiday flats that lined the Bayview shorefront. On the opposite side of the table, Doug Sterne was trying to talk the principal into voting for him in the council elections, while the principal tried to talk Doug into allocating some of the council budget to the school's new gym. Lucy smiled politely at both of them every now and then, pretending to listen, although actually she was watching a tall girl with fluffy ginger hair kick a curl of dried orange peel across the yard.

There was something about the girl that attracted and held her attention. Lucy wondered who she was and where she fitted in.

It was a bummer that Jude was home sick, Serenity was thinking. She relied on Jude, even though she could be prickly at times. Serenity would have made friends with her even if Jude hadn't lived down the road, because she could see, right from day one, that Jude wasn't prepared to suck up to the Bayview crowd or the Lomond clique – the kids who caught the school bus to Bayview and hung together for the rest of the day. She and Jude were both outsiders and that suited Serenity just fine. She was a city girl, trapped in the country. She didn't want to become an insider here.

The piece of orange peel that she was kicking skittered across the asphalt, bounced off a pair of high-top trainers and landed on their trailing laces. Serenity looked up to see Scott Sterne grinning at her. He kicked the piece of peel into the air, caught it and threw it away.

'Don't often get a chance to talk to you on your own,' he said. 'Where's your little shadow?'

'You mean Jude?' Serenity said. 'She rang me first thing this morning to say she'd be staying home. Reckons she picked up some sort of bug last night.'

Scott's head jerked back a fraction, as though she had swung a punch at him. A weird reaction. This place was full of them. Serenity was convinced she would never understand the way things worked here. Then again, she wasn't trying too hard. The minute her year 12 exams were over, she would be out of Lomond so fast that she would run down anyone who was standing in her way.

'Katie's over at the basketball hoops,' she told Scott, to get rid of him.

As far as Serenity was concerned, Katie Brewster was the female version of Scott Sterne – next year's designated head prefect, sporty and popular, the ultimate insider and (if you believed the gossip) practically engaged to Scott. Katie was smarter than him, though, the only other kid in year 11 who could give Serenity and Jude a run for their money. She waited for Scott to take off after his girlfriend but he just pushed some wheat-blond hair out of his eyes and let his grin widen.

'I know where Katie is,' he said. 'I wanted to talk to you.'

For a moment Serenity wondered whether he was coming on to her. Nah, not possible. Not Scott Sterne. Besides, he wasn't her type. Her mind went time-travelling back to her old school - specifically, to Zac Moretti's dark eyes with their impossibly long lashes; Zac's olive-pale skin and crest of black hair, tipped with blue; Zac's black jeans stretched tight across the world's most impressive arse. Serenity blushed and sighed. If she could've hung around for another year, Zac might finally have noticed her – "might" being the operative word, after bloody Caro had dragged her off to the back of beyond. Now Zac Moretti was a hundred kays away and Scott Sterne was standing right next to her.

'Okay, talk,' said Serenity.

It was worth a try, after all. The guy might have said something interesting. But he didn't. He said, 'What's it like, living in the city?'

Serenity wished she had a dollar for every time someone in Lomond had asked that question. By now, she would be rich enough to catch the train back to Sydney and rent a flat on her own for the next six months.

'It's big,' she said, the way she always did. 'More fun. More happening. More different kinds of people.'

'Ah, people are the same everywhere,' said Scott.

That showed how much he knew. Serenity decided she was bored.

'Sorry, gotta go and find my cousin,' she said. 'It's his first day at school today.'

'How come he's living with you now?' Scott asked.

'Dunno,' Serenity said, which was true, although it sounded like a brush-off. Since she didn't care if Scott thought it *was* a brush-off, there was no point in explaining, so she just added, 'See you round, okay.'

Scott narrowed his eyes like a doctor making a diagnosis. 'Bad mood, eh?' he said, suggesting that he mightn't be quite as thick as she had thought. 'That's cool, Ren. I'll catch you later.'

He turned away, walking out on her before she could walk out on him. As he headed across the yard, Serenity noticed that his arse was just as cute as Zac Moretti's. He had called her 'Ren' too and she always liked that. On the other hand, he still wasn't her type and she still didn't want to get involved with anyone who lived in Lomond, so she stopped eyeballing Scott's arse and looked around for Daniel.

There weren't many short muscular guys with black cockatoo hair in the schoolyard. Serenity found him straight away, under the trees by the side fence, listening to Orion Casey. After doing a quick sum in her head, she realised the two of them had probably ended up in the same class because Orion was a total smartarse, even though he was two years younger than Daniel. Still, that was no excuse for hanging with Orion between classes. The kid was a complete loser. Serenity mightn't care what Lomond thought of her but she was not - repeat, not - going to be seen in public with *him*.

It was time to take evasive action, before Daniel spotted her. The words *basketball hoops* echoed from the back of her brain and she drifted off in that direction. She was looking for something else to kick when Katie Brewster waved to her.

'Serenity!' she called. 'You're tall. Come and show us what you can do with this ball.'

Serenity wondered whether Katie had seen her with Scott and decided to buddy up, as a way of keeping an eye on the competition. Then she changed her mind. Katie Brewster didn't think like that. She was just terminally nice, was all.

'Chuck it over,' Serenity called, holding her hands high. She caught the ball, dodged, feinted, leapt and dropped it neatly through the hoop.

'Easy,' she said with the best smile the schoolyard had seen on her face so far. 'What next? Make it hard for me, why don't you?'

Lucy Dove edged her chair away from the table, so she could get a better view of the schoolyard. The boys spread out across the middle of the yard like the Milky Way and the girls clustered round the edge in twos and threes like constellations, except for a bunch of girls who were tossing a basketball about. The orange peel girl was one of the players. When she scored a goal, Lucy felt as proud as if they were related.

She looked round the yard and realised that she wasn't the only person watching the girl. In fact, the kid seemed to be one of the main centres of attention. All the girls on the basketball court were focused on her, of course. A smaller kid with frizzy yellow curls was jumping up and down on the sidelines, visibly shrieking encouragement, although Lucy couldn't actually hear anything through the glass. A tall blond guy, handsome as a male model, had propped himself against the wall near the court, at a carefully chosen angle which allowed him to watch the girl, without being too obvious about it.

And over by the fence, the stocky young guy that Lucy had met on the platform of the Lomond station – Daniel, wasn't it? – had fixed his eyes on the orange peel girl with such aching concentration that Lucy had to look away. It had been fun to watch everyone from above, like an old-fashioned god, but she couldn't keep on watching without getting involved.

And getting involved usually spoiled the fun.

Orion Casey had spent the first half of the break telling Daniel Matheson about solar power, Australian artists and his latest passion - a long poem by T.S. Eliot called *The Waste Land* - but Daniel's eyes kept shifting away, as if he was searching for something. That bothered Orion. He had decided last night that, even though he had a bunch of online friends already, he needed another Real Life friend.

After Orion's last RL friend's family had moved back to Sydney, Dylan Parker had seemed like a natural choice for his next friend but that plan came up against a few problems. For one thing, Dylan was away two days in every five, because of his allergies, and for another thing, he backed off the minute Lockie and Tommo started calling him "Orion Casey's new boyfriend". Orion had tried being a loner for the next few months but every time he settled down in a quiet corner of the schoolyard to read during the breaks, someone always came over to hassle him.

A bodyguard was the obvious solution and Daniel looked as though he would make a good one. He wasn't tall but he had serious muscle and he sounded quite intelligent, so it wouldn't be too boring to spend time with him. Orion tried to think of a way to hold Daniel's attention and remembered a piece of

advice his mother had given him: 'Try asking questions, Orion. It makes you look as if you're interested.'

'So, Daniel,' he said, 'what was the *real* reason for the American Civil War?'

It worked. (Raewyn's advice often did, which was why Orion had made a note of it.)

'Well, most people think the war was about ending slavery,' Daniel told him. 'But in my opinion the real problem was that the North wanted to move with the times and the South wanted to stick with the old way of doing things ...'

Then he vagued out again. Orion followed the direction of his eyes and saw Serenity Cox scowling at them. As she turned away, heading for the basketball court, Daniel let his breath out in what was probably supposed to be a secret sigh. It looked as if he had a crush on his cousin. Orion could sympathise with that, because he was in a similar situation himself. Even better, Serenity didn't seem to be equally keen on Daniel, which meant that Daniel would need a friend.

'Come on,' he said. 'You're not concentrating, Dan. You've read heaps about the Civil War and I really want to *know* -'

To his embarrassment, he choked on the last word and started coughing. It had been a mistake to talk so much. His throat had dried out, which was a side effect of his asthma medication – not one of the usual side effects but Orion always seemed to react differently to other people, even where medication was concerned.

'Hold on, I'll be back,' he croaked and raced for the tap over by the toilet block.

But before he could even swallow his first mouthful of water, someone pushed him away. Orion turned and saw a bulky bull-necked guy with a number one haircut standing over him, accompanied by a ferret-faced guy with an overbite that gave him a particularly nasty grin.

'Can't you wait for your turn?' he said. 'I won't be long.'

In reply, the bull hoisted his arm and shoved Orion towards the ferret, who giggled and shoved back. Orion went limp (another trick his mother had taught him) and let Tommo Thompson and Lockie Conway bounce him back and forth.

'Why are you - doing this?' he said, between shoves. 'I didn't - insult you. I just asked - why you couldn't - wait for your turn.'

'What makes you think we need a reason to bash you?' said Tommo and Lockie added, 'Jesus, you're such a girl.'

'Is that meant - to be an insult?' Orion asked. 'I like - girls. Don't you?'

Asking questions seemed to have worked on the bullies, to a limited degree. They didn't actually go away and leave him alone but at least they stopped shoving him.

'Shut your face, Casey,' said Tommo and Lockie said, 'No one gives a fuck, 'cause you're such a little fag.'

That didn't make sense at first but suddenly Orion got it. 'Homophobia!' he said, feeling better now that he had a word for what was going on. 'I was reading about that last week on an LGBT website. But listen, what makes you think I'm gay? As a matter of fact, I've been in love with someone - with a girl - since I was eleven.'

'So?' Lockie said. 'You're still a fag.'

Orion sighed patiently. 'No, I'm not, Lockie. "Fag" is slang for homosexual, meaning someone who has an exclusive sexual preference for their own gender. If I'm a guy and I prefer girls, that makes me heterosexual, right?'

No answer. Oh well, Orion already knew that Tommo and Lockie weren't the kind of guys who would want to stand round in the yard analysing the causes of homophobia. On the other hand, he had enough belief in the powers of reason and logic to give it one more try.

'So what's with all the fag stuff?' he said. 'Are you anti-gay or do you just have a limited vocabulary?'

'Why, why, why?' Tommo burst out. 'You sound like my little cousin. She goes, "Why, why?" all the time, because she's only three years old. Here's a question for you, Casey. Why don't you grow up?'

Orion felt deeply disillusioned. It had happened to him before, so he knew he would recover, but he still hated being forced to acknowledge that other people didn't think about what they were saying.

'Oh, great,' he said. 'In other words, you reckon grown-ups don't ask questions. That is *so* not the way life ought to be. The more you find out, the more questions you ought to have. Here's a question for *you*. Were you born thick or do you have to work at it?'

Lockie and Tommo turned and looked at each other with puzzled frowns, as if they couldn't figure out why they were standing there and listening to him.

'The kid wanted a drink, remember,' Lockie said finally. 'Let's give him one.'

He pushed the tap lever. As the water spurted out, Tommo thumped Orion on the shoulders, bending him double, and Lockie grabbed a fistful of his hair and dragged his head towards the tap. Orion was wondering what a pacifist was supposed to do in this sort of situation when the guys yelled in unison and released him. He looked round cautiously and saw Daniel behind him, one hand twisted into the back of Tommo's t-shirt and the other clamped round the back of Lockie's neck.

'Ouch, that hurt' Orion said, rubbing his scalp. 'Hey, Daniel, my dad says Australians don't like people who think too much. I thought he was exaggerating but now I'm not so sure. What do you reckon?'

Daniel heaved, pushing Tommo and Lockie apart, and they flailed and struggled, until they realised that they were strangling themselves. 'Could we save it till later?' he said, dodging a punch from Tommo and a kick from Lockie. 'I need to work out what to do with these guys first.'

'Bang their heads together and knock them out,' Orion suggested. 'That'll make it safe to let go.'

'Orion Casey!' said a voice from behind them. 'I thought you were a pacifist.'

Daniel jumped and glanced over his shoulder and, in the process, lost his grip on Tommo and Lockie. Orion flinched and prepared to die but, to his amazement, the other two backed off.

'Just you wait, Casey,' Lockie muttered on his way past. 'We'll get you later, when there's no chicks to protect you.'

Orion turned round. Just as he had expected, his sister Maya was standing there, jogging on the spot and trying to look feisty, although he was slightly more surprised to see Serenity Cox beside her, holding a basketball.

'Thanks,' Daniel said, smiling at both of them. 'I have a feeling you might've just saved our lives.'

Maya marched over to Orion and started to check him for bruises. 'Turkeys!' she said. 'I hate guys who beat up on little kids, then go all soft in front of girls. We're meant to be equal these days - like, y'know, girls can fight too. I would've taken them on. *I'm* not a pacifist.'

'Well, *I'm* not a little kid,' Orion said, twisting out of her grasp. 'What's the matter with you, Maya? You sound like you actually want to go three rounds with Tommo and Lockie. Trust me, it's not a lot of fun.'

'I don't want them to bash me,' Maya explained. 'I just don't want them to not bash me because I'm a girl, if you see what I mean.'

'No, I don't see. You aren't making sense. Try that sentence again, without a double negative.'

'Ah, get stuffed, Orion. Why don't *you* try saying something without being a pain?'

Arguing with his sister was such a familiar process that Orion was able to put his mouth into automatic and keep on talking, while he eavesdropped on Daniel and Serenity. He wasn't sure how he felt about Serenity coming to Daniel's rescue. Maybe Daniel wouldn't be needing a friend, after all.

'Playing hero on your first day?' Serenity was saying. 'That was nice of you but it wasn't smart. Orion's pretty low on the cool factor. If it looks like you're siding with him, you'll never make any other friends.'

Daniel blinked. 'How about you, Ren? Do you side with the cool kids or what?'

'That's irrelevant,' said Serenity. 'I don't need friends, apart from Jude, because I'm not going to be here long. We aren't talking about me, Dan. We're talking about you.'

'I don't think I'm particularly cool either,' Daniel said. 'Never have been and it's too late to start now. Sorry if that's a problem.'

'Hey, I was just giving you some advice,' Serenity said. 'If you're not interested, I'll go away.'

She walked off, tossing and catching the ball. Daniel stood and stared after her, until Orion decided he'd better do something to distract him. He tugged

on the back of Daniel's t-shirt and held his hands out, studying the tremor in his fingers like a scientist studying a lab rat.

'Look, Dan,' he said. 'I'm shaking. Why? I wasn't *that* scared of Tommo and Lockie. I mean, they were only going to soak me, not slaughter me. How come I've got the shakes?'

'It's the "fight or flight" reflex,' Daniel informed him. 'When you get a danger alert, your body pumps in an extra dose of adrenalin. You didn't run and you didn't fight back, so you're in adrenalin overload.'

'Thanks, Dan, I didn't know that,' Orion said, filing the fact away for future reference. He examined his quivering fingers, sighed and said, 'Bodies are a nuisance. I wish I could be a brain in a jar, like those old horror movies on late night TV.'

'Well, you can't,' Maya said. 'You have to live in a body, same as everyone else. In case you hadn't noticed, the knee on your body happens to be bleeding. Sit down and let me stick a bandaid on it.'

When Orion let go of the tap, he wobbled and started to fold in half. Daniel scooped him up and carried him over to the nearest bench, dumped him there and looked down at him with a wry smile. It didn't take an IQ of 150 to work out what he was thinking. After that demonstration, the entire school would be convinced that he was on Orion's side. Orion smiled back contentedly.

If he had to have a friend – and it looked as though he did – he could do a lot worse than Daniel.

Lucy Dove's mobile rang, giving her an excuse to get up and walk away from the table, where Doug Sterne and the principal were still competing to see which of them could bore the other into making the first offer of support. She looked down into the school yard, where the orange peel girl was flamboyantly shooting goals from every angle of the court, while the others stood round and applauded. Lucy smiled. If she had grown up in Lomond, she liked to believe she would've turned out like the orange peel girl, although she had a sneaking suspicion that she might have ended up more like Jude.

'It's funny how, when you look at a crowd, you always pick out someone to identify with,' she said. 'I guess it's a way of imposing order on chaos. Do you know a tall girl with reddish hair, Jude?'

'Sounds like my best friend, Serenity Cox,' said Jude. 'Is she the one you picked out of a crowd? Psychic or what ... Hang on - seriously, is that how you knew it was me phoning you?'

'Sorry,' Lucy said, smiling into the phone. 'You're the only person who's got my mobile number, so it had to be you. I don't even have enough ESP to know why you called.'

'Oh, right. I slept in, so I didn't find your note till a few minutes ago, when Frank woke me up, banging on the front door. He's going to drive me home before he opens The Caff for the day. I just thought I'd ring and let you know.'

'Thanks,' said Lucy. 'Keep in touch, Jude, and have a nice day.'

Jude splashed water on her face, ran a comb through her hair and hurried out to the car. As they drove along the coast road, she couldn't help wondering whether Frank fancied Lucy Dove. It would make sense. Lucy was more his type than any of the other women in Lomond. Shelley reckoned she'd made a pass at Frank years ago but Frank wouldn't have a bar of it, probably because he was scared of what his mum would say.

Not that Shelley held that against him. After all, she was scared of her own mum. Jude's gran lived over in Bayview with husband number three but the Happy Valley house belonged to her, so she dropped in at regular intervals to sort them out. Everyone always heaved a sigh of relief when she went back to Bayview.

Thinking about her family made Jude feel exhausted and the dazzle of sunshine, reflecting off the waves, hurt her head. She closed her eyes and retreated into the dark empty space behind them. When she opened them again, the car was pulling up outside her house.

'Thanks for the lift,' she said. 'You're a hero, Frank.'

'Me? Hardly.' He paused and added, 'Listen, Jude, I've been thinking. I could use a bit of help with Mum and you two seemed to be getting on well last night. What do you reckon? It'd just mean sitting with her for a few hours after school, when things get really busy at The Caff. I'll give you the same rate of pay as the call centre.'

Jude bit the corners of her mouth to stop herself from grinning. Yeah, Frank had to be interested in Lucy. Why else would he go out of his way to take on the kid Lucy had just been defending? Still, that was fine by her. Anything that got her out of the call centre would be fine.

'Why not?' she said. 'Want me to start on Monday? Good, I'll see you then - and thanks again.'

Her eyes were still blurred with sleep, so she tripped three times on her way to the door, cursing Shane for shifting the stack of tyres and Britt for building a tin can fortress across the path and Apeman for leaving his workboots on the porch. She dropped her key and found it and let herself in. Everyone was watching a guns-and-car-chase video on the telly - 'everyone' meaning her stepdad Shane, his mate Apeman, her cousin Terry and Terry's mate Dave, plus her little sisters Britt and Shana, who weren't supposed to watch M-rated vids.

Jude tiptoed past the lounge room, although the gunshot and squealing brakes were so loud that nobody would have noticed if she had been wearing Apeman's boots. She steered round the tins of paint that had been blocking the

corridor for the last six months and went into the kitchen. Shelley was there, giving Anakin his morning feed. She looked up and ran a hand through her wild blonde perm.

‘Jesus!’ she said. ‘You gave me a shock! I forgot you weren’t going to school today.’ She looked harder, took a step forward and said, ‘Baby, what’s the matter?’

A second later Jude was in her mother’s arms, with Shelley holding on tight and Anakin blowing bubbles against her neck. She breathed in his yeasty little-kid smell and started to cry. Within five minutes Shelley had got the whole story out of her. She started pacing up and down the kitchen, her narrow face pale with fury, while Anakin bounced excitedly on her hip.

‘Fucking bastards!’ she said. ‘I’ll sic Shane and the others onto them. That’ll fix them - and Shane’ll get a kick out of it too. He’d do anything for you, Jude, even if you’re not his kid.’

Jude grabbed her arm. ‘No, don’t. Don’t, Mum, please. Honest. It’s like Lucy wanting me to tell the Bayview cops – it’d only make things a whole lot worse.’

Shelley tensed in her grasp. ‘Yeah, you got a point,’ she admitted. ‘The way people talk around here, it’d just turn into another story about those bloody Martins. Better keep it to ourselves, I guess.’ She sighed and stroked Jude’s hair, saying, ‘Life’s a bitch, right?’

‘Not always,’ Jude said. ‘Frank Carretto drove me home and offered me a job looking after his mum.’

‘So you can quit the call centre?’ Shelley said, cheering up straight away. ‘That’s great, Jude. The two of us in one night. Tell you what, I’m glad to see the back of the place. All that youth suicide stuff was getting me down. I kept thinking of all the young blokes from around here who’ve gone that way. I mean, you could sell a million pen sets every day and it still wouldn’t bring them back,

Jude thought about Leo Farrell, the supermarket manager’s oldest kid, and Darren Hopgood, the brother of Mike at the garage, and Johnno Taylor who had sat behind her in the first year at primary school. She’d liked Johnno. Well, she still liked him, even if he was dead.

‘Maybe this Suicide Prevention mob could’ve helped, if they’d been around then,’ she said, because that thought had kept her going on the really bad nights at the call centre.

‘Yeah, maybe...’ said Shelley, who didn’t believe in happy endings.

And maybe she was right. Jude knew that Shelley was smarter than her in some ways, although she was smarter than Shelley in different ways. Too different. It wasn’t easy, being different from your own family. She loved Shelley and the others but she still wished she was adopted and she still wanted Lucy Dove to be her secret mother.

Thirty kays down the road, in the staff room at Bayview/Lomond Secondary, Lucy was thinking about Jude as well. It looked as if she had found her first recruit already, at a point where she still didn't really know what she was recruiting for. Okay, she had promised to put Sibyl Dove's last wishes into effect but she wasn't sure how to go about it. Jude had seemed like a good omen, taking her straight into Lomond's secret places and confirming everything that Sibyl had warned her about. But now, in order to decide what to do and how to get the work done, Lucy needed another sign and other recruits.

She looked around and caught a last sighting of ginger hair as the orange peel girl crossed the yard and vanished into the school. Lucy's mouth twisted. The orange peel girl had been exactly the sort of kid she would've liked to recruit, so her disappearance felt like a bad omen. For a moment Lucy felt all the atoms in her body shift ominously, as if they were preparing to fly apart and scatter her across the countryside, leaving Doug Sterne to stare blankly at the empty space where she had been.

Then, with a violent effort of will, she dragged the atoms back together and followed Doug out of the staff room, telling herself she could afford to wait a little longer for her next sign.

As long as there was absolutely no chance of her mum overhearing, Serenity was prepared to admit that Bayview/Lomond Secondary was better than she had expected when Caro told her she was being exiled to Hicksville. A lot of her teachers came from Happy Valley – the history professor who had dropped out to write a novel; the permaculture bloke who took most of the year 11 and 12 science classes and the economist who'd had a nervous breakdown and moved to the country to recover – but Serenity's favourite teacher was married to one of the local farmers.

Rochelle Abrahams, called Rocky by everybody, had a face like a chimpanzee with sad brown eyes and a broad forehead and a long upper lip, although when she smiled, she looked as mischievous as a marmoset. Serenity actually looked forward to Rocky's lessons, so she was pissed off when she found out that her double science class had been cancelled because Dr Sterne, the local GP, was giving a talk to years 10 and 11.

By the time she got there, the back rows were full. Serenity looked around, remembering that Jude was away and wondering who she could bear to sit with. Daniel was over in the far corner, staring out of the window, with Orion beside him, reading a book under the desk. Scott Sterne sprawled across two desks, his long legs blocking the aisle, and Katie Brewster sat responsibly at the centre of the room, in the middle of the teachers' sightlines, with a notebook open in front of her. Serenity shook her head at all of them and went to sit in the front row on her own. She watched Rocky walk in, accompanied by a human frog in a

business suit and a woman wearing a white crop-top and a skirt like a length of white tubing.

'No, no, I won't need any help, Mrs Abrahams,' the frog was saying. 'Just sit in the audience with Lucy. I can get feedback from you afterwards.'

Rocky (who hated being called Mrs Abrahams) shrugged and left him to it. Serenity had been assuming that the principal must've invited Dr Sterne to give them a talk on Sex Education for Non-Beginners but within two seconds she realised he was practising his speech for the council elections. He began by droning on about how he was related to the old pioneers who had changed Lomond from a useless bit of bushland into a seriously rich sheep-farming town, like anybody cared.

'The pioneers were brave, determined men,' Dr Sterne droned, moving on to his second note card. 'If times got tough, they stiffened their spines and soldiered on. Unfortunately, there's not a lot of pioneering spirit left in the modern world. These days most people seem to be looking for easy solutions. Workers aren't interested in old-fashioned virtues like loyalty and getting the job done - they'd rather have money in their pockets and large screen TVs in their lounge rooms. Families used to stick together through thick and thin but now everyone rushes off for a quick fix divorce, at the first sign of trouble. Women are forced out into the work force, children are growing up without masculine influence and ...'

Serenity's fingers started to tap on the desk. At moments like this, she would normally have turned and swapped private grins with Jude. But Jude wasn't there, so her fingers drummed all the way across the desk, faster and faster, until her hand took off and soared into the air.

'Excuse me, Dr Sterne,' she said. 'What do you reckon my mum was supposed to do, after she and my dad split up? Are you saying she should've gone on a quick round of computer dating, so I'd have some of that masculine influence? Or -?'

'No, no,' Doug Sterne cut in. 'This isn't an individual problem. It's a social problem. In the old days divorce wasn't seen as the universal answer, so -'

'So people went on being miserable together for their entire lives,' Serenity said. 'Do you really think that was better?'

Doug's bullfrog throat puffed out in a gentle sigh. 'Do I think a stable home life's better for children? Yes, my dear, I'm afraid I do.'

'My home life wasn't exactly stable, when Mum and Dad were arguing all the time,' Serenity said. 'And some kids have it way worse - like, domestic violence and incest and that.'

Doug Sterne shuffled his note cards and sighed with relief, as if he had found his place again. 'Well, you see, that's another social problem. In the past, a young lady like you wouldn't have even known that those sorts of issues existed. But nowadays children spend half their lives in front of the television, where they're exposed to adult topics and opinions that aren't always suitable for young minds. I'd like to see all of you turn off your TV sets and -'

A chair grated across the floor and Tommo Thompson surged to his feet. 'Hang about, Dr Sterne,' he said. 'Are you saying the Lomond council wants to ban TV? I don't think that's such a great idea. I mean, some shows are, like, really educational. I watched this doco last week about these guys who climbed this mountain and -'

'Thank you, Tom, that's very interesting,' Doug Sterne said. 'I'm glad you enjoyed the documentary. But wouldn't it be even better to climb a mountain yourself, rather than just watching it on TV?'

Lockie Conway sniggered. 'No way known. Fatso Thompson would fall off the first ledge.'

Tommo punched him, Lockie punched Tommo and Doug Sterne pretended he hadn't noticed. He clutched his cards more firmly and went on with his speech.

'It isn't easy to be a young man in the twentieth century,' he said. 'Back in the pioneering days, young men were able to find an outlet for their high spirits by exploring the country or working as farmers and drovers and shearers. After that, Australian soldiers had the chance to prove themselves in two world wars, where the legendary Anzac spirit -'

'Huh?' Serenity said, so shocked that she couldn't wait to raise her hand. 'Are you saying we ought to keep having wars, just to give guys something to do? That's crazy. Watching action movies on telly or playing video games has to be better than *killing* people.'

'Good one, Ren,' Lockie chipped in. 'How about the council sets up a video arcade? I vote for DeathStalker - it's really sick. Pow pow pow-pow!'

He and Tommo started shooting each other with finger-guns. Doug Sterne couldn't pretend he hadn't seen that. He glanced at Rocky, silently pleading with her to intervene, but Rocky made it clear that she had decided to take him at his word when he'd asked her to stay out of it.

'Yes, well,' he said, looking nervously round the room, 'does anyone else have a question?'

'I do,' Katie Brewster said straight away. 'I'm writing an essay about reconciliation between Aborigines and white people and I was wondering how that fits with your pioneer stuff.'

Doug gave her a froggy smile. 'Good point, Katie,' he said. 'Although there's no need to go overboard about reconciliation. It's not really relevant to Lomond, remember, because there aren't any Aborigines here.'

Serenity's hand tapped twice and then flattened out on the desk. Dr Sterne was right, for a change. The only Aborigine she had met since she came to Lomond was Mick Bates and he was a Murri who had moved down to Happy Valley in the seventies, because black activists weren't exactly popular in Queensland then. Oh well, never mind, she was on a roll now. She would get Dr Sterne next time he said something stupid and, at the rate he was going, that shouldn't take long. She was settling back, watching Doug Sterne as intently a

seagull waiting for chips, when a voice cut through Tommo and Lockie's 'pow pow pow-pow' routine.

'Okay, Doug,' said Scott Sterne, 'what do *you* reckon us young guys should be doing?'

Silence spread across the room in long, slow ripples, the way it did whenever Scott took charge. Serenity grinned. This was more fun than she had expected. Everyone was teasing Dr Sterne now, although he didn't seem to have caught on yet. He gripped the lapels of his suit and frowned at the back wall, as though he was reading from an invisible cue card.

'Young men need challenge and adventure,' he said. 'That's a well-known biological fact. If they can't get it by battling against nature or fighting for their country, they're liable to turn to drugs or get themselves killed in road accidents and, in extreme cases, there's even the risk of youth suicide. So my job on the council is to restore the traditional values that made our country what it is, in order to ensure that our young men's potential isn't wasted.'

The echo of his words sank into an even deeper silence. Serenity looked round and saw Scott lolling in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head and his mouth clamped into a narrow line. With a shiver of surprise, she realised that Scott wasn't just stirring, like her and the others. It looked like he had actually been hoping for an answer.

'Yeah, right,' he said. 'In that case, maybe the council ought to back Lockie's video games arcade, after all.'

Lockie grinned triumphantly and shot Tommo again. Tommo swung his right arm up like an Uzi and sprayed imaginary bullets round the room. Most of the other guys joined in. Most of the girls yawned or said 'Gross' or went on with their homework. Dr Sterne yelled, 'Quiet, please' and 'All right, that's enough' and looked at Rocky Abrahams, begging for help.

'Only a few minutes left,' Rocky said. 'Time for one more question.'

Serenity was already leaning forward like a runner on the blocks. As her hand shot up, Doug Sterne's pop-eyes blinked nervously. He needn't have worried, though. Serenity wasn't stirring any more. She wanted to ask a real question this time, the way Scott had done.

'Dr Sterne, you keep talking about families and what guys are like,' she said. 'I don't get it. How does that relate to the Bayview/Lomond council? Aren't councils just on about, like, fixing roads and stuff?'

'We look after that side of things too, of course,' Doug said, looking relieved. 'But the council is also responsible for the moral and psychological health of this community. If we want to remain stable, we have to develop policies that slow down the rate of change. We don't want to go overboard ...'

The siren hooted and everyone grabbed their bags and went stampeding out the door. But in the two-second gap between the siren and the stampede, Serenity heard a voice say, 'Don't we?' Not Scott's voice this time but a stranger's voice, coming from the front of the class room. Serenity turned and found herself staring at the woman in white. As their eyes connected, the woman

raised her hand in an almost invisible salute, like a secret password that only the two of them knew. Serenity's eyes widened. She followed the woman out of the room and hovered beside her when she joined Rocky and Doug Sterne.

'Your kids are quite a challenge, Rocky,' Doug was saying, while he dabbed his forehead with a folded white hanky. 'Still, I think I got the message across in the end.'

He tugged his suit coat into place and went bustling off to his car. The woman in white laughed.

'Dr Sterne's supposed to be showing me round the area,' she said, letting Rocky and Serenity in on the joke. 'Just watch. In a few seconds he'll realise he's left me behind.'

Sure enough, at that moment Doug Sterne swung back, gestured to her and called, 'Come along, Lucy.' The woman in white paused to say goodbye to Rocky and Serenity before strolling over to him. Heads turned, faster than a row of falling dominos, as she crossed the yard. Somehow she seemed to compel people's attention, even before they knew why she was important – although, having seen the way Doug Sterne behaved around her, Serenity felt sure that the woman in white *was* important. As a matter of fact, she looked like the nearest thing to a celebrity that Serenity had ever seen in real life. A sudden impulse propelled her into standing on tiptoe and waving frantically, to catch the woman's eye.

'Go, Lucy,' she yelled, loud as a footy fan. 'See you around.'

On the opposite side of the yard, Lucy Dove thought: *Yes! My sign at last – and it has to be a good omen, coming from Orange Peel Girl. 'Go, Lucy.' That should be enough to keep me going for another day*

And, hopefully, by that time I'll know what Sibyl wants me to do.

Four

The Lomond community hall was packed to overflowing. Rows of folding seats had been dragged out of the store room and Rocky Abrahams had driven over from the school in a ute loaded with stackable plastic chairs but still people filled the aisles and crowded together at the back of the hall.

The first row was reserved for people who had known Sibyl Dove all her life – a dozen old women dressed in black, their hats decorated with veils or curly feathers, and half a dozen old men in suits that would have been showcased by a costume museum. Behind them sat the Lomond establishment, who had arrived early to make sure that their place in the hall reflected their importance – Rob Sterne, representing the other founding family of Lomond; Doug Sterne, the town doctor; Dick Brewster, editor of the *Lomond Star*; Marion Fitzgerald, principal of the Bayview/Lomond Secondary College; Matron Gillian Larch, keeping an eye on her patients in the row ahead; Marie Boyle, president of the Central North Coast branch of the New South Wales Country Women's Association; and Sibyl Dove's only surviving relative in the area, Norm Kelly, looking round at regular intervals, to see whether anyone was going to challenge his right to sit there among the elite.

The rest of the audience had to take what they could get. Farmers' sons and daughters gave up their seats to couples from Melbourne and Sydney who had retired and come to live in one of Jack Wheaton's houses. Second generation hippies from Happy Valley, wearing black gipsy skirts and pirate

shirts, stood shoulder to shoulder with Lomond shop keepers in navy blue suits, bought for the occasion from the Bayview mall.

At the front of the hall, an old table had been turned into an altar by the addition of a heavy white and gold damask cloth, two candlesticks and an elaborate gold cross. All the churches in Lomond had closed down twenty years ago but Colin Mayhew, the Anglican minister from Bayview, was familiar with the set-up at the Lomond community hall, because he held a service there every third Sunday, alternating with a Uniting Church minister and a Catholic priest. He checked to make sure the congregation had settled down, gave the signal to stand and waited for the foot-shuffling to fade away.

‘“I am the resurrection and the life”,’ he began. ‘“He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die”.’

As the words echoed round the hall, Colin Mayhew had a sudden, unnerving memory of Sibyl Dove’s bright, sceptical gaze directed at him from the front row of other funeral services, as if she’d had her own private opinions about life after death, which didn’t match the views of the Anglican Church. Oh well, at least Miss Dove had come to church, which was an improvement on conducting funeral services for people he had never met. Colin cued the Bayview/Lomond Secondary music teacher to play a chord on the piano, activating the school choir, who sang:

*‘I lift up my eyes to the hills:
but where shall I find help?’*

He watched a series of irregular white lines zigzag across the hall like lightning flashes, as people pulled out hankies and tissues. One more reading – from 1st Corinthians, he thought, to show Sibyl Dove what the Bible had to say about resurrection – and then it would be time for his sermon. Colin had intended to warn the people of Lomond about the importance of putting their trust in God, not in the cranky old woman who had run their town for twenty years by sheer force of will, but last night he had changed his mind and decided to praise Sibyl Dove’s works here on earth. She might have been an old bat but even so, she deserved a good send-off.

As a matter of fact, he was going to miss her.

Funerals weren’t Serenity Cox’s sort of thing. Caro had totally bullied her into being there. ‘It’s a sign of respect,’ she had said with unusual firmness and she’d kept on saying it, no matter how good Serenity’s arguments got, so here they were, listening to the school choir sing, ‘Abide with Me’. According to the handout that Serenity had collected on her way in, that was the end of the service, which worked for her. Caro was sniffing away, probably thinking about her dead

boyfriend, Jack Wheaton – *his* funeral had been in Sydney, because his ex-wife and their kids lived there – but Serenity was bored out of her brain. She couldn't understand why people went on and on about death. Okay, it wasn't something she was looking forward to but she didn't see the point of stressing about it in advance.

The choir finished the hymn and the minister said grace or whatever, then disappeared into the store room, to mark the end of the service. A bunch of year 12 boys started to clear away the folding chairs, under the direction of Rocky Abrahams, and a woman dressed in white rose up at the far end of the front row. *The woman in white*, actually – the one Serenity had fixated on at the end of Dr Sterne's speech. Everyone was staring at her, same as yesterday, but there was a strange sort of vacuum around her, as if people were afraid to get too close. Serenity dared herself to smile and wave and, with a combination of triumph and terror, watched the woman smile and wave in return.

'Omigod,' she whispered, clutching Caro's arm. 'She's coming over. Quick, tell me - am I supposed to know who she is?'

'Weren't you listening to Finn last night?' Caro asked. 'She's Lucy Dove, Sibyl Dove's greatniece.'

The world went into slow motion. Serenity had time to notice everything that was going on – the vicar folding the altar cloth, a group of men setting up trestle tables and an urn on the other side of the hall, a group of women covering the trestles with white cloths and plates of cakes or sandwiches. She could hear everything people were saying too - 'A great loss'; 'Yes, Lomond will miss her'; 'It won't be the same without Miss Dove'; 'The last of the old guard.' And she could sense that everybody in the hall was watching her, Serenity Cox, to see why the star of the show had singled her out.

Because the woman in white *was* a celebrity, just like she'd thought.

Then Lucy Dove was standing beside her, saying, 'You were at the school yesterday, weren't you? Thanks for coming along.' She noticed Serenity's admiring glance at her long, body-hugging white jacket and skirt and added, 'Oh sure, I know. I ought to be dressed in black. Doug Sterne offered to rustle up something but I prefer my own clothes, so I told him white's the colour of mourning in India – which, as it happens, *is* a true fact.'

'Yeah, well, you look amazing,' Serenity said. 'Like, totally amazing, y'know.'

She could hear herself gushing, although she normally despised gushers. Then she followed it up by introducing Lucy to her mum, as if, underneath all the dramas, she still thought Caro was a big deal. That meant she'd embarrassed herself twice in five seconds, which had to be a personal best. Serenity gave up and retired into the background, leaving her mum to say all the right things, including the offer of a cup of tea. When Lucy accepted the offer, Caro went off to fetch the tea and passed Lucy on to Finn Casey, who preferred to say all the wrong things.

‘Nice to meet you ... at last,’ he said. ‘Why didn’t you come back for a visit while your greataunt was alive?’

Serenity wanted to jump in and defend Lucy but she was convinced she would only say something stupid. Fortunately, Lucy just twinkled at Finn, like the star she was, and murmured, ‘Oh, I had my reasons.’

‘For goodness sake, Finn!’ Raewyn cut in. ‘Stop interrogating the poor woman. In case you’ve forgotten, it’s her greataunt’s funeral.’

Finn looked from Raewyn to Lucy with the mischief-making glint still bright in his eyes. ‘Ms Dove, let me introduce my wife,’ he said. ‘Sibyl was going to back Raewyn as a candidate for the Lomond ward in the council election next month.’

Raewyn frowned at him. ‘Finn’s exaggerating, as usual,’ she told Lucy. ‘Miss Dove and I had a couple of preliminary conversations, that’s all. I’ve been thinking about getting involved in local politics – “Think globally, act locally”, as they say – and after Jack Wheaton’s death Sibyl needed someone to represent her point of view on the council but honestly, the whole idea was still in the planning stages. You mustn’t feel obliged to support me – if you’re even staying on in Lomond, that is.’

‘What’s there to stay for? This town’s on the skids,’ Finn said, exaggerating, as usual. ‘The sheep farmers are going down and taking the rest of us with them. Mind you, we deserve it. Two hundred years of ringbarking the gum trees and fencing off the sacred sites, so our ancestors could run sheep and cattle all over the country, and now – surprise, surprise - the rest of the world’s lost interest in woolly jumpers and juicy steaks. Frankly, my advice is to quit while you’re ahead.’

‘Sorry, I never take advice,’ said Lucy. ‘I guess I must be kind of ornery. I’ve already been told to get out of town but it just made me a whole lot keener to hang in there.’

She turned and stared at the far corner beside the double doors at the entrance of the hall. Serenity angled her head the same way, to see who’d told Lucy to leave town, but she was distracted by the sight of Scott Sterne, looking almost scarily adult in an actual *suit*. She had never seen Zac Moretti in a suit but she felt sure he couldn’t have looked more edible. Her tongue slid out to moisten her lips and at that exact moment Scott’s eyes met hers, amused and appreciative.

As she looked away, trying not to blush, Finn let out a crack of laughter. ‘You should think about standing for council yourself, Lucy,’ he said. ‘If you went for the Lomond ward, you’d be going up against one of the Sternes, y’know.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t do that,’ Lucy said. ‘Not if your wife –’

Raewyn settled her black kurta into place with a businesslike tug that sent half a dozen Native American silver bangles tinkling down her wrist. As she and Finn started to talk at the same time, Serenity sighed regretfully. There went her last chance of any one-on-one conversation with the local celebrity. Raewyn had a thing about politics and Finn loved making mischief, so they would probably

monopolise Lucy forever. She might as well give up now, instead of hanging round like a loser.

She took a last look at Lucy Dove, noticing for the first time that Lucy seemed less shiny and perfect than yesterday. Okay, the white suit was fantastic but Lucy's face looked pale and shadowy, like those old negatives that reversed the black and white parts of black-and-white photos. Serenity hesitated, wondering for a brief, improbable moment whether Lucy might actually need some sort of help from someone: possibly even from her. Then she reminded herself that she wasn't supposed to get involved with anybody in Lomond and went off to take a look at the display of cakes.

And maybe – just maybe – to take another look at Scott Sterne.

Katie Brewster was sixteen but she had watched Sibyl Dove's funeral service from the point of view of an eighty year old. All the wrinklies on her corridor at the Lomond District Aged Care Facility had talked about nothing else for the last two days. While half of Lomond was lining up to tell the Reverend Colin Mayhew how lovely his sermon had been, Katie was sitting with her old men and women, listening to them complain that the service had been held in a hall, not a proper church, and in modern English, not the old-fashioned language in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder and she turned round to see Matron behind her. 'Sorry, Katie, I know you're off duty but some of Miss Dove's old mates want to have a word with her grandniece,' she said. 'Could you nick across and fetch her for me?'

Katie looked around the hall without any success, remembered how small Lucy was and climbed onto the nearest chair. After that, it was easy, because everybody was dressed in dark colours, except for Lucy Dove, who shone like a star at midnight. Katie went over to her and waited, silently but with next-year's-head-prefect authority, until Finn and Raewyn Casey stopped talking. She passed on Matron's message and steered Lucy to the front of the hall, then stood back and watched Lucy move along the row of old men and women, listening politely to incomprehensible stories and answering the same questions over and over again.

As Lucy leant towards Mrs Sandford, the oldest woman in the home, a flash went off behind her. For a surreal second Katie was convinced that the intense white glow came from Lucy herself, illuminating Mrs Sandford and showing Katie how it felt to be so old that you would probably never find out what your great-grandchildren were going to do after they left school – or whether the Liberal Party would win again in the next elections – or even how *Buffy* was going end.

Then her dad stepped forward, brandishing his camera. 'Hope you didn't mind the flash,' he said. 'I couldn't resist that photo opportunity. Miss Dove – or

do you prefer “Ms”? – I’m Dick Brewster, the editor, chief reporter and photographer of the *Lomond Star*. Tell me, what do you think of our town so far?’

‘I’ve been here two days, Dick,’ said Lucy. ‘I just bet you’ve lived here most of your life. Wouldn’t it make more sense for me to ask what *you* think of Lomond?’

‘Who interviews the interviewer, eh?’ he said with a grin. ‘You’ve got me there, Ms Dove. What do you want to know?’

‘Everything,’ Lucy said. ‘But I’ll start by asking why this place seems to expect so damned much from anybody called Dove.’

Dick Brewster rolled his eyes. ‘You don’t know what you’re letting yourself in for. It all goes back to the 1850s when - but I’ll get Katie to fill you on that part of the story, while I go and get us something from the buffet.’ He tapped Katie on the shoulder, the way Matron had done, saying, ‘You’ve met my daughter, haven’t you, Lucy? She’s going to take over the *Star* when I retire, marry Rob Sterne’s boy and run this town the way it ought to be run. Rob and I call it the Sterne & Brewster Merger Scheme.’

He laughed, to show he wasn’t really serious, but Lucy Dove didn’t join in. Instead, she gave Katie a strange, almost pitying look, as if she felt sorry for anyone who was forced to associate with Scott Sterne. Katie wanted to explain that the scheme was just something that Rob and her dad joked about whenever they met up at weddings or funeral - but, come to think of it, she and Scott had been going out together since they were thirteen, so their dads’ jokes seemed to have much the same effect as arranged marriages in other cultures.

Besides, Lucy had only been in Lomond for three days and she probably hadn’t come across Scott yet. She must’ve had some other reason to feel sorry for Katie. Maybe Lucy pitied her for having a dad who bossed her around and never asked whether she wanted to spend the rest of her life working on the *Star* and having kids with Scott and ruling Lomond benevolently for ever and ever, amen. For a moment Katie was tempted to ask Lucy where she got her clothes, instead of following her dad’s orders, but that impulse was cancelled by an equally strong urge to answer any question Lucy wanted to ask.

‘Like Dad told you, it all started around 1858,’ she said. ‘That’s when these two sheep-lifters happened to climb down the escarpment, to get away from some troopers who were after them. They looked around and realised they’d found a nice little pozy, cut off from the rest of the world - the perfect place to hide the sheep they’d stolen from further inland. Back in those days the rules were still pretty flexible and over the next few decades the sheep-lifters split the valley between them and set themselves up as respectable graziers.’

Lucy laughed. ‘Oh, wow,’ she said. ‘So the original Dove and Sterne were a couple of criminals. I love it.’

Katie grinned back but, before she got a chance to say anything, her dad appeared behind them. ‘Don’t mention that around Doug Sterne,’ he warned Lucy. ‘He won’t thank you for the reminder that he’s descended from sheep-lifters. Once they stopped stealing sheep, the Sternes became a pretty

conservative lot. They're big on working hard, keeping their noses down and doing as they're told.'

'And what about my lot?' Lucy asked with a smile.

'Oh, the complete opposite,' Dick said. 'The Doves went in for compassion – looking after the disadvantaged, trying to see the big picture and thinking more about their responsibilities than their rights.'

He held out a plate of sandwiches, decorated with two stuffed olives, and tapped each of the olives in turn, christening them 'Dove' and 'Sterne'. One olive fell off the mound of sandwiches straight away and Katie went to pick it up but her dad shook his head.

'No, Girl Wonder, that's the exact point I was about to make,' he said. 'Ever since the 1860s the Doves and the Sternes have taken turns at being on top of things in Lomond, because the times have always seemed to favour one family more than the other. Sometimes the people around here feel more in control of things if they can listen to the Sternes telling them to pull their socks up and stand on their own two feet. Other times they go running off to the Doves for a wider perspective – or just for a handout.'

'And what sort of times are we in now?' Lucy asked.

Dick Brewster picked up both olives and ate them. 'Interesting times,' he said with his mouth full. 'As a matter of fact, neither the Sternes or the Doves have been doing too well lately. Robert Sterne died before his time, so his sons, Rob and Doug, weren't ready to take over. And Sibyl Dove had to work through her father, while he was alive, and then with Jack Wheaton. I'm afraid Lomond isn't exactly a hotbed of feminism.'

At that point Katie was tapped on the shoulder for the third time. She looked round and made way for a woman with a cap of iron grey hair, dressed in the kind of navy blue shirt and skirt that suggested she would change into a tracksuit the minute she got home.

'I'm Marie Boyle, president of the Central New South Wales branch of the CWA,' she said, advancing on Lucy with her hand held out. 'Finn Casey tells me you intend to stand for the local council. Now I can't make this official until I consult our members, of course, but one of our stated aims is to get women's voices heard in rural New South Wales, so I think I can safely say that you can count on our support.'

She shook Lucy's hand and bustled off, without waiting for a reply. Katie caught Lucy's eye and shared a quick smile. It looked as if Lomond might be more of a feminist hotbed than her dad realised.

'I don't know what you two are smirking about,' Dick Brewster complained. 'What was I saying, before Marie butted in? Oh yeah, Jack Wheaton. It looked as if Jack was about to solve all Lomond's problems. The Sternes liked him because he was a good Aussie bloke who could sort things out over a beer at the pub. Sibyl Dove liked him because he did stuff like putting a park in the middle of his retirement housing to preserve some old gum tree that the Aborigines cut a canoe out of, a couple of centuries back. Basically everybody was happy – well,

except for Doug Sterne, who's always had his eye on the mayor's robes - but then Jack's death upset the apple cart. So you can see why we'd all like to know whether Finn Casey's telling the truth about you standing for council or whether he's just stirring up trouble, as usual.'

He added the last sentence casually but Katie could practically hear the click of a miniature tape recorder switching on inside his head. She hesitated for a second, wondering whether to let her dad do his job or whether she owed it to Lucy to warn her. While she was still trying to make up her mind, Lucy issued one of her friendly smiles.

'So, Dick, if I *did* stand for election, would the *Star* back me or Dr Sterne?' she asked.

Dick Brewster's jaw dropped for half a second, before he pulled himself together and started to blah on about "impartiality", "responsibilities to the public", "the power of the media", "the freedom of the press" and all sorts of other pompous words he never normally used. Katie clamped her lips together and let a giggle roll round the inside of her mouth. Her dad was one of the most influential people in Lomond. Everybody always wanted to know what he thought (and what he was going to say in the *Star*) but nobody ever dared to ask him straight out. He wasn't used to being put on the spot and he couldn't handle it – although Katie would never have known that, if Lucy Dove hadn't shown her.

'I guess that says it all, Dick,' Lucy told him when he ran out of words. 'I'll give you a straight answer to your questions when you're straight with me. Thanks for the history lesson, Katie. I'll go check out the opposition now.'

Katie watched her turn away and insert herself into a gap in the crowd, realising with a pang of sympathy that Lucy looked as pale as a vampire's victim. She must be exhausted by meeting a hundred strangers and she probably felt sad about her greataunt as well, even though she had only just met Sibyl for the first time in ages. And maybe, after all that talk about the Dove family, Lucy was also feeling as if she was carrying the entire weight of the past on her own shoulders. Katie knew what that was like, although she was only supposed to take on a small local newspaper, not an entire town.

She stood on tiptoe, to see where Lucy Dove was headed, and let out a long, soft whistle. 'Lucy's going over to the Sternes' corner,' she reported.

'Sounds like another assignment for the *Star*,' her father said. 'Your job or mine, Girl Wonder?'

Katie bit her lip. Technically, as Scott Sterne's girlfriend, she had right of entry to the Sternes' part of the hall. But since the moment when she had started to follow Lucy down the main street, she had been feeling progressively more uncomfortable about her girlfriend status, although she still hadn't let herself think it through. The trouble was, she couldn't examine the way she felt about Scott without considering the possibility of breaking up with him – and she couldn't give Scott the flick without destroying the Sterne & Brewster Merger Scheme.

In other words, Scott wasn't her only problem. She needed to sort out how she felt about her dad as well. It wasn't exactly surprising that she kept putting

that off, because it involved going right back to when she was three. Isobelle, the sister next in line to Katie, had colic for the first three months after she was born and their dad had got into the habit of taking Katie to work with him while their mum looked after Isobelle. At first Dick Brewster had just let Katie think she was helping him by stapling pieces of scrap paper together or making chains out of paper clips but gradually she had started to do jobs that really needed to be done.

She had loved it back then and she had gone on assuming she loved it until a few days ago, when meeting Lucy had made her start to see that she was just doing her dad's shitwork – telling the stories that didn't interest him or returning his bloody videos. Although the last part was kind of ironic. If she hadn't had to go back for the video, Katie wouldn't have walked down the main street behind Lucy, in which case she still wouldn't have noticed that there was more to life than a boyfriend who was in love with himself and a father who treated her like slave labour. Everyone in Lomond thought Katie Brewster had it made but Lucy had turned that right around. Katie was even beginning to wonder whether she wanted to be a journalist at all, although she really couldn't see herself telling her dad that ...

'Earth to Katie,' Dick Brewster said. 'Do you read me? Repeating the question: you or me?'

Katie scrolled back through her thoughts until she worked out what he was talking about. 'Um, would you mind doing it?' she asked.

'Fair enough,' he said. 'For a moment there, I forgot about you and Scotty. Never mix business with pleasure. I'll take this one, Girl Wonder.'

He charged into the crowd with the energy that had made him one of Lomond's best football players twenty years ago. Katie's eyes stung with sudden, apologetic tears. She'd been acting as if her dad was one of those tyrannical fathers in the movies who forced their kids to play tennis or the piano or whatever. But Dick Brewster wasn't like that. He wouldn't bully Katie into taking on the *Star*. As a matter of fact, he would probably let her off the hook straight away, if she could tell him what she wanted to do instead. Only she couldn't do that, because she had never really asked herself what *she* wanted.

And that was her real problem.

If you had to be on top of things all the time – and Scott did - it helped to be tall. From his corner by the door, he could see where everyone was and who they were talking to. For instance, he knew that Katie and her dad were having a long chat with Lucy Dove (memo: ask her about it after the movie tonight) and he had identified the top of Jude Martin's head, over by the opposite wall (memo: stay out of her way, because of – hang on, what was it? - oh yeah, that business in the bus shelter).

Then, while he was still congratulating himself on having put the Jude Martin incident behind him in record time, Scott realised he had accidentally caught Serenity Cox's eye. Again. If he didn't make a move, he would start to look like some kind of redneck, gawking at the gorgeous city girl from a distance. Although, on the other hand, if he *did* make a move ...

He had only just begun to on his list of reasons to stay away from Serenity – “1. I already have a girlfriend” – when he noticed that Lucy Dove had left the Brewsters and started moving towards the Sterne corner. Scott nudged his dad, intending to warn him. But Rob insisted on finishing the funny story about Sibyl Dove that he was telling to Dave Conway and Bluey Thompson and by the time he turned round, it was too late for warnings.

‘Hi, Mr Sterne,’ Lucy said, holding her hand out. ‘Good to see you here.’

Rob stared down at her hand, visibly wondering what to do with it. If he shook hands, he would look like he was negotiating with the enemy but if he refused, he would look like a big strong man being mean to a tiny blonde woman. It wasn't much of a choice. Scott couldn't blame his dad for choosing the handshake option, although he groaned quietly when a flash went off, enclosing Rob and Lucy in a momentary bubble of light.

‘A historic moment,’ Dick Brewster said, pocketing his camera. ‘Mind if I use this in the *Star*?’

‘Can't stop you, can I?’ Rob retorted. ‘Now, clear off and stop acting like paparazzi at a car crash.’

As Dick Brewster grinned and strolled away with his scoop, Rob glanced at Scott, giving him the signal to close ranks and force Lucy to clear off as well. But before they could make a move, Dave Conway dug his elbow into Rob's ribs.

‘Miss Dove is dead – long live Miss Dove, eh?’ he said. ‘You never mentioned meeting the new one, Robbo. Come on, introduce us, will you, mate?’

Rob scowled and stared down at his feet and muttered something inaudible. Only a couple of days ago Scott would have thought his dad was putting Dave in his place but now it confirmed his new theory that Rob was shy. He decided he'd better do something to help.

‘Miss Dove, this is Mr Conway, who works for my father, and Mr Thompson, who's the Lomond butcher,’ he said, giving Lucy the full benefit of his could've-been-a-male-model smile.

She shifted position, causing her long white jacket to swirl out slightly. Something in that small movement made Scott feel as if he was in an actual church, instead of the community hall. A memory downloaded into the front of his brain – his mother taking him to the Anglican church in Bayview every Sunday, back in the days before she had become completely spineless and stopped doing anything his dad disapproved of. There had been a stained glass window in the church that showed an angel with a fiery sword driving Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden.

Lucy had looked like that angel when she appeared in the bus shelter and she still looked like it now. Fucking hell. Scott might have forgotten that business

with Jude Martin but he was beginning to get the impression that Lucy Dove didn't forget quite so easily. When he looked cautiously across at her, she gave him the half-smile of someone making polite conversation.

'I didn't see the Land Rover outside,' she said. 'I guess you must've driven your mom and dad here in your car, Scotty.'

That told Scott five things about Lucy Dove. She had a good memory, because she had remembered that Rob drove a Land Rover. She was observant, because she had noticed his mother hovering in the background. She was quick, because she had already scored a point by drawing attention to the fact that that he hadn't introduced her to his mum. And she was both psychic and ruthless, because she had instantly identified and exposed his biggest weakness – the lack of a car. Oh well, at least he could set one part of the record straight.

'Lucy, meet my mum, Bethany,' he said.

When Lucy held her hand out again, Scott's mother tried to slide her right arm through a gap in the circle, realised it was the broken arm with the cast, whisked it back and offered her left hand instead. Rob sighed audibly; Dave Conway cracked a joke about Rob's missus being an accident waiting to happen; and Lucy kept a firm hold on Bethany Sterne's hand, gazing at her with silent sympathy.

For a moment Scott found himself looking at his family through someone else's eyes – Lucy Dove's eyes, to be precise – and he wasn't sure he liked what he saw. He knew his mum was a write-off. Everyone in Lomond said so. But everyone also thought she was dead lucky to have married Rob Sterne, so it came as a shock to see that Lucy didn't go along with the party line. Worse still, Lucy actually seemed to feel sorry for his mum. It made Scott's stomach cramp, as if he was trying to squeeze into a smaller space than the one he usually occupied.

'As a matter of fact, we've only got the one car,' his mum said, probably under the impression that she was helping. 'Rob parked it outside his brother's house today.'

Lucy's blue eyes opened wide. 'Don't you drive, Scott?' she said. 'In the States, all the country kids have cars. It's the only way to get around.'

'Yeah, it's the same here,' said Bluey Thompson, before Scott could answer. 'You can't legally own a car till you're eighteen but most country kids start driving as soon as their feet reach the brake pedal. I won't let my son use the family car, but. He's a bit on the heavy side, so it does him good to walk everywhere, like we did in the old days.'

Bluey was still nodding wisely at Lucy when Dave Conway practically shouldered him aside, desperate to get a word in.

'I bought my Lockie an old Kingswood last year,' he told Lucy. 'But none of his mates have wheels and he spent a fortune on petrol, ferrying them around. When the rego came up this year, I said, "Sorry, son, not till your little mates start paying their way".'

None of that had been particularly helpful in getting the conversation away from the subject, “Scott Sterne – cars – the lack of”. Scott almost told the pair of them to shut up, before he remembered that they weren’t Tommo and Lockie. It was an easy mistake to make, because they looked like their sons, except that in their case the Fat and Skinny effect was reversed. Bluey Thompson was as thin as a ginger whippet and Dave Conway was the one with a beer belly, a chubby face and, right at that moment, an accusing stare directed at Rob Sterne.

‘I give Scotty a reasonable allowance,’ Rob said defensively. ‘It’s up to him to spend it however he likes. Not that I can blame him if he chooses to shout his mates to a meal at The Caff every now and then, instead of saving every last cent in order to buy some old wreck. I’ll be giving him a top of the line Falcon for his eighteenth birthday, anyway, same as my dad did for me.’

Too much information, Scott thought uncomfortably. One reason for not buying him a car would’ve been fine but three reasons sounded suspicious. He found himself wondering, for the first time, whether his father was as well-off as he had always assumed or whether Rob might in fact be bleeding money at a slightly slower rate than Jeff Parker. Since he didn’t want to think about that, it was a relief when Uncle Doug came hurrying over with his wife and their three kids in tow.

‘Nice to see you in our corner, Miss Dove,’ Doug said. ‘I hope this means you’ve forgiven Scotty for the other night. Just a bit of fun that nearly went too far. Boys will be boys, you know. No need to go overboard about it, that’s what I say.’

‘Of course you do,’ Lucy murmured.

That sounded a bit ambiguous to Scott but Doug didn’t seem to notice. ‘Let me introduce my wife Gwen and our three children, John, Emma and Sarah,’ he went on. ‘As you can imagine, they’ve been a real asset in the local council election campaigns. I hope you’re going to support my candidacy too, Lucy.’

Scott wondered how his uncle had managed to miss the rumours about Lucy Dove standing for council that Finn Casey had been spreading all round the hall. Then he realised this was Doug’s idea of a cunning way to trick Lucy into declaring her intentions. Somehow Scott didn’t think Lucy Dove could be tricked quite that easily. He braced himself and waited to see what would happen next.

‘I listened to that speech of yours the other day real carefully,’ Lucy was saying. ‘But I gotta tell you, Doug, I’m still not sure what you stand for. Could you wrap it up for me in a sentence?’

‘This town needs a firm hand on the reins,’ Doug said straight away, ‘although at the same time, of course, it’s important not to go overboard.’

‘Uh-huh,’ Lucy said. ‘So, Doug, do you think this town’s a horse or a ship?’

She looked and sounded so serious that it took Scott a few seconds to realise she was sending Doug up, although his mother must have caught on straight away, because she was already laughing like a kid at its first puppet show and then clapping both hands over her mouth. Beside her, Rob scowled at

his brother, while Doug's wife and kids just stood there, solid as an overstuffed lounge suite.

With no real opposition, Lucy could have gone ahead and decimated Doug but, as she was getting ready for the next lethal comment, Norm Kelly sidled towards them. Lucy saw him coming and escaped into the crowd, which seemed fair enough to Scott, who sometimes wished he could escape from his family too. While Norm stared after Lucy like a mongrel who had lost a potential bone, Doug Sterne took a firm hold on the lapels of his suit.

'That went quite well, I thought,' he announced.

'Yeah, but you're a bloody idiot,' said Rob.

There was a two second pause, during which Doug's bullfrog throat worked convulsively and his wife and children stared at Rob with glassy disbelief. Scott tried to think of some way to rescue the situation but it wasn't easy, because he basically agreed with his dad. Then Dave Conway laughed and said, 'Runs in the family, does it?', as if Rob's insult was just another joke - and Rob said, 'You bet' and laughed - and Bluey Thompson laughed along - so Doug laughed too - and Norm Kelly laughed last, because it always took him a while to catch on. And in the end Scott managed to crack a smile as well, taking them back to the blokes-together solidarity that they had been enjoying before Lucy arrived.

All of which proved that he would be making a mistake if he got mixed up with Serenity Cox, who was just as cool and unpredictable and twenty first century as Lucy Dove, but Scott left the Sterne corner and went looking for Serenity anyway.

Everybody else was milling about, drinking tea and eating cake, but Jude Martin had got stuck on the opposite side of the hall with old Mrs Carretto. Okay, maybe "stuck" wasn't quite the right word. Jude really wanted the job Frank had offered her and it had felt like a job interview when he asked her to sit with them during the funeral service.

'I thought Mum ought to be here, because there aren't many of that generation left,' he said. 'But she's not big on crowds at the best of times and she seemed to take against Lucy the other night. I'd appreciate having you around, Jude, to help calm her down if anything goes wrong.'

As it turned out, Mrs Carretto had sat quietly all through the service, hanging onto Jude's hand like a little kid, which had felt kind of weird but also kind of nice. Afterwards, while the congregation was filing out of the rows of seats, Jude steered the old woman towards the far wall, to get them both out of everybody's way. They had just settled into a quiet alcove when the crowd heaved like volcanic lava and Tommo Thompson popped out, right in front of them.

Jude froze. It was too soon. There hadn't been enough time for the memories to drain away into the past, not even slightly. One look at Tommo and she could feel hands hurting her: eyes sticky on her skin: shame: rage: mind-numbing terror. And it was all her own fault. She shouldn't even be here. She had known she would run the risk of seeing Scott and his gang but she'd come along, all the same, because she really wanted to see Lucy Dove again ...

Tommo let out a yelp, swung away and burrowed back into the crowd, treading on the principal's foot in his hurry to escape. When Jude looked round, Mrs Carretto's hand was still pointed in his direction, her index finger and little finger making a pair of horns. *Mano cornuto*, Frank had told Jude while he was driving her home on Friday - the sign you made in Italy to bounce curses back onto the person who was cursing you. Tommo couldn't have known what the sign meant but it seemed to have scared him off, all the same.

'Brilliant!' Jude said. 'You're better than a bodyguard, Mrs C.'

Mrs Carretto beamed and started to tell her things in Italian. Jude nodded politely while she scanned the room, to make sure that Scott's other mates weren't lurking near by. They weren't, so she relaxed and let her eyes explore further but, no matter where she looked, she couldn't find Lucy Dove anywhere. Although, come to think of it, that might be a good thing. Jude couldn't have tried to attract Lucy's attention, not with Mrs Carretto standing beside her. The old lady had already practised on Tommo and she'd probably enjoy bouncing curses onto Lucy as well.

'Statt' accuorto a chilla Lucy Dove,' Mrs Carretto said at that exact moment.

Jude jumped. 'What did your mum just say?' she asked, tugging at Frank's sleeve.

'Sorry, I don't listen half the time,' he apologised. 'We spoke Italian at home, back when I was a kid, but I'm out of practice these days. Lomond's so full of skips – sorry, Anglo-Australians – that after Dad died, me and Mum switched over to English, till the Alzheimers got her. I tune in if I think she's asking for something but most of the time I just let her chat away.'

He took a sudden step backwards. Jude looked round and saw a stack of chairs barrelling towards them, with Rocky Abrahams at one end and a hefty year 12 guy at the other.

'Hey, Rocky,' she said, as she got out of the way, 'do we have any Italian classes at school?'

'Thursday morning,' Rocky said, putting down her end of the stack. 'Have to wait till next year, but. Or do an Adult Ed summer school, if you're keen.'

She bent to pick up the chairs and realised the year 12 guy had taken the opportunity to skive off. Jude lifted the chairs with one hand and waved goodbye to Mrs Carretto with the other, feeling doubly pleased to have escaped from the old lady by doing a good deed. Even better, after she and Rocky had deposited the chairs in the storeroom, she walked back into the hall and found Lucy Dove coming towards them, looking oddly insubstantial, as if her image had been

photoshopped into the crowd by someone who didn't really know what they were doing.

'Are you okay?' Jude asked. 'If you need to sit down for a bit, there's a zillion chairs in the back room. I can get you one, easy as.'

Lucy shook her head. 'If I sit down, I'll never get up. You people have been so wonderful that I want to speak to everyone before I go.'

'Not me,' said Rocky, who didn't believe in wasting words. 'No need. Met you already.'

'That's right,' Lucy remembered. 'You teach at the school and you're married to a local farmer. Hey, maybe you could brief me on the farming situation. I don't want to say the wrong thing by mistake.'

Rocky frowned. 'Not sure I can help there. My Mal never meant to be a farmer. Met him at Duntroon – what they call the Australian Defence Force Academy these days. Thought of ourselves as career army, till Mal's oldest brother got smashed up in the car crash that killed their parents and the next brother said, "Farming? No thanks". Not a lot of fun for poor bloody Mal. Could see right from the start there wasn't any future in wool.'

'Seriously?' said Jude, thinking of her stepfather, who did odd jobs for the local farmers. 'You mean the entire wool business is on the skids? I thought it was only bad luck magnets like Jeff Parker who were having problems.'

'Easy mistake to make,' Rocky said. 'Most people round here keep making it. Your average Lomond farmer likes things to stay the same. Drop into the pub, you'll still hear that old saying, "Australia rides on the sheep's back". Got news for them. We fell off years ago.'

Lucy gave Rocky a smile calculated to show how much her honesty was appreciated. 'So what should your average Lomond farmers be doing instead?' she asked.

Rocky shrugged. 'No simple answers. Take Mal, for instance. Gave the wool business away and started raising lambs instead. Junked that last year, because his contact in the States warned him the US government was about to raise their tariffs on imported lamb, to protect American farmers. Moving into canola crops now - for the moment, at any rate. Might try corn sometime soon.'

'Wow,' Lucy said admiringly. 'Your Mal sounds like one busy dude.'

'He is,' Rocky agreed. 'But give the old guard their due, they work just as hard. Main difference is, they think farming's a way of life and Mal thinks it's a business, same as making widgets. If people won't buy your widgets any more, you have to make something else, right?'

'My Uncle Norm wouldn't agree. I guess you'd write him off as a conservative, though.'

'Norm Kelly?' Rocky said with a grin. 'Yeah, he's one of the dinosaurs ... but I wouldn't write anyone off. Mal and I are doing all right for ourselves but we're part of a community. If blokes like Norm are hurting, that hurts us too.'

'Why?' Lucy asked. 'Can't you and Mal just congratulate yourselves on being smarter than the rest of them?'

'I teach biology,' Rocky said unexpectedly. 'Read a lot about what makes human beings human. Scientists used to go on about how we were wired for competition but lately they've had to admit we're wired for cooperation as well. Not a good idea to set yourself up against your neighbours. Goes against our basic nature, y'see.'

She coughed apologetically, embarrassed by her optimism, and backed away into the crowd. Jude looked round, wondering whether she would get to keep Lucy now or whether some other adult would come along and take her over. When she turned back, Lucy was smiling contentedly. There was a faint blush on her pale cheeks and her face seemed rounder, as if she had been feeding on all that information and growing stronger.

'All of this has been great,' she said. 'But I need something more, as well. You're my good luck charm, Jude. Come see me tomorrow and we'll have a good long talk, okay?'

She melted into the crowd, leaving Jude so buoyant with happiness that she found herself rising on tiptoe to look for Serenity. Up till then, she had been – well, not avoiding Serenity, exactly, but not making a major effort to find her. When Serenity had rung last night, Jude hadn't been able to say anything about the bus shelter incident, partly because it was harder on the phone but mainly because she was scared that Serenity would blame her, the way the rest of Lomond would if they knew the story.

But Lucy had reminded her that there were other ways of thinking, out there in the world, and Serenity came from the world outside Lomond too. So Jude went on turning in a circle, still standing on tiptoe, until she came across something that brought her crashing down, so hard that her heels hurt. She stood there for a second, internalising what she had just seen - Serenity over by the tea table, standing disconcertingly close to Scott Sterne.

Jude's happiness escaped in a rush, like air from a punctured balloon. I should have told her, she thought as she turned and headed back to the storeroom. Should have told her about Scott when it happened, she thought, letting herself out of the back door. Shouldn't have kept my mouth shut in case Serenity got that "all Martins are sluts" tone in her voice, Jude thought while she ran for the phone in the supermarket car park, to ring Shane and get him to drive over and collect her and take her back home.

But she hadn't told Serenity, so Serenity didn't know.

Too late now.

The minute the funeral service ended, Orion and Maya circled round to the food table and collected a plate of egg sandwiches (not exactly forbidden, although their mother was trying to convince them to become vegan, as well as vegetarian) and five slices of cake each (definitely forbidden, because Raewyn thought white sugar was a drug, nearly as bad as heroin). After that, they

retreated under the trestle table. They were halfway through their last pieces of cake when the tablecloth rose like a theatre curtain.

'Oh, Orion! Oh, Maya!' Raewyn said sadly. 'What a waste of a beautiful day! You should be outside, playing with your friends – unless you'd rather talk to some of the interesting older people here.'

Maya crawled out obediently and headed off straight away, which was all very well for her. She actually had a couple of friends who might be over in the park beside the community centre, if she was lucky. Orion would have preferred to stay under the table but, as he stared up at his mother, formulating an argument, Raewyn flapped her hands at him with a jangle of silver bracelets.

'Off you go, spit-spot,' she said.

That came from *Mary Poppins* and meant she wouldn't stand any nonsense. Orion sighed and stood up and took a few steps into the crowd. The instant he moved out of his mother's sightline, he stopped, already weighed down by boredom. He hated feeling bored, although it didn't happen too often, because he was generally within reach of a computer or a book. In fact, he had a paperback jammed into the belt of his black jeans right at that moment but he couldn't think of anywhere he could go to read in peace. Even he could see that it might be considered disrespectful to sit and read in the middle of a funeral. On the other hand, if he went to the park, he would be picked on by Lockie and Tommo, who got particularly pissed off if they saw anyone with a book.

While he vacillated, the crowd shifted and pushed him towards a woman in a wheelchair with an age-freckled face, milky eyes and white hair, so drastically permed that it looked like a wig. Orion had a sudden inspiration.

'Hi,' he said to the interesting older person. 'Will you tell me what it used to be like in Lomond, please?'

The woman peered at him through her cataracts and smiled indulgently, probably under the impression that she was looking at a cute little eight year old. Normally that would have annoyed Orion but today he didn't mind playing along, because it encouraged her to launch into a series of stories. Most of them were pretty low key. The old lady had grown up during the Great Depression in the 1930s and she went on a lot about how her family had saved paper bags and string and milk bottle tops. She kept insisting that people were really wasteful these days, even though Orion tried to tell her that his family did the same thing (well, apart from the milk bottle tops), because his parents were heavily into recycling.

After she'd had a good grumble, however, the old lady cheered up and told him how the baker used to come round the streets in a horse and cart and put freshly-baked bread into a box on their doorstep. The grocer delivered stuff as well and the iceman came once a week, bringing a block of ice for the ice chest that they used instead of a fridge, with all the kids following him down the street in the hope of getting chips of ice to suck.

'The nightcart man came once a week too,' she said. 'That was in the days before indoor toilets. We had a little shed with a gable roof at the end of the yard,

where you went to do your business. Our parents called it the WC but us kids just called it the dunny. Inside, there was a wooden bench with a hole in it and under the hole there was a ten-gallon can. On Friday night, the nightcart man drove along the little alleys at the backs of the houses, made specially for his cart, heaving out the full cans and putting an empty one in. One night my sister got a bad case of the runs, so she went outside, instead of using a chamber pot - and the nightcart man almost pulled the can out from under her bottom!

She laughed so hard at the memory that Orion thought she might choke. 'Gross,' he said. 'More, please.'

He listened attentively to a series of stories about peeing in chamber pots, eating fried kidneys for breakfast and dropping Emperor gum moth caterpillars down the backs of people's shirts. Then, just as the old woman was starting to explain how her mother poured boiling water on their cuts and grazes to sterilise them, her son and daughter-in-law came to wheel her out and drive her home.

At that point, Orion discovered that his old lady was Lockie Conway's gran. He had a vague feeling that, if he had been a different sort of person - a person like Lockie, for instance - he might have been able to use that information against Lockie somehow. But before he had really started to think that idea through, he saw Lucy Dove in the distance and his one-track mind switched to thinking about Jude Martin.

The Caseys had given Jude a lift to the funeral and Orion had tried to tell her about this brilliant new manga website he'd just discovered but he hadn't been able to get a word in, because she had raved about Lucy Dove all the way there. Orion figured that following Lucy would be his best chance to find Jude and have another go at getting her attention. The main advantage of being short was that it was easy to slip through the gaps. He began to wriggle towards Lucy, skirting round the edges of groups and picking up fragments of sentences as he went.

Last time the Caseys had been in Sydney, Finn had taken Orion to an art exhibition called a soundscape, where half a dozen tape decks played city noises and overlapping conversations in an empty white room. Finn reckoned you could never do that sort of thing in Lomond but, as Orion pushed through the crowd, he got the impression that Lomond was performing a soundscape for him, right then and there.

'Sibyl Dove was one of the old school. They don't make them like that any more.'

'... didn't sit around and whinge, just got on with it.'

'... takes you back to happier times, when people could leave their back doors open without the need to worry about having their TVs stolen or their children abducted or ...'

'... young ones today don't know how lucky they are ...'

'Mind you, it wasn't perfect back then. I remember adults dying of flu, children dying of everything under the sun, fathers and husbands doing whatever they liked to their wives and daughters, without anyone saying a word about ...'

'The Depression. The Second World War. Communism. Women's Liberation.'

'It's a worry.'

'Not much to look forward to in this new millennium, eh?'

'... seen the country being sold out ...'

'... betraying everything we fought for in the 70s ...'

'... even taking our guns away ...'

'... no religion to give shape to our lives now ...'

'... young ones today don't know what they're missing out on ...'

'Bloody politicians, think they know more than ordinary Australians.'

'Bleeding heart journos, going on about multiculturalism, till you don't even know if you count as Australian.'

'It's a worry.'

'... read in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Aboriginal life expectancy's still twenty years lower than the rest of the population.'

'... read in the *Bayview Mirror* that the government's handing over even more of our tax dollars to the Aborigines.'

'... single mothers, dole bludgers, everyone except the honest working man ...'

'Yeah, we're surviving – just – but there won't be any jobs for our kids ...'

'... Asians coming here and taking Aussie jobs from our Aussie youth ...'

'... all right if you're young but no chance of a job for anyone over fifty.'

'... just want a fair go, that's all ...'

'Now that Sibyl Dove's gone ...'

'... and with Jack Wheaton gone too ...'

'It's a worry.'

At that point, Orion caught up with Lucy Dove and started listening to the things people were telling her, which was less interesting than the soundscape. The Happy Valley mob wanted to warn Lucy that the farmers were a bunch of bigots who thought the world owed them a living. The farmers, equally predictably, wanted to warn her that the Happy Valley lot were either a bunch of hippies and junkies and single mothers, living off the taxpayers' money, or a politically correct elite, trying to tell ordinary Australians how to think. The eastern stagers from the retirement community wanted more attention paid to the old. Frank Carretto, speaking on behalf of the kids who hung out in The Caff, wanted more attention for the young.

And every single one of them seemed to be convinced that Lucy could do something about it. One minute Orion was listening to an old guy, saying, 'This town wouldn't have got through the twentieth century without your great-aunt. We need someone like her to steer Lomond into the new millennium – someone to make sure things don't change too fast and leave too many of us behind. Can we count on you, Miss Dove?'

Next minute another voice was saying, 'Okay, I admit Lomond can be pretty sexist and racist and homophobic but the thing is, fear always makes

people more conservative. The whole world's going through some enormous changes at present. You can't blame the people here for being afraid. They just need someone to show them that there *are* alternatives to fear and bigotry. In other words, they need you, Lucy Dove.'

The last voice belonged to Orion's mother, so he abandoned Lucy and made a dash for the door, before Raewyn spotted him. But Lucy must have felt the same need to get away, because they ended up side by side on the front step.

'That was kind of stressful,' she said, as if the two of them had known each other for years. 'All the people in your little town seem to want me to lead Lomond into the twenty first century but they all have different ideas about how it ought be done.'

'So what do *you* think?' Orion asked politely.

Lucy spread her hands wide. 'Who knows?' she said, contemplating the empty space between them. 'Who the hell knows?'

They stood in companionable silence, shading their eyes and checking the main street, to make sure that the bronze soldier was still guarding the war memorial, then turning towards the park by the community centre, where the kids who'd escaped from the hall had gathered together.

Maya and two other girls from her year huddled in a corner, twisting each other's hair into devil's horn pigtails, to match the pop star on the cover of *Girl*. Lockie Conway and Tommo Thompson were under the trees, preparing to jump out and scare some of the little kids. Serenity Cox and Katie Brewster headed over to the basketball ring, tossing a ball between them. Eden Parker and his brother Cam sat at the edge of the basketball area, smoking and looking up the girls' skirts, then yelling at Tommo and Lockie when they started to tease Dylan, the youngest Parker. And Scott Sterne lounged on the sidelines, his eyes shifting from Katie to Serenity and back.

By that time, Orion was starting to feel bored again. He turned to Lucy and saw her hand reach up, as if she was making a grab for something that had come tumbling towards her on the breeze - something small and light and fragile, like the missing piece from a jigsaw puzzle.

'The kids,' she said, as if she was making an important breakthrough. 'Of course! Why didn't I think of that before? Everything starts with the kids. I have to start there too.'

Orion, who didn't identify as a kid, took that as his signal to leave. When he went back inside, he realised he had already searched everywhere in the hall, so he was forced to give up on the idea of finding Jude. Then, as he looked round rather mournfully, he remembered that he had, in fact, made a new friend yesterday. He dodged past Doug Sterne, who was showing signs of wanting to pat an eight year old on the head for his election campaign, and went off to look for Daniel Matheson.

But Daniel wasn't there. Caro had knocked on his bedroom door the night before, half an hour after he'd tactfully excused himself.

'Sorry about the fight,' she said. 'I promised myself I wouldn't let Serenity get to me, for your first month at least.'

'It wasn't much of a fight,' Daniel said, mildly surprised. 'I just thought you might like a bit of privacy.'

Caro laughed. 'Feel free to stick around next time. You can even take sides, if you like.' She made an abrupt movement with both hands, as if she was pushing all of that behind her, and said, 'Actually, I came to tell you there's a service for Sibyl Dove at noon tomorrow. Serenity and I will both be going but you needn't come, unless you're really keen. It doesn't seem like a great idea to start your life here with a funeral.'

'Thanks,' Daniel said. 'I'll take you up on that. I've met enough new people for one week and I want to explore the hills out at the back of your house.'

But next morning, while he was waiting for the others to leave, it occurred to him that Lomond would be practically deserted during Sibyl Dove's funeral, making it an ideal time to explore the town. When Caro and Serenity came in, looking unnervingly dignified in their best city clothes, Daniel asked his aunt to drop him off in the main street. He waved goodbye, saluted the soldier on the war memorial and took the first road to the left.

After studying the aerial photograph that morning, he had decided to start with Jack Wheaton's retirement community, because he figured it would be the least interesting part of the town. He was right, in a way. The long, low brick houses with their picture windows and streamlined verandahs were too new to have been marked by their owners' personalities. On the other hand, it was fun to follow the road round the outer edge of the building development and see how Jack Wheaton had secretly shaped it to match Australia's west coast.

Daniel was still enjoying the in-joke when he turned the next corner and was hit by the Pacific Ocean. It took him a while to recover from the first impact of endless blue and realise that the sea was still a fair way off. In fact, he had to negotiate the railway line and cross a flat stretch of sea grass, before he was able to stand on the edge of a perpendicular cliff and look down at the rocks below. The expanse of navy blue water, ridged and guttered with sunshine, looked even more impressive from here than from Happy Valley. Daniel sat down on the grass, eating the bread and cheese Caro had given him and letting the steady, regular beat of the waves wash all his thoughts away.

After that, he consulted his memory of the aerial map and continued on, following the path along the cliff-top and down a sandstone slope to the mouth of the Danville River, which marked the southern border of the town. Daniel took one detour, to look at a huge sandstone mansion at the top of Lomond's second-biggest hill, labelled 'Sterne House' on its gable and 'Lomond District Aged Care Facility' on its front door, but mostly he stuck to the path that ran between the river and the train track, until it brought him to a bridge over the Danville River.

He crossed the bridge and started walking along a dirt road that led towards the escarpment. Eventually it occurred to him that, although he'd been walking for half an hour, the escarpment didn't seem any closer. It looked as if he would have to save exploring the rockface for another day. Daniel turned back, promising himself a panorama view from Lomond's biggest hill as his final treat, but the top of the hill turned out to be occupied by another mansion, bigger than Sterne House and scarier than the Addams family home, surrounded by iron railings set as closely together as the bars of a cage.

The house made Daniel nervous. He swung away and took the first side street he came across, which led into a maze of lanes running along the backs of the old houses. It was quiet and peaceful there, although he couldn't help wondering why the original town planners had built a whole street-system that no one seemed to use any more. He wandered around until he came across a Moreton Bay fig tree, which had grown so vast that it had broken down someone's back fence. Its lower branches were so thick that he was able to swing on them, doing his Tarzan impersonation.

He started climbing from branch to branch, avoiding the moment when he would have to admit that he was trespassing by the simple method of keeping his back turned to the house. The view was worth any amount of trouble – a 360° turn that took in everywhere he had been during the day, from the retirement community to the Danville River. Even before he had finished turning, Daniel realised he must have inadvertently circled back to the top of the hill and climbed into the garden of the haunted house. So it wasn't a complete surprise to look down the side of the house and see Lucy Dove, standing at the gate and talking to a tall man with a black shirt front and a clerical collar.

'Here you are,' the vicar said, handing over something that looked like a plastic vase. 'The Dove name still packs a punch around here, even at the Bayview crematorium. When I told them who they were dealing with, they rushed the job through straight away. I assume you wanted it done quickly because you're looking for closure. Maybe some sort of ceremony ...'

He paused, offering his services by implication. Lucy took the urn but ignored the hint. 'Thanks,' she said, leaning heavily against the gate. 'You've been great, Mr Mason. I'll be in touch.'

The vicar told her she looked exhausted and headed back to his car. As he drove off, Lucy straightened up and carried the urn down the side of the house. She paused in the back garden for a moment, standing as steady and bright as an altar candle. Then she prised the lid off the urn, held it high over her head and shook out the contents. As the ashes poured out, they seemed to hang on the air, suspended in time for an impossible moment that turned them into a dark pillar or – Daniel thought, his heart beating faster - the shadowy outline of someone not quite as tall as Lucy herself.

'Well?' Lucy said, holding her hands out towards the shadow-shape. 'Did I get it right? Is this what you wanted?'

The pillar of ash wavered slightly, making it look as if the shadow was leaning towards Lucy. Daniel flattened himself against the trunk of the fig tree, trying not to breathe, and watched her take a step forward. As the dark blur started to break up, Lucy reached out even more urgently.

'Okay,' she said. 'Okay, Sib, I'll do it. Just tell me, please, whether I'm doing it for Lomond or for you or for my-'

But the ashes were already beginning to blow away, clustered together like a small dark cloud or a silent swarm of March flies. Lucy (down in the garden) and Daniel (up in the fig tree) watched them gradually spread out on the wind, carrying the remains of Sibyl Dove down the hill and out across Lomond. When the cloud had passed and the garden was empty, Lucy turned and walked into Dove House. Daniel waited till he was sure she wasn't coming back and slid down from the tree. By the time his feet touched ground, he had persuaded himself that he had seen nothing more unusual than Lucy Dove tipping her greataunt's ashes out onto the garden and talking to herself.

And, just in case some part of him still wasn't convinced, he remembered the blue expanse of the Pacific Ocean and got its waves to wash his thoughts away again.

So there you have it. No, wait a minute, there's one more thing you need to know, before we move on.

While Daniel walks down the hill from Dove House towards the Lomond main street, a man called Han Chung is walking by the river in China's Guandong province. It is summer and the air is sticky with heat but Han Chung feels cold, because he is trying to decide whether he can bear to separate himself from the soil he was born on.

He watches the little boats that set out from the river bank, looking for fish or for passengers who are too impatient to wait in the queue on the town's only bridge. He listens to the squawking of cormorants and the cry of sea birds and the fishermen calling to each other in the dialect that he shares with them. He widens his nostrils and sniffs the smells of cooking-rice and fish sauce and roast pork, leavened by the smells of water and salt air and woodsmoke, and wonders whether he will long for it, after he has left, and whether his hometown will miss him.

Will anyone say, 'Han Chung used to walk here but he's gone now'? Probably not. He has no wife and not much family. That's one of the reasons why he has often thought about leaving. The other reasons are so old and embedded that he hardly thinks about them any more. But today, for some reason (the cry of the sea birds, the smell of salt air), he finds himself thinking about all the ways in which this country is wrong for him.

With sudden decision, he turns away from the river and walks to the small tea-house near the garage, where his cousin Han Qing holds court. Although

they have talked about this matter before, Han Qing pretends to be surprised by his visit.

'What can I do for my own cousin?' he asks, pushing his empty cup over for Han Chung to fill. The rudeness is deliberate, intended to show Han Chung that men who work for the triad have no need for manners.

'I want to go to Australia,' says Han Chung, not daring to sit down or pour tea for himself.

'Ten thousand yuan,' Han Qing says. 'And that's a discount, for a relative.'

'I don't have ten thousand yuan,' Han Chung tells him.

Han Qing's mouth remains level but his eyes smile. 'If you sign this contract and agree to some small conditions, I can send you free and for nothing,' he says with a cursory imitation of kindness.

He produces a much-copied document and slides it across the dirty, scarred table. Han Chung slides it straight back, without wasting a glance on it.

'You want me to work for you?' he says. 'No, I'll find five thousand yuan. That should be enough ... for a relative.'

He stands and walks out, without any of the usual formalities. All of the difficulties that Han Qing has put in his way have had the paradoxical effect of confirming Han Chung's decision. He will gather his capital together and leave Guandong within the next month, heading for his second chance – for prosperity, adventure, companionship and whatever else he may find there, in Australia.

And that's it. The last piece of the jigsaw puzzle has been slotted into place. The final thread has been spun.

Now it begins.

PART 2

WEAVING THE THREADS

Five

The Danville Range was basically a giant pile of rubble, dumped at the end of the fault line that had created the escarpment around Lomond, bound together by centuries of compost from its trees and scrub. Definitely hills, not mountains. You could jog up the track to the lookout at the highest point of the range without getting breathless. But Daniel knew that all hills had at least one difficult face and he scouted through the bush till he found it - a bare slab of sandstone, seamed with orange watermarks and pocked with holes as big as his hand.

First he examined the slab carefully, deciding on the best place to start. Then he hooked his fingers onto an outcrop and hoisted both feet off the ground, wedged one foot into a shallow crack and swung the other foot onto a stone shelf. After that he flattened himself against the sandstone and went wriggling up the cliff like a gecko, until the rockface turned perpendicular on him. He stuffed his fist into the nearest hole, swung his whole body out and around, using his wrist as a fulcrum, and lifted himself half a metre higher.

Good one, he thought. That worked. Now, where's the next hole?

Twenty minutes later he was sitting on a narrow ledge, just below the lookout. His forearms were crosshatched with scratch marks and there was a piece missing from his left eyebrow, where a chunk of stone had bounced back and hit him, but he felt satisfyingly exhausted. He unbuttoned his shirt, fanned air across his sweaty skin and settled back to study the view.

Below him, the gravel bends of Karma Drive led up to the Coxes' house and beyond, passing the turn-offs to all the other houses in Happy Valley. On both sides of the road, the woolly blue-green pleats of the Danville Range angled down towards the coast. After that the land levelled out into a clay-coloured plain,

dotted with miniature farmhouses and tiny blobs of cottonwool that (when Daniel thought about it) had to be sheep. And, at the point where the plain met the river and the river met the sea, Lomond shimmered like a mirage on hot tarmac. From this angle, it didn't look like a map of Australia at all. It was just a toy town, carved out of sandstone and dusted with glitter from the afternoon sun.

Daniel hitched one foot up onto the ledge, propped his chin on his knee and tried to work out why he had felt compelled to sneak out of the house and climb the hill before he went to school. It wasn't like he was desperate to be on his own. The Coxes were sort of people who knocked on your bedroom door, instead of walking straight in. He had way more privacy here than he'd had a house, with people all around you. Daniel wasn't sure how to describe the difference but he knew he needed it. He knew that, if he went without it for too long, he started getting edgy, like a junkie hanging out for a fix.

His thoughts were different too when he was completely, totally and utterly alone. In his bedroom at the Coxes' place, for instance, Daniel would never have dared to bring out and examine his mental image of Lucy Dove talking to her greataunt after the funeral. Even in the remote sanctuary of the lookout, he found the image unnerving. Some parts of it were obviously wrong - like, Sibyl Dove couldn't actually have been present in the form of a pillar of ash. On the other hand, even if Lucy had just been talking to herself, he still felt convinced that he had been in the right place at the right time for an advance warning that something serious was about to happen.

Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be any way to pass on the warning. For one thing, Daniel didn't know anyone in Lomond well enough to tell them the story. For another thing, even if he went to the cops in Bayview and explained that he had been spying on this woman, from a tree in her back yard, and it had given him a funny feeling - basically, that would be more likely to get him into trouble than to get Lomond out of trouble. But even so, as he looked down from his ledge at Lomond, shining in the morning sun like a sandcastle waiting for the tide to sweep it away, he couldn't help feeling obscurely protective.

He thought: *okay, I can't stop bad things from happening - I know that already, from my own family. Still, at least I can watch over this place. I can bear witness. Sometimes that's all you can do.*

The itch at the back of his brain that had driven him up to the ledge seemed to have subsided now. Daniel stood up and turned carefully and leaned back, looking for the best way to climb from the ledge to the lookout. A five minute jog down the hill, a quick shower and he would be in time to catch the school bus into Bayview.

Rocky Abrahams appeared in the doorway halfway through Orion's history class. 'No sport today,' she said, without bothering to acknowledge Dr Ravel, the history teacher. 'The assembly room instead. A talk for years 10 and 11.'

A couple of the kids groaned but Orion felt quietly grateful. As far as he was concerned, sport was basically a licence for bullying. Oh sure, Rocky had noticed that he was a year younger and several sizes smaller than anyone else in the class, so she looked after him some of the time, but frankly, that only made it worse for Orion when Lockie and Tommo caught him on his own. He was so pleased to get a reprieve that he celebrated by dropping into the school library on his way to the assembly room. A batch of fat, shiny s.f. novels had just arrived on the New Books shelf but as Orion started to gather them up, the librarian hurried over and asked him to leave one or two for the rest of the school.

By the time he had finished choosing, he was running late, so there were only a few seats left in the big double-room. His new friend Daniel was over in the far corner, with Tommo and Lockie squeezed into the space beside him. They had obviously commandeered the seat Daniel had been saving for Orion and all the other seats at the back had been taken by the year 10 and 11 boys.

More surprisingly, all the seats in the front row were occupied as well. Jude Martin was there, gazing at the empty platform, along with Orion's sister Maya, who was in year 9 and technically shouldn't have been there at all. Orion puzzled about that for a few seconds and then lost interest and went to sit beside Katie Brewster in the middle of the room. Just as he had predicted, Katie was too busy organising her notebook and pens to say anything to him. Orion slid the thinnest of the s.f. novels under the desk and started to read.

When he lifted his head some time later, like a diver coming up for air, Lucy Dove was standing in the middle of the platform, already launched into some sort of rave. She was wearing knee-length white shorts, a white cardigan with huge pockets and a sunhat tilted back on her head, like a fashion shot of a jungle explorer. Jude Martin and the rest of the front row were watching her with such rapt attention that Orion decided he'd better find out what was going on.

'This town is a living symbol,' Lucy was saying. 'A symbol of everything that's going wrong with the world, right this minute. I want to turn that around. I want to make the Bayview/Lomond council work for *you*, not for the state government or the federal government or the people who control all the governments right round this planet.'

Katie Brewster sucked her breath in and started to write faster, covering a page of her notebook with shorthand scribbles in sixty seconds flat. Orion couldn't see why she was getting so worked up. People were always carrying on about the end of civilisation as they knew it – like, the Romans used to worry about the barbarians, the barbarians worried about the Christians and the Christians worried about the Muslims, who were worried about the Christians as well.

And all of them went on and on about the mythical good old days when everything had been a hundred times better, just like Doug Sterne had been telling them last week. Admittedly, Lucy was a whole lot cooler than Doug Sterne. Orion had seen enough of Maya's magazines to know that baggy shorts, random layers of singlets and shirts and white lace-up Docs were cutting edge right now.

But basically, Lucy and Doug were both making the sort of noises that politicians always made, because it was what their audience wanted to hear. Orion shrugged dismissively and went back to the s.f. novel.

He tuned in again a few minutes later, however, not because of anything Lucy had said but because of the intense silence all around him. The other kids were listening to Lucy – *really* listening, in a way Orion had never seen them do before. He shut his book, unwillingly curious, and within seconds he was forced to admit that, although he had lost interest pretty quickly, the stuff Lucy was saying seemed to be getting through to the other kids.

He watched Dylan Parker flinch when Lucy talked about how hard things were for the Lomond farmers. (Dylan's dad, Jeff Parker, was going down the tube right now.) He watched Tommo scowl when Lucy talked about how the farmers' problems affected the whole of Lomond. (Everyone knew that lots of local farmers, including the Parkers, were running up big bills at the Thompsons' butcher shop.) And he watched half a dozen girls duck their heads and stare down into their laps when Lucy talked about how the Lomond streets could be as dangerous after dark as the streets in big cities like New York.

'We all know times are tough,' she said. 'I've been asking people why they're sitting back and letting it happen and they say, "The government ought to do something" or "Lomond's just too small to survive in this supersized new world". Well, that's not good enough for me. I can't sit back and watch this town die, while we all wait for someone else to do something.'

She spun round, so fast that her white shirt billowed out like a sail, and paced up and down the platform. Lockie Conway stared at her open-mouthed, looking like he was ready to crawl across the floor and polish her Doc Martens with his sleeve. Katie Brewster forgot to take notes and just sat there nodding, as if Lucy was putting her thoughts into words. Jude Martin leaned forward, making sure she didn't miss a thing. Everyone was totally focused on Lucy - well, everyone except Scott Sterne. He had come in even later than Orion, so he was lounging by the door, his face as blank as a handsome mask.

'I decided to look for some people who *hadn't* given up,' Lucy was saying. 'People who still had open minds and lots of energy. And that's why I'm here today, talking to you kids. I can't do this on my own. I need help. I need *you*. Tell me straight, how many of you would be prepared to put in a bit of work, in order to save Lomond? Give me a show of hands, okay?'

Orion looked round the room again, trying to take in everybody at once. He saw Tommo's hand rise to shoulder height and then drop back to his side - Dylan's hand bouncing up and down on his knee - Lockie's hand knotted in his shorts, as if he had to stop it from lifting. When Orion checked the angle of their eyes, he realised they were all looking in Scott's direction.

And Scott's hands were clasped, casually but definitively, behind his back.

Katie Brewster's breath hissed in between her teeth and her hand soared straight up into the air, like a rocket fuelled by pure anger. She was followed by three other girls - Rita Farr, a skinny silent kid whose brother had gone off to

study medicine, leaving her to do his share of the work on the family property; Jacinta Witton who cracked jokes and volunteered for everything and got on well with everyone; and Merian Harper who had a cupboard full of trophies for running and could've been at the Australian Institute of Sport by now, except that she wanted to do microbiology at uni. Orion checked on Jude, expecting to see her hand waving as well, but, although she had seemed really keen on Lucy before, she was just frowning down at her desk.

Beside her, Serenity Cox yawned and rolled her shoulders and, rather reluctantly, hoisted her hand into the air. Once she and Katie had put their hands up, most of the girls did the same, including Jude: but still none of the boys. While Lucy took a long slow scan of the room, as if she was hoping the guys would change their minds. Orion glanced down at his own hands, clasped in front of him like a primary school kid who had been told to sit up straight. He waited to see whether one of the hands would lift off and soar into the air but neither of them did.

'Okay, I guess that's a pretty clear message,' Lucy said finally. 'Moving right along, Rocky and I will be organising a team-building exercise at the school campsite this weekend. If you're interested in being part of it – and that includes you guys, as well as the girls – give your names to Rocky over the next few days. And thanks for listening.'

As Rocky ushered Lucy out, Scott Sterne pushed himself away from the wall and strolled towards the door, with the other guys clustered around him. At the same time the girls scattered, forming into their usual groups and heading off in a dozen different directions. Orion stood back to let all of them go past and waited for Daniel.

'I think I blew it,' Daniel burst out, as soon as he came within talking distance. 'I didn't put my hand up, because I'd decided that it was my job to be a witness, but then Serenity voted for Lucy and – oh shit, what if she thinks I was siding with the guys against the girls ... against *her*?'

He went on about the "guys versus girls" business for the whole of lunchtime, ignoring all Orion's attempts to change the subject. Orion just wanted to forget about Lucy Dove. She had created a situation where he had only had two choices – to vote with the girls or abstain with the guys – and he resented having been forced to take sides. Although he didn't identify as a boy, if that meant acting like Lockie or Tommo or even Scott, he didn't identify as a girl either.

He stroked the cover of his s.f. novel, wishing Daniel would shut up and let him escape into the nearest alternate universe.

Jude's stomach still clenched every time the siren told her to leave the classroom and go out into the corridor or the yard, and she still had to plan ahead and work out ways to avoid Lockie or Tommo or Scott, because coming face to face with

them still flashed her back to those five minutes in the bus shelter. But today all the guys in year 10 and year 11 were working so hard at separating themselves from the girls that they were doing her work for her. Even better, Serenity was kicking a piece of gravel across the tarmac, instead of gazing at Scott Sterne. Jude had been scared that Serenity would turn Serenity into a Scott-groupie, after talking to him at Miss Dove's funeral, but luckily she seemed to be immune. Maybe the two of them could go on being friends, after all.

'Get a move on,' she said, giving Serenity a shove, to relieve her feelings. 'I want to catch up with Katie Brewster. She's a key player and I need to make sure she stays interested.'

'Huh?' said Serenity. 'If you're that keen on helping Lucy, why did you take so long to put your hand up? You were practically the last person to volunteer.'

Jude sighed. 'You still don't get it, do you? I'm a Martin. That counts for a lot round here.'

'How, exactly? I mean, it's not like you're black or Asian or gay or whatever.'

Jude hesitated for a few seconds, wondering whether it was worth trying to explain. City kids thought they'd seen it all but in some ways they were pretty innocent. For instance, Serenity seemed to think prejudice always came with nice neat labels that you could read from a distance and make laws about but – oh well, if she was planning to spend any more time with Scott Sterne, she ought to know how Lomond really worked.

'In case you haven't noticed, there aren't enough blacks or Asians or gays in Lomond to go around,' Jude said. 'So we're it. Being a Martin's the same as being a Sterne, only in reverse. All the guys follow where Scott leads. None of the girls would've followed if I'd taken the lead. Simple as that. End of story.'

To prove her point, she towed Serenity across the basketball hoop and stopped in front of Katie Brewster. Serenity was halfway through a puzzled frown when she realised Katie had automatically looked straight past Jude to focus on her.

'All right, I get it now,' she told Jude. 'I don't like it but I get it. I'll do the talking.' She turned to Katie and said, 'Okay, what do you reckon? Are you coming to this weekend gig that Lucy's putting on?'

Katie bounced the basketball once, twice, three times, making them wait. 'Could be fun,' she said eventually.

'Fun?' Jude said, unable to stop herself. 'It's more than that, Brewster.'

'True,' Katie said, watching the ball spin on her fingertip. 'Lucy Dove looks like she's about to split Lomond in two. Guys vs. Girls has always been the name of the game around here but Lucy's brought it out into the open. I hope she knows how to handle the flak.'

Jude nodded agreement but Serenity raised a sceptical eyebrow. 'You reckon?' she said. 'From where I was sitting, it looked more like the guys were letting Scott tell them what to do, because it's easier than thinking for themselves.'

That's why I voted for Lucy in the end. I don't give a flying fuck about saving Lomond but I didn't want to act like one of Scott's sheep.'

That was the problem with getting Serenity to do the talking. She didn't always know when she was putting her foot in it. Every time she mentioned Scott's name, Katie's face tightened slightly, until she looked even more like a Pekingese than usual. Jude decided she'd better take the risk of butting in.

'So, Brewster, why did *you* vote for Lucy?' she asked. 'If you come in on this, you'll have to go up against the Sternes sooner or later.'

Katie bared her teeth in a grin. 'Actually, that's one of the reasons I put my hand up. Everyone's always been so sure I'll marry Scott and have five Sterne sons to keep running the property and I think I just wrecked that plan. Scott hasn't even bothered to come and talk me out of supporting Lucy but – hey, what do I care? If we're going to split up, sooner's better than later, right?'

She stretched her grin even wider, which only made it seem more fake. Jude studied Katie (trying not to look sad about Scott) and Serenity (trying not to look too interested in the idea of Scott and Katie splitting up). No way did Scott Sterne deserve that much attention. Jude decided it was time to move things along.

'That's not your only reason for backing Lucy, is it?' she said. 'Come on, Brewster, tell us all about it.'

And Katie exploded. She spun round, put the ball through the hoop, shouted 'Goal' and punched it to Maya Casey, who had been watching from the sidelines.

'I'm sick of this town,' she said, not even breathing faster. 'Nothing ever happens here – nothing real, anyway. I'd like to see Lucy shake the place up. That'd give my fucking father something to write about.'

They stood and stared at her, half mystified and half envious - Serenity, who hadn't spoken to her own father in months, and Jude, who didn't even know her own father's name. Katie looked exactly the same as usual, snub-nosed and athletic and pretty but with a normal, sensible sort of prettiness, not so gorgeous that it was almost frightening, like Lucy Dove. Jude had always assumed she fitted in perfectly but apparently Katie hated Lomond as much as she did – and even more disconcertingly, the two of them had been having a proper conversation for the last few minutes. It looked as if Lucy Dove had already started to turn Lomond upside down.

'Anything else you need to know, Brewster?' she asked.

'Nah, I get the picture,' said Katie. 'Lucy's planning to take over the council, right? That's fine by me. I'd like to see the look on Doug Sterne's face, when she ends up as the next mayor. Need any help with the team-building weekend?'

Jude nodded. 'Yeah, it'd be great if you could round up as many people as possible. Lucy reckons we need at least twenty kids to make it work – well, seventeen, counting us.'

'Sixteen, counting me,' someone said behind them.

When Jude looked over her shoulder, she saw Maya Casey, dressed like a *Girl* cover in a purple t-shirt and electric blue skirt, with her hair screwed into two stupid knots on top of her head.

'Get lost,' she said. 'This is big kids' business. There's no room for little kids.'

Maya's face clenched like a baby about to howl. 'Try me,' she said. 'Just try me, okay? If you don't, I'll tell Finn that Lucy was in the FBI *and* the Mafia while she was living in the States. My dad's the biggest gossip in Lomond. It'll be all over town in ten seconds flat.'

Jude and Katie looked at each other, wondering how to handle that one, but Serenity just shrugged. 'Blackmail,' she commented. 'It works every time. All right, Maya, you can come to the team-building weekend but if you make a nuisance of yourself, you're out. Is that a deal?'

'Deal,' Maya said. 'Wait and see, Ren. I promise I'll be a really, really excellent recruit.'

Her shoulders jerked back, her chin jutted and her knots of hair quivered with excitement. With a bit of encouragement, Jude suspected that Maya would lie down on Serenity's feet and start panting like a puppy dog. Ridiculous. It would've made Jude laugh out loud, if she hadn't had an uncomfortable feeling that she might look the same when she was talking to Lucy Dove.

Katie's mother said, 'How was school?' and her youngest sister wanted to play but Katie said, 'Homework' and went straight to her bedroom. She switched on her computer, found her notebook at the bottom of her bag and propped it against a stack of books. For the next hour nothing moved in the room, except Katie's fingers, but they moved so fast that her wrists went on tingling after she had finished typing. She read through what she had written and changed some of the sentences, read it again and wondered whether she was getting her point across. The quickest way to find out would be to show the article to her dad. Katie pressed Print and leaned back in her chair.

Bummer, she thought. Now I'll have to decide how I feel about Scott.

When she'd got the idea of writing an article about Lucy Dove, straight after talking to Serenity and Jude, it had felt like being possessed. She hadn't been able to think of anything else for the rest of the afternoon. In fact, she had hardly said a word to her friends in the bus on the way home, because she had been too busy arranging and rearranging words in her mind. Looking back, she couldn't help noticing that her sudden obsession had been kind of convenient. Jacinta and Merian had tried to talk about Scott but she had been able to brush them aside, without even realising that she was doing it.

Although the article was more than just a distraction, she told herself, avoiding the topic of Scott again. She meant every word she had just written. It was important to tell the world – the part of the world that read the *Star*, at any

rate – about Lucy’s campaign. From the moment Katie had first seen her, walking down the Lomond main street, she had been impressed by Lucy’s sense of purpose. Then Norm Kelly had shown her that Lucy had a vulnerable side and somehow that combination of confidence and vulnerability had lured Katie into putting her hand up when Lucy called for support.

Well, she’d done it now. She had known from the start that voting for Lucy would put her on the opposite side to Scott, because there was no way that a Sterne could ever be seen to vote for a Dove, and the result had been pretty much what she had expected. Scott had stayed out of her way for the rest of the day and she hadn’t gone running to him, either. No question about it, she and Scott were through. Katie told herself firmly that she didn’t regret it, not for a moment. She just felt a bit giddy because it had happened so fast, that was all.

But the giddiness went on increasing, until it swelled into a tidal wave of guilt and regret that hung over her for a split second and then came crashing down in a flurry of questions: “What if I was wrong about Scott and he does love me and I’ve really hurt him?” and “What if I become one of the losers, once people know I’m not going out with Scott Sterne?” and “Oh, and, just by the way, what the hell am I going to do on Friday nights?”

Katie clutched the edge of the desk to steady herself and heard the thunk that meant the printer had stopped. She took a long, deep breath, picked up the article and went to see whether her dad was home yet. The kitchen was overflowing with voices. When she opened the door, she saw her father piggybacking Emily (her youngest sister), while he admired a painting of a house by Hannah (second youngest), dealt with a long diatribe from Isobelle (the nearest in age to Katie) about what her best friend had said about her second best friend and, at the same time, kissed their mother hello.

‘G’day, Girl Wonder,’ he said over her sisters’ heads. ‘What’s that in your hand? Haven’t written me a lead article, by any chance?’

Since he thought he was joking, Katie got a kick out of saying, ‘Yeah, sure.’ Dick Brewster looked interested. He swung Emily to the ground, stuck Hannah’s painting onto the fridge with a dinosaur-shaped magnet, told Isobelle to phone both her friends before tea, said, ‘Back in a minute’ to his wife and swept Katie off to the sunroom, which he used as a study. He took the article out of her hand and read it through twice.

‘Not bad,’ he said. ‘Although it’s much too obvious that you think Lucy Dove’s wonderful. You’re not writing an opinion piece here. You have to look as if you’re at least trying to be objective.’

He tossed the article onto his desk, to show that the discussion was over. Katie heard an echo inside her head, bouncing back from her weird outburst in front of Jude Martin and Serenity Cox, which she had managed to forget until now: *‘That’d give my fucking father something to write about.’* She thought about it and decided that, having gone this far, she might as well go a bit further.

‘Okay, show me how to change it,’ she said.

‘If that’s what you want,’ said her father. ‘But I’d better warn you that, even if you clean it up, I won’t print it.’

‘Why not?’ Katie said, too surprised to be angry. ‘It’s the best story we’ve had in years. Sibyl Dove’s grandniece breaks the news that she’s running for council to a bunch of school kids, instead of having some tired old campaign launch. How cool is that?’

Her dad shook his head. ‘Sorry, Girl Wonder, we’re not in the cool business. Lucy’ll have to contact the *Star* and make a formal announcement, just like any other candidate. We can’t take her private statements into account. Otherwise we’d soon find ourselves printing all the gossip that goes round this town – and if we did that, we’d have to double the size of the news section.’

‘But this isn’t gossip,’ Katie objected. ‘I was *there*, Dad. Lucy’s trying to do something really important. We ought to be getting behind her, not going on with all this crap about how we’re *sooo* objective.’

‘That’s enough, Katie,’ said her father, who hated to hear his daughters swear. ‘It’s good that you’re taking an interest in local politics but you’ll need to keep that separate from your work on the *Star*. We’re the only newspaper in this town, remember. City papers can target specific readerships – Liberal or Labour, radical or right wing – but for us, taking sides would be the quickest way to lose all our readers. You do see that none of them could trust us then, don’t you?’

Katie would have liked to argue back but she knew enough about the newspaper business to know that, logically speaking, her father was right. Okay, her feelings about Lucy’s campaign went beyond logic but, as her dad had just said, that was a different matter. She took a last, regretful look at her article and turned away, leaving it on his desk.

‘Like I said, it’s not a bad effort for your first go at a leader,’ Dick Brewster said. ‘By the way, Marie Boyle just handed in a CWA report that’d run for two pages, if I printed it as it stands. Want to cut it down to size, Girl Wonder?’

He was offering her a consolation prize, to cheer her up. He hadn’t realised that Katie wasn’t interested in that stuff any more. Maybe this was the moment to tell him that she’d changed her mind about working for the *Star* when she was older, because she didn’t want to end up as a journalist on a country paper, after all. But, as she hesitated, she became aware of all the contradictory emotions sloshing around inside her – feeling angry at her dad for pressuring her but, at the same time, feeling guilty for even considering the idea of abandoning the *Star*; feeling relieved that she would never have to watch another action movie with Scott but simultaneously feeling sad in advance about having no one to snuggle with.

It was too much. She couldn’t dump Scott *and* her father, all on the same day.

‘Yeah, sure,’ she said. ‘Give me the report, Dad. I’ll do a bit of work on it before tea.’

Scott was empty. He'd done what he had to do and now he needed a break. He told the guys he had to go home and help his dad; he rang his dad and said Tommo had invited him over for a few hours of DeathStalker 4, with dinner included; and he was heading for The Caff, hoping for a chance to consult Frank about Serenity Cox, when he remembered that Jude Martin was working at The Caff these days.

He turned back straight away and then stalled in the middle of the footpath with visions of Serenity burning a hole in his head. The images had been there ever since Scott had talked to her at Sibyl Dove's funeral, so he knew the burning sensation wouldn't be fatal, but it was messing him around, all the same. Look at this afternoon. He hadn't even had enough spare energy to keep Katie in line and now she seemed to be running the Lucy Dove Fan Club. He would probably have to dump her, which would be a nuisance - although, come to think of it, a lot of couples split up for a while and then got back together again.

Scott indulged in a brief fast-forward fantasy where he had unlimited access to Serenity until she went back to the city and he settled down with Katie, the way everyone wanted. That would be perfect, which meant it was guaranteed not to happen. He was so busy being realistic about his chances with Serenity that he almost missed the moment when she stopped in front of him with an enormous smile on her face. Scott pulled himself together just as she was beginning to shrink the smile and move on.

'Hey, it's you,' he said, smiling back. 'Didn't expect to see you here. What brings you into town?'

'No big deal,' Serenity said. 'Jude talked me into having dinner with Lucy Dove, that's all.'

Scott didn't want to waste a good-luck moment on talking about Lucy Dove. He decided to change the subject but when he checked his reserves, his energy tank was still empty and, to make it worse, Serenity was watching him with a suppressed smile that showed she knew he was spinning out. It was typical. Serenity always noticed everything and she always refused to be impressed. It was what he liked about her and why she scared him, all rolled into one ball. He watched her warily, to see which way the ball would bounce this time.

'What made you blank out all of a sudden?' she asked. 'No, don't tell me. It's because I mentioned Lucy, right? Jesus, what *is* this business with the Doves and the Sternes? Everyone keeps going on about it but no one ever really explains.'

Scott shrugged. 'Yeah, well, have you got a spare hour or two?'

'Actually, I do,' she said. 'I got a lift in with Mum, because she'd run out of olive oil, and I was planning to hang with Jude at The Caff till it was time to go to Dove House but she'll be working and ...'

She stopped short, looking as if she was sorry she had said so much. Scott panicked at the thought of losing her. He found an extra energy reserve,

hidden away in a back corner of his psyche, and prepared to charm her into sticking around.

'Yeah, it can be a real hassle, having your mates there while you're working,' he said. 'You'd be doing Jude a favour if you could think of somewhere else to go. Ever been for a walk along the river, Ren? Seriously, you really ought to try it some time.'

'Want to know how you could have said that quicker?' Serenity asked. 'You could've just said, "Want to go for a walk?"'

She was laughing at him, which should have felt like a threat to his position as the Crown Prince of Lomond, but for once Scott didn't give a stuff.

'Want to go for a walk?' he said obediently.

'Sure. Come on, show me the way.'

It was a miracle, Scott decided, leading Serenity down the first side street they came to. If he'd got there a minute later or Serenity had got there a minute earlier, she would already have been in The Caff by the time he walked up the main street. Come to think of it, if either of them had seen anyone they knew during the last five minutes – and in Lomond, that should have been a statistical certainty – they would never have been able to run away like this, weaving through the back streets between old sandstone houses and coming out onto the path beside the Danville River.

They talked about school at first - homework, favourite and unfavourite teachers, Orion Casey jokes, who was going with who. It was the same conversation that Scott would've had with anyone from school that he didn't know too well. But what they were saying wasn't important. They both knew they were just going through a set of warm-up exercises, like two singers about to perform a duet seeing how their voices meshed together. Scott looked around for somewhere they could sit, while they moved on to the next stage, and noticed a bench over by the bridge.

'Wait a minute,' Serenity said, as he steered her towards it. 'Aren't you supposed to be explaining this crazy feud?'

The thought of all that history made Scott feel tired. He collapsed onto the bench and looked up at her.

'Do I have to?' he asked. 'It'll be hard going. As far back as I can remember, Dad and Uncle Doug have been talking as if there was some big competition between the Sternes and the Doves, with Lomond as the prize. Basically, I just took it for granted. If you really want to know how it got started, you might have to hypnotise me or something.'

Serenity sat down beside him, closer than she needed. 'Maybe I will, she said with a smile that turned it into a tease. 'I mean, you have to admit it's a pretty cool story - kind of like *Romeo and Juliet*, if you could just fall in love with Lucy Dove.'

'No,' Scott said, looking her straight in the eyes. 'No, I couldn't do that.'

The miracles continued. He had gone as close as he could, without using the actual words, to telling Serenity that he was falling in love with her, but neither

of them needed to make a big deal out of it. Scott went on looking at her, to prove he meant it, and Serenity looked back equally directly, to show she knew. But basically, he just left it at that and she just said 'Good' and they kept on talking.

Afterwards, when he tried to reconstruct the afternoon in his memory, Scott found it hard to say why it had felt so different from any of the other afternoons he had lived through. It was easier to make a list of the things that *hadn't* happened. There were no big confessions, for example. They traded all the ordinary details of their everyday lives, so easily and casually that he was convinced he could have told Serenity anything he liked, but he didn't need to spill his guts straight off. In the same way, although he wanted to know all about her, he caught himself deliberately saving his best questions for later and bookmarking stuff that they could talk about next time: because there would be a next time: he was sure of that.

There was no sex either, not even when he took Serenity across the bridge and down to the huge green cave formed by the trailing branches of an old willow, where they were as private as if they had booked into a Bayview motel. (More private, actually, considering that most people who worked at the Bayview motels lived in Lomond or had relatives and friends there.) They kissed dreamily, in between sentences, and lay side by side on the sandy bank, pressing close together while they talked.

Scott memorised the texture of Serenity's skin and the taste of her plump underlip and the feel of her hand moving across his chest. He didn't need to make a grab for anything more, because he knew there would be time for that later. Somewhere in the last three hours he had finally got the point of all the stuff that adults said about taking it slowly and letting things develop at their own pace, although he still wouldn't have been able to explain it to Eden or Tommo or Lockie.

'Why are you friends with Lockie and Tommo?' Serenity asked, reading his mind for the third or fourth time.

Scott wasn't quite ready to answer that. 'Why are *you* friends with Jude Martin?' he said, to distract her.

It worked. 'Don't tell me you go along with all that garbage about the Martins,' Serenity said, lazily annoyed. 'Jude's one of the smartest people I've ever met. Give her a break, why don't you?'

'Maybe I will,' Scott said and right at that moment, it felt as if he was telling the truth.

Then Serenity shifted around, to make herself more comfortable, and caught sight of her watch and reluctantly told him that it was time for her to go. They made some half-serious jokes about whether the Feud Monster would get Scott if he went too close to Dove House but he walked Serenity to the gate anyway, although, when he leaned back to look up at the huge pile of sandstone slabs, he felt a brief stab of panic, as if the house was about to collapse on top of him.

Serenity kissed him one last time and went hurrying up the path. Scott heard a churchyard clang from the front door bell, followed by a horror movie creak from the hinges as the door swung open. He thought he was going to hate the moment when Serenity disappeared inside but it turned out that, even after she had gone into the darkness, he could still see her image shining behind his eyes.

He turned away and went back down the hill, so full of happiness that he had to move carefully to stop it spilling over.

Dinner at Dove House was Bayview flounder, crisp from the grill, and Lucy telling stories about America - the stretch limo with a small tiled swimming pool in its boot that she'd seen in Vegas; the stand-up comedian who had shared her New York apartment; working for a TV evangelist in the Mid West and a gay senator in San Francisco. Serenity listened and laughed and every now and then, while Lucy and Jude were talking together, allowed herself to think about Scott Sterne.

Scott wasn't just a jock, after all. He could definitely handle his half of the conversation and he looked great too, with those streamlined muscles and the wheat-blond hair that he had to keep flicking away from those cloud-grey eyes. There was only one thing wrong with him but it was a biggie. Scott lived in Lomond and, from what he had just told her about the Sternes, he wasn't ever likely to leave.

Serenity wished she could sit down with someone and have a good long talk about what to do next. If she had been living in one of those old US sitcoms, she would've talked to her mum but Caro wasn't even on the shortlist of people she could trust with her secrets. Jude wouldn't be any help, either. In general, she was incredibly smart but when it came to guys, there was something young about her, like she hadn't really started to be interested in that side of things yet.

On the other hand, her city friends were way too interested in that side of things. If she emailed Fi or Toby or Sera Jane, she knew they would say, 'Go for it, girlfriend' or 'Hey, treat yourself to a holiday romance' or whatever. She couldn't see how to explain that it wasn't quite that simple, without waving her hands around and making meaningful eye contact - and she couldn't make meaningful eye contact, unless the others came up to Lomond or Caro let her go down to Sydney for the weekend, which wasn't about to happen any time soon.

She was trying for a psychic link with Sera Jane when Lucy leaned towards her, the two tiny diamond studs in her left earlobe winking confidently. Lucy was looking as good as ever. Her pale hair had a lycra shine and her dress was a dozen layers of some white floaty material that merged together like morning mist.

'Want to hear my plans for Lomond, Serenity?' she said.

A few hours ago it would have been exciting to have the local celebrity asking for her opinions but right now Serenity wanted everyone to leave her alone, so she could keep on thinking about Scott.

'Go ahead,' she said. 'I can't stop you. Just don't expect me to be all over you, like Jude.'

If she had talked to Caro like that, she would've had to sit through a lecture about manners. But Lucy was too cool for lectures. She just tipped her head back and laughed.

'I knew you'd make a good recruit,' she said. 'You're going to keep me on my toes, aren't you? All right then, here's the plan. I'm going to turn this town around - right round in a circle. But I need help. I need you, Serenity Cox.'

For the space of a heartbeat Serenity felt as if she had walked into one of Orion's fantasy novels, where mysterious strangers could drop in on you at any time of the day or night and invite you on a quest to get rid of evil. Then, just in time, she remembered that Lucy was talking about Lomond.

'Come off it,' she said. 'You're dreaming. Time for a wake-up call.'

A frown hooked itself onto Lucy's eyebrows. 'What's wrong with dreams?' she asked. 'Oh sure, I agree that the people here have been dreaming about the past for way too long - but trust me, I'm about to give them a dream that'll skyrocket them into the future.'

'Like how?' Serenity said, getting interested in spite of herself.

'I'll start by showing them what the future looks like,' Lucy said. 'You heard Dr Sterne the other day. He'd like to take Lomond back into the past, which, according to him, was full of macho men and happy families and -'

'Oh, right,' Serenity said, disappointed. 'You're a feminist, like my mum. Sorry, I'm not interested in all that old stuff.'

A complicated series of expressions crossed Lucy's face - a downward tug of her mouth that might have signalled frustration, a shone on her eyes like remembered sadness and a deepening of the comma-lines between her eyebrows that definitely resembled anger. She looked at Jude for a long moment and Jude looked back at her. Serenity was beginning to feel excluded when Lucy's full attention swung back towards her again.

'You think ideas come with a use-by date?' she said. 'Walk a few kays along the road outside this house, girlfriend, and you might change your mind. Tell her, Jude.'

They both turned to Jude but she just stared down at her plate and drew patterns with her spoon in some leftover raspberry sauce. In the end Lucy had to take over again.

'Right at this moment there's an unofficial curfew in Lomond,' she said. 'Any woman who's out on the street after sunset gets whistled at or followed or worse. If I can figure that out in a couple of days, a smart kid like you must've noticed *something* in the time you've been here.'

She flashed a quick glance at Serenity, bright as a dueller's sword, and Serenity lifted her shoulders in a defensive shrug.

'I don't spend much time in town,' she said. 'Why would I? Lomond's the pits.'

By now, she was starting to enjoy the argument. She waited for Lucy to argue back but all she got this time was another friendly smile.

'Too bad,' Lucy said. 'It doesn't affect you personally, so you don't want to get involved. Oh well, I guess that's fair enough. Come on, it's time to drive the two of you home.'

When Serenity stood up, she felt as floaty and giddy as the night when she had drunk too many glasses of champagne at her parents' "God-have-we-really-been-married-for-fifteen-years?" anniversary party. The combination of fantasising about Scott and sparring with Lucy seemed to have made her light-headed. She tripped on the back step and skidded across the gravel in the drive, which meant that Jude beat her to the car and got into the back seat.

It was an obvious set-up. For the first few minutes Serenity felt sure that Jude had given her the front seat so that Lucy could try and talk her round on the drive back to Happy Valley. But Lucy didn't say a word. They drove down the hill in silence, while Serenity stared out at the navy blue rectangle of the night, divided into separate sections by parallel lines of street lights. As the car slowed, just before the roundabout that led into the main street, she unfastened her seat belt with a decisive click.

'Stop here,' she said. 'I want to test your theory about the unofficial curfew. You can pick me up at the other end of the main street, Lucy. If no one hassles me, you have to admit you were exaggerating, okay? And if they do, I - I'll come to your team-building weekend.'

'It's a deal,' Lucy said straight away. 'See you in ten.'

Serenity got out of the car, waved to Lucy and Jude and walked down to the corner. She could feel her muscles stretch and tighten with every movement, as efficient and infallible as if she was a cyborg. As she turned the corner, she noticed a bunch of guys, gathered outside The Caff. There was nothing scary about them. She recognised half of them from school and the older guys were probably their brothers or cousins or whatever, just as easy to handle as the ones she knew already. No question about it, she was going to win that bet. She even considered the idea of crossing the road and walking straight past the guys, in order to score extra points, but her feet were already marching her on to the next corner.

The main street was empty. Light glistened like rainwater on its asphalt surface and shadows huddled together under the shop verandahs. She stayed close to the outside edge of the footpath, avoiding the shadows, until a late ute reversed out of the parking space beside the pub and came speeding towards her. There was something a bit unnerving about being caught in its headlights. Serenity automatically veered across to the inside of the footpath and found herself staring into the black hole of the empty supermarket car park. Who knew that a blank space could be so scary? She changed course again, heading back to the other side of the footpath, and bumped into something warm and solid.

'Hey, hey,' a voice said. 'No need to knock me down in the rush.'

She turned her head and came nose to nose with a guy who was exactly the same height as her. He was pale, even at the end of summer, and his wide forehead and blunt chin made him look like a marble statue, although his eyes spoiled the effect by moving busily up and down her body. There was something vaguely familiar about him. Serenity checked her identikit files and remembered the guy from her class who had left school at the start of the year.

'Eden Parker,' she said. 'Jesus, who'd want to rush *you*?'

She hurried on but Eden lengthened his stride and caught up easily. Serenity heard footsteps behind them and swung round, thinking *rescue me, please*. She found herself facing another marble statue, indicating that the guy who had been following them was another Parker.

'Hey, Eden, who's your girlfriend?' he asked.

'As if!' she said. 'No way am I his girlfriend.'

'She's Serenity Cox, the one I was telling you about,' said Eden. 'Thinks she's too good for us rednecks. A city girl, Cam. You know what they're like.'

'Yeah, sure,' said Cam Parker, hitching at his jeans. 'Everyone knows city girls are hot. This one looks nervous, but. Why don't we walk her to wherever she's going, protect her from the bad guys and all? You'd like that, wouldn't you, city girl?'

Serenity said 'No' but the Parkers didn't take any notice. They closed in, trapping her between them, and frogmarched her towards the far end of the street, heading for the park beside the community hall. She looked round for an escape route but there was nowhere to run. The street was deserted and the supermarket car park would be just as dangerous as the park - too many shadows, anything could happen there - so, even though she hated to admit it, Lucy seemed like her only chance of escape. She looked down at her watch, to see how much longer she would have to wait, and Cam followed the direction of her eyes.

'Look, Eden!' he said with a shout of delighted laughter. 'She's checking out my equipment. I told you she'd take care of us, if we took care of her. Hey, city girl, want to know what one of the guys from your school just told us? There's this graffiti in the boys' toilet that goes, "Serenity - heart - Cox." Real romantic, except it doesn't spell Cox like you do.'

There was a rank taste in Serenity's mouth and her skin felt greasy all over. She wanted to throw up on Cam or, even better, hit him where it would hurt most. But lashing out would only give the guys another excuse to grab her, so she just walked faster, hating the way it made her breasts bounce. Her body didn't feel efficient and infallible and cyborgish any longer. It had turned into something for Eden and Cam to perve on - something that made her vulnerable to them.

She stared straight ahead, pretending the Parkers weren't there, met the eyes of the bronze soldier on the war memorial and thought: *if only I could climb onto the monument, ask for a loan of his rifle and turn it on Eden and Cam*. The

fantasy worked so well that she didn't even notice they had reached the end of the main street until her right foot thumped down into the gutter, hard enough to twist her ankle.

Her left knee buckled under the strain, throwing her against Eden. As he caught her, he added an extra spin that ground his groin against her, while Cam helped by clamping both hands round her backside. For a long moment Serenity hung suspended between them, still in denial, still thinking: *this can't be happening* and then she pulled herself together and began to fight back.

She started by stamping down on Cam's foot and pushing hard at Eden's chest. They reeled back, arms flailing, looking up at her with identical snarls. As they recovered and lurched towards her, Serenity heard the sound of running footsteps and a voice like a whipcrack saying, 'Quit that.' The Parkers let go of her and backed off, so suddenly that she lost her balance again. But before she could fall, someone caught her and steadied her. Serenity turned and looked up at Scott.

'Pair of morons,' he said, as the Parkers sauntered away. 'They'll leave you alone from now on. Are you okay, Ren?'

Serenity couldn't answer, because her voice seemed to be trapped at the bottom of her lungs. She just stood there, gazing up at Scott, who stood there and gazed down at her. As his hand lifted and reached out, Serenity's hand rose of its own accord and floated towards him. Her fingers were flexing dreamily, getting ready to grip and hold, when a car horn sounded from the other side of the road.

'My lift,' she gasped. 'See you later. Thanks a lot.'

It was dark inside the car. Serenity couldn't see Lucy Dove's face, just the steady gleam from her diamond stars, but that made it easier to say what she needed to say.

'You win,' she told Lucy. 'Count me in. I'll do it. I'll do anything.'

She wouldn't have blamed Lucy for saying "I told you so" but in fact she just started the Ford and took off, driving back down the main street and out onto the highway. A flat dark sky spread out above the flat dark land, with a faint line of starlight to mark the edge of the escarpment. The darkness made Serenity feel small and cold and empty. She leaned her forehead against the side window and wondered why she had agreed to go along with Lucy's plans.

Not because she was interested in helping Lucy to save Lomond, that was for sure. Not because her best friend had talked her into it – Jude had hardly said a word since dinner. Not even because of the Parkers – they had scared her, all right, but there were other ways to deal with that kind of fear. No, her real reason for joining Lucy's team was Scott. For a moment there, Serenity had wanted him to take over. She'd wanted him to wrap his arms around her and promise to look after her and protect her from all the dangers in the world forever more.

And that scared her worse than anything the Parkers could do.

Six

On Friday afternoon Daniel got into an argument with one of his teachers, the history professor who had dropped out to live in Happy Valley and write a novel. Dr Ravel claimed it was inevitable that the Northern states would win the American Civil War, because they were industrialised and therefore had better guns and equipment, but Daniel insisted the South could have won, because they'd had better soldiers and more fighting spirit. Dr Ravel had kept him there for five minutes, trying to convince him, which was a bit annoying. Daniel didn't mind if Dr Ravel thought the North was bound to win, so he couldn't see why the teacher should mind him thinking something different.

By the time he had collected his bag from his locker, all the kids had divided into their usual groups to wait for the school bus. Daniel stood at the top of the steps and mapped the schoolyard. The guys occupied the middle ground, from Scott Sterne and some of his Bayview followers over by the gate, working on their cool, through to Lockie and Tommo stalking the primary school kids who were playing hide and seek under the trees. The girls filled in the gaps, separating into clusters of two or three or four to gossip and giggle, read each other's magazines and do each other's hair or mess around on the basketball court, like Serenity and Katie.

All the usual groups ... or were they? For one thing, Jude Martin was standing on the sidelines with the rest of Katie's group and judging by what Daniel had seen so far, the Lomond girls generally ignored Jude. Maya Casey was in that group as well, which was seriously unusual. Bayview/Lomond Secondary followed the same unwritten rule as every other school Daniel had been to – you weren't supposed to hang with kids who were older or younger than you.

Even the kids from the primary school were acting differently today. Whenever Lockie and Tommo trapped one of them, the others would run over to form a circle around the cornered kid, spoiling the guys' fun. Then, while Daniel watched from the steps, every kid under the age of ten swooped across the yard, squawking like seagulls, and gathered at the bottom of the steps. Daniel smelt a light frangipani scent and saw Lucy Dove float past him, carrying a stack of books. He tilted his head to one side and read the titles: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit, The Pushcart War.*

'Thanks for reading to us, Miss,' the kids called. 'See you next week, Miss. Look, Miss, we remember the secret sign.'

They held their hands up, forefinger and thumb touching to form a circle. Lucy laughed and waded through the crowd, calling each of the kids by name and promising to return next week. In the background Lockie and Tommo scowled and swung away, probably to go and look for Orion. Daniel sighed and followed. Orion wasn't his idea of the perfect friend – he talked *at* Daniel more than he talked *to* him - but he was the nearest thing to a mate that Daniel had in Lomond, so he was stuck with looking after the kid.

He tracked Lockie and Tommo to a cave of bushes near the fence. When he squatted down and peered under the bottom layer of branches, he could see Orion sprawled on his stomach, reading poetry out loud in a deep actor's voice, quite different from his usual speedy, high-pitched tones. A love poem, for fuck's sake. The little idiot had no sense of self-preservation. Daniel took a step forward, crunching gravel underfoot to warn Lockie and Tommo that he was there, and they jumped and turned: but in the wrong direction.

Daniel turned with them and watched Scott Sterne strolling towards the bushes, hands in his pockets. As he passed, Lockie and Tommo backed off and hurried along behind him, as if they had been summoned by one of those soundless dog whistles. Daniel glared after them. He'd had to practically wrestle Tommo and Lockie to the ground the other day, to stop them harassing Orion, but Scott Sterne could have the same effect by wandering past and raising an eyebrow. And to make it even worse, his cousin Serenity, who had despised Daniel for taking Orion's side, was watching Scott admiringly from the basketball court.

Some people had all the luck.

Jude drummed on the goal post at the end of the basketball court, tapping out the rhythm of "Come on, Aussie, come on", as if that would make the bus get there quicker – either the school bus (taking the others back to Lomond) or the mini-bus that Lucy had borrowed from the old folks' home (taking thirty girls, including her, off to the weekend camp), she didn't care which.

Every time she turned round, she caught Scott Sterne giving Serenity a meaningful look or Serenity looking meaningfully back. It had been like that ever

since Scott had rescued Serenity from the Parkers on Monday night, although some last-minute piece of good luck seemed to have stopped Serenity from flinging herself straight into Scott's arms. Otherwise, the two of them would probably be on their honeymoon by now. Jude kept reminding herself that Serenity didn't know what Scott was really like but she couldn't help feeling betrayed, all the same.

She looked round again and almost cheered out loud when she saw the mini-bus pulling up at the gate. A supermodel stepped out - incredibly tall and incredibly thin, with high cheekbones and tawny eyes and lots of ash blonde hair, so perfectly groomed that she looked as though she was gliding down a catwalk in Paris, although she was wearing a tracksuit, instead of a ballgown.

'My niece Paige,' Rocky announced. 'She's doing a Phys Ed course at Newcastle CAE, so this'll count towards her assessment.' She herded the girls on board, counted heads and said, 'Okay, Paige, let's go.'

As the bus pulled out, Scott Sterne stepped off the curb and stood stone still in the middle of the road, forcing Paige to steer round him. He scanned the windows until he found Serenity, who stared back just as intently. Jude wanted to grab the wheel from Paige and run him over but, in a way, it was almost as satisfying to watch him recede into the distance until he was just a dusty speck on the dusty road. They had left Lomond behind them for an entire weekend - three whole days where Jude could forget that Scott existed and concentrate on helping Lucy to build her team.

The bus drove through the outskirts of Bayview and continued on round the coast road. White beaches shimmered in the sun and the waves juggled with dots of light. There was a buzz of talk, getting louder as they got further away from the school. When the mini-bus stopped at the school campsite twenty kays out of Bayview, the girls jumped straight out and went to look around, commenting on everything they passed.

'Never been here before. Have you?'

'Little cabins. Way cool.'

'I'm starving. What's that smell?'

The smell - wood smoke and a meaty sizzle - came from a barbecue under the ti-trees, beside a sandy track that led down to the beach. Lucy Dove, with a long white apron over her white shirt and shorts, was flourishing a pair of tongs and turning hamburgers, sausages and vegiburgers. Paige went over to help her and the girls watched them longingly, half of them yearning to be as tall and glamorous as Paige, the other half coveting Lucy's friendly, confident smile.

Then Rocky shouted, 'Move it' and chased them away to the cabins, where they dumped their backpacks, argued about the beds and raced back to the barbecue. They stuffed themselves with burgers, ate some salad when Rocky bossed them into it and collapsed on the grass with their stomachs bulging like new puppies. Lucy came and sat between Jude and Maya, facing the sea. Sunlight clung to the folds of her white t-shirt and turned her blue eyes gold.

‘You’re probably wondering why I asked you here,’ she said. ‘But you’ll have to keep wondering for a while, because I want to start by asking you to tell me why you decided to come along. Katie, will you go first?’

Katie looked down at her hands, then looked across at Jude and Serenity and went into her “Nothing ever happens here” spiel. Jude had heard it all before, so she wasn’t surprised, but she could see the other girls’ eyes opening wide at the idea that Katie Brewster – future head prefect, going out with Scott Sterne – could think there was anything wrong with her life. They believed her, though. As she went on explaining, they began to nod and whisper, ‘Yeah, right’ and ‘Me too’ and ‘Same here.’

After Katie finished, Lucy pointed to Rita Farr, who told them she worked hard on the family farm but her dad never listened to her ideas, so joining Lucy’s campaign felt like a way of having her say. Everyone nodded at Rita as well and they nodded even harder when Jacinta Witton said there wasn’t much to do around Lomond and the campaign sounded like it could be fun. Clever Lucy, thought Jude. It was a smart move, making the kids talk themselves into it, like using your opponent’s strength against them in karate.

Then Lucy’s finger moved on towards Merian Harper. ‘Yeah, well,’ Merian said, pleating the edge of her t-shirt. ‘I’m here because I want to find out more but I’m not, like, totally committed. It feels weird, all of us being girls. The guys in this town have it tougher than us in a whole lot of ways. I don’t want to make it worse, by shutting them out of this group.’

‘Good point,’ said Lucy. ‘Maya, what do you think?’

As everyone turned towards her, Maya’s baby face went stiff and pinched and adult. ‘Actually, I’m here because I’m really, really mad at the guys in this town,’ she said. ‘There was this painting I wanted to do - the war memorial by moonlight, okay? Dad drove me into Lomond. I was wearing my lime green t-shirt and yellow skirt. Eden Parker and his brother – the oldest one, not Dylan, right? - came over and started saying stuff. How Tommo and Lockie had said I fronted up to them when they were bullying Orion, which was all wrong, because I was just some stupid chick. How my skirt was short and my t-shirt showed my boobs. What guys want to do with girls who look like that. I felt dirty. When I got home, I cut my clothes into bits and stuffed them in the bin. I wear nice things to make me feel good, not to make guys think about sex. I don’t know what to wear now. It isn’t fair.’

In the silence that followed, Jacinta leaned over and took hold of Maya’s hand. ‘That happened to me once,’ she whispered. ‘Only I never told anyone. I think you’re brave, Maya. Incredibly brave.’

The others started to nod again, like a ripple around the circle. Katie Brewster said, ‘Everyone reckons girls shouldn’t be out late on their own, as if we’re the problem.’

Rita Farr said, ‘I thought I was the only one.’

And Merian Harper said, 'Hold on, is it really that bad? Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying Maya or Jacinta or Rita are making things up. I just want to know whether it's, like, a few guys being stupid or a major problem.'

On the far side of the ti-tree barrier, waves were whispering and thundering. The air was so thick with sundust that Jude couldn't see anybody properly, except for Lucy who sat cross-legged and straight-backed, as white and bright as a lighthouse. Jude felt like a ship lost at sea. She fixed her eyes on Lucy and, when Lucy's finger pointed in her direction, she started to talk and didn't stop until she had spewed out every detail of the night when Shelley walked out of the call centre and left her stranded in town.

There was more silence after that, ten times quieter than the silence after Maya's story. Jude told herself that she'd been a fool. Okay, Lucy understood but the others never would. They were Lomond kids, most of them, and Lomond blamed everything on the Martins. But – oh well, Lucy had wanted her to tell them and Jude wanted Lucy to have everything she wanted.

Even this.

'Jude!' Jacinta said, breaking the silence. 'They would've r-r-'

'Raped me?' Jude said. 'Maybe. Why not? I'm Shelley Martin's daughter.'

'What does that mean, exactly?' Lucy asked, sounding more American than usual. 'We're all somebody's daughter, right?'

'Jude means that her mum's famous for having, like, gone out with heaps of guys,' Merian Harper explained. 'Sorry, Jude. I used to make jokes about Shelley too. Never realised before. I didn't mean -'

'They set her up,' Rita said fiercely. 'The guys set her up. It's a message to the rest of us. "Play along or we'll treat you like Shelley Martin." But what's Shelley ever done that's so terrible? If she was a guy, everyone would go, "Oh yeah, good for him." Only she's female, so it's "What a slut" instead.'

The sound of the waves in the distance was like a series of echoes: *slut slut slut slut*. Rita Farr bit her lip, as if she thought she should've kept her mouth shut, but Jude didn't care, because she was too busy trying not to laugh. It was crazy. One minute her mum was a total liability and next minute she had become a feminist heroine – although actually Shelley wouldn't give a shit either way.

'The double standard,' Serenity said in a voice that sounded more like Caro's than her own. 'One law for the guys, another law for the girls. If we dump on Jude's mum, we're dumping on ourselves.'

'And that's why it's fine for this group to be all girls, to begin with,' Katie Brewster summed up. 'We've got more reasons for wanting things to change but once the guys get the hang of it, they'll be begging to join.'

Merian went, 'Mmm' and Maya said, 'Yes!' and Jacinta hummed in the back of her throat - a chorus of small murmurs that reverberated around the circle, adding up to a quiet cheer. Jude watched Lucy's smile beam out, illuminating each of the girls in turn.

'Wow,' she said. 'You've been amazingly honest. That's probably the hardest work you'll do all weekend. Now you deserve a reward. Paige, where's that cake?'

Paige came gliding forward like a supermodel down a catwalk, carrying the biggest chocolate cake Jude had ever seen. It was fluffy with frosting and decorated with tiny silver balls and crystallised rose petals. The others jumped up and mobbed her, giggling and grabbing at the cake, as if one look had been enough to give them a sugar high. But Jude didn't move. She stayed there, hugging her knees to her chest, until she heard the rough purr of a car motor over on the far side of the cabins.

Lucy's EA Ford. So Lucy was leaving.

The Ford idled up the track and roared off along the road back to Bayview. Jude dropped her head onto her knees and let herself fold inward, until she was curled up like a foetus in the womb. Now that Lucy had gone, she regretted telling her story to a bunch of girls who had been so safe and protected all their lives that they wouldn't know how to react. With the right cues from Lucy, they had been able to summon up a bit of sympathy but not enough to cancel out all the years when they'd giggled together about Jude Martin in the toilets and refused to sit next to her in class. Oh sure, the guys had done worse stuff than that but the girls hadn't been great either ...

The waves crashed and boomed like distant heartbeats. Jude was losing herself in the maze of sound when someone touched her tentatively on the shoulder and someone else reached down and pulled her to her feet. She looked round, disoriented. Rita Farr was handing her a wedge of chocolate cake. Jacinta was asking whether she wanted coffee or Coke. Everyone else was gathering round her, saying, 'Things'll be different now' with their eyes and drawing her into the group, whether she wanted it or not.

Jude kept waiting for one of them to pull the cake away and shout, 'Fooled you' but it never happened. Apparently, Lucy had taught them to bond together so well that they were even prepared to bond with a Martin. She let herself be escorted across to the barbecue area, nudged by twenty eight hopeful smiles. Warm hands, warm face, the strong dark taste of chocolate coating her mouth and twenty eight kids competing to fuss over her. She felt - yeah, she really did - happy. There was only one thing missing.

Her so-called friend Serenity, who had walked away from the group and was standing on one of the sandhills with her hands clasped behind her back, gazing out to sea.

Orion was sick of being a kid. People either ignored him or laughed at him and he'd had enough. He had decided to make a million dollars over the next few years, because everyone listened to you if you were rich, and he was going to do it by writing a series of fat gold-letters-on-the-cover science fiction novels.

'It's not that easy,' Daniel said, when Orion went next door after tea, to tell him about the plan. 'For one thing, you're only thirteen.'

'Yeah, but I'm very literate,' said Orion. 'Besides, according to this article I read, most s.f. readers are thirteen-year-old geeks, so I know the audience from the inside. And plus you're being ageist again. Mozart was only eight when he wrote his first concerto. Bobby Fischer was beating grand masters at chess when he was ten. That gymnast Nadia Comenici was only -'

'Okay, I get it,' Daniel interrupted. 'You found a website about junior geniuses and you want to be one. Go ahead. Nobody's trying to stop you.'

Orion tried out a copy of Maya's poor-little-me look that he had been practising in the bathroom mirror. 'All right,' he said. 'I suppose I can manage on my own. I just thought you might like to give me a hand – in return for a percentage of the royalties, of course.'

Daniel went on looking uncooperative, so Orion tried an experimental sigh, which just made Daniel burst out laughing. 'Sorry, mate,' he said. 'Small and helpless looks terrible on you. Stop sleazing and tell me what you want.'

'I want to invent a world,' Orion said straight away. 'Different enough from this world to suck people in, similar enough to be easy for them to understand. I need to figure out the basic details before I start writing, so I don't have to keep stopping to think about what the characters eat and how they travel round and stuff. You read a lot of history, Dan. You ought to be good at that sort of thing.'

'Wrong,' said Daniel, still being uncooperative. 'I just read history, I don't invent it.' Then he shrugged and added, 'But you can count me in, anyway. It sounds vaguely interesting and I don't have anything better to do.'

They spent the next two hours arguing about whether to go for a hi-tech or low-tech world, while Orion made notes on his laptop. Every now and then he stopped to calculate how much money they would make if the novel sold ten or fifty or a hundred thousand copies. At eight o'clock, however, Daniel announced that he was bored with Elmansor. (They had managed to agree on a name for their planet, if nothing else.) Orion saved his notes and went back home, to continue work on his own.

When he opened the back door, there was a ghost sitting at their kitchen table. Finn had always insisted that the house was haunted, so Orion wasn't really surprised. He just felt disappointed that their ghost was all white and floaty like the ghosts in comics or on telly, because he would have preferred something more original. Then, while he was wondering what to do about the ghost, his mother strode into the room and switched the light on and the pale blur at the kitchen table turned into Lucy Dove, wearing white shorts and a big white t-shirt.

'Sorry, Orion,' she said. 'Did I give you a shock?'

Orion checked his hands for tremors. 'Looks like it,' he said. 'That's weird. I didn't feel scared.'

'Camomile tea with three spoonfuls of honey,' his mother told him. 'Jane Moondancer says it's the best treatment for shock.'

She made the tea, sat him down at the end of the table and forgot about him, the way people tended to do. Orion still felt a bit wobbly, so he decided to stay and eavesdrop until his adrenalin levels dropped back to normal.

‘It’s nice of you to volunteer to be my campaign manager,’ Lucy was saying to his mum. ‘But it seems like a hell of a comedown from running for council yourself.’

‘You could see it that way,’ Raewyn said. ‘Or you could say someone called Dove’s got a much better chance of winning than a Happy Valley hippy who’s only lived here for fifteen years.’

Lucy laughed. ‘All right, I get your point. Thanks, Raewyn. I really appreciate this.’

Raewyn rattled her bracelets – the heavy silver ones from Indonesia today – to cover her embarrassment. Orion had noticed before that she couldn’t handle being complimented, although he’d also noticed that his father’s compliments tended to be double-edged.

‘We need to draw up a campaign plan,’ she told Lucy. ‘You’ve only got a month, remember. It’ll be hard going but I reckon it’s do-able.’

‘Oh, we’ll be fine,’ Lucy said, calmly confident. ‘I started recruiting days ago.’

‘Are you talking about this school camp that Maya and Serenity have gone on?’ said Raewyn. ‘It’s all girls, isn’t it? I’m not sure I like the sound of that.’

‘Why?’ Lucy asked, wide-eyed. ‘I thought you were a feminist.’

Raewyn threw her hands up in an emphatic gesture that sent the bracelets clattering down towards her elbows. She frowned at them, removed them and stacked them into a silver tower. Orion watched with fascination. He had never seen his mum without bracelets, except when she was getting ready for bed. It looked as if she must be taking this business with Lucy really seriously.

‘I’m a feminist, of course,’ she said. ‘But I’m a realist as well. It’d be a mistake to spend too much time on the women’s vote. Some of the women in Lomond will support you just because of who you are. Other women might sympathise with you but they’ll still vote the way their husbands vote, no matter what they think themselves. Either way, it’s the men you need to convince, not the women – and setting the girls against the boys isn’t a great start.’

‘I didn’t plan for it to happen that way,’ Lucy conceded. ‘But it feels right, just the same.’

Her voice sounded dreamy but determined. When Orion turned to check on her, she was staring at a blank spot on the wall between Raewyn’s political posters and Finn’s murky paintings, as if she could look through the white paint and mudbricks and see straight into the future. Then Raewyn snapped her fingers and broke Lucy’s stare.

‘Too bad,’ she said. ‘You can’t run a campaign on feelings. Trust me, Lomond went straight into the anti-feminist backlash without bothering with the feminist stage. As your manager, I really wouldn’t advise you to base your campaign policies on women’s issues.’

Lucy's smile gathered up all the light in the room and directed it towards Raewyn. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I have to work with what I've been given. Jude Martin was the first person I got to know here and the girls at the school were the first people who offered to help. I can't turn my back on them now. If you don't feel you can go along with that, then –'

Raewyn sighed. 'Don't worry, I'm in for the long haul. You have some strange ideas, Lucy, but you've got guts, I'll say that for you. And, if I can be cynical for a moment, you're a lot prettier than Doug Sterne - maybe even pretty enough to get the men's vote, despite your campaign politics.'

'Pretty enough?' echoed Orion's father, appearing in the doorway. 'Of course she is. You're a dream of a girl, Lucy Dove.' He swept into the kitchen and sat down at the end of the table, preparing to take over. 'Well? What are you scheming about?'

'None of your business, Finn,' Raewyn told him. 'Lucy and I are still discussing the basics. We don't have time for all your jokes and carrying on. Go and paint something, okay?'

Finn looked wounded. 'I never stay where I'm not wanted,' he said. 'I'll go and paint a masterpiece. That'll show you all.'

He stood up and went to the door, dragging his feet slightly, allowing plenty of time for Raewyn to call him back. Looking wounded was one of Finn's specialties but this time Orion got the impression that his dad's feelings might genuinely be hurt. Although his mum was the acknowledged boss of the household, she was usually careful to consult Finn about everything, especially when there were other people around. Not this time, however. Orion was starting to feel sorry for his dad, when Finn turned back and smiled at Lucy.

'Has my wife told you the story of her name?' he asked. 'They used to call her Raelene while she was growing up in Shepperton but, when she went off to uni, she decided it was a ridiculous, made-up name and switched to Raewyn, because it sounded Celtic and groovy. Then, after Orion got his first laptop, I ran a search on "Raewyn" and – guess what, it wasn't Celtic at all. It's actually a New Zealand invention, a combination of "Rae" and "Winifred". In other words, a ridiculous made-up name.'

He walked out, giving a little skip of triumph as he disappeared down the corridor. Orion hoped his father had enjoyed his revenge, because it hadn't done him any favours with the others. Lucy was looking embarrassed and Raewyn was looking actively murderous. Orion had been planning to go off and work on his novel but he decided it mightn't be a great moment to draw attention to himself.

'Shall we get down to business?' Raewyn said, sounding frighteningly calm. 'I'll start by giving you an overview of the Bayview/Lomond area. It's divided into nine wards – three around Lomond and six around Bayview. At present, the six Bayview councillors are the CWA president, two retired blokes with an interest in youth work and aged care, the man and woman who run the two biggest tourist agencies in Bayview and a young dairy farmer who looks like he's making his first move towards a seat in the federal parliament. We might as well forget about the

dairy farmer, because there's no way we can challenge him on his own ground at such short notice. The retired blokes are do-gooders, so you don't stand much chance of ousting them, but on the other hand it shouldn't be too hard to get them on side. Marie Boyle and the CWA have already said they'll back you and I reckon we can make a bid for one of the tourism votes. Are you following me so far?'

Orion usually scored well on comprehension exercises but his mum's speed-lecturing had left him breathless. He was impressed when Lucy nodded and repeated everything back to Raewyn, word for word.

'We need to campaign in one of the Bayview wards, to win the tourism vote,' she finished up. 'But apart from that, I can just get out the family silver, invite a few people to dinner and charm them silly. Sounds easy enough. What about Lomond, then?'

'You'll be standing against Doug Sterne in the town ward, of course,' said Raewyn. 'It's vacant at present, because that was Jack Wheaton's seat. The other Lomond councillors are Fisher King, representing Happy Valley, and Josh Abrahams, who's been the sheep farmers' representative for the last seven years. Fisher's the old hippy who started the Happy Valley market and he's on your side – I checked with him this afternoon. And Josh Abrahams is Rocky Abrahams' brother-in-law, so you've got a hotline to him. If you can take the town ward, Fisher and Marie Boyle will definitely support you. In that case, you'd only need to win over Josh and two Bayview councillors to be voted in as mayor.'

'Mayor?' Lucy said with the ghost of a smile. 'Is that what we're aiming for?'

'What else?' said Raewyn. 'It's the only way to get any real power.'

'That reminds me – how do the big political parties fit into all of this?' Lucy asked. 'I thought they controlled most of the local councils as well.'

Raewyn shrugged. 'The dairy farmer and one of the retired blokes are card-carrying Nationals and the tourist woman's a Liberal but they don't have the numbers. Jack Wheaton was an independent and he worked hard at keeping party politics out of council business - it was one of the things the voters liked about him. People round here are sick of party politics. They reckon the major political parties all look much the same these days, because none of them have the guts to say what they really mean, so they just keep pinching each other's policies.' She grinned and added, 'While we're on that subject, we'll need to work out how to let everyone know what you stand for. How would you feel about a public debate with Doug Sterne?'

Orion didn't wait to see how Lucy felt, because he already knew how he felt. If he had to stay and listen to the two of them talk politics for a second longer, he was going to die of boredom. He pushed his chair back soundlessly, sidled out of the room and tiptoed down the corridor. As he passed the studio, he could hear Finn talking to his painting – 'You little beauty, you're the best thing I've ever done.' When Orion looked in, however, the painting was just the usual collection of brown and green splotches. He started to chew at his bottom lip,

wondering whether he was equally deluded about his s.f. novel, but he went to his bedroom and began working on it, all the same.

The morning sun was clear as glass and bright as ice. Maya Casey could practically count the grains of sand under her bare feet. Rocky and Paige had woken them at dawn and chased them over the dunes and down to the beach for a jog and a swim. Now Rocky was striding up and down the line of yawning (Maya), puffing (Jacinta), curious (Serenity), alert and eager (Katie) girls, telling them what to expect from the rest of the day.

'Had fun last night,' she said. 'Going to do things now, instead of talking about them. Turn you into an efficient working unit. Need to think smart and act smart. Otherwise, forget the whole deal.'

Maya nodded enthusiastically. That was good psychology. Lucy and Paige had softened them up with true confessions and chocolate cake and now Rocky was coming in with the tough stuff. It worked, too. She could see what they were doing but she still wanted to show Rocky – and, of course, Serenity - that she was able to think and act smart.

She was jolted out of her thoughts by a slap from a rolled towel and Rocky shouting, 'Wake up, Casey.' Maya blinked and realised that the others were charging the dunes. She jogged along behind them, pushing through the ti-tree just in time to see Lucy get out of her car with a baker's tray of fresh rolls and copies of the *Lomond Star*, with photos from Doug Sterne's campaign launch on the front page.

'Showers first, food second,' Rocky said in her sergeant's voice. 'Take an hour's break and meet me by the path. Get your next lot of instructions there.'

Maya looked round at the others with a welcoming smile. One of the big things she had learned from living with Orion and Finn and Raewyn was the importance of being normal, so she had done a lot of research on normality. It was true that, when she acted normal, people often reacted as if she had done something weird but Maya wasn't bothered when the other girls ignored her smile and scattered, leaving her there on her own. If she'd got something wrong, *Girl* magazine would tell her about it eventually. In the meantime, being on her own left her free to follow Serenity around.

Serenity was Maya's hero. Orion said that wasn't logical, because Serenity was totally unlike all the styled and groomed models in *Girl*, but Orion didn't understand that Serenity was where *Girl* was heading. Right now, for example, all the other girls were wearing navy and white brandname tees and shorts and trainers but Serenity was wearing coffee-coloured drawstring pants and a strappy pink vest. Maya was prepared to bet next month's allowance that the models in *Girl* would be wearing drawstring pants and pink vests this time next year, because Serenity ruled: simple as that.

For the next sixty minutes she tried sixty different ways to corner Serenity and lucked out every time. If Serenity wasn't circling around the edge of one of the groups, she was making a beeline for the showers or the tea urn or the breakfast queue. Eventually Maya realised that all of Serenity's zigzag moves around the camp had one thing in common - Jude Martin. It looked like Serenity was stalking Jude, as diligently as Maya was stalking her.

That didn't make a whole lot of sense. Serenity and Jude were best friends, weren't they? Why would anybody need to stalk their best friend? Maya watched Serenity watching from a distance while Jude ate her egg-in-a-roll, still surrounded by a bunch of concerned Lomond girls, and suddenly two unconnected images slotted together in her head – Scott Sterne practically walking under the mini-bus and Jude Martin telling her story last night. She slapped both hands over her mouth.

'Omigod!' she whispered into her cupped palms. 'Serenity's in love with the guy who almost raped her best friend!'

That was so awesome – at least twenty times cooler than any of the problems on *Girl's Problem Page*. Maya wrote an imaginary letter to *Girl* and then imagined *Girl's* answer.

Dear Troubled,

Oh wow, your poor friend! There are a lot of slimeballs around but this guy sounds slimier than most! Tell your friend to move on – and after she's dumped Mr Slimy, take her on a girls' night out, to show you'll always be there for her.

On consideration, however, she realised that *Girl's* usual advice didn't really apply to girls who lived in Lomond. If you lived in the city, it was easy to move on to a different café or club or whatever but out here you couldn't move very far. And plus, what if the guy in question was (a) a slimeball but (b) better looking than Brad Pitt and more like a king-to-be than Prince William? The *Girl* philosophy didn't seem to cover Scott Sterne, either.

When Rocky bellowed 'Atten-*shun!*', Maya abandoned the problem with relief and went racing across to join the others. 'Too many of you,' Rocky said. 'Have to split you into three groups. Need names but nothing fancy. Call you Group One, Group Two and Group Three.'

That was the first time anyone had mentioned anything about dividing into groups. Maya started jogging on the spot. This whole weekend would be completely pointless if she wasn't in the same group as Serenity, so she waited in an agony of suspense to see how Rocky would divide them up. Jude Martin was the first to be chosen for Group One, followed by nine girls from Bayview. Maya's current state of panic didn't leave much room for any other emotions but she couldn't help being impressed by Rocky's reasoning. The Bayview kids wouldn't have Lomond ideas about the Martins and they wouldn't be feeling guilty

about what Scott and the others had done to Jude. That ought to give Jude her best shot at being a normal part of a team.

She jogged faster, watching with a mixture of interest and terror as Rocky read out the next list – Katie Brewster and nine clones, all as neat and efficient and totally bland as Katie herself. Maya almost dissolved into a puddle of bliss when she realised that the only people left were her and Serenity – oh, and Jacinta, Rita, three of Rita’s sporty mates and the three stroppiest Bayview girls. Maya was grateful to Rocky, of course, but she couldn’t see why the teacher had grouped all of them together. No way did she have anything in common with Rita and her mates, who hardly ever spoke, or Jacinta, who never shut up. She hurried over to stand at Serenity’s side, guarding her from the idiots, and at the same moment Rocky stepped back and let her niece take over.

‘We’ll start with a nature walk,’ Paige said with a glamorous smile. ‘There are three tracks to the headland, so each group can take a different track. No prizes for hurrying. We want you to look around at everything you pass on the way, in case we decide to ask you about it later on.’

Group Two moved off straight away, followed by Group One. As Group Three took the third fork in the path, everybody started complaining.

‘Nature walks! Like we’re little kids in bubs’ grade.’

‘What’s the point in making lists of wild flowers?’

‘I thought this was supposed to be team-building exercise.’

‘Well, it is,’ Serenity snapped. ‘Rocky told us to think smart, remember. Let’s see if we can notice twice as much as Group One and Group Two put together.’

Group Three thought about it and decided to believe her. After that, they really got into it - too far, in some cases. Jacinta insisted on describing every pebble on the path and the Bayview girls kept squabbling over the map they were making. Maya was the only one who was doing anything useful, drawing wild flower sketches in her note book, so she was annoyed when Serenity lumped her in with the others and moved them all along. They arrived at the headland, to find that Group Two had got there already, which was a bit disappointing, although Maya reminded herself that Paige had said there weren’t any prizes for hurrying.

‘Abseiling next,’ Katie said, grinning across at them. ‘Your lot can have first go, if you like.’

Serenity bared her teeth in a return smile. ‘Yeah, right,’ she said. ‘Very generous. In other words, you want to see how Group Three performs and make sure your lot goes one better.’

She went to have a look at the abseiling equipment and the rest of Group Three followed, waiting in a semi-circle behind her, as patient and trusting as a dog obedience class full of labradors.

‘How are we going to do this, Ren?’ said one of the Bayview girls.

‘Maya better go first,’ Serenity said. ‘Rita can let the rope out, while she abseils down the cliff.’

'Um,' Maya said in a voice that squeaked more than she had hoped it would. 'Why me, Ren?'

Serenity blinked, as if she was wondering about that herself. 'Because you're too small and light to take a turn at holding the rope,' she said after a second's thought. 'And plus, you're the youngest. If you can do it, any of us can.'

The thought of deliberately stepping off a cliff would normally have been enough to make Maya turn around and start walking home. Being brave wasn't anywhere near the top of her to-do list. *Girl* magazine only used the word in sentences like, 'Why not be brave and wear pink stripes with brown?' But Serenity was looking her in the eye and taking her seriously, for the first time ever, and Maya really, really wanted Serenity to go on being brilliant and leading Group Three to victory. She nodded, because she didn't trust herself not to squeak, and Serenity helped her into the harness, explaining the purpose of every buckle and strap. Maya went on being brave until the last minute, when she stalled at the edge of the cliff.

'What if Rita drops me?' she squeaked.

Serenity made her feel Rita's muscles, reminded her that Paige would be there as back-up and explained everything all over again. 'You'll be fine,' she said. 'Just pretend you're Spiderwoman, walking down skyscrapers with your suction-cap feet.'

Maya lifted one sneaker and looked doubtfully at its sole. Going over the edge was the scariest thing she had ever done in her entire life but, after she had settled into position, she braced herself against the rope, the way Serenity had shown her, and walked down the rock face as steadily as if she was taking a horizontal stroll round the block. She felt fine, right up to the moment when she felt something sharp underfoot, looked down to see what it was and watched a piece of rock go bouncing down the cliff.

And froze.

Time passed. Being stuck halfway down a cliff was different from what Maya would've expected. She wasn't nearly as scared as she had been when she was on top of the cliff. She just felt utterly convinced that she was never going to move again, ever. Somewhere in the distance, someone was shouting, 'Come on, girl. Get a grip.' The voice sounded so urgent that Maya automatically looked for the source and saw Rocky with her hands shaped into a megaphone, waiting on the sand below.

Looking down made Maya feel even giddier. When she looked up again, the world started to turn in slow circles around her. As she squeezed her eyes shut, she heard a second voice say, 'Butt out, Rocky. This is *my* team.' Then the voice started talking to her, saying, 'Maya? Maya, stay cool, okay? Can you open your eyes for me? Yeah, that's excellent. Find a mark on the rock and stare at it till you calm down. Good girl. Now lean back and balance yourself properly. Terrific. You're doing fine. Try moving your right foot - oh, brilliant. And the left foot? Hey, you're in business.'

Maya knew she was moving again, although she didn't seem to be making any kind of effort. It felt as if she had turned into a puppet, with Serenity's voice working the strings. She watched the cliff face jerk past, one section succeeding the other at regular intervals, feeling nothing more than a vague, detached interest in what was happening. Then, the minute her feet touched the ground, she started to shake like a loose piling in a high wind.

Rocky checked her pupils and gave her some barley sugar, humphed at her and told her she was fine. But Rita Farr practically ran down the cliff in order to come and say, 'Maya, that was scary! I'm glad you're okay'; and Jacinta gave her an enormous hug when she arrived; and even Serenity refused to accept her apologies and said that the bravest thing anyone could ever do was to keep going when they were frightened. After that Maya couldn't have felt better about herself, if she had swung over the cliff without looking and abseiled one-handed all the way down, humming a medley of Kylie songs.

She sat back and watched Katie Brewster take over and send Group Two speeding down the cliff. When they had finished, one of the Bayview girls acted as the anchor for Group One, while Jude Martin gave the orders. Both of the other teams were much quicker. Group Three would have to improve by about two hundred per cent, if they wanted to stand a chance of catching up, but nobody in the group seemed too worried about that right then.

'Not bad,' Rocky said, as the last Group One abseiler landed. 'Back to the camp site now. Get another swim in before lunch, if you're quick.'

Katie and Jude pelted off in the lead but Serenity hung back, pacing the slower kids like Maya and Jacinta. They jogged round the curve of the bay, stripped off their shorts and t-shirts and waded into the sea. As Maya floated on her back, surrounded by the other members of Group Three, she felt a strange fizzy sensation inside her, which she eventually identified as happiness. She bobbed on the waves, letting her hands trail through the water like jellyfish, until Paige came and called them for lunch.

Scott leaned on the counter, watching Frank Carretto work the espresso machine, while he planned his opening line. Serenity Cox. In a way he just wanted to say her name out loud to someone safe and Frank was safe as. Besides, he always seemed to feel better after he talked to Frank, although it was hard to work out exactly how Frank did it. The guy never said much; he just seemed to listen differently from other people.

'Thanks, mate,' he said, as a circle of creamy beige froth appeared on the counter in front of him. 'Listen, Frank, I was wondering. Do you know S-?' and then, wouldn't you know, his dad walked into The Caff.

'There you are, Scotty,' he said. 'I had a good yarn with Doug. He seems pretty pleased with his campaign launch and this morning's write-up in the *Star*. We better be getting back now, soon as I've picked up some stuff for your mum.'

Scott's fists had started to clench but there was never any point in arguing with his dad, so he unclenched them and offered Rob one of his best smiles: charm level 9.

'Chill, Dad,' he said. 'I've done all my homework, plus a shitload of work on the property. Why can't I hang here for the rest of the arvo? Eden or Lockie can drive me home.'

'Don't waste my time,' Rob said, not even bothering to get angry. 'You're talking to your father, Scotty, not your mother. When I tell you to do something, you do it, okay?'

Oh well, it had been worth a try. Scott gave his dad a charm level 5 smile, to show that there were no hard feelings, picked up his coffee and went over to the window, to enjoy his last few minutes of freedom. He stood and watched his father's reflection in the glass, collecting milk from the fridge and a tin of tomatoes from the grocery shelf. It looked like his mother wasn't going to win this year's award for Lomond's Most Organised Housekeeper, either.

'So, Frank,' Rob said, striding over to the counter, 'you know everything that goes on in this place. Tell me all about Lucy Dove.'

Frank's hand lifted and smoothed his sleek dark hair. 'Lucy? I dunno, it's hard to sum her up. You ought to have a chat with her, Rob. She's one of the movers and shakers, same as you.'

Rob looked pleased and embarrassed, all at once. 'I haven't done much for Lomond lately,' he admitted. 'Been too caught up in my own problems. They reckon all these cutbacks are good for Australia but us country folk seem to be getting the rough end of the stick.'

'Could be worse,' Frank said. 'As a matter of fact, it *is* worse for people like the Martins.'

'True enough,' Rob said, cheering up. 'You have to keep these things in perspective, don't you? At least my family's not that low.'

He went on trying to talk Frank into telling him about Lucy, so Scott went back to thinking about Serenity. After his two miracles – first the walk by the river and then the chance to rescue her from Eden and Cam, which should have been a clincher – Serenity seemed to have been avoiding him at school. He couldn't do much about it either. There was no point in locking himself into a situation where everyone knew he had broken up with Katie, until he knew where he stood with Serenity. It had taken him till Thursday to get a chance to ask her out – and then she had said no, because she was going on that fucking camp.

Scott was asking himself, for the fiftieth time, what it all meant, when Eden Parker and Matt Fahey came into The Caff, elbowing and shoving and joshing each other. Eden tried to tease him about Katie being away for the weekend but, since Scott could've cared less, it took no effort to ignore him. After that Eden settled for teasing Matt Fahey, which was relatively harmless. Matt was stoned off his face, as usual, and didn't really take it in.

Scott worried about Matt sometimes. He couldn't help wondering how Matt managed to pay for the blow, being on the dole and all. If the guy wasn't careful,

he would end up as a petty crim, just like that loser Shane Martin. Half the time Matt didn't even hang with the gang any more. He just sat on the steps of the war memorial, vegging out with the other dole bludgers – the supermarket manager's son, a couple of guys who had been in the year above them at school and Jayden Kazantzakis from their year, who came over from Bayview whenever he could hitch a lift. Scott frowned at Matt, trying to think of a way to make him feel part of the group, although it wasn't easy when the guy just stood there staring blankly at the street.

'Great idea, Matt,' he said with sudden inspiration. 'Babewatch!'

They were still working on the job of picking the hottest chick from the passing parade, when Eden suddenly switched off his running commentary. Scott looked round to see his dad scowling at them from the background. Rob Sterne had been king of Lomond for most of his life and he got mad if people didn't do what he wanted, when he wanted it. Scott didn't let that get to him but he tried to keep his dad sweet, all the same, because it made life a whole lot easier, so he stood up and followed Rob out to the Land Rover. While they headed along the road towards the escarpment, he ran a quick check on the last twenty four hours, looking for anything that might interest his dad.

'Heard the latest on Lucy Dove?' he asked. 'Josh Abrahams told Eden's dad that Rocky's taking the year 10 and 11 girls on a weekend camp to turn them into Lucy's backing group.'

'News to me,' said Rob. 'Doug didn't say anything about it, when I talked to him.'

'Well, he wouldn't, would he?' said Scott. 'Uncle Doug doesn't take Lucy seriously. I told you on Monday that she sounds pretty bloody keen about getting onto the council. It's not my fault if you and Uncle Doug still think she's just some city chick who won't last the distance.'

Rob squinted into the sun, creasing the skin around his eyes and masking any expression they might have contained. 'So what's your impression of Lucy, then?' he asked.

'She's got something,' Scott said, thinking of Lucy but seeing Serenity. 'Most of the girls signed up straight away – and who knows what the guys would've done, if I hadn't been there.' When he glanced sideways, his dad was still looking impassive. Scott frowned and said, 'Do you think that was a mistake? Maybe I should've volunteered, so I could keep an eye on things.'

'Nah, you did the right thing,' Rob told him. 'You're a Sterne, remember. We're not going to join Lucy Dove. We're going to beat her.' He hesitated briefly and added, 'I didn't like to mention it in front of everyone, back in The Caff, but Doug was carrying on like a pork chop about how he'd just accepted an invitation to have a debate with Lucy in the town hall. He was pretty full of himself, because he reckons she'll ante up for the publicity and the hall and give him a lot of free advertising. Only trouble is, I've heard Duggie's idea of a rousing speech and frankly, I reckon he may've taken on more than he can handle. If I can't talk him

out of it before word gets round, we'll have to make sure Lucy Dove's credibility has been shot to pieces before the debate starts.'

His fingers drummed on the steering wheel, keeping time with a tune that Scott couldn't hear - some old tune, like a folk song or whatever, about Sternes and Doves feuding their way through fifteen decades of Lomond history. It didn't do much for Scott but Rob was looking happier than he had been for ages. Scott could practically hear his dad's brain ticking over, unless that was the whirr of the four wheel drive's air conditioning.

'So that team of Lucy's is all girls?' Rob said finally. 'They call that discrimination, don't they? We could get her on the equal opportunity wicket.'

'Not when she asked for volunteers and no guys put their hands up,' Scott reminded him. 'Besides, equal opp's pretty retro these days. According to some of our teachers, girls are scoring top marks in exams all round the world, which shows that feminism's gone too far. They reckon schools ought to be putting more resources into boys, to even things up again.'

Rob had been listening so attentively that he almost missed their gate. The four wheel drive jerked to a halt and Scott got out to unhook the chain. As he swung himself back in, his dad reached over to thump him on the shoulder.

'Good one,' he said. 'Thanks, Scotty. I'll have a think about it. Let me know if you get any more brainwaves like that.'

They jolted up the track in a friendly silence. As they walked into the house, Scott automatically checked the framed photos of his sisters, side by side in the hall. Jan was in her second year of nurses' training and Fran was obsessed by her two year old twins. They hardly ever came home these days, which was fine by Scott. It was nice not to feel like the youngest any more.

The blinds on the windows in the main room were drawn, to keep out the heat. At the sound of their footsteps, Scott's mother came hurrying in, dark among the shadows, except for the white triangle of the sling supporting her arm. Rob tossed the tin of tomatoes at her and groaned when she fluffed the catch. The tin rolled noisily across the wooden floor and Bethany Sterne went running after it.

'I'd like to see Lucy Dove in action,' Rob told Scott. 'You wouldn't happen to know where I can get a look at her, would you?'

Scott thought about it. 'Tommo's little brother Keanu reckons Lucy's coming back to school on Friday, because she promised to read the littlies some stories. Is that the sort of thing you mean?' His dad shook his head, so he shrugged and said, 'Sorry. Dunno where else you could meet her.'

His mother straightened up, clutching the tomato tin to her chest. 'Lucy Dove?' she said breathlessly. 'She'll be here tomorrow for my book group. Raewyn Casey invited her along.'

Rob looked as startled as if one of the dogs had spoken to him. 'Here?' he said. 'That's nice and convenient. All your bloody reading might be some use, for once. How about I sit in on the group, eh?'

Scott watched his mother take a step backwards, as if she wanted to say, 'No way known.' Not a chance, though. She was too much of a wuss.

'I'll give you my copy of the book and you can read it tonight,' she wittered. 'Well, skim it, at any rate. I'm afraid it's rather long.'

'Oh, for Christ's sake!' Rob said. 'I don't want to read the fucking book, you stupid bitch. I just want to get a squiz at this bloody woman, okay?'

'Of course,' Bethany said, backing away even further, till she hit the kitchen door. It swung open and sunlight streamed in, spotlighting Bethany's beige linen dress and the careful waves of her beige hair. She was all dressed up, as if she was going to town, but she had forgotten to make up her left eye, which made her look lopsided and a bit crazy.

Scott sighed. Other guys had mothers who knew all the footy scores, drove tractors and cooked meals for ten at five seconds notice. Why did he have to be stuck with a mother who kept zoning out all over the place? If he had to have a weird mum, he'd rather have a mum who was interestingly weird - Caro Cox, for example, who talked to all the kids in the Lomond video shop, more like another kid than a proper adult.

Although in that case Serenity Cox would be his sister, which wouldn't exactly be ideal.

The afternoon was nearly over. Blue shadows were filling up the hollows between the dunes as Serenity slid down a sandy slope and paused to look behind her, muscles tensed, brain on maximum awareness level. She scanned the horizon, simultaneously registering the sound of waves breaking: a smothered giggle in the distance: a line of footsteps across the sand: Paige sitting on top of the highest dune with her binoculars.

At lunchtime Paige and Rocky had given them a quiz about the nature walk and Group Three had remembered a lot more than the others, which had been good for their morale. After that Rocky sent Group Three off to hide in the dunes, with orders to jump as many Group Two kids as possible on their way through. Serenity's group had decimated Group Two and then sat back to watch Group Two successfully stalk Group One. But now it was her group's turn to be hunted, which was way scarier than being the hunters.

Group One had caught Maya and Jacinta, before they had even got past the ti-tree, and five more of Group Three had been ambushed in a narrow gully that ran down the middle of the dunes. Then Rita and Tayla Price, one of Rita's Bayview mates, had walked into a trap at the end of the gully. Serenity was the only one left, the last kid in the whole camp with a chance of making it through to the beach. She wanted to win this one - wanted it so badly that she could taste it. She hadn't done too well this morning, because she'd been miserable about Jude, but if she could pull this off, she would show Lucy and the others that she was worth something, after all.

As she took a cautious step forward, Serenity stubbed her toe on a piece of driftwood and bit her tongue to stop herself from yelping. But the driftwood had given her an idea. She picked up the grey branch, weighed it in her hand and hurled it into the dunes behind her. When she held her breath and listened hard, she could hear a scurry of voices and the sound of feet slithering on sand. Serenity grinned and ran for the next dune. Nearly there. If all the girls in Group One had gone chasing after the driftwood, she would be home clear, although she'd better check first. It would be frustrating to get caught at the last minute.

Her heart pumped faster and adrenaline surged through her system, sharpening her eyesight and speeding up her reflexes. She ducked round the base of the dune, eyes wide and wary, taking in everything at once - the beach opening out ahead and the dune looming up to the right, sharp spikes of sea grass poking through the sand and a shadow streaking downhill. The shadow was a solid block, not a crisscross of fine lines. In other words, human-shaped, not grass-shaped.

Serenity glanced up, to identify the exact position of the Group One scout, and found herself looking straight at Jude Martin. It was the first time they had made eye contact since she'd heard that terrible story. Serenity still winced at the memory of going into a Caro-style feminist rant, when everyone else had been hugging Jude and being nice. She hadn't even been able to talk to Jude next morning. In short, she had stuffed up and she hated stuffing up.

She thought: *bloody Jude. We were supposed to be friends. Why didn't she tell me about Scott when it happened?*

Then she thought: *bloody Scott. How could he do that to Jude and then turn round and rescue me from Eden Parker? And why did he have to ask me to go clubbing in Bayview this weekend, of all weekends? Okay, I said no but Scott isn't stupid. He could tell I would've said yes, except for the camp. He knows I was keen on him, before I found out what he'd done.*

She winced and thought: *so, most of all, bloody stupid Serenity. Why didn't I guess what Scott was like? Why wasn't I able to talk to Jude yesterday?*

The questions went on repeating themselves in an endless loop until Serenity froze, even worse than Maya had frozen on the cliff. She couldn't move a single muscle. She could only stand there helplessly, while Jude shouted 'Gotcha' and came running down the slope and slammed straight into her. They crashed to the ground together but Jude fought free, planting a knee on Serenity's chest and pinning her arms back. Serenity didn't struggle. She just went limp and boneless.

'Oh, Jude,' she said. 'Jude, I'm so sorry. I wouldn't've even spoken to Scott, if only you'd said.'

Jude looked down at her for the count of ten heartbeats. 'I know that,' she said finally. 'Come on. We have to report back to Rocky.'

She hauled Serenity to her feet and they ploughed through the sand together, arms linked, grinning like fools. Rocky was waiting for them at the water's edge.

‘Couldn’t see properly from here,’ she said. ‘Who won in the end?’
Serenity looked at Jude and Jude looked back. ‘Both of us,’ they said in unison. ‘We both won.’

In the recreation room at the campsite Lucy cooked spaghetti and heated up two big saucepans of bolognese and mushroom sauce. Everyone said, ‘Lucy, that’s way too much’ and proceeded to eat it all. After dinner Rocky taught them a trust exercise, where they had to fall back and let the others lift them, and Paige brought out her sound box and her CD collection – Christine Aguilera, Vanessa Amorosi, JayLo, Britney Spears, Shania Twain and a New Zealand group called Sister2Sister. They danced like maniacs for a while and then Lucy produced a box of videos and they watched *Xena Warrior Princess* until Rocky noticed that half of them had fallen asleep and packed all of them off to bed.

After breakfast next morning they sat outside under the trees. Lucy asked them to think of ideas for her election campaign and Paige typed everything into her laptop. They made a list of places where Lucy could talk to lots of people at once - the Lomond supermarket on Saturday morning, the Happy Valley market, the Bayview shopping mall and aquatic centre. They tried to work out what Lucy should say to wrinklies and women and farmers and shop keepers and southerners. They talked about things that got people steamed - problems with the roads and the bus service, banks closing, no cop shop, youth suicide, kids on the dole.

Katie Brewster was sitting with her back against a tree trunk, slightly apart from the rest of the group. While the others went on brainstorming, she watched the clouds roll across the morning sky and thought about the question Lucy had asked her at breakfast. Although she was pretty sure she had given the right answer, it would be a big change. Katie couldn’t help wondering whether she’d be able to handle it. She wished Lucy would hurry up and make the announcement and get it over with.

‘I want to tell you a story that explains why I asked you here,’ Lucy was saying. ‘Five years ago I was travelling through China. (Yes, on my own, Maya. Why not?) I’d been following the Silk Road, like Marco Polo, through Kashgar in China down to the Cave of a Thousand Buddhas in Mongolia, where I met up with a Tartar tribe. I was sitting by the fire with the old woman who was boss of the tribe when I heard hooves pounding like a drum roll and twenty horses galloped out of the sunset, aiming straight at us. The old woman didn’t even flinch. She just reached across to turn the kebabs on the coals, so I made myself stay still - and two seconds before the hooves trampled us, the whole group wheeled around and the horses reared up on their back legs. The leader hoisted a spear tufted with feathers, shouting, “Hiya!” and the rest of them shouted with her. Twenty girls, aged between ten and sixteen years old, mounted on Tartar ponies.’

'Whoa!' Rita breathed. 'Who were they? Bandits or what?'

Lucy grinned. 'No, they weren't attacking the camp. They were just showing off, like young guys gunning their engines at stop lights. Those girls were the Wolf Guard. It was their job to watch the herds during the day and ride the camp's boundaries at night, to make sure no wolves or passing crazies got in and none of the goats wandered out. The leader wore a wolf skin, to show that she'd killed her own wolf, and every girl in the Wolf Guard was a brilliant rider. The ancient Romans called their ancestors centaurs, half human and half horse, and the girls used to say, "The horses are our sisters". They meant it too. On the day I was leaving, I saw this eleven-year-old kid whose horse had a cut inside its hoof, weeping and packing cotton wool soaked with oil around the cut and saying, "Don't worry, sweetheart, you'll be all right tomorrow".'

A sigh eddied round the circle, starting with Maya and ending at Serenity. Katie watched them from under her tree, smiling to herself. Lucy Dove was a genius. She had a real knack for guessing what everybody wanted.

'How come the girls were guarding the herds, not the guys?' she asked, to help Lucy along.

'Among the Tartars the herds belong to the women,' Lucy said. 'The men are away most of the time, working as horse-breakers or soldiers in the Chinese army, and they reckon you can't trust boys. "The boys wander off", the boss woman told me. "The girls keep their minds on the job. They know we rely on them and they won't let us down".' Her blue eyes skimmed round the circle so fast that she seemed to be meeting everyone's eyes at once. 'So that's why I'm asking you to be *my* Wolf Guard. Are you ready to take on the job of looking after Lomond, like the Wolf Guard in Mongolia looks after their tribe?'

Half the girls looked as though they'd say 'yes' straight away but Jacinta frowned and leant forward. 'Um, Lucy, what would that mean, exactly?' she asked. 'Like, we don't have any wolves in Lomond.'

'Oh yeah?' said Maya. 'I heard a few wolf whistles, the night the guys hassled me.'

Lucy waited till the giggles died down. 'Sure, there aren't many real wolves in Australia,' she said. 'But a lot of people won't like the changes I'm planning. I want to know if I can count on you to be the front line of my election campaign. I need people I can trust and there's no one I'd trust more than you.'

Katie did a quick headcount and nodded with satisfaction. By now, three quarters of the girls were on Lucy's side, although there were still half a dozen standouts – Serenity, for example, and Merian Harper, who was plaiting her fingers together and staring down at them.

'So where do the guys fit in?' Merian asked, without looking at Lucy.

'They don't,' Rocky said. 'Not yet. Only a month to go before the elections. Get Lucy onto the council, then sort out the other stuff.'

'But what do you want us to *do*?' said Rita Farr's friend, Tayla Price. 'I don't really see how we can help, especially the ones who live in Bayview.'

Lucy's smile intensified, until it shone like the morning star. 'As a matter of fact, you Bayview kids are crucial,' she said. 'I need you to do all the leafletting and poster paste-ups and door-to-door work that'll let Bayview know what I'm on about. We'll have to organise all of that in Lomond as well ... and there's one more thing I want the Wolf Guard to do, back in the heartland of my campaign.'

Everyone was leaning forward now, apart from Katie, who was leaning back and watching Lucy Dove. Unlike the rest of them, she knew where all of this was heading, which meant she could admire Lucy's skill in keeping the others guessing. The leaflets and stuff were a fairly obvious part of an election campaign but Katie was prepared to bet that no one else would have thought of Lucy's other tactic.

'I want the Wolf Guard to patrol the streets of Lomond every night,' Lucy announced. 'That way, you can do three things for the campaign at once. On a practical level, you'll be guarding Lomond against the human wolves we were talking about – the ones that break into people's houses or hassle them on the street or worse. At the same time, you'll be putting across the message that this campaign's about order and justice and everyone living peacefully together, without hurting each other or ripping each other off. And on the most important level of all, you'll be showing this town that, when we're in a situation we don't like, we can do something about it, instead of waiting for someone else to change things. What do you say about that? Are you with me, Wolf Guard?'

Lucy had been revving the team up, so Katie was expecting them to cheer. Instead she saw something more impressive – silent nods from everyone, even Serenity, and the same look of total dedication on an entire circle of faces. The silence was followed by an almost inaudible murmur ("Yes," "Yes, Lucy," "Yes," "Yes,") that gradually grew and grew, until it encircled the group like a wall of sound: "YES, YES, YES!" Then Lucy raised her hand and straight away everyone was silent again.

'One more thing,' she said. 'The Wolf Guard ought to have a leader, someone who can make decisions on behalf of the whole group when you need it. Rocky and Paige and I had a long talk and we picked Serenity Cox.'

That was Katie's cue. She sat up straight and said, 'Good luck, Ren. Rather you than me.' The others studied her for a moment, to make sure she meant it, and after that they all went wild. Jude thumped Serenity on the back. Rita Farr punched her on the arm. Merian was whispering, 'Good one,' Jacinta was beaming like a full moon and Maya Casey's eyes glittered with excited tears.

Serenity seemed to be the only one who didn't think she was the obvious choice. She muttered 'Thanks' and concentrated on counting the stripes down the side of her trainers, while Rocky dealt with the final round of admin – organising the Bayview team, making a list of everyone's contact details, arranging a time to drill the Wolf Guard for their first public appearance. Then, as the others raced off for a last swim, Serenity came striding over to Katie's tree. She hauled Katie to her feet, took her by the arm and marched her across to where Rocky, Lucy and Paige were packing up the breakfast things.

'What was that about' she demanded. 'Why me, instead of Katie? I've only been at Bayview/Lomond Secondary for six months. I'm not even prefect material, like her.'

'That's school,' Rocky said. 'This is life. Looked after Group Three pretty well. Bawled me out about Maya.'

'Plus you made everyone take turns on the abseiling rope, so they could learn what to do,' Paige said. 'You talked Maya out of her panic and you hung back with the slow kids on the beach, instead of racing ahead.'

'I could tell you were the one, the first time I saw you,' Lucy said with a sunshine smile. 'I know people, Serenity. I always choose well.'

They smiled benevolently and went on with the packing. Serenity tightened her grip on Katie's arm and asked, 'Is it *really* all right with you?'

'Sure,' Katie said. 'Lucy checked with me in advance, if that makes you feel better.'

Serenity bit her lip. 'I guess it should but I just feel kind of distant and shocky, like I felt when my parents said they were going to split ... except that this is a good surprise, not a bad one.' She laughed at herself and said, 'Ah, forget it. Come on, Brewster, I'll race you down to the beach.'

They had a quick swim and climbed back up the dunes together, packed their stuff and found a place on the mini-bus. Paige started a chorus of 'Man! I feel like a Woman' and they wheeled round the curves of the coast road singing all the songs they could remember from her CD collection, loud and tuneless and happy. They dropped the Bayview contingent off at the school and continued on. Halfway through the Wolf Guard's cover of 'Sister', Rocky got a call on her mobile. She listened and nodded and rose to her feet.

'That was the principal,' she announced. 'Told me a dozen kids have gone missing. All from Lomond, aged between eight and twelve. Asked us to look out for them along the road.'

That put a stop to the singalong. The Wolf Guard started waving their hands and shouting suggestions to Serenity, while Katie swivelled round and watched them from the front seat. Back in the old days, when she had tried to get the girls involved in school sports days or fasting for peace or whatever, it had been like trying to herd cats but Serenity seemed to be having an easier time of it. After a weekend of team-building, the girls were volunteering all over the place. They were working on a plan for finding the lost kids when the bus turned into the Lomond main street.

Their voices caught in their throats and stuck there, silenced by surprise. The street had changed overnight. Walls and shop fronts, letter boxes and lamp posts were plastered with posters, like blue and white festival flags. Keanu Thompson and Jakqui Conway had climbed onto opposing verandahs to string a home-made banner across the street, saying GO LUCY in slightly wobbly letters. The rest of the missing children lined the footpath, carrying bundles of blue and white leaflets, holding their hands up with the thumb and forefinger touching, to form a circle, and shouting, 'Go, Lucy!'

Katie jumped out and lined up a shot of the cutest kid. The click of the shutter told her that she had made the right decision. She was where she wanted to be – waiting on the sidelines, ready to record all the high points of Lucy's campaign till she came up with a lead article that was such a scoop her dad couldn't possibly knock it back.

Then the shutter clicked again. Katie realised that her eye had automatically registered Scott, leaning against the wall of The Caff, and her hand had automatically taken his photo. Unfortunately, the camera had made him look as if he was gazing at Serenity Cox with an almost tragic expression. Katie shrugged and deleted that frame and looked up again, preparing to go and see whether Scott had time for a coffee. The two of them needed to sit down together and sort a few things out. Today would be as good a time as any.

But Scott seemed to have disappeared in record time, so she shrugged again and took a leaflet from a passing kid. The logo - a blue bird in the top corner - had obviously been drawn by one of the littlies, which was a clever idea, and the headline announced that Lucy would be debating Doug Sterne next Saturday, which went beyond clever to bloody brilliant. Katie turned to congratulate Lucy and found her standing close by, with the sun spinning a halo of light around her head.

'Looks like you're on the job already, Katie,' she said. 'I knew you'd give great PR. Let's see if we can move Doug Sterne off the front page next week.'

Seven

Lomond on a hot summer afternoon was about as hot as it got. None of the early Doves or Sternes had got around to planting any elms or poplars, to replace the gum trees they'd chopped down, so the main street lay open to the sun. Thick layers of heat clogged the wheels of the utes cruising to the pub. The footpaths sweltered and their asphalt was sticky to the touch. The bronze soldier on the war memorial looked as if he was suffering from an advanced case of sunstroke but he clung grimly to his rifle and frowned down at the grass, which seemed to wither as he watched.

Serenity Cox was studying all of this through the window of The Caff, protected from the heat by Frank Carretto's new air conditioning, which was making it possible for the retired southerner couples to drink lattes and espressos and ristrettos all through the summer. (Frank said it was only fair, considering that the extra income from the southerners' business had made it possible for him to afford air conditioning in the first place.) Serenity was sitting with Jude and Frank's mum, listening to Mrs Carretto chat away in Italian. The only words she recognised were people's names but she noticed that Jude always responded by saying something in English about the people Mrs Carretto had mentioned.

'Can you actually follow all of that?' she asked, as soon as there was a gap in the conversation.

'Nah, nothing but the names,' said Jude. 'I'm just coasting along, getting a sense of the rhythm, for when I start my Italian class. Wish I *could* understand, but. I get the impression that Mrs C's dishing the dirt on everyone in Lomond. She's been around a long time – Frank's her youngest, y'know - so I reckon her stories would be worth hearing.'

Serenity tried to listen to the rhythms of Mrs Carretto's sentences but she didn't have Jude's patience. She let her eyes drift back to the window, while her thoughts drifted back to her two biggest problems. Caro first. Her mum had been giving her the silent treatment ever since she got back from the team-building weekend the day before. Admittedly, Serenity had let Caro think it was just an ordinary school camp, because she hadn't realised that someone in this town of busybodies – Raewyn Casey, as it happened – would tell Caro what was really going down.

But so what? There was no law that said you had to tell your mother everything. Okay, Caro was the sort of mum who would drool over the idea of a bunch of girls getting together to change the world but that was precisely why Serenity hadn't said anything. She didn't want Caro muscling in and telling everyone about her feminist demos in the seventies and eighties, making Serenity feel like she was just copycatting. So fuck Caro. If she wanted to turn the whole thing into a big drama, that was her decision. Serenity had other things to think about.

Like Scott Sterne, for instance. That afternoon, while everyone was waiting for the bus, Lockie and Tommo had started sparring and Serenity had backed through the trailing branches of the peppercorn tree, to get out of their way, and found herself effectively alone with Scott. They had only stood there for a few seconds before she backed out again but there had been enough time for one of them to say, 'We have to talk'. Serenity hadn't said it because she knew about Jude now and presumably Scott hadn't said it because he knew she knew.

It was kind of sad. For a while there, Serenity had almost believed Scott was The One. If they'd actually had sex in the willow cave by the river – and it could have happened - she might've ended up like those women who kept insisting that their husbands were great blokes, long after the cops had totally proved the guys were serial killers. But luckily for her, things hadn't gone that far. Now, of course, she couldn't imagine having sex with a guy who had almost packraped her best friend, less than a week before he started coming on to her. If some part of her still fancied Scott, it just meant that she was as sick as he was. It didn't mean she was entitled to start making excuses for him ...

Thinking about Scott had turned out to be even worse than thinking about Caro. Serenity let out a long, shuddering sigh, as quietly as possible, to make sure Jude didn't ask what she was sighing about. She looked round The Caff for some sort of distraction and smiled at the sight of Lucy Dove, cool as an icicle in a sleeveless white dress with a fashionably lopsided hem.

'Frank! It's good to see you again,' she was saying. 'They tell me you do dinners here. Is that so?'

'Certainly is,' Frank said. 'Mum makes pizza and spaghetti bolognese for the locals, plus a few traditional dishes every week for the southerners and the Happy Valley mob. I reckon she'll go on cooking till she's lost the last of her marbles. It's a great outlet for her, what with all the grandchildren being down in Sydney and only coming here for Christmas and holidays.'

‘So what keeps you in Lomond?’ Lucy asked. ‘Seriously, you’re the kind of guy who could walk straight into a top San Francisco restaurant and start waiting table. Why not open a restaurant in Sydney and give your mom a chance to fuss over the grandkids?’

Frank sighed. ‘Not a prayer. Mum’d go berko if I tried to load her into the car and take her off to the city. Back when she was able to express an opinion, she was dead set on staying in the place where she lived with Dad, even though he passed away fifteen years ago.’ He smoothed his already immaculate hair and said, ‘All right, Lucy, when do you want this dinner then?’

‘Tomorrow night. I’ll be dining with Josh Abrahams. I gather the guy’s in a wheelchair, so I figured I’d better drop in and make sure this place is wheelchair-accessible.’

‘No problems there,’ Frank told her. ‘The Abrahams have eaten at The Caff dozens of times. You gotta hand it to Rocky and Mal for letting Josh stay on at the farm. He can’t do much round the place, after his accident, but he’s made quite a name for himself, running the local gun lobby. I suppose you’ll be asking him to arm this girls’ militia of yours?’

He grinned at Lucy, who grinned back, saying, ‘News sure gets around. I should’ve guessed you’d know about the Wolf Guard already. I’m off to the community hall now for their first practice. Can I borrow Jude and Serenity, please?’

‘Go right ahead,’ Frank said. ‘And I’ll get Mum to cook something really nice for dinner tomorrow – although I bet you could charm Josh without any extra help, same as you’ve charmed all the blokes in Lomond. They say Pat Fahey even stopped writing blonde jokes on that board outside the pub, after you dropped in there for a drink.’

Lucy laughed and insisted that it had nothing to do with her and swept Serenity and Jude off to the hall, where Rocky showed the Wolf Guard how to march, drilled them for an hour and a half and taught them some basic self-defence moves. Serenity and Jude stayed on for a planning session with Lucy and Rocky, working out the route for the Wolf Guard’s patrol and trying to decide what to wear. By the time Shane Martin turned up to drive them home, Serenity was feeling so pleased with herself that she knew she could handle anything Caro tried to dish out.

After Shane had dropped her at the bottom of the hill, she walked up Karma Drive and paused to watch Maya marching round the Caseys’ verandah, practising everything Rocky had taught them. Before the weekend, Serenity would have been irritated at Maya for making the drill look ridiculous, by taking it too seriously, but today she caught herself beaming at the kid. Although she still reserved her right to hate Lomond and all the people in it, she had to admit she was getting kind of attached to the Wolf Guard.

As she ran up the steps to her house, voices drifted towards her from the kitchen window. Visitors. Serenity eased the front door open, just centimetre or two, and looked cautiously through the crack. The best tea cups were clustered

round their matching pot, with a chunky fruit cake beside them. Behind the cups, Serenity could see Daniel reducing a slice of cake to smaller and smaller crumbs, while Caro picked up the tea pot and poured four cups - one for her, one for Daniel and one for each of the people at the far end of the table.

The man was big and burly, with sleek black hair and a permanent smile and wrestler's shoulders, disguised by a well-cut jacket. The woman sitting next to him was small and slender, dressed in pale green slacks and a green silk shirt, with sapphire rings to match her sapphire eyes and gold chains to match the tips of her bronze hair. Serenity whooped and flung the door open and went racing across to them. The man caught her like a goalie, swinging her into the air, and she smiled over his shoulder at the woman.

'Great shirt, Aunt Fay,' she said. 'What are you and Uncle Phil doing here?'

Fay Matheson stroked her sleeve. 'Nice, isn't it?' she agreed. 'I bought the silk in Noosa - it's handpainted by a local artist - and had it made up by a clever little Vietnamese dressmaker, right next door to our hotel in Bayview. We're here to see Daniel - and you too, of course, Ren. It's a business trip, looking at holiday resorts along the coast, but we thought we'd take a couple of days off and visit our son.'

She laughed and shook the bracelets on her wrist, making the same sound twice: a soft silvery tinkle. Serenity sat down between her aunt and uncle and they launched into a comfortably predictable conversation. Her uncle and aunt talked about the resorts where they had been staying - Fay checking them out for her travel business, Phil looking for investment properties that might appeal to the clients at his real estate firm. Daniel didn't say much but Caro launched into her usual speech about resorts destroying the environment, until Uncle Phil told her tourism was Australia's major source of income, which shut her up, because it was true.

After that, everybody suddenly went silent. Phil and Fay looked wistfully at Daniel and Serenity realised they wanted to talk to him on their own. She grabbed a slice of cake and headed out to the verandah, signalling to Caro with her eyes as she went past. But her mother didn't get the message. She just settled her plump backside even more firmly into the chair, as if she was at some seventies demo getting ready to sing, 'We shall not be moved.'

Serenity groaned. Caro was so pathetic. She thought Daniel belonged to her now, just because he had come to stay while his parents were working extra hard. Her mum was such a write-off that she didn't understand how successful people operated. Serenity shut the glass door behind her and leaned on the railing, picking pecans out of the cake and thinking: *bloody Caro, she knows I hate pecan nuts*. She flicked the nuts into the bushes and listened to the verandah door slide along its groove, followed by the sound of high heels tapping across the boards.

'Well, Ren,' her aunt said, 'how are you enjoying country life?'

'Omigod, don't get me started!' said Serenity. 'I'd kill to be back in the city, doing normal stuff like parties and sleepovers at Sera Jane's and following the latest bands. This place is so ... Ah, what's the use? It could be worse, at any rate. Things have started to improve in the last few weeks.'

'That sounds interesting,' Fay said. 'Come on, Ren, tell me everything'

So Serenity began at the beginning, back when she'd seen Lucy Dove at school. Fay's sapphire eyes narrowed at the first mention of the council takeover. She insisted on hearing every detail of the team-building weekend and she actually cheered when Serenity said that Lucy had made her the leader of the Wolf Guard. It was the exact response that Serenity would have expected to get from her feminist mother. She couldn't believe she was getting it from her beautifully dressed, perfectly made-up aunt instead.

'That's wonderful, Ren,' Fay said. 'Your Lucy sounds wonderful too. I hope she wins this election. I sometimes think I would've made a good politician myself but in my day, women were supposed to stay behind the scenes and bake cakes for fund-raisers. I've never been much of a cake-baker, so I had to find other ways of making a difference.'

'Like making money, you mean?' said Serenity.

Fay studied a perfect set of pearly nails. 'Well, succeeding in my business puts me in a position to help other women every now and then. As a matter of fact, I'd love to do something to help Lucy's campaign. I could provide the uniforms for your group, for example. Appearances are important, after all. If you get the girls' measurements, I'm sure that marvellous little dressmaker in Bayview could run something up in no time.'

Serenity closed her eyes and saw a band of girls in matching uniforms marching through Lomond. It looked good.

'Would you?' she said. 'Would you really?'

'Oh yes,' Fay said with an unexpectedly fierce smile. 'I'd be delighted. Now tell me, Ren, how's Danny getting on? He hasn't written or phoned since he walked out but I suppose that's typical in a boy his age.'

Serenity nodded politely, although most of her brain was occupied in working out how to get everyone's measurements as quickly as possible. If she conscripted Maya and Jude, the three of them could ring around the Wolf Guard before Fay went back to her hotel tonight ...

'Hang on,' she said, catching up. 'Did you say Daniel walked out on you?'

Fay shrugged gracefully. 'In a manner of speaking. What did he tell you, Ren?'

'Nothing,' Serenity realised. 'I sort of assumed he'd come to stay because you and Uncle Phil had other stuff going on.'

They both turned to look through the long window at Daniel, sitting on his own by the TV. While they watched, he switched channels from a news bulletin about Eastern European refugees to a documentary about World War Two.

'That's as good an explanation as any,' Fay said dismissively. 'Let's talk about the uniforms now. From what you've told me about Lucy Dove, I'd suggest a futuristic look.'

It was true that Lucy Dove made you see things you had never seen before. But that wasn't all good. Three days after Lucy's team-building weekend, Jude realised she could see her family.

Most of the time she just manoeuvred around them, tuning out the TV and the fights, while she did her share of the housework or read bedtime stories to Britt and Shana. Whenever she got the chance, she retreated to her room - a masonite sweat-box in the corner of the verandah that Shane had enclosed for her - and disappeared into a book or switched on the computer screen at the back of her mind. It was the nearest thing to a personal computer that Jude was likely to get. Shane had nicked an old Mac once, trying to help, but in typical Shane fashion he had chosen a machine that had something missing, so when they set it up and switched it on, the screen was just a mass of black and white fractyls.

Not that Jude cared. Personal computers and internet access were for kids like Serenity and Katie. She would do it her own way, like a jockey with a handicap, knowing that if she managed to do as well as them, she was actually doing a whole lot better. But doing it her own way meant tuning out her family and today, as Jude sat at her desk and thought about seeing Lucy again in an hour's time, she realised the family static was getting through her defences. Even in her room she could hear Britt whining, Shelley screaming at her and Shane and Apeman planning a job with two losers from Bayview out in the front yard. The voices kept pushing in between her eyes and the book on her lap. She had to listen. Had to. Couldn't stop herself.

'Don't wanna go to bed. Don't wanna. Don't WANNA!' (That was Britt.)

'Stupid little bitch. You woke Anakin up. I warned you, Britt. Now you're in for it.' (Shelley, a slap and Britt roaring along with Anakin.)

'I still reckon we need a look-out. Why don't we get that Jude to come along? She can watch for the jacks, while we go over the fence.' (One of the losers.)

'No way, mate. Leave Jude out of this. She doesn't do that sort of thing.' (Shane, sounding furious, as usual.)

'Oh yeah? What's so special about her?' (The other loser.)

'She's different, that's what.' (A pause, while Shane thought about it.) 'She reads.'

'She reads *books*.' (Apeman, being helpful.)

Jude focused on the book that had started to slip off her knee. She spelt out g-r-a-v-i-t-a-t-i-o-n-a-l f-o-r-c-e letter by letter, lost the start of the sentence and said, 'Forget it.' It was time to go, anyway. She stuffed the book into her

backpack and went out onto the verandah, hoping to make a quick getaway before anyone noticed. But there was no chance of that with Shane around. His restless eyes saw things that hadn't even happened yet. As Jude edged along the side of the house, he broke off the argument with the losers.

'We making too much noise for you?' he called. 'Sorry, Jude. We'll keep it down, okay?'

Jude reluctantly turned back. Her stepdad did his best to protect her - keeping her out of his scams, belting Britt and Shana if they stole her pencils while she was doing homework at the kitchen table, turning up at parent/teacher nights and nodding glassy-eyed as Ms Felperin reported on Jude's progress; boasting about her to his mates, as if she was some sort of weird but interesting pet, like Apeman's moulting paranoid German Shepherd. There was only one problem. Shane couldn't protect her from the stuff that counted, because he didn't really understand what she was on about, any more than Jude really understood him.

When she turned to face him, he was straining towards her like a greyhound on the leash, his flat stomach arched with tension, one foot jig-jig-jiggling. Shane always looked as though he was about to explode with suppressed energy. ('Can't keep him off me,' Shelley complained.) His constant pacing and tapping and jiggling rubbed his jeans paper-thin and stripped every gram of fat off his body. Apeman, who lived on the same diet of hamburgers and chips and chicken, was soft and pudgy, like a gorilla vegging out in a cage but Shane was a greyhound, skinny and speedy and perpetually ready to bite.

'Nah, that's fine,' Jude told him. 'I'm going into town. Got a lift with Serenity's mum.'

Shane's eyes went blank. Serenity and Caro weren't his sort of people. Three days after they moved in, he had decided that the best way to deal with them was to pretend they didn't exist. While his brain was disengaged, Jude took the opportunity to move on, glancing through the kitchen window on her way past. Shelley was rocking Britt in her arms, while Anakin squalled and hammered the frame of his baby-bouncer. Jude turned away and went scrambling up the path behind the house, still brooding about her family.

Different. Shane's word for her said it all. But why? Okay, giving birth to Jude had knocked Shelley around so much that she had gone home to her mum's house for a while and left Jude with Nanna for a while longer. Jude had started off with six years of Nanna laying down the law, plus the old lady next door who used to be a chalkie had taught her to read while she was babysitting. Maybe that had changed her somehow.

On the other hand, Shelley had grown up with Nanna laying down the law and Jude had tried to teach Britt and Shana everything the old lady had taught her but she still felt different from her mum and half-sisters. The three of them skidded along from one moment to the next, laughing when they were happy, bawling when they were upset. They didn't seem to have been landed with this feeling that they had to do something / be something / make something of their

lives. Jude tripped on a patch of shadow and grabbed hold of the wooden pillar that propped up the Coxes' house. She clung to it for a few seconds and then said, 'Get a move on, girl!' and went scrambling up the path.

The Coxes' house, high on the hillside, was a lot cooler than the Martins' house. All the windows were open and a breeze blew in from the sea, bringing a smell of salt and seaweed. Caro Cox was churning home-made ice cream in the kitchen with Orion Casey watching like a hungry sparrow. Maya was marching indefatigably up and down the Coxes' verandah and Serenity's strange silent cousin sat beside the TV, with the sound down low and images of soldiers and burning houses flickering across the screen. Jude leaned in the doorway, taking it all in. Books on shelves, books stacked on Caro's desk, books littering the long table, books propped against the kitchen window. What would it feel like, living with that many books?

'Jude!' Caro said, looking up. 'Come on in. Serenity's been sulking in her room. Maybe you can lure her out for some ice cream.'

As Jude headed for the corridor, Orion came hurrying over. 'Hey, Jude,' he said, blocking her way, 'you know how you want to learn Italian? I found this website that teaches basic conversation. You could come to our place and have a look later on, if you like.'

'Yeah, later,' she said, thinking: a lot later.

Jude had never liked the Caseys' house. It was too like her own house, even though the details were different. Overflowing compost buckets, instead of chip packets piling up on the floor. Raewyn's protest group newsletters, instead of Shelley's celebrity gossip mags. The musty smell of Finn's pot, instead of the yeasty smell from Shane's beer cans. The backbeat of old seventies rock music, instead of the TV's blare. In other words, chaos - and Casey chaos wasn't much better than Martin chaos. Jude didn't need any more losers in her life.

Orion was still dagging along behind her, bleating about his bloody website, so Jude sidestepped into Serenity's room and shut the door in his face. As the thud echoed off the walls, Serenity looked up with a scowl that pushed out her plump lower lip and pulled her eyebrows down, shading her chocolate eyes. For a moment Jude felt like a waste of space, second best for Serenity in the same way that Orion was second best for her, but then Serenity stretched and sighed.

'Oh, it's you,' she said. 'Sorry, Jude. I came in here to get away from Mum's lame dog collection. Daniel *and* the Casey kids. I can't handle three different kinds of weirdos at once.'

Jude grinned with relief. At least Serenity didn't think *she* was a weirdo. 'Ready to go?' she asked. 'Rocky said eight o'clock but there's no harm in getting there early.'

She wasn't the only one who'd had that idea. Fifteen minutes later, when Caro dropped Jude, Serenity and Maya off at the community hall, they found half of the Wolf Guard there already - not only the girls who lived in town but even two of the four Bayview girls who had volunteered for the patrol. Most of the girls

in the hall were already wearing sky blue leggings and a matching tunic with a silver triangle inset at the front, making them look as if they were on the starship *Enterprise*.

'Omigod!' Maya shrieked. 'The uniforms!! They're amazing!!! Where's mine?'

Everyone laughed at her but it was affectionate laughter. Maya seemed to be turning into the Wolf Guard's mascot. Jude ducked past her and found her own uniform, put it on and joined the group. The others went on arriving in ones and twos, admiring the cut of the tunics and exclaiming over the way they turned everyone into passable imitations of superheroes - even little kids like Maya and plump kids like Jacinta. In the end Serenity had to raise her voice and call them to order, after which Rocky drilled them for an hour and then told them to stand at ease.

'Not bad,' she said. 'Not bad at all. Improved a lot, all things considered.' She cleared her throat and added, 'Proud of you, actually. Know what to do next. Go and do it.'

She saluted the Wolf Guard, who saluted back and marched out of the hall and down the main street. Jude noticed Rocky giving a secret salute to the soldier on the war memorial, one professional acknowledging another. The street was almost empty, as usual, but people came out of the Royal George or the streets behind the shops and gathered on the footpath to watch them pass. That wasn't completely unexpected. Jude knew that a bunch of Lucy's volunteers had gone round Lomond that afternoon, leafleting all the houses to let everyone know about the Wolf Guard's first patrol. But even so, she was startled when they turned left at the roundabout, marched up to the top of the hill and found a small crowd waiting outside Dove House.

Dick Brewster was there, taking photos for the *Star*. Doug Sterne was there, checking out the opposition. Lots of Wolf Guard parents were there - not Jude's, of course, but plenty of others, radiating pride in their daughters. Lockie Conway was there in the middle of Scott's gang, turning bright red when Dr Sterne came over and said, 'Lachlan, don't forget your check-up this week.' And Scott Sterne was there, taking an instinctive step forward as Serenity came marching towards him and (Jude observed with vicious pleasure) taking a step back when Serenity blanked him.

Then everyone turned in unison as Lucy Dove came out onto the upstairs balcony of Dove House, small and straight-backed in a white jacket with silver buttons, like the president of a very stylish South American republic. She waved to the Wolf Guard, who stood to attention and saluted, then reversed and marched back into town. Jude was a bit startled when the crowd cheered as they marched past but she managed to keep in step without missing a beat.

The part that really threw her came later, when the Wolf Guard left the main street and marched through Jack Wheaton's retirement village. Suddenly the summer evening was full of elderly voices calling out and thanking them, telling them how much safer they felt, even though the Wolf Guard was only a

group of girls carrying mobile phones, instead of guns, and relying on three days of karate practice to fix the bad guys.

They marched right round the retirement village, crossed the main street and patrolled the roads by the river. By the time they reached the end of their route, it was completely dark. As they marched back to the main street, the Wolf Guard could see curtains twitching and the slats in venetian blinds lifting, striping the dusk with light, as people looked out to watch them go by. Jude nodded with satisfaction. The way gossip travelled round Lomond, everyone in town would know all about the Wolf Guard by tomorrow morning.

They grinned at each other and headed on down the road to pick up the pizzas Lucy had ordered from The Caff and take them back to Dove House for a celebration. The street was completely empty now, except for Matt Fahey and Jayden Kazantzakis sitting on the steps of the war memorial, deciding whether to spend the last of their dole money on a burger or the racing car game machine in the pub.

'Hey, look! It's Army Barbie,' they called, waving to the Wolf Guard.

Some of the girls were annoyed but Jude thought that counted as friendly, compared to the names Scott Sterne's gang had called her. She waved back, to express her general goodwill. The world felt like a better place than it had been that afternoon - not just because of the cheering but because she had spent two hours marching in step with twenty other girls and making a bunch of wrinklies feel safe. Oh sure, when she got back home, her house would still be a mess and her family would still be giving their usual demonstration of chaos theory.

But that was all right, because Jude was starting to get the rest of her life in order.

Katie Brewster felt (no, she didn't / yes, she did) really pissed off. She didn't have any right to feel that way. When Lucy had consulted her about making Serenity leader of the Wolf Guard, Katie had said it was fine and she'd meant it too. But that had been five days ago. Since then, Dick Brewster had knocked back Katie's article on the Wolf Guard's first public appearance and written his own version for this Saturday's *Star*, even though she had taken all his criticisms of her first story into account. Now she felt like a complete failure as a reporter and she was marching in the second row of a patrol that she could have been leading.

Katie had never realised how much she took it for granted that she would always be the leader of anything important, until she'd had to stand back and watch Serenity lead the Wolf Guard. She didn't even enjoy the karate lessons and marching practices, the way non-sporty types like Maya and Jacinta did, because she had always played any sport that was going, ever since her dad had given her a mini cricket bat for her fourth birthday. If she couldn't lead the Wolf Guard or write about it, she would have preferred to sit at home watching TV - except that she didn't have a boyfriend to sit with these days. When she thought

about all the things she'd given up for Lucy Dove, Katie couldn't help wondering whether she had gone temporarily bonkers.

Her feet had been marching her along without any assistance from her brain but when they passed the war memorial, the usual greeting from Matt Fahey and Jayden Kazantzakis – 'G'day, Army Barbies' – broke into her trance. She waved back, looked around to see how far they had got and found herself wondering why Matt and Jayden were the only guys on the street today. All the fine hairs on her forearms tingled and stood to attention. She glanced at Jude Martin, who was marching beside her, but in good army fashion Jude was looking straight ahead. Katie waited for the next arm-swing and flicked her hand sideways, tapped Jude on the wrist and whispered, 'Hey, Martin, what's going on?' But Jude didn't answer. She just stared with hypnotised intensity at the bus shelter.

Or, maybe, at the six or seven guys charging out of it.

Katie blinked and the world went into fast forward. Running footsteps. Clutching hands. Panicky screams. Bodies cannoning off each other. Four-letter words hurled like bricks, hitting hard. Maya shrieked as Lockie grabbed the back of her pants and hoicked them into a wedgie. Eden Parker pulled Jacinta's tunic up: she whimpered and wrapped her arms across her chest. Cam Parker tripped Merian and fell on top of her, squirming and grunting.

'Run and regroup,' Serenity yelled in Rocky's sergeant-voice. 'Listen to me! *Run and regroup!*'

The other girls scattered but somewhere in the last few minutes Katie's camera had made its way from her back pocket into her hands. She seemed to have automatically documented everything she had seen and she went on taking photos of the guys until Tommo Thompson spotted her and yelled, 'Hey, get the camera off her!' After that she ran like the rest of them, heading for the safest refuge she could think of - Dove House and Lucy. She was jogging up the hill when an engine coughed beside her and Rocky leant out of the mini-bus.

'Smart move,' she said. 'Hop in, Brewster.'

Katie squeezed into the gap between Merian, who was shaking violently, and Jacinta, who was sobbing into her hands. When Rocky pulled up in the driveway of Dove House, they fell out and stumbled into the big front room. Surrounded by dusky paintings in gold frames, old-fashioned couches with carved wooden backs and a complicated carpet, patterned with tiny flowers and leaves, it was hard to believe that only five minutes ago they had been fighting in the street. Lucy and Rocky handed round cups of tea and sugary biscuits - 'for shock,' Lucy said – and the girls started to tell them what had happened, or as much of it as they could remember.

Halfway through the story Merian began to shake uncontrollably and Jacinta leapt to her feet, saying, 'Sorry, I can't stay in the Wolf Guard. Not after that.' She bolted out into the hall, with Rocky at her heels. Maya Casey was shaking as badly as Merian, although she seemed to be shaking with rage, not terror; Serenity was slumped against the wall, wearing an invisible sign that said

'Failure'; and half of the Wolf Guard was in tears, with the other half trying to comfort them. In short, everyone was a mess.

Except for Katie. She felt just fine. She had twenty photos in her camera, which would prove that the guys weren't just having a bit of fun, along with half a dozen pages of notes that she had jotted down while the others were telling their stories. She looked around, to see whether she was the only one who had enjoyed the fight, and noticed Jude Martin leaning back with a half-smile.

'You feel all right too, don't you?' Katie said, edging closer.

'I feel fucking terrific,' Jude said in a conspirator's whisper. 'Okay, I scored a few bruises but – oh, I dunno, they feel good too. I can see why people carry on about their old war wounds.' When Katie laughed, she narrowed her eyes and said, 'And why are you so cocky, Brewster? You didn't land a single punch, as far as I could see.'

'In your terms, I suppose I'm the war correspondent,' Katie said. 'I got some great pictures and a great story. Let's see whether my bloody dad can knock me back this time.'

'Tried to get Lucy's ideas into the *Star* before, have you?' said Jude. 'Maybe you're more of a battler than I thought. Keep it up, Brewster. You'll get there in the end.'

She stood up and wandered across to the dusty velvet curtains at the long front windows. As she looked through the gap between them, she tensed visibly. Katie went to join her, peering over Jude's shoulder into the night. At first she could only see the collage of black and grey shadows that was Lucy's front garden but eventually she noticed someone standing under one of the tall trees. It was Scott. Katie would have recognised that perfect profile anywhere.

'Jesus, I hate that guy,' Jude breathed. 'It's not enough for him to get stuck into the Wolf Guard. He has to come here and gloat, as well.'

Katie studied Scott's profile for a few more seconds. 'Honestly, Jude, I'm positive Scott wasn't in the main street,' she said. 'You can check my photos, if you don't believe me.'

Jude shrugged. 'Why bother? It won't change my mind. As far as I'm concerned, even if Scott Sterne wasn't there, he gave the orders, like a general sitting back behind the lines.' She turned away from the window and said, 'Come on, Brewster, do something. We can't let the bastards win. Make Serenity pull herself together and take charge.'

Katie hesitated, wondering why she was supposed do Serenity's job for her, when she still secretly thought she would be a better leader herself. Then she heard another suppressed sob, somewhere in the room, which flashed her back to the moment when the guys had attacked. Her own instinctive reaction had been to take photos and Serenity's instinctive reaction had been to look after her troops. That made Serenity the rightful leader of the Wolf Guard, by any standard Katie could think of.

‘Fair enough,’ she said. ‘But there’s a trade-off, Martin. You have to tell Rocky and Lucy that I’m going home – but wait a while, because I don’t want them running after me. I need to check some stuff out, okay?’

‘Who’s a big tough investigative reporter then?’ Jude said mockingly. ‘All right, Brewster, it’s a deal.’

They shook hands on it and Katie went straight over to Serenity. ‘Come on, team leader,’ she said. ‘Pull yourself together. You can’t let it stop here.’

Serenity shuddered - a long ripple of fear that ran from the top of her head right down to her feet. She looked as close to breaking point as Jacinta and Merian. Katie stood there, maintaining eye contact until Serenity straightened her shoulders and pushed herself away from the wall. She watched approvingly as Serenity took a deep breath and walked into the middle of the room.

‘We’re the Wolf Guard,’ she said, loud and clear. ‘Never forget that. Lucy set us up as the guardians of Lomond and she wants us to be her guard of honour at the town hall meeting this Saturday. Be there, okay? You have to do this. Otherwise you’re giving the guys permission to walk all over you for the rest of your lives. Just remember, if we can convince them, we can convince anyone. Well? Are you with me or not?’

The others shuffled and muttered, which worried Katie at first, but when she listened more closely, she realised they were muttering, ‘With you. We’re with you.’ Serenity did her Rocky impersonation and made them repeat it three times - loud, louder, loudest – and by the third time, everyone in the Wolf Guard was standing tall again, even Jacinta and Merian. Katie decided, once and for all, that she’d done the right thing when she let Serenity have the leadership. She might have been able to nag or persuade or shame the girls into carrying on but Serenity had the ability to draw people along with her like a magnet – or, come to think of it, like Lucy Dove.

Jude caught her eye and grinned. ‘Thanks, Brewster,’ she said. ‘I couldn’t have done that myself. Run along now and I’ll cover for you.’

Katie sidled out of the room and down the front path, feeling like a big tough investigative reporter. Then, as she stepped off the path and into Lucy’s overgrown garden, the shadows made a grab for her and she started to wonder whether this had been such a great plan, after all. She reminded herself that she had known Scott and the other guys all her life, so there was nothing to be scared of, and went on pushing on through the bushes till she reached the tree where Scott was standing. He swung round, smiling, but his smile only lasted for half a second.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ he said. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘I saw you from the front window,’ said Katie. ‘Thought I’d come and ask what that business at the bus shelter was all about.’

‘Nothing to do with me - but I bet I get the blame for it,’ he said. ‘Apparently, my fucking uncle organised the whole thing. Lockie reckons Uncle Doug dropped a few hints about how I wanted to put the Wolf Guard in its place,

only I couldn't be seen doing it. And Lockie's too fucking thick to realise that I'd never let Doug run my life, so now –'

He broke off, as if the consequences were too terrible to put into words, although Katie couldn't see how he was any worse off than before. 'So you were cool about the attack on Jude but you don't want to be connected with the attack on the Wolf Guard?' she said, imitating her dad at his most sarcastic.

'It isn't the same thing,' Scott said in a flat, expressionless voice. 'I *did* fuck Jude over, more fool me, so I have to take the consequences. By the way, is that why you gave me the flick?'

'Not exactly,' Katie admitted, matching his honesty. 'We just weren't going anywhere, you and me.'

'And Lucy Dove *is* going somewhere?'

'Oh yeah. You better believe it.'

As they stared at each other, they shifted position slightly. Something in their new positions seemed to reveal an antagonism that was older than both of them put together. It made Katie feel frightened all over again.

'Sorry,' she said. 'Gotta go now.'

'Then I'll walk you home,' Scott told her. 'The guys are still pretty worked up. Trust me, you don't want to run into a bunch of them on your own.' When Katie didn't answer, he said, 'Seriously, *I'm* not too keen on running into them either. We'll go round the back way, okay?'

Katie laughed and agreed. They left the garden and walked down the hill, taking a roundabout route past the old houses that lined the river bank, talking about nothing in particular. When she thought about it later, Katie realised that, even though they hadn't even mentioned their three years of going out together, the walk through the back streets had felt like some kind of ritual, confirming that they really had broken up. As they approached her house, Scott stopped a tactful ten metres away from the lane where they used to kiss goodnight.

'Have you told your folks yet?' he asked.

'Not yet,' Katie confessed. 'My dad'll be disappointed, so I've been putting it off. How about you?'

Scott grinned. 'No way. *My* dad'll be ropeable. I thought I'd let him figure it out for himself.'

'Good luck with it. See you around, Scott.'

'Yeah, good luck yourself. See you, mate.'

He set off down the street. By the time Katie reached the front door, she had completely forgotten him. She let herself in and listened to the family noises, crossing her fingers for luck. If she could get to her room without being spotted, she would be able to write for at least an hour before her mother told her to turn out the light, in which case she could give her father the story about the attack on the Wolf Guard tomorrow morning, in time for him to decide whether to use it in Saturday's *Star*.

Although this time she didn't really care what her dad decided. It was a good story. Katie knew that. She just wanted to get it exactly right. That was the most important thing.

Scott jogged along the street that led to his uncle's house, relieved to be doing something, even though it probably wasn't going to help. When he'd walked into the middle of the guys' celebration and Lockie had told him about the attack on the Wolf Guard, Scott had been so furious that he had gone straight to Dove House, without thinking it through. He had stood in the garden, beaming psychic messages that were meant to draw Serenity across to the window and out into the street, but he'd ended up with Katie instead. He still wished he could've got the chance to apologise to Serenity but yelling at Uncle Doug would at least blow off some steam.

When he leaned on the front door bell, Doug came to the door straight away. 'Stop that, Scotty!' he whispered. 'John and Emma and Sarah are in bed. Where have you been, anyway? You told your father you'd wait for him in The Caff but he says –'

'Yeah, well, I went there first off,' Scott cut in. 'Only Lockie told me how you'd fucked me over, so I went up to Lucy Dove's place to apologise.'

Rob loomed up behind his brother, saying, 'What's all this about?' and Doug pulled a face like an anguished frog. He flapped his hands at them until he'd herded them into the lounge room, then went to stand in front of the empty fireplace with his hands clasped behind his back.

'I was worried about the Wolf Guard,' he told them. 'Law and order's one of *my* issues but Lucy was taking it over. I might have indicated to Lachlan Conway that it'd help if we could show everyone how, underneath those fancy uniforms, the Wolf Guard's just a bunch of frightened little girls. And, ah, I might've mentioned your name, Scotty.'

'You might've lost your fucking mind too,' Rob snarled. 'What's your problem, Doug? You were a bloody cert for mayor, till you decided to make us look like a bunch of thugs who enjoy beating the shit out of "frightened little girls".' He transferred the scowl from Doug to Scott, saying, 'As for you, Scotty, please, *please* tell me you didn't actually walk into Dove House and say, "Sorry, miss" to Lucy Dove.'

Scott winced. As a matter of fact, it hadn't even occurred to him that he could go up to the front door of Dove House and ask for Serenity, let alone that he could have apologised to Lucy and the Wolf Guard. Apparently, the anti-Dove conditioning from his childhood was still working as well as ever.

'It's okay,' he said. 'I didn't see Lucy. I just had a word with Katie.'

'Jesus, I forgot all about her,' Rob said, making the transition from anger to sympathy with a visible effort. 'See what you've done, Douggie. You haven't just

made a mess of your own campaign – you’ve put Scotty on the out with his girlfriend as well.’

‘He can always go over to the Brewsters’ and explain,’ Doug said. ‘As a matter of fact, it mightn’t be a bad idea to call round tonight and calm Katie down, before she spills the beans to Dick.’

‘Yeah, it’d be a great idea, *if* I wanted to cover up for you,’ Scott said. ‘*And* if me and Katie hadn’t split up a week ago.’

Rob turned and stared at him blankly. ‘You split up? You never told me that.’

‘You never asked,’ Scott said. ‘You could’ve guessed, but. What else was I supposed to do, after she joined Lucy’s team?’

‘She was your girlfriend, for God’s sake. You could’ve stopped her. Your mother wouldn’t ever vote for anyone I disapproved of.’

‘Yeah, but you like Katie because she’s different from Mum,’ Scott pointed out. ‘You were always going on about how she was sensible and interesting and good at stuff like sport and riding. Seriously, Dad, you can’t have all of that *and* expect to boss the person round all the time.’

Rob held his stare for half a second longer and then swung back towards Doug. ‘Dunno why we’re rabbiting on about Katie Brewster,’ he said. ‘We ought to be making plans for damage control. You’ve screwed up twice in the last week, Duggie – tonight, when you let a pack of morons loose on the street, and last weekend, when you agreed to this bloody stupid debate with Lucy Dove. What are you planning to do about it, mate?’

‘You’re overreacting,’ Doug said sulkily. ‘There’s still a reasonable chance that Lucy’s soldier girls will go home with their tails between their legs and throw their uniforms in the bin. In that case, things’ll soon be back to normal.’

‘Till Katie’s photos appear in the *Star*, at any rate,’ Scott said. ‘She takes her camera everywhere, y’know. She told me the guys were like animals - feeling the girls up, pulling half their clothes off, that sort of thing. It’s not going to look good.’

He looked across at his uncle and found that Doug had turned a murky greenish-yellow, which made him look even more froglike. Scott was still enjoying his revenge when his eyes moved on. His dad’s face was such a cartoon shade of scarlet that Scott thought “heart attack” and touched the wooden arm of his chair, to ward off bad luck.

‘So there’s photos,’ Rob said, keeping his voice level with an obvious effort. ‘Nice one, Duggie. Hope you’re working hard on that speech for the debate. It’ll need to be extra bloody brilliant now.’

‘I –,’ Doug said. ‘I – I’ll go and see Dick Brewster first thing tomorrow. He’s a reasonable man. He’ll see –’

‘For Christ’s sake!’ his brother bellowed. ‘How stupid can you get? Dick Brewster has a kid in the Wolf Guard, you cretin. You sooled your dogs onto the daughter of the *Star*’s editor.’

'I -,' Doug said. 'I didn't think. But Dick'll remember – substantial annual contribution from the Sternes –'

'*And the Doves,*' Rob said. 'That's how Dick justifies taking the money, because he's always taken it from both sides. But no amount of money's going to act as a sweetener for a bloke who just found out that you set a pack of young idiots onto his daughter and her mates.'

'I – I'm sure Dick won't hold it against us,' said Doug. 'He always says – completely objective –'

Rob groaned. 'Wake up, mate,' he said. 'Dick likes to *think* he's objective. That's worked for us so far, because it held him back from giving Lucy Dove rave reviews, even though he knows she's good-looking and smart as paint and talks a blue streak. Maybe – just maybe - we might've been able to nudge Dick round to our way of thinking about this latest incident, if we'd had a bit more time. But as for marching into his office and telling him what photos he can and can't print – well, you can try it if you like, Dougie, but I won't be standing next to you. Which reminds me, we ought to get going. Come on, Scotty.'

By that time Doug was so demoralised that he didn't make any attempt to stop them. Scott followed his father out of the house and down to the corner, where the Land Rover was parked.

'Good-looking, smart as paint and talks a blue streak,' he quoted, while Rob wrestled with the steering lock. 'If you love Lucy Dove so much, it's a pity you can't dump Doug and take up with her.'

'You're not wrong,' his dad said. 'Doug's turning into a bloody liability. Tell me honestly, Scotty, what do you think of him?'

Scott looked back over the last few weeks until he came to the trial-run election speech that Doug had made to his class. 'He's a boring old fart,' he said.

Rob laughed. 'He is, isn't he? That used to work in our favour, back in the old days, but not any more. Lomond needs someone with a bit more oomph.'

'Someone like Lucy Dove?' Scott asked.

He was sure his dad would say, 'Don't be a bloody idiot' but instead Rob sat and drummed on the steering wheel for a while.

'You were right when you told me she's got something,' he said eventually. 'On the other hand, she doesn't know Lomond the way I do. Tell me, Scotty, if I asked you to mobilise the guys, the way Lucy's mobilised the girls, could you deliver?'

'Sure,' Scott said, startled. 'Apart from a couple of deadheads, like Orion Casey and that weird cousin of Serenity's, most of the guys around here'll do what I say.'

'They'd need to be ready by Saturday,' Rob said. 'Nothing too fancy. As long as they can march in a straight line, that'll be fine. There's some uniforms left over from the old days – Norm Kelly's been storing them out on his property – and I'll get Mal Abrahams to give you a hand with drilling your blokes. Mal can hardly say no, when his missus has been helping Lucy and the girls – not unless

he wants to make a public announcement that he's for the Doves and against the Sternes, which wouldn't be smart.'

Scott held his hand up. 'Whoa, Dad! Not so fast. I only said I *could* get the guys together. I'd need to know what it's about, before I actually did it.'

'Sorry, mate, can't tell you that,' Rob said with a grin. 'It's an idea Doug and I were tossing around earlier. You ought to like it, because it all started from something you told me, but I need to see whether it'll be feasible before I go public with it. Let me sleep on it and give you the details in the morning, okay?'

He widened the grin, making it so aggressively cheerful that Scott couldn't keep on raising objections, even though he suspected that his dad's new plan was likely to get him into even worse trouble with Serenity. As the Land Rover hit a speed bump and jolted him across the seat, he caught the eye of his reflection in the rear vision mirror. Level mouth, strong jaw, steady eyes. He still looked like the old Scott Sterne, so people kept expecting him to act in the same old way, but inside he felt like a lovestruck idiot - the sort of guy that, in a movie, would be played by some little fag like Leonardo di Caprio.

The car went over another speed bump and, just like burping a baby, the jolt brought another thought up to the surface. Jude Martin. Scott had never even considered the possibility of apologising to her but all of a sudden he realised he would never get anywhere with Serenity unless he sorted things out with her best mate. He wasted a few seconds trying to blame Serenity for that - why the hell did she have to make friends with a Martin? - and then admitted that he was a fool in love and anything Serenity wanted was fine by him.

On the other hand, that didn't get him any closer to solving the problem. Scott couldn't begin to imagine how to go about apologising to Jude. It all seemed too hard, starting with the problem of choosing the words that would make her listen and going right through to the problem of how to get Jude on her own, without looking like he was harassing her all over again. Basically, tonight's work had just confirmed what he knew already - that he had lost Serenity, as effectively and finally as if he had let her swallow poison in some grotty old tomb.

And meanwhile, his dad was sitting beside him, buzzing with excitement about his mysterious plans. There didn't seem to be much to gain from holding out against him.

'When you figure out what you're doing, you may as well count me in,' Scott said, pledging his support and resigning himself to the consequences

Normally, Orion would have been home at five in the afternoon, emailing his regular contacts - the guy in Peoria who knew all about biology, geography and the world in general; a guy in Birmingham who had the same sense of humour as him; his s.f.-novel-writing list and a few others. On Thursday night, however, he'd had a bad asthma attack, so he had missed school on Friday. Raewyn had decided he wasn't quite sick enough for her to take a day off but she had told

Finn to park him in the back seat of the taxi and keep an eye on him. You couldn't get away with that sort of thing in the city but nobody in Lomond minded.

Then Finn had got a job driving Bluey Thompson's wife, mother-in-law, daughter and daughter's best friend into Bayview and back, which didn't leave any room in the taxi, so he'd had to drop Orion off at The Caff and ask Frank Carretto to keep an eye on him. Orion wasn't exactly thrilled. For one thing, Jude wasn't around. She had printed out some pages from the website he'd recommended and taught herself a bit of basic Italian, so she was out in the kitchen, helping Mrs Carretto with the cooking. And for another thing, it was rush hour at The Caff, with lots of wrinklies from the retirement village coming in for their afternoon coffee and talking at the tops of their voices.

Just before the noise drove him completely mental, Orion remembered the trick he had taught himself to use at school lunchtimes, before he'd had Daniel to protect him. He imagined a cone of silence and fitted it over himself, filtering out most of the sounds. That worked pretty well. Orion wrote emails on his laptop for a while and then worked on his novel until he noticed that the silence around him was real now, not imaginary. While he had been providing his planet with three incompatible religions, The Caff had emptied – although a few seconds later the door swung open and his dad surged in, wiping his face with an old t-shirt.

'I don't like the heat,' Finn announced. 'My Irish ancestors keep telling me it's unnatural. But I've had a good day, all the same, thanks for asking. I spent two hours propped against a bollard at the end of the Bayview pier, while the Thompson girl tried on her wedding dress and I've got some good ideas for a water painting sloshing around in my brain.'

He looked around The Caff, to see how his audience was reacting. The last southerner couple was counting out the money for the bill and Orion, who was used to his dad's Irish artist act, had gone back to reading his notes for the novel. That left Frank Carretto. Finn loped across to the coffee machine and dropped his sweatstained t-shirt on the counter that Frank had just finished wiping.

'G'day, mate,' he said, switching over to his true-blue Aussie act. 'How's business? Slow as a wet week, by the look of things. You'll have time for a chinwag then, while I drink my macchiato.'

Orion frowned. Frank was one of the few people offline who didn't treat him like an eight year old. He didn't approve of Finn teasing Frank, so he shifted position, in order to keep an eye on the two of them from behind the screen of his laptop. Frank looked as if he was trying to decide whether he was more irritated by Finn's country bloke slang or his perfect Italian accent. In the end he gave up and made Finn a triple concentrate espresso with a dash of cold milk. Finn examined the black-opal foam glinting round the rim of the tiny cup and nodded his approval.

'Okay, what's the latest gossip, Franco?' he said. 'Give me something really juicy.'

'Come off it,' Frank protested. 'As if I'd tell you anything I don't want the whole town to know.'

'You calling me a blabbermouth?' Finn said, looking hurt. 'I can keep my mouth shut, if I need to. I never told anyone about the time when I caught you with -'

Frank blushed and glanced at Orion, who pretended to be absorbed in his novel. He lowered his voice and said, 'No, you didn't, Finn, and I'm grateful for that. But it doesn't mean I'm going to tell you everyone else's secrets.'

Finn exchanged looking hurt for looking sincere. 'I wouldn't want you to,' he said reassuringly. 'I just need one or two minor pieces of information. Between the two of us, we know everything that goes on in this town. And a lot of stuff's been going on lately, so it's time we put our heads together.'

'All right,' Frank said resignedly. 'What do you want to know?'

Orion was outraged. Teasing Frank had been bad enough but now his dad was trying to blackmail the guy and, worse still, succeeding. He closed his novel file and focussed on the conversation, in case he was needed for damage control.

'Lucy Dove's the woman of the moment,' Finn was saying thoughtfully, 'but I've got enough on her to be going on with. I'd be interested in hearing a bit more about the opposition, though.'

'Rob's done the hard yards,' Frank said, as if he was defending Rob Sterne against accusations of being a slacker. 'He used to be pretty wild in his younger days, same as Scott. Then Robert Sterne – that's Rob's dad - died before his time, so Rob had to take over the property *and* turn himself into a responsible citizen practically overnight. It couldn't've been easy.'

'You've really studied Rob, haven't you?' Finn commented.

'Not exactly,' said Frank. 'We were in the same class at Lomond Primary, before Rob's dad packed him off to a boarding school down south.'

Finn grinned. 'Oh yeah, I forgot about about the old school tie. How about Rob's big brother, then? Why didn't the property go to Doug Sterne?'

Orion watched Frank's shoulders lift and his hands spread out in a more Italian gesture than he usually allowed himself. 'Because Doug's a bastard,' he said.

Finn choked on a mouthful of coffee, tried to pretend he wasn't choking and ended up spitting coffee into a paper serviette and gasping for breath. Orion couldn't blame him. As far as he knew, nobody in Lomond had ever heard Frank Carretto swear before.

'Yeah well, I knew that,' Finn said, as soon as he recovered. 'Unless you're using "bastard" in the technical sense ... Jesus, you are, aren't you? Okay, Franco, you have to tell me the whole story now.'

'Do I?' Frank asked, leaning over to remove the soggy serviette.

'Of course you do, unless you want me to spread my own version all round Lomond,' Finn said promptly. 'Come on, you know you want to.'

Frank hesitated for a moment and then gave in. 'The fact is, Rob's dad was a bit of a ladies' man,' he said. 'He played the field for a long time but he got married in the end, because he needed a son to inherit the property. A few years later it was starting to look as if his wife couldn't have kids, so he talked her into adopting this five year old boy he'd had by some girl in Bayview. Then his wife got pregnant too - it happens that way sometimes - and even though she only had the one kid, it was enough to put Doug out of the running.'

Finn whistled softly. 'So that's why Doug Sterne's such a respectable bastard - because he can never forget he *is* a bastard. Thanks, Franco. It's been fascinating. I wish I could stay and keep on chatting but I have to be out at the Sterne property in fifteen minutes time.' He paused for a few beats, to let that piece of information sink in, and added, 'Don't worry, I won't let on to Rob that I know.'

'You're the real bastard in this story, aren't you?' Frank said, almost admiringly. 'See you later, Finn.'

Orion followed his father out of The Caff, frowning to himself. If he had followed all of that properly - and he was only fifty per cent sure that he had - then he didn't need to worry about Frank, after all. It was starting to look as though he had been watching a game that the two men played on a regular basis, where Finn lured Frank into saying more than usual and Frank justified his secret love of gossip by putting the blame on Finn. In an odd sort of way, the two of them seemed to be good friends.

The back seat of the taxi was littered with wedding confetti from the Thompson girl's free samples. Orion brushed away the cupids and silver bells and settled down with his laptop. As the taxi crossed the bridge over the river, the escarpment loomed up ahead. When Orion glanced up from the screen, he found himself looking out at yellow dust, an occasional clump of hot exhausted gum trees sheltering hot exhausted sheep, the Danville River sludging along beside the road and an arc of bleached blue sky with a few scrolls of cloud at the edges.

Letter boxes made out of bread bins or old kerosene tins marked the properties on either side of the road and Finn recited their names in advance, as a party trick to keep Orion entertained. He opened a rusty gate, jolted over a metal grid and drove up the track to the Sterne house, leaving a car-high trail of dust behind him. Bethany Sterne was waiting on the front verandah in her going-to-town clothes - beige shoes and beige pants, cream shirt and a creamy plaster cast on her left arm, which matched her creamy skin and beige hair and contrasted with her mournful deep-set dark eyes. Finn jumped out of the taxi and bounded over to her.

'The lovely Bethany,' he said, bowing like a kid at dancing class. 'How would you be, on this beautiful afternoon? Great time for a drive to the hospital, isn't it?'

Bethany Sterne started to witter on, apologising for the length of the drive and the time of the appointment for having her cast removed. While Finn ushered her across to the taxi, Orion turned round to look through the back window and

saw another car-sized dust trail heading towards the farm. He shaded his eyes and peered into the sun.

Seconds later an EA Ford burst through the dust wall and pulled up beside the taxi. Lucy Dove got out, wearing white jeans, baggy and then tapered like jodhpurs, and a white shirt, which blazed so vibrantly that it seemed to repel the dust. The whole outfit reminded Orion of an illustration from some old-fashioned kids' book that Raewyn had tried to make him and Maya read when they were little. *Norah of Billabong*, that was it.

'G'day, Finn,' she said. 'How y'going? And Mrs Sterne too. I had a ripper time at your book group the other day. Sorry you can't stick around.'

She gave them a radiant smile and walked on, holding her hand out. Rob Sterne had been leaning against a verandah post in the background, arms folded across his chest, but now he stepped forward and took her hand.

'G'day, mate,' said Lucy. 'Beaut of you to ask me over. It'll be good to have a yarn.'

She shook Rob's hand heartily and made a move towards the front door. Bethany Sterne waved to her husband, unnoticed, and scrambled into the passenger seat of the taxi, holding her arm out stiffly to avoid knocking it. She spent the entire journey to Bayview apologising for one thing or another, except when Finn was pumping her for information about the Sternes. After five minutes of that, Orion secretly flipped his laptop open and read through his notes again, while his dad dropped Mrs Sterne at the hospital and headed back to the coast road. (She was spending the night with one of her sisters in Bayview, so Finn didn't need to wait around.) They drove in silence for a while but then Orion heard his dad muttering under his breath.

'G'day. Beaut. Mate. Have a yarn. When did Lucy Dove stop talking American and start talking like a dinky-di Aussie? And why the hell is she dropping in for a chat with Rob Sterne?' He looked over his shoulder and said, 'Listen, Orion, there's something funny going on and just this once, I'd rather not be first with the news. Can I trust you to keep quiet about Lucy visiting the Sterne place?'

Orion drew in a long deep breath, which made his lungs swell up so drastically that his chest hurt. His dad had never asked him for a special favour before. Although no one said it out loud, it was understood that he was Raewyn's son, the way Maya was Finn's daughter, but now Finn had trusted him with a secret and Orion found himself feeling – well, he wasn't very good at naming his emotions but it was a big, painful one, at any rate.

'It's okay, Finn. I won't tell,' he promised, sticking his chin out with as much determination as if there had been anybody, apart from Daniel, who he *could* tell.

The house was empty when Daniel got back from the Caseys' place. (Orion had made the teachers set him extra homework while he was away and he wanted it

delivered immediately.) Serenity hadn't been on the school bus either, so Daniel figured that Caro must have driven into Bayview to pick her up. He poured himself an orange juice and went to sit on the verandah, watching the wind ruffle the tops of the gum trees and looking forward to the moment when Caro's station wagon would turn the corner and come bumping up Karma Drive, with Serenity hanging out of the window.

But the minute Caro and Serenity walked in, the house erupted. They'd had fights before, of course, but none of them had ever registered very high on Daniel's personal Richter scale. This one was different. They had obviously been arguing all the way back from Bayview, so it took Daniel a while to establish the cause of the fight, but eventually he worked out that Caro was hurt because Serenity had taken so long to tell her about the Wolf Guard and Serenity was furious because Caro was treating her like a nuisance kid, instead of a troop leader.

'What's your problem, Mum?' she asked. 'Are you saying there's something wrong with girls making a contribution? I thought you were totally into that sort of thing.'

'I am,' said Caro, running her hands through her hair. 'I just don't like secrets. If Lucy's campaign's so fantastic, why didn't you tell me about it straight away?'

'See!' Serenity said triumphantly. 'You just called the campaign fantastic. Even you have to admit there's nothing wrong with Lucy's ideas.'

'Hold on, that's not what I said,' Caro protested. 'I don't know whether Lucy's ideas are smart or stupid, because I haven't heard enough about them to make up my mind. I'm just saying I would've expected you to discuss it with me, before you got involved.'

'What's the point?' Serenity demanded. 'Your lot talked and talked and never got anywhere. These days people want to pull their fingers out and get things done. Look at that guy Jeff Kennett who was premier in Victoria. He was, like, this total conservative but heaps of kids voted for him, because he had a can-do attitude.'

'Yes, and look at what he did,' her mum countered. 'Education cuts, health cuts, closing down half the services in the country and selling off everything the state used to own, so he could give the money to big business and casinos and race tracks and freeways.'

Serenity shrugged impatiently. 'So? Lucy's not like that. She cares about ordinary people. She's trying to get Lomond back on track. You ought to be on her side, Mum, but I bet you won't even come to the big meeting on Saturday. You'd rather hang around and criticise from the sidelines.'

'I might feel a bit more positive if I had a better sense of Lucy's politics,' said Caro. 'You keep telling me she wants to get Lomond on track but what does that mean? What, precisely, is she planning to do?'

'She's going to turn this town around,' Serenity said proudly.

Caro groaned. 'Oh, spare me, Serenity. That's just an advertising slogan. I hate the way people keep reducing important issues to twenty-second soundbites, like those reporters who ask politicians a complicated question and don't wait long enough to -'

Serenity swung away, cutting her mother off in mid-sentence, and marched across to the window. She stood there for a moment with her back turned and then whirled round to face Caro, her ginger hair bristling so fiercely that Daniel could almost hear it crackle like the static electricity in a cat's fur.

'That's it!' she yelled. 'This isn't about Lucy, it's about Dad. You can't handle the fact that he's a successful journo and you're just dagging round, playing with your computer. You're so not part of the real world. I wish you'd let me stay in Sydney with Dad.'

'So do I,' said Caro. 'But Marshall didn't want you, did he?'

The temperature in the room seemed to drop twenty degrees in twenty seconds. Serenity clutched at the curtains, swaying on her feet; Caro sucked her cheeks in, as if she was trying to suck the words back into her mouth; and Daniel hesitated between them, nervous as a lion tamer on a bad day.

'Terrific,' Serenity said in a small tight voice. 'In other words, I'm practically an orphan. You don't want me. Dad doesn't want me. It's lucky I've still got Lucy Dove.'

She took a careful step forward and wobbled slightly, recovered her balance and went storming out. Doors slammed one after the other – the door into the corridor, the bathroom door, Serenity's bedroom door. Daniel and Caro stood there in silence, counting the bangs. Their eyes met briefly, then veered off to opposite sides of the room. Daniel could have used another of Caro's comforting hugs but he knew he couldn't ask or offer, without feeling as if the two of them were ganging up on Serenity.

'Right,' he said. 'Dinner. What can I do to help?'

'Comfort food,' said his aunt. 'We need comfort food right now. My secret treat's always been pasta with a big dollop of pesto – and it has to be eaten out of the saucepan. What works for you, Daniel?'

'Pizza,' he said regretfully. 'But I bet we can't get home delivery out here.'

'Not a problem,' Caro told him. 'Take a look in the freezer. There ought to be a choice of three.'

As they bustled round the kitchen, Daniel started to feel more normal but then, just as they were sitting down at the table, Serenity came in. 'I'm off now,' she announced. 'Aunt Fay's coming to see the Wolf Guard's uniforms before she goes back to Sydney. We're starting the patrol earlier tonight, while it's still light, because – but hey, why am I telling you this, when I know you don't give a fuck about the Wolf Guard or Uncle Phil and Aunt Fay?'

She walked out, taking half the pizza. That was fine with Daniel, who had just lost his appetite. He excused himself and went next door, to help Orion with the s.f. novel and, hopefully, to hide from his parents until they gave up and went home. Orion was the best kind of person to be around when you felt shaky. He

genuinely didn't notice that Daniel was out of it, because he was too busy explaining how he had read through all his notes and decided to write about a civil war between the people on the main continent of Elmansor (who were very organised and obedient and conformist) and the people on the islands along the coast (who went their own way and questioned everything). That sounded like the story of Orion and Bayview/Lomond Secondary but – oh well, Orion kept saying that most s.f. readers were thirteen-year-old geeks.

'You'll need to think it through properly,' Daniel warned him. 'Otherwise the organised lot will just cream the individual lot, first time around. Let's talk military strategy. How will your island resistance fighters get together, if they're all individuals? Will they fight like the organised lot or invent their own way of fighting? Come to think of it, would they even approve of fighting back? Maybe they'd be pacifists, like you're supposed to be.'

Orion looked annoyed, because he wanted to get started on the actual writing, but in the end he decided to take Daniel seriously. They settled in a corner behind the couch, which was the only clear space in the Caseys' lounge room, and argued amicably until Orion decided he had to make some changes in his map of Elmansor. As Daniel leaned back against the couch, he heard people talking on the other side and recognised his aunt's voice. It looked as if Caro had dropped in to visit Raewyn – and, probably, to hide from his parents as well.

'You're pretty involved with this election campaign, aren't you?' she was saying. 'Can you tell me why everyone's getting so excited? When I ask Serenity to explain, she just mouths clichés at me but you've been an activist since the seventies, so I'd be interested to know what *you* see in Lucy Dove.'

'Lucy genuinely wants to make a difference,' Raewyn said straight away. 'Admittedly, her ideas are a bit vague but I reckon I can give her a push in the right direction and she's an extremely convincing speaker, with a real talent for putting her ideas across. If anybody can bring the people of this town together, Lucy's the one.'

Caro laughed. 'Dream on. Have you seen the Letters pages in the *Star* or the *Mirror* lately? Every week someone writes in, complaining about government subsidies to migrants or Aboriginal organizations or kids on the dole or whatever. They don't have a problem with the idea of *farmers* taking government money - they just hate to see it go to anyone else. You'll never start the global socialist revolution in Lomond.'

'You don't know that for certain,' Raewyn told her. 'People can't make informed choices till they've seen all the options. If you want to find out what the people around here are really like, you've got to show them there *are* alternatives to fear and bigotry. They need someone they can rely on to lead them through the changes, look after their interests and encourage them to be compassionate. I believe Lucy can do all of that.'

'Oh, Raewyn, you're such an idealist,' Caro said, the second she paused for breath.

‘And you’re such a cynic,’ Raewyn countered, so speedily that Daniel was convinced they must have used the same lines a dozen times before.

They spent the next five minutes trying to prove that people were basically lazy, greedy and fixated on short terms goals (Caro) or the powerless pawns of multinational capitalism, with a hidden potential for revolution (Raewyn). It was an old argument that went as smoothly as a well-rehearsed play. Daniel started to lose interest. He was leaning forward to examine the map of Elmansor when Caro’s voice shifted into a new gear that made him sit up straight again.

‘All right, let’s pretend Lucy *is* the best thing since sliced bread,’ she said. ‘What sort of back-up does she have? Who else is on her election team?’

There was a short pause and then Raewyn said, ‘Marie Boyle, the CWA president, has promised her support and Fisher King was on side before he’d even met Lucy, because he and Doug hate each other’s guts. We’re putting lots of effort into the ward that covers the Bayview seafront, where Jane Moondancer from Happy Valley’s standing against the bloke from the big tourist agency, raising issues about eco-tourism - but you know that already. Oh, and Lucy had dinner with Josh Abrahams on Tuesday and talked him into backing her. That’s a real coup, because Josh is guaranteed to get in. No one’s even standing against him.’

‘Josh Abrahams?’ Caro repeated. ‘Isn’t he the president of the gun lobby for the whole of northern New South Wales? What if he and his mates reckon *they* can give Lucy a push in the right direction too?’

‘They’ll probably try,’ Raewyn agreed. ‘But Lucy should be able to keep them in their place. I reckon it’s worth the risk, although I suppose it all depends on whether you believe in Lucy - and whether you genuinely want to see things change.’

After that, neither of them said anything for a while. When Daniel looked round the edge of the couch, he saw them outlined against the big front window like shadow puppets confronting each other from opposite sides of a wayang screen - Caro round and dumpy, shoulders hunched and jaw jutting; Rae angular and tense, with her long hair and long Indian skirt fluttering like banners. They were still staring each other out when the door opened and a shaft of light sloped in, hitting him between the eyes. As he blinked, Serenity walked through the door, followed by his parents.

Caught in the spotlight, Daniel didn’t have a hope of escaping. He scrambled to his feet and let his mother pull him into an embrace, while his father stood back and beamed. They wanted to take him back to their hotel for a last dinner but when Daniel looked desperately at Orion, the kid came to the rescue and explained that they were working on a vitally important school project. Luckily, his parents went along with that - in fact, they seemed to have been expecting him to say no - but they insisted on taking him out to their car, to give him an early birthday present, and Daniel couldn’t really say no to that. Even Caro wasn’t able to save him this time, although she gave him a wink and a thumbs-up sign as he went past.

Outside, the silvery blue of the sea was striped with orange reflections from the sunset. Fay fluttered around, touching, testing, prodding for a reaction; Phil smiled his permanent salesman smile; and Daniel gritted his teeth and escaped to a safe place inside his head, where he ran through the battle in the Wilderness between the Union and the Confederates. The Confederates should really have won the entire Civil War right then. In fact, Daniel was sure they would've won, if Stonewall Jackson hadn't been injured by friendly fire ...

He went on rehearsing Civil War battles while he unwrapped a gold foil parcel, told his mother that he loved bright red shirts covered with hibiscus flowers and laughed at his father's punchlines without actually listening to the jokes – a new tactic, which made laughing much easier. Then, all of a sudden, it was over. Fay gave him a last wrenching hug and bolted into the hired Saab. Phil said, 'Hang in there, kid' and went to punch him on the arm, then pulled his fist back and stared sadly at the white stretched knuckles.

Daniel felt sad too - sad and shivery and sick in the stomach. But it was their fault. They shouldn't have come. He'd told them, in the note he left on the table before he caught the train to Lomond, that he needed more time.

Finn Casey drove Maya and Serenity and Jude over to Lomond two hours before the big debate, stopping off at The Caff, because Maya was desperate for a gelati. While they waited for Frank to fill a line-up of coffee cups, a middle-aged woman came up to them. She was dressed in a style Serenity would have described as smart casual, indicating that she was one of the southerners from the retirement community, not a Happy Valley hippy or a Lomond farmer.

'You're the little girl from the front page of today's *Star*, aren't you?' she asked Maya. 'My husband and I were really shocked when we saw that photo. If we'd known things like that could happen in Lomond, we would've thought twice about moving here.'

'Nah, that's not typical,' protested a young guy who was waiting for a pizza. 'We don't all go round bashing sheilas. It was political, that's what it was.'

'Exactly,' Finn agreed. He lowered his voice to its gossip register and said, 'I heard that Lockie Conway - one of the ringleaders - says he only did it because Dr Sterne egged him on. They reckon Doug wants to make people lose faith in the Wolf Guard.'

'Well, *that* didn't work,' said the woman. 'The girls were marching along our street last night, the same as usual. We hadn't heard the story then, so we didn't realise how brave it was, but they've got our votes now, for sure.'

'Mine too,' the young guy said with a grin. 'I'd rather look at Lucy Dove than Doug Sterne, any day of the week.'

He collected the pizza and headed out to his car. The woman smiled tolerantly, to demonstrate that she knew boys would be boys, although her own reasons for supporting Lucy were much more intellectually respectable. After that

Frank handed out gelati all round and told them it was on the house, causing Finn to change his order to a double-header. As they walked out, Serenity was concentrating on licking the drips off her cone, so it took her a few seconds to realise that Scott was standing on the opposite corner, talking to Tommo and Lockie.

For the first time since the team-building weekend, she decided to risk looking straight at him and - oh, not fair! - at that exact moment, he turned his head and looked straight back. The air sizzled where their gazes met and the street melted into a watery blur. Serenity wanted to sit down on the footpath and burst into tears: or walk over and hit Scott: or kiss him till her ears popped.

The bastard. She could've liked him. If only he hadn't done that to Jude.

Then she blinked and the moment was over. Scott swung away to say something to Tommo and Serenity swung away to say something to Maya, smiling till her teeth ached, because she was convinced that everyone in the street must be watching her and Scott. After a few minutes, however, it became clear that nobody had noticed the moment when their eyes met, not even Jude - and if nobody had noticed, you could say that, in a way, it hadn't really happened. She pushed Scott out of her head, turned back into a team leader and herded the others off to the community hall.

All the girls from the Wolf Guard were waiting there - every single one of them, including Jacinta and Merian - but, even after last night's successful patrol, they still looked a bit nervous. Serenity checked her watch and decided she had time for a quick pep talk, before Rocky took them through the drill. The pep talk helped and the drill helped and the uniforms helped and it helped to be part of a team. They formed ranks and went marching out of the hall and into the street, arms swinging, feet hitting the pavement in a steady even beat.

The Lomond main street was busier than Serenity had ever seen it. Cars were edging into every possible parking spot. Couples and singles, families and groups of friends were hurrying along the footpath and up the steps of the town hall. Serenity recognised lots of the faces - her teachers; the southerners from the retirement community who had cheered their first patrol; the shop keepers from the main street and a bunch of people she had seen at Sibyl Dove's funeral. Even Frank Carretto had closed The Caff early and come over to keep an eye on things.

At first it looked like everyone in the area had turned out for the debate but after a while Serenity realised there were no young guys around the town hall. Not Scott. Not any of them. She pointed that out to the Wolf Guard, who nodded gratefully, relieved that they wouldn't have to confront the guys tonight. At the same moment Lucy Dove waved to them from the town hall steps and came gliding across the light-slick surface of the road, as if she was walking on water.

'I've got a surprise for you,' she said. 'You had a rough time on Thursday night but I've solved that problem now. Come inside. I'm letting Doug go first but I want you there in the wings, so you're ready to come on stage when it's my turn to speak.'

'What's the surprise?' Maya asked eagerly but Lucy smiled and shook her head.

'Sorry,' she said. 'You'll just have to wait and see.'

She took them round to the back door of the town hall, led them up a narrow staircase and left them in the wings. Serenity watched her cross to the far side of the stage and join Marie Boyle, the CWA president, who was chairing the debate in her capacity as deputy mayor. When she looked round, she saw the town hall caretaker eyeing the Wolf Guard suspiciously. Doug Sterne came bustling up the stairs and shouldered past them, pausing to shake hands with the caretaker and say, 'Wish me luck, Len.'

'Too right,' said the caretaker. 'You got my vote already, Dr Sterne. I can't be doing with those feminazis.'

He scowled at the Wolf Guard, who backed away and huddled closer together. Serenity found a roll of mints in her pocket and passed them round, to improve morale. Out in the middle of the stage Doug Sterne was taking possession of the lectern. While Marie Boyle introduced him, he reached into his breast pocket and produced a familiar bundle of notecards. Serenity groaned. Oh, great. It looked as though she was about to hear the speech that he had given at school, all over again.

Sure enough, Doug started by blahing on about being related to the pioneers, which led him into telling the audience how things had been going downhill ever since. He worked his way through all the people who, in his opinion, were responsible for the downhill slide – single mothers, working women, immigrants, the Family Law Court, Aboriginal organizations and families who ate dinner in front of the telly – and then moved on to the problems of being a guy in the twentieth century.

'Young men need challenge and adventure,' he told the audience. 'It's a well-known biological fact. I'm a doctor, so you can trust me on that one. If young men are deprived of the opportunity to battle against nature or fight for their country, they sometimes make unfortunate mistakes - like the young men in this very town, only a few nights ago, who started some fun and games that went a bit too far. But I don't think we need to get too pessimistic about that sort of thing. In fact, my main purpose in coming here today is to reassure you that, when I'm re-elected to the Bayview/Lomond council, I'll continue to work hard at restoring the traditional values that made our country great, in order to make sure our young men's potential isn't wasted.'

From where she was standing, Serenity couldn't see the audience but she could hear a rustle of voices, starting in opposite corners and gradually spreading across the hall. Doug Sterne held his hand up, to silence the whispers, and smiled down at the crowd.

'There's no need to be alarmed,' he said. 'I think you know me well enough to know I won't rush into anything. In two weeks time you'll be asked to choose between a charming young girl from the city, without much experience of life, and a man who knows changes have to be made but who promises he'll never go

overboard. On that day, I hope you can look into your hearts and see what's best for this little town. Thank you, Lomond.'

Serenity would have liked to know how much applause Doug got but she didn't get a chance to assess it properly, because the first round of clapping was her cue to make a move. She whispered, 'Form ranks and forward march' and the Wolf Guard went marching out of the wings. As they reached the exact centre of the stage, Serenity shouted, 'Halt. Attention.' She stood at attention herself and slid her eyes along the ranks, feeling deeply gratified when she saw that her troops had lined up perfectly.

Meanwhile Marie Boyle had returned to the lectern to introduce Lucy. Serenity got the impression that Marie's introduction was short on facts and strong on words like "energy", "vision", "change", "compassion" and "twenty first century". Like everyone else in the hall, however, she wasn't really listening to Marie. Basically, they were all just waiting for the moment when Lucy would rise and come forward. Tonight, her silvery hair had been brushed back into a close-fitting helmet and she was wearing a looseknit white cotton jumper that shone like chainmail under the spotlights. She looked like a young soldier – Joan of Arc, maybe, listening to the voices that told her to lead an army into battle.

'Doug Sterne reckons he'll do all sorts of beaut stuff if you elect him to council,' she began. 'Sorry, Lomond, I couldn't wait that long. I started a week ago, when I recruited this beaut bunch of girls. Meet the Wolf Guard. They care about their town so much that they're prepared to get out there and do something about it - and they won't let anybody stop them.'

She caught hold of Serenity's wrist and swung her arm high, as if she was congratulating the winner of a boxing match. The crowd clapped and cheered and stamped their feet and held their hands up with their thumbs and forefingers pressed together, to make the O that seemed to have become Lucy's symbol. Rita Farr went bright red. Maya waved to her dad in the front row. Katie frowned at the audience, as if she was counting heads for her next article in the *Star*. And, for the first time since she had left home that evening, Serenity felt a twinge of fear, just below her midriff.

Help, she thought. What if Lucy wants me to say something? I couldn't, not to this many people.

It was a huge relief when Lucy smiled at her and turned back to the audience. 'There's another thing Doug Sterne's always saying,' she went on. 'He keeps telling us it's important not to go overboard. I have to admit I can't go along with him there. It may look as if I've done my fair share already, by establishing the Wolf Guard, but I *do* believe in going overboard, so I've already moved on to my next plan. Let me show you what I mean.'

She flung her arm wide, pointing into the wings on the other side of the stage. Scott Sterne came marching out, at the head of a line of guys - Tommo, Lockie, Eden and Cam Parker and a dozen more. They were dressed in old-fashioned khaki tunics, with a complicated white belt and a harness made

of white webbing, and they all wore slouch hats with a badge on one side – a white enamelled map of Australia.

Serenity's eyes opened so wide that they pushed back against their sockets. If that was Lucy's surprise, it worked for her. She was as surprised as hell that Lucy expected them to share the stage, after what the guys had done to the Wolf Guard two nights ago. But before she could get up the nerve to walk out, Lucy turned and gave her a smile that said, 'Trust me.' She expanded the smile until it included the rest of the girls and stepped back, to let the guys line up beside the Wolf Guard.

Serenity found herself standing so close to Scott that their shoulders were practically touching, in front of an audience demonstrating its approval so loudly that the air around them vibrated with cheers. The timing was as wrong as it could possibly have been. Two weeks ago it would have seemed incredibly romantic to be publicly coupled with Scott and in two weeks time she might have figured out how she really felt about him but right at that moment she was stuck in the middle, halfway between fancying him and making sense of him. She felt as if Lucy Dove had scraped her raw and then exposed her to the whole of Lomond. It was a relief when her eyes misted over, blotting out the audience.

'Two nights ago these boys played a nasty trick on my girls,' Lucy was saying. 'It could've started one of those feuds that Lomond used to specialise in. But it looks like those days are over, because - guess what, Rob Sterne's son Scott had a word with his mates and they're here with us tonight. Your kids are setting the pace, Lomond. Are you going to keep on dreaming about the old days, like Doug Sterne wants you to do, or will you take a risk, go overboard and join us?'

The meeting went crazy. When Serenity blinked her tears away and looked around, she saw people clapping up a storm, people passing each other tissues, people rising to their feet for a standing ovation. Behind her, the Wolf Guard got into the swing of things and started cheering the audience. Over in the wings, the grumpy caretaker was giving Lucy the thumbs-up sign and saying, 'She's done a bit, y'know.' Tommo and Lockie hoisted up a sky blue banner that said, 'GOING OVERBOARD' with the G and the O in silver. Everyone was applauding and making the O-sign and shouting, 'Good one' or 'We're with you' or 'Go, Lucy.'

Everyone except Caro and Daniel and Orion, at any rate. Serenity spotted the three of them huddled together in the back row, looking bothered and confused. She waited to get mad at her mum, the way she usually did: but evidently not this time. The truth was, she felt confused as well - or maybe just used.

Too fast, Serenity thought. Lucy's going too fast. I can't keep up with her.

Eight

On the last Sunday of every month, from dawn onwards, scores of people came driving or cycling or hitching to a semi-circle of land sheltered by the Danville Range, where they set up stalls that sold everything from fresh mango juice to medieval swords. By the time all the stalls were in place, hundreds more people had arrived, ready to hunt for bargains, find the perfect present for someone's birthday, buy food for a picnic on the beach, catch up with their friends or just wander round and soak up the atmosphere of the Happy Valley market, which had just celebrated its thirtieth anniversary and, according to its website, qualified as a national treasure.

The website said the market was open from 7 am to 2 pm but a lot of the stall-holders started setting up before dawn, so Fisher King got there before dawn as well and sat in his usual place - the enormous boulder that jutted out from the rock wall surrounding the market site. Back when the market was just beginning to become popular, Fisher's first wife Lilla used to say at regular intervals, 'You know, if we dynamited that boulder, we could fit in three more stalls' but these days everybody accepted that the boulder was Fisher's throne, from which he looked out across his little kingdom.

Right now, scanning the avenues of stalls, he could name and place every one of the hundred and fifty potters and jewellers, cooks and musicians, toymakers and vegetable growers and more who would be converging on Happy Valley over the next hour. The stalls themselves had been set up the day before, one of the many advantages of Fisher's decision - oh, all right, prompted by Lilla - to take out a mortgage on the land twenty nine years ago.

His eyes, which were as keen as ever, zeroed in on Stall 59, where Rosie Cartwright was serving wholewheat and cornmeal rolls, fresh from the oven, to the other early arrivals. Fisher frowned, remembering the half dozen near-arguments they'd had about this habit of hers. Rosie and Gaia Bread were

among the market's biggest names but because she obstinately refused to hire an assistant or invest in a larger wood-fired oven, her bread usually sold out by mid-morning and the second influx of tourists, coming down from Coffs Harbour or the Gold Coast, usually let Fisher know how disappointed they were.

Fisher stroked his beard – a long sweep of the hand down to the middle of his chest, very conducive to meditation – and tried to visualise a way of persuading Rosie to let that enthusiastic young girl from Bayview bake a second batch of bread in the Gaia oven, while Rosie was dispensing the first batch. It was an interesting problem. If anyone else had been wasting stall-space like that, he would simply have told them to shape up or ship out but the rules were different for Rosie. She was the only other person, besides Fisher and Lilla, who had been there from the beginning.

Fisher's eyes blurred and he found himself looking back through the years, to the time when the original Happy Valley hippies had spread lengths of batik or tie-dyed sheets on the grass and started to sell each other carrot cake and bongos and screen-printed t-shirts. He and Lilla had wandered round in matching caftans (Fisher was still wearing a caftan, although Lilla had gone over to tracksuits in the eighties), spruiking for the t-shirt stall, talking their neighbours into making lentil soup and pumpkin scones and (in Rosie's case) home-baked bread for the people who had started to drop in from Bayview and Lomond and, in general, creating the pre-conditions for the market's success.

These days everything was far more organised - a car park, portaloos, five rows of thirty stalls and everybody had to book their stalls in advance - but it was still a buzz. Every now and then someone from down south would turn up and try to headhunt Fisher but he had knocked back all the invitations to organise another market or an organic food festival or a children's farm or an ecological centre. Why on earth would he want to leave Lomond? All his old hippy mates were married with two kids and wearing power suits these days, because they didn't want to offend the neighbours, but the blokes in Lomond (who would never even think of wearing a dress or living with two women themselves) just nodded and said, 'Yeah, that's Fisher for you' when he walked down the main street in his caftan, with Lilla on one arm and Kaarin on the other.

He glanced down from his throne, saw Rosie Cartwright talking earnestly to the girl from Bayview and smoothed his beard with a satisfied hand. Problems had a habit of sorting themselves out while he was visualising their solutions, which saved a lot of effort on his part. Fisher checked to see whether anything else required his attention and noticed two of the Wolf Guard girls arguing quietly a few metres away. He hesitated briefly and then let his gaze sweep on, completing the circuit of his kingdom.

From what he had seen of Lucy Dove, he felt sure he could trust her to take care of her own problems. She was just as effective in her area as Fisher was in his.

Jude Martin was having trouble with Serenity. She supposed she should have expected it, after the look she had seen on Serenity's face last night when the boys' militia marched onto the town hall stage. If she hadn't picked up on her friend's ambivalence then, she should at least have registered the fact that Serenity had taken off ten minutes after the meeting ended, without waiting around for all the backslapping and celebration. But at the time Jude had assumed that Serenity was embarrassed about being lined up with Scott, as if the whole world thought the two of them made a lovely couple. It hadn't occurred to her that Serenity might have other problems with Lucy's plans.

'So, okay, how do the guys fit in?' Serenity was saying. 'Why did Lucy suddenly decide Lomond needed a boys' militia as well?'

'It wasn't that sudden,' Jude protested. 'Don't you remember how the original Wolf Guard got started? In that tribe Lucy loves so much, the guys were off on their own business most of the time - breaking horses, working as soldiers in the Chinese army, getting together for the horse racing and wrestling at the Tartars' autumn games. Lucy wants to try the same sort of thing here, keeping the Wolf Guard as her front line but having the guys there as back-up, in case things get nasty.'

'Sounds great,' Serenity said, obviously not meaning it. 'But how's it going to work in practice - like today, for instance?'

Jude shrugged. 'We'll hand out leaflets and stuff at the entrance, the way we were going to do, only now the guys will be available for security work as well. They can patrol the market and -'

'Yeah, yeah, I get the message,' Serenity cut in. 'It's what Rita Farr was saying last night. From now on, us girls are going to do the shit work, while the guys do the big hero stuff. In other words, boys rule, okay - same as usual around here.'

She kicked a tussock of grass, glanced up guiltily at Fisher and patted the grass back into place with the sole of her trainer. (There wasn't a lot of grass left on the market site and the regulars had orders to treat it as gently as an antique Persian carpet.) Jude sighed soundlessly. Bloody Serenity. She'd been dumping on Caro's feminism for as long as Jude had known her. This was a fine time for her to decide to get worked up about women's rights.

'It's not a guy / girl thing, Ren,' she said. 'Lucy talked to Rita after you left last night. If she and her Bayview mates want to transfer from the Wolf Guard to the militia, that'll be fine - and the other way round too, of course.'

She waited to see whether that would solve the problem but Serenity just walked across to a nearby post and kicked it instead. Jude wanted to say, 'Stop being such a drama queen' but Lucy had asked her to keep Serenity sweet and Jude could see that calling Serenity names wasn't the best way to go about it. To make things worse, she privately agreed with Serenity. There *was* something weird about the way Lucy had sprung the militia on them, without any

consultation. Jude wasn't prepared to say that out loud but she decided to risk giving Serenity a bit of background information.

'Would it make a difference if I told you Lucy got landed with a split-second decision?' she said. 'Rob Sterne asked her out to his property on Thursday and made a one-time-only offer – like, he'd support her in the election campaign, as long as she took on the militia. Lucy's still wondering whether she made the right choice but hey, what else could she do? I mean, look at the symbolism. Doves and Sternes, united at last! That's so what Lucy's on about. I don't see how she could possibly have said no.'

'It *is* kind of awesome, ending a feud that goes back to, like, the start of Lomond's history,' Serenity admitted. 'When you put it that way, I have to agree with Lucy, even if C –'

She swallowed the rest of the word but Jude knew what it would have been. Last night she had been too hot to sleep – and maybe too worked up after the debate – so she had gone out into the yard and seen the lights of the Coxes' house, still shining out at one in the morning. Serenity had obviously been talking to her mum, who had probably been telling her not to get involved in anything even the slightest bit dodgy. It was lucky that Jude knew how to knock that idea out of Serenity's head, as easily as her grandad used to knock ashes out of his pipe.

'Your mum can't stand Lucy, can she?' she said casually. 'How about you, Ren? Are you planning to quit the Wolf Guard now?'

Just as she had suspected, Serenity hadn't realised that resigning from the Wolf Guard was the logical conclusion to that line of thinking. 'No way known,' she said straight away. 'In case you hadn't noticed, I don't jump every time Mum says "frog" - and I don't want to join the boys' team either, if that's what you mean.'

Jude grinned. 'No hidden meanings, kiddo. I'm just glad we're still on the same team. Let me buy you one of Rosie's rolls to celebrate.'

She tucked her hand into the crook of Serenity's arm and steered her through the aisles of stalls, trying to work out whether she had succeeded in the mission Lucy had given her. On the whole, she was fairly sure she had got to Serenity in time, before her friend's doubts about the boys' militia turned into anything serious enough to threaten her commitment to the Wolf Guard but even though she felt pretty confident, it still seemed like a bad omen when they turned a corner and came face to face with Scott Sterne.

Jude was relieved to see Serenity stiffen and go expressionless and walk on. But her own relief made her clumsy. She tripped over a tangle of extension leads, waiting to be taped to the side of a stall, banged her knee and flailed wildly. Scott's hand automatically shot out to steady her but, just in time, he made a wordless sound and pulled back. They stared at each other for half a second and simultaneously turned away.

Jude's skin erupted into goosebumps, belatedly registering the fact that her worst enemy had almost made contact with it. As she limped on, she started

to picture herself doing things to Scott's body that were radically different to the things he had wanted to do to her in the bus shelter. She turned out to be good at thinking up stuff like that - so good that, in the middle of a particularly violent sequence, she had to stop suddenly, sickened by her own imagination.

I should be over it by now, she told herself, swerving to avoid Matt Fahey: and she felt sure she would have been over it, if the Sternes hadn't come barging back into her life with this stupid militia that had nearly driven Serenity away: so it was their fault: all of it: *everything*. Unfortunately, Rob's support would leave Doug Sterne in the lurch and win the election for Lucy, which meant she ought to be pleased that Rob and Scott were on side.

Not a problem, thought Jude, locking the torture scenarios away in the back of her head. I can handle that. If it helps Lucy, I'll *be* pleased.

Matt Fahey dodged round Jude Martin and lugged the next case of beer into the refreshment tent, trying for the millionth time to make sense of his dad. If Pat Fahey thought he was an unreliable pothead, why did he rely on Matt to fill the gap every time Cam Parker called in sick (a.k.a hungover). And if his dad wanted Matt to get a job – any job anywhere, even if it meant leaving Lomond and moving down south - why did he keep slipping Matt little bits of money, like the fifty bucks for today's work, that allowed him to survive on the dole? On the other hand, if Pat actually wanted his youngest son to stay in Lomond and keep him company, why didn't he just sack Cam and give the job to Matt?

He had asked himself all those questions before but they still churned him up so much that it took him a while to notice that there was someone else in the tent. In fact, he only just managed to avoid running into Doug Sterne, who was practically galloping across to the trestle table where Pat Fahey was setting out the glasses. Matt dumped the beer behind the bar, glanced over his shoulder and decided that Dr Sterne looked nearly as churned up as he felt.

'Any chance of a quick whiskey?' Doug asked, confirming Matt's diagnosis.

'Ah, Dr Sterne, you know the council gave me a license for the market on the understanding that I'd only sell beer and wine,' Pat was saying, as Matt left.

Pat Fahey was a law-abiding bloke but he was also Doug Sterne's biggest fan. When Matt returned with the next slab, he wasn't surprised to find his dad pouring Doug a glass of the Lagavulin that he kept under the counter for Fisher King.

'There you are,' he said. 'A medicinal whiskey, eh?'

Doug held the glass up to the light. 'Medicine for the soul,' he said. 'Right at this moment, my soul needs healing.'

It was such a dorky thing to say that Matt had to bite the insides of his cheeks, to stop himself from laughing out loud. Pat Fahey, on the other hand, sighed sympathetically and went to collect one of the plastic chairs, placing it in

exactly the right position to ensure that Doug would only need to bend his knees slightly in order to sit on it.

'A bit down in the dumps, are you, Douggie?' he said. 'Never mind, she'll be right.'

'Oh yes, *she* will,' said Doug. 'But I won't. You've put your finger on it, Pat. I've been dumped.'

Matt blinked. "She'll be right" was just one of those things Aussie blokes said but for some reason Doug seemed to be taking it personally. He wondered briefly whether Gwen Sterne had given Doug the flick but that didn't seem anywhere near likely, so who the hell was *she*? Come to think of it, there was only one possible answer to that question these days.

'Lucy Dove?' his dad said. 'What's she done to you, Douggie?'

'Don't tell me you haven't heard,' Doug snarled, pushing his empty glass across the table. 'Everyone in Lomond must be having a good laugh about it by now.'

'Not me,' Pat protested. 'I was at work, while that meeting of yours was going on, and I didn't take much notice of what the regulars said afterwards. People talk a lot of nonsense, especially in a pub. I usually wait till I get it from the horse's mouth.'

He poured more whiskey and Doug downed half of it in one swallow. 'They reckon blood's thicker than water,' he said. 'Then again, water isn't very thick. *I've* been thick, though. Thick as a brick, thinking my bloody brother would back me up. Want to know what Rob did to me, Pat?'

When Pat nodded, Matt went over to the slabs and started stacking them into a neat pile, as an excuse for hanging around. He wanted to hear about last night's meeting, because he had missed it too. Scott had asked him to join the militia but, since Cam Parker had signed up already, Matt had been needed at the George. He watched Doug Sterne pick up his glass and set it down again with a thump, implicitly demanding more whiskey before he continued.

'My little brother humiliated me in public,' he said, as Pat refilled the glass. 'Didn't even have the decency to give me any warning. Just let his son go marching onto the stage at the head of Lucy's latest bunch of converts. Even used my own tactics against me.'

'Is that so?' said Pat Fahey. 'How did he do that, Douggie?'

Doug heaved a sigh that lifted his chest almost as high as his chin. 'The boys' militia was *my* idea in the first place,' he said. 'Rob and I were having a chat on Thursday – not last Thursday but the one before - about whether we might need to do a deal with Lucy Dove. I told him, if it came to that, we ought to get something from Lucy that she wasn't too keen to give. Best way to make sure she couldn't forget we'd made a bargain. Even suggested using that business of Lucy favouring the girls over the boys. Didn't expect my bloody brother to turn round and use it against me. What do you make of that, Pat?'

Matt picked up the next slab and turned away, to hide a grin. Okay, his dad was Doug Sterne's main fan but he couldn't come down too hard on Rob

Sterne either, because Rob drank at the George as well. He dropped the slab onto the pile and waited to see how his dad would handle that one.

‘Must’ve come as a shock,’ Pat said diplomatically. ‘Since when has Rob been a mate of Lucy Dove’s?’

‘Oh, my little brother’s always had an eye for the main chance,’ Doug slurred. ‘He’s hoping Lucy can swing the balance of power back from Bayview to Lomond – and it helps that he’s got the hots for her.’

Pat’s eyebrows rose so high that his forehead pleated. ‘Lucy Dove wants to tell Bayview to buggger off?’ he said. ‘Actually, that’s not such a bad idea. I keep telling people it’s only a matter of time before all those slants in Bayview start moving in on us and taking over our businesses. If Lucy can do something about *that*, I might even vote for her myself.’

Doug’s eyes bulged and his cheeks puffed out, transforming him into a giant humanoid frog. He looked scarier than anything Matt had seen in the all-night horror movie marathon that he’d watched last week with Jayden. If Doug was about to get stuck into Pat, it would make sense to get out fast, before he copped any of the flak.

As he ducked through the tent flap, Matt wondered whether he ought to warn Scott or Lucy or someone that Doug Sterne was on the warpath but, on second thoughts, he decided not to bother. That was the main advantage of knowing that most people in Lomond had written him off - he didn’t need to feel like he owed Lomond anything. He strolled over to the van, picked up another slab and carried it back to the tent, giving Dr Sterne plenty of time to finish yelling at his dad and take himself off. But when he came in, Pat and Doug were clinking their glasses together in some kind of toast.

‘Good for you, mate,’ Doug was saying. ‘Don’t let anybody talk you out of it. I miss those jokes of yours, Pat, and I bet other people do too.’

‘But Lucy’s blonde herself and she reckons –’ Pat began.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Doug cut in. ‘No one blames you for letting a pretty girl twist you round her little finger. I’m just saying there’s something the matter with the world if we can’t have a good laugh every now and then. I’m not a racist, any more than you are, but I don’t see why we shouldn’t crack the occasional joke about our neighbours.’

‘You’re not wrong’ Pat said, nodding enthusiastically. ‘Look at the fuss some people make about slant jokes and wog jokes. Political correctness run mad, that’s what it is.’ He took a closer look at Doug and said with a concerned frown, ‘Listen, mate, you ought to head on home now. You won’t do yourself any favours by sticking around, not in your condition.’

Doug levered himself out of the chair and then dropped straight back into it. ‘Thanks, Pat, you’re a real mate,’ he said. ‘I came here to show them they can’t keep a good man down. But you’re right. Not on top form today. Touch of the flu or something. Better go home to bed.’

He rose to his feet and lurched out, walking into two of the canvas walls before he found the tent flap. Pat Fahey watched him with affectionate pride, like a dog lover forgiving a badly behaved Rottweiler.

'He's a real character, isn't he?' he said. 'Take a look at this, Matty. Dr Sterne gave me a hand with it. I got him onto it, as a way of cheering him up.'

He reached for the whiteboard displaying the drinks prices and swivelled it towards Matt. Across the top, it now said GO, LUCY – THROW THE BOAT PEOPLE OVERBOARD. Matt flinched. Pat Fahey had a habit of stirring up trouble and then looking round, wide-eyed and innocent, waiting for back-up. Just this once, he would've liked to walk away and leave his dad to deal with all the outraged southerners but unfortunately he had got into the habit of protecting his dad.

'You reckon you got Dr Sterne onto it, do you?' he said. '*He got you* onto it, more like. The guy's setting you up and you can't even see it.'

'Huh?' said Pat. 'Why would Douggie want to do that?'

Matt sighed. 'In case you hadn't noticed, he was livid when you said you'd vote for Lucy. But he's such a sad bastard that he'd never tell you up front. He just conned you into acting like a racist, to land you in the same sort of mess as him.'

He waited to see whether he had got his point across. There was always a chance that Pat had been listening but he wasn't surprised when his dad just stared back blankly.

'Jesus, Matty, you have some bloody stupid ideas,' he said mildly. 'It's a joke, Joyce. J-O-K-E. Know what that means?'

'Sure I do,' said Matt. 'Jokes are funny – or at least they're supposed to be. I don't think Jim Carrey's going to be hiring you and Doug as gag writers any day soon.'

Pat Fahey folded his arms and studied him. 'Douggie warned me I might run into a bit of opposition,' he said. 'But I never thought the first bloke to put the boot in would be my own son. I sometimes wonder whether your mum was having a fling with the milkman nine months before you were born – and before you get your knickers in a knot, that's a joke too.' He gave Matt one more chance to laugh and then said, 'Ah, what's the use? Off you go. There's work to do and I don't pay you to stand round arguing.'

Matt turned and walked away. For the first fifty paces he went on shouting at his dad. ('Actually, you don't pay me at all – not an actual wage. You just use me as slave labour and give me a tenner for a whole day's work or a hundred dollars for a couple of hours, depending on how rich you happen to be feeling.') But his fifty first step took him past Frank Carretto, who was delivering a carton of mini-pizzas to one of the food stalls and by the time he arrived at the van, he had forgotten about his dad, because he was too busy thinking about his favourite people so far - Frank Carretto and John Nguyen, who had been his best mate at school, although they had lost touch since Matt dropped out.

Frank and John were the only ones who'd ever seemed to see something more than a dropout no-hoper when they looked at Matt. He hated the thought of either of them walking into the drinks tent, seeing that sign and maybe believing that he went along with his dad's ideas. Hell, he even hated the idea of Jayden Kazantzakis seeing it and Jay was usually too stoned to take much notice of anything. There was no point in trying to talk his dad into changing the sign, because Pat never listened to anything he said, so he'd need to get some other people on the job. He looked round, hoping to spot Katie Brewster, who always smiled at him when the Wolf Guard marched past the war memorial, but unfortunately, the only kid in sight was Orion Casey.

'Hey, mate,' Matt called, 'if you see Katie Brewster, tell her I'm looking for her.'

Then he headed on towards the van, without waiting for an answer. It was like tossing a coin. If Katie came through, he would be able to do something for John and Frank at long last. On the other hand, if Orion didn't pass on the message or Katie didn't get in touch, Matt would at least have remained loyal to his dad.

Orion listened and nodded and promptly forgot about Matt. The Happy Valley market usually bored him rigid but he'd usually had to trail along behind Maya, while she worked her way through all the stalls that sold shiny things. Today he was showing his new friend Daniel around for the first time and it was turning out to be fun. At present, they were standing beside the organic fruit stall, running a quick scan on the people around them.

Daniel spotted two wrinkled hobbit-bearded hippies, staring at the tourists and going, 'Wow, man. What a trip.' Orion countered with a group of four-star-hotel tourists, middle-aged women with perfect hair and outfits that cost more than his mum would have spent on clothes in five years, comparing the aromatherapy essences they had just bought. Daniel pointed to a gang from the Society for Creative Anachronism, wearing home-made chainmail or floor-sweeping medieval gowns, and Orion swept his arm round in a circle that included Lomond farm women stocking up on jams and chutneys from the CWA stall, Japanese tourists taking photos, Happy Valley kids busking, a man in an Akubra hat reciting bush poetry and three Bayview girls in the shortest shorts ever.

'Brilliant,' Daniel said. 'Everyone's so different.'

'Yes and no,' said Orion. 'There's something the same about them too.'

He nicked an enormous plum from the stall and ate it slowly, giving Daniel time to notice the blue and white t-shirt under the hippy's army surplus jacket, the small oval blue and white badge on the four-star tourists' cream and navy lapels, the ornate blue and white letters intertwined above a row of blue waves on the SCA mob's shields.

‘Got it,’ Daniel said, snapping his fingers. ‘Every second person’s wearing a Going Overboard badge or a GO t-shirt. Funny, I didn’t notice till you mentioned it.’

‘Subliminal advertising,’ Orion explained. ‘It’s the best kind. Back in the fifties, before they made proper laws for the ad industry, the ad men used to flash “Buy McFoozle’s popcorn” on movie screens for a microsecond, way too fast for people to register ... but they all trooped out and bought McFoozle’s popcorn at interval anyway. Lucy Dove’s working on the same principle. She ordered all these cool tees and badges from a shop in Bayview and the Wolf Guard’s been flogging them at the gate. Now everyone’ll think her ideas are as cool as the tees, without actually stopping to think about it.’

Daniel grinned. ‘Thanks for the lecture, Professor Casey. Now can we get something to eat? I skipped breakfast this morning.’

‘The German Kitchen’s down the end of this aisle,’ Orion said, suddenly starving. ‘Seven different kinds of sausages. Heaven.’

He dived into the crowd, a small pale terrier sniffing the scent of meat, and Daniel followed along behind him. They stopped to check a stall loaded with garden gnomes in pinstripe suits, waved to Mick Bates over the heads of the tourists crowding round his display of pots with Murri designs and then swerved to avoid Lucy Dove, who was chatting to a guy selling historical photos of Bayview. The guy just happened to be Harry Walden, one of the Bayview councillors. It was the fourth time Orion had seen Lucy corner somebody important. She seemed to have some special sort of radar that helped her to find the important people in a crowd.

As Orion detoured around her, he bumped into a stall that smelt of sesame oil and coriander. He smiled at the Nguyens, who ran one of the Vietnamese restaurants in Bayview, and caught sight of the German Kitchen at the end of the row. When he looked over his shoulder, however, he realised he had lost Daniel somewhere along the way. He retraced his steps and found Daniel on the edge of the crowd around the platform at the centre of the market, where people gave demonstrations of local crafts and skills, from sheep shearing to making pottery bowls.

A tall woman with long silvergrey hair and a smooth youthful face was standing on the platform, wearing jeans and a GO t-shirt and silver earrings in the shape of double-headed axes, with silver astrological symbols dangling from the silver chains round her neck. Jane Moondancer. Orion had seen her every day for the past fortnight, talking politics in the Caseys’ kitchen, but he had forgotten that Jane worked as a weaver, when she wasn’t being one of Lucy’s council candidates.

‘We’ll start with a spinning demonstration,’ she said. ‘One of my neighbours has volunteered to spin wool into thread and after that her mum will help me show you how to weave it. Serenity’s never done this before, so we have to send her lots of positive energy.’

Okay, that explained why Daniel had developed a sudden interest in weaving. Orion stood on tiptoe and located Serenity at the back of the platform, sitting beside an old-fashioned spinning wheel, like Sleeping Beauty in a blue and silver uniform. He could see Daniel tensing, as if he wanted to shout, 'Don't touch it, Ren! Don't fall asleep for a hundred years.' But it would have been too late. When Orion rose up on his toes again, Serenity had already begun to pedal and the wheel had begun to turn.

The wool ran through her fingers, faster and faster, buckling as it went. Serenity dipped her hand into a jar of water and tried to smooth it but it was already turning into lumpy grey string. Caro measured out a length of the string, wrapped it round a wooden shuttle and gave it to Jane, who carried across to a loom laced with blue and white wool. She passed the shuttle through the gap behind the white threads, from right hand to left hand, thumped the treadle with her foot to bring the blue threads forward and tossed the shuttle through the next gap.

'Do that several hundred more times and you'll have turned your thread into cloth,' she told the tourists clustered round the platform. As she repositioned the shuttle, a grey tendril knotted itself round her wrist. She tugged at it impatiently, saying, 'Oh Goddess, where did I put those scissors?'

'Over here,' said a voice like a silver bell.

It was Lucy Dove again, demonstrating the ability to be in the right place at the right time that Orion had already noticed. He watched her step onto the platform, pick up the scissors from a low table and cut Jane loose. While the tourists cooed and clicked their cameras, Jane Moondancer smiled down at them.

'Do you realise you're taking photos of a myth?' she asked. 'The ancient Greeks believed your destiny was decided by the three Fates - Clotho who spins the thread of your life, Lachesis who measures it and Atropos who snips it off when your time's up. And the Fates are a version of the triple moon goddess - the maiden, the mother and the crone, just like these three women standing here on this platform.'

The tourists looked slightly confused and Orion said loudly, 'A crone? *Lucy?*' Jane frowned, as if she had surprised herself as well.

'Yes, well, "crone" is just a way of saying "wise woman", of course,' she said with an apologetic glance at Lucy.

Fortunately, Lucy didn't seem to be offended. She just smiled even more brilliantly than ever. A couple of tourists squatted down to take photos of her from a more artistic angle, revealing three guys in slouch hats and khaki tunics, who had been standing behind them. Scott and Tommo and Lockie. For some reason, Scott was staring up at Serenity as if she was Juliet on a balcony, while Lockie and Tommo were scanning the crowd, hands on hips, braced to deal with any trouble – or make some.

Running into Lockie and Tommo always made Orion's heart beat faster. It took him the best part of a minute to remember that he had brought his own

bodyguard and even then, he didn't really register that Lucy Dove was making a speech, until she was halfway through. Not that it mattered. Orion had already heard her election speech twice, at school and in the town hall, although Lucy changed it a bit every time. Today she seemed to be focussing on the market people and the tourists.

'Back in the days when the Happy Valley market got going, the hippies used to say, "Small is beautiful",' she was reminding them. 'These days, people seem to only think big is beautiful. Big fast food chains, not home-cooked meals. Big municipal councils, instead of small local councils that understand local needs. Big multinational companies, chasing the lowest wages and the best tax concessions all round the globe and leaving a trail of empty factories and unemployed workers behind them, as they move on. It's a one-size-fits-all world ... and we all know that one size doesn't *really* fit everyone.'

Orion had never been interested in politics. As far as he was concerned, it was just one of the things his mum ranted about. But now he was inventing a world of his own and it occurred to him that he would need to give it a political system. When he checked to see whether Lucy's ideas would suit either of the two sides in his novel (currently known as the Good Guys and the Bad Guys, although Daniel kept telling him to change that), he discovered, to his surprise, that the beleaguered young king *and* the wicked regent would be equally likely to go on about protecting the rights of ordinary people.

'This is all pretty general, isn't it?' he complained. 'I can't tell what Lucy's actually going to do.'

'You can tell she's saying something different from Doug Sterne,' Daniel pointed out. 'He gets his ideas from the nineteenth century and she's totally twenty first century. Maybe that's enough.'

'Well, it shouldn't be,' said Orion. 'People deserve more than that.'

His voice had risen to a squeak and three of the tourists turned simultaneously to shush him – one of the four-star ladies, an SCA guy in full twelfth century armour and a girl in short shorts. They were about as different as any three people at the market could have been and yet they all wanted to know what Lucy was saying. Orion's brain started to speed ahead, so fast that he felt breathless with excitement. When the three tourists listened to Lucy, did they all hear the same thing? – or did they all hear something different? – and if so, were they filling in the gaps with their own ideas or did Lucy have a special knack of saying stuff that you could interpret in any way you liked?

Orion decided he needed more information and tuned in again to find Lucy explaining that, when she was a kid, people used to be scared about communists taking over the world. 'They warned us that the commos would make everyone eat the same food and wear the same clothes and work impossibly long hours,' she said with a smile hiding at the back of her voice. 'Now everyone eats McDonalds and wears Nikes and works ten hour days, if they're lucky enough to have a job. They call it globalisation and progress but it scares me, all the same, just as much as the communists scared my parents.'

The crowd chuckled but Orion sniffed irritably. That was one of his mum's favourite comparisons, so Lucy must've borrowed it from Raewyn. It didn't help him to get a handle on her ideas - it just proved Lucy could recognise a good line when she heard one.

'I'm not against progress,' she went on. 'Our ability to handle change is part of what makes us human. But I believe we should be heading into the future together, not dumping half the population along the way. That's why GO's going overboard to defend the rights of the individual - the little people who can sometimes get lost in a big global village.'

On the word 'lost', her voice deepened and quivered. The entire crowd heaved a sigh, including Orion. Seconds later, he realised that (for those few seconds, at least) he had been reacting in exactly the same way as everyone else. If he could feel what the four-star lady and the SCA guy and the girl in short shorts had been feeling, that should help him analyse the effect Lucy had on people, shouldn't it? Or was it actually easier to understand things if you weren't involved?

All the unanswered questions combined inside his skull like a mixture of volatile gases. They exploded on contact, propelling him across to the Nguyens' food stall, where his English teacher, Ms Macready, was buying today's special - half a dozen vegetarian spring rolls. Orion started talking straight away, spilling out questions and suggestions. He was halfway through a fastforward rave about his ideas about Lucy's ideas, when he noticed Tommo and Lockie eavesdropping in the background and realised that he had left his bodyguard behind.

'Enough, Orion,' said Ms Macready, as he paused to check for escape routes. 'As it happens, I agree with you. Lucy's ideas would make excellent material for a class debate. If you can formulate a topic over the weekend, we'll choose the speakers on Monday.'

She dropped a U-turn and sped off, before Orion could think of anything else for her to do. Tommo moved in straight away.

'What's your problem, Casey?' he said. 'You reckon we need *more* homework?'

'He's sucking to Ms Macready again,' said Lockie. 'Forget it, loser boy. We don't want no fucking debates, get it?'

Orion thought about making a run for it but he still felt too breathless. He tried to inflate his lungs, in order to say something that would put Lockie and Tommo in their place, but his chest was as tight as if he had been wearing the SCA knight's metal breastplate. He was searching for his inhaler when Daniel appeared behind him. Lockie and Tommo took one look at Daniel and made a silent decision to back off, instinctively rubbing the sides of their heads that he had banged together.

'You're the man, Dan,' Orion said gratefully. 'Here, I'll buy you a double order of spring rolls.'

His mum often got takeaway from the Nguyens' shop in Bayview. Apparently she and Mrs Nguyen had exchanged all sorts of information about

their kids, because Orion had to answer a series of personal questions while he was waiting for the spring rolls. That gave him time to recover from the confrontation with the bullies and start fizzing with ideas again. Ideas tended to make Orion overconfident. As he turned away from the stall, he held the bag out to Tommo and Lockie and said, 'Like a spring roll?'

Even before Lockie's face narrowed and Tommo's hands knotted into fists, Orion knew he had made a mistake. Next minute Lockie was aiming a punch at him, Tommo was bending his arm backwards and Daniel was preparing to lunge. It felt like an action replay of the fight in the schoolyard, right up to the moment when someone else intervened: Scott Sterne inserting himself into the middle of the group.

'Chill, guys,' he said. 'You're in uniform. You're supposed to be setting a good example. Don't hassle the kid. Just take a spring roll and say thank you nicely.'

Tommo snatched the bag from Orion, Lockie muttered, 'Th'ks' and they both hurried away. Orion beamed and said, 'Thank *you*, Scott.' As Scott shrugged and strolled off, Daniel frowned down at his feet and sighed deeply.

'What's the matter?' Orion asked. 'Aren't you pleased that Scott saved you from having to bash the guys up again? No, wait a minute, I get it! Those two idiots took all the spring rolls. Hang on, I'll buy you another bag.'

He had a good time bitching about Tommo and Lockie to the Nguyens, who giggled indulgently and refused to let him pay for the second round, but when he returned to where they had been standing, Daniel had disappeared. Orion looked around and finally located him in the aisle that led to the car park, walking beside – would you believe - Lucy Dove.

The sight of his bodyguard retreating into the distance gave him a brief pang of fear but then he remembered he was under Scott Sterne's protection. That ought to be good for the rest of the day. Orion cheered up, ate a spring roll and went off to find Katie and pass on Matt's message. If he wandered round the market for a while, he should be able to find enough kids to do a preliminary survey on what his class thought about Lucy Dove, which would be good preparation for the debate. With any luck, it might even make him hungry enough for the visit to the German Kitchen that he had been planning all morning.

Flat brown earth. Flat blue sky. No landmarks, apart from the occasional dusty gum tree. Daniel could hardly tell the car was moving, until he looked at the escarpment ahead of them. In fact, Lucy Dove was driving so fast that the sandstone wall seemed to come towards them in leaps and bounds, like one of the jumping boots in a Monty Python video. Any minute now, if Lucy wasn't careful, it was going to jump on them and squash them flat.

'Thanks for accepting my invitation, Civil War boy,' she said. 'I'm not all that comfortable around my uncle. It's nice having someone to keep me company.'

'That's fine,' said Daniel, although actually Lucy had hurried him over to her car so fast that he felt as if he had been kidnapped. 'I mean, it'll be interesting for me too. I haven't seen much of the countryside yet.'

'Well, I still think I owe you,' Lucy said. 'Maybe I could give you a special chance to make an impact. You've heard my plans for this town. How about telling me the sort of changes you'd like to see?'

'Me?' Daniel said, startled. 'I'm not sure. Things change all the time. I have enough trouble with that already. I don't really need any more changes.'

Lucy stepped on the accelerator, making the escarpment lunge at them again. 'Interesting,' she said. 'Most people want something from me but you're different, aren't you? I get the feeling we're linked in some sort of way.'

'We arrived on the same train,' Daniel said, trying to be helpful. 'Can't think of anything else, but.'

Lucy laughed. 'Fair enough. Tell me about yourself, then. What do you want out of life, Dan?'

'Nothing much,' he said, surprised into honesty. 'Basically, I just want to be left alone.' That sounded a bit insulting, so he added, 'Not that I've got anything against people, of course. It's just that I prefer watching them from a distance. I'm not too keen on getting involved.'

'I know how you feel,' Lucy said. 'But it's not always possible to keep your distance. Look at Lomond, Dan. The people here want to be left alone too, in order to go on doing things the way they've always done them. Unfortunately, the world started moving a whole lot faster once we were able to communicate with anyone anywhere, just by switching on our PCs. A couple of emails can shift a factory from an Australian suburb to a town in Korea and no one seems to care what happens to the Aussie workers once the factory's gone – or to the Korean workers, if the factory moves on again. They reckon that, if you want to succeed in business these days, you've got to be prepared to shoot your wounded. But that's not business, in my opinion. It's war - a pretty nasty kind of war too.'

She went on talking, while Daniel hopped out to open gates and hopped back in again. Lucy hardly seemed to notice that he was gone. It felt as if she was continuing the speech she had been making at the market, instead of talking to him personally. As they got nearer to the Kellys' house, however, she gradually got quieter and by the time they pulled up, she had slid down so far in her seat that she looked like a little kid pretending to drive her father's car. Daniel looked round and saw a tall guy with cropped iron grey hair, dressed in a loose shirt and baggy pants, watering some sad geraniums on the verandah. He – no, wait a minute, not a man, Daniel thought - in that case, *she* came over to the car and peered in the window.

'They're here, Norman,' she yelled.

She disappeared round the side of the house and two seconds later Norm Kelly came sidling down the verandah steps. 'You're late,' he complained. 'I would've set off without you in half a tick. Jeff Parker - he owns the property across the way - just phoned to say one of my ewes was down. We look out for each other round here, not like you city folk.'

Lucy scrambled out of the car, smoothing her white pants and tucking in her white shirt. 'Sorry, Uncle Norm,' she said. 'We're ready to go now.'

'Bloody stupid way to dress,' Norm said, running his eyes over her. 'Don't blame me when you end up covered in dust.'

Lucy giggled - such a childish, breathless sound that Daniel looked at her in surprise, wondering whether she was scared of Norm. Nah, that couldn't be right. Not Lucy Dove. According to Orion (who'd heard the story from Maya, who heard it from Jude Martin), Lucy had fronted Scott Sterne's gang without blinking and tackled Scott's dad for an encore. If she could do all of that, she couldn't possibly be afraid of a middle-aged blob-lipped runt.

Could she?

As Daniel turned to take a second look, Norm stuck two fingers into his mouth and blew a whistle blast. A heap of dust under the verandah rose up and shook itself and changed into a three-legged dog that came lurching towards an old ute and climbed into its rusty tray. Norm ushered Daniel and Lucy into the front seat of the ute and angled a grin at them.

'Get a shock when you saw old Dusty?' he said. 'He's a great little worker, leg or no leg. Used to round up ducklings, back when he was a pup, and he'll be rounding up sheep till the day he drops down dead. It's bred into them, see.'

At the last minute, just as he was getting into the driver's seat, the tall woman reappeared. 'Taken your pills, have you, Norman?' she yelled.

'What do you bloody think?' Norm yelled back. 'Took them at morning tea like I always do, regular as clockwork.' He winked at Daniel and said, 'Women. They're born nagging. I got a dicky heart, according to Dr Sterne, but I outlasted old Sibyl, didn't I? The wife can't stop pestering me, but. No kiddies to fuss over, that's her trouble.'

Daniel tried to think of something to say but he could only come up with 'Um'. Luckily, that seemed to be enough. Norm grinned at him, pushed the gear stick into first and sent the ute bouncing across the brown nibbled paddocks, leaning across Lucy, in order to maintain eye contact with Daniel.

'Sheep are hard on the land,' he said. 'They crop so close that they almost eat the grass's roots and their hooves cut the ground up something terrible. You gotta give the place a rest every now and then - unless you're Jeff Parker, of course. The stupid bastard got it into his head to buy up big last year and run twice as many sheep as usual, counting on a good season ... only last winter was dry as chips, so Jeff's done for now. Serves him right too. Even if it'd paid off, that's not the way to treat this sort of country.'

The ute bounced and bumped. Norm's voice droned on, grouching about the foxes - 'murdering bastards, shooting's too good for them' - and the crows -

'peck the eyes out of a baby lamb right in front of its mum, they will' - and the shearers - 'eat you out of house and home, won't work without morning and afternoon smoko, lunch and dinner and tea' - and the ups and downs of farming life - 'me and the wife, we been so hard up, we had to pick scraps of wool off the fences and pluck dead sheep in the paddocks.'

Daniel got out to open another gate and leaned back to look up at the escarpment, so close now that it didn't seem like a yellow wall any more. It looked more like a vertical lunar landscape, pitted with grey craters and seamed with orange runnels where water had eaten into the stone, like Norm's sheep ate up the grass. For the first time since he and Lucy had set out, Daniel felt as though he could look past the dust and the heat and the flatness and see brief flashes of beauty in the country around him.

That cliff. He could climb it some day. He could stand at the top of the plateau and see everything.

As he got back into the ute, Lucy slid across the seat towards him, dislodging Norm's hand from her knee, and Norm chuckled and took up his monologue from where he had left off, as if there had never been a break. 'Like I was saying, a good sheep dog has to have an eye, so he can outstare the sheep. Ewes can be fierce, y'know, like those sheilas back in town. What do you call them, Lucy? The Wolf Guard, right? I bet you think you invented that idea but actually there's been secret armies in this country for bloody decades.'

Daniel waited for Lucy to argue with Norm, the way Serenity argued with Caro. When she stayed silent, he leaned forward and said, 'Secret armies, Mr Kelly? What do you mean?'

'Never heard of them?' Norm asked, looking pleased. 'Well, you wouldn't, would you? - them being secret and all. They got going during the Great Depression, back in the thirties. The communists wanted to stir up the unemployed and take over, so all the decent blokes - the ones who fought for their country in World War One - decided to get together and stop the mongrels. My grandad started a group round these parts and my dad was ready to move again in 1948, when the commos talked Prime Minister Chifley into nationalising the banks. Then in the seventies that commie bastard Gough Whitlam was letting the country go to the dogs, so we -'

He braked suddenly, cutting off the end of the sentence, and jumped out of the ute. Dusty ran on ahead and stopped beside a dun-coloured mound. As Daniel caught up, a bald-faced ewe raised her head and fixed wearily patient brown eyes on him.

'She looks all right,' he said with relief.

Norm made a gargling noise at the back of his throat, as if he was getting ready to spit. 'Nah, she's been picked, poor old lady,' he said.

When Daniel tried to work out what that meant, he came up with a picture of Death like a skeleton with a long pointy finger, walking across the paddocks and picking out the sheep that were due to die.

'Duh?' he said, suspecting that he had got the wrong idea.

'Picked by the crows, ya nong,' Norm said. 'Here, I'll back the ute up and you can help me lift her on.'

The ewe turned to watch him go, revealing a ruined eye. Daniel gagged and instinctively swung away, before the image embedded itself in his brain. He focused on a jut of rock at the base of the cliff, sheltering a strip of sandstone crosshatched with ochre lines that looked almost like a picture. As he moved closer, the marks stirred and quivered and realigned themselves into a pattern. *Exactly* like a picture, he decided.

'Mr Kelly!' he shouted, waving at Norm as the ute reversed towards him. 'Did you know you've got an Aboriginal rock painting on your land?'

'True dinks?' Norm said with a wry grin. 'Only seen it a thousand times before. That's a map of this area, the way the Abos used to draw things. Take a look at it. You'll be able to spot the plateau and the river, the dip where the road goes and the underground spring we use for the dam.'

Daniel followed the lines with his eyes, then looked back across the flat brown land. He couldn't see it himself but he was prepared to take Norm's word for it.

'You ought to tell someone - people from the uni or an Aboriginal group or -' he began.

'Not on your life,' said Norm. 'I don't want a pack of professors tramping over my property and the Abos from around here are dead and gone, long ago. Good riddance to them, I say. Mind you, if you're keen on that sort of stuff, there's some more paintings in a cave higher up. Different from these ones, a bit spooky in a way. Scared the living daylight out of Lucy, when she was a little tacker. Remember how we used to climb up there, Lucy girl?'

Lucy had been silent for so long that Daniel had almost forgotten about her. When he looked round, she was standing diagonally behind him, half-buried by the shadow from the escarpment. Although she was only a few metres away, it felt as though they were separated by a desert of vacant space where she waited forlornly, a little girl lost, as dusty and silent and passive as the ewe.

'Jesus, look at her, will you?' Norm said. 'The Dove women are all crazy, y'know. They get ideas above their station and they won't let go. A recipe for disaster, if you ask me.'

Daniel realised he couldn't bear to look at Lucy any longer. It would be easier to look at the mutilated sheep. He turned away and hurried across to help Norm, who was hoisting the ewe's front legs over his shoulders. She didn't even try to struggle as Daniel tucked his hands under her padded backside and heaved.

'Can you save her, Mr Kelly?' he asked, while they were settling her in the tray.

Norm shook his head. 'Nah, she's a killer now,' he said. When Daniel's eyes widened, he sniggered and added, 'Not a serial killer, like on the telly. Meat, boy. Dead meat. I'll cut her throat soon as we get back, then string her up, slice

her belly open and let the innards drop out, all hot and steaming. It's quite a sight. Lucy used to love it, didn't you, Luce?

Lucy looked up, empty-eyed. She waited till Daniel climbed into the ute and sat on the far side of him.

'So,' Norm said, starting the engine, 'talking of Aunt Sibyl - which I was, even if you weren't listening, Lucy girl - what are you planning to do with the loot? You've seen the property now. It could be a nice little earner, if I had some decent stock. Oh, and we could use a few extra hands as well, seeing the wife and me never managed to raise our own workers. What do you reckon? Are you going to help me out?'

Lucy looked so small and distant and fragile that Daniel was scared she would sign everything over on the spot. He held his breath and waited for her answer.

'I'll think about it, Uncle Norm,' she said in a wobbly child's voice.

Daniel let his breath out in a sigh of relief but Norm had obviously expected to do better than that. He drove straight at a deep rut in the track, grinning maliciously when Daniel and Lucy made a grab for the dashboard, although after that he kept his mouth shut until they got back to the house. As he stopped the ute, he looked across at Lucy and fingered his lower lip, pulling it down to display a fold of wet red-purple skin.

'Come on, girlie,' he said. 'I'll give you a treat. You can watch me butcher the ewe, just like old times.'

When Daniel turned to check on Lucy, her eyes had sunk deep into their sockets and her skin was stretched tight across her bones, as if she had gone from eight years old to eighty in the course of the drive. Daniel decided he'd had enough.

'Sorry,' he said. 'We have to go, Mr Kelly. Like, now.'

'Is that so, Lucy girl?' asked Norm.

Lucy hesitated. 'Yes,' she said in a rush. 'Yes, we have to go now. I'll get back to you about the investment idea.'

'That's more like it,' Norm said. 'I knew you'd come round in the end. I still got *some* influence in this town - maybe not as much as Rob Sterne and his pretty-boy son that everyone thinks is so wonderful, but I could put a spoke in your wheel, all the same. Hooroo, Lucy girl. Keep me posted about the money situation and I'll see you soon.'

Lucy headed for the Ford, moving so fast that dust puffed up round her feet like little wings. She didn't say a word till they were safely inside the car.

'Goodbye, Uncle Norm,' she called then, revving the engine, and they took off down the track that led back to Lomond.

Flat brown earth. Flat blue sky. An occasional dusty gum tree and the escarpment retreating behind them. Daniel leaned back and closed his eyes and thought about the bare beautiful lines of the land and the blood pooling on the ground underneath the hanging corpse of the ewe. He had gone so far into the landscape that it came as a shock when Lucy nudged him and he opened his

eyes to find that the journey was over and they were parked in front of the Caseys' house.

Behind him, waves queued up and sailed in a slow and dignified procession towards the cliff, where they threw themselves onto the rocks. Ahead of him, people were queuing on the Caseys' verandah and filing into their lounge room – Fisher King, Marie Boyle, Jude Martin, Katie Brewster. And beside him sat the woman he had seen on the day he arrived in Lomond. Lucy didn't look like a scared little kid any more. She was an elegant pioneer again, ready for anything. Even the dust of Norm Kelly's property seemed to have been absorbed into the folds of her white shirt.

'Thanks for coming along,' she said. 'And listen, mate, keep on watching everything. It's a useful sort of talent to have.'

Katie squeezed into the Caseys' overcrowded lounge room and looked around. Serenity and Jude had got there before her, so they were already seated at one end of the long table – well, three tables pushed together, actually. The tables were littered with copies of the latest *Star* and bundles of GO campaign leaflets, which everyone was folding while they talked and stuffing into envelopes for a mailout. Only five days to go before the election. They had to make the most of every minute.

As she elbowed towards Serenity and Jude, someone called her name. Katie looked over her shoulder and saw Raewyn Casey waving at her, so she reversed and headed for the opposite end of the table, where all the heavies were sitting – Jane Moondancer and Fisher King, Marie Boyle, Rocky Abrahams and Lucy Dove herself, currently represented by an empty place at the head of the table.

'Sit here, Katie,' Raewyn said, patting the chair next to hers. 'How's the survey going? Got any results for us yet?'

Katie sucked her cheeks in, to stop her grin of triumph from showing. It was only two weeks since she had agreed to let Serenity become the leader of the Wolf Guard but already she was sitting at the top of the table with the grown-ups, while Serenity was right down at the bottom. The survey was the main reason for Katie's promotion. She opened her folder, getting ready to impress Raewyn, but as she looked up, a few more people edged into the room.

Including her mother.

For the first few seconds Katie literally couldn't believe that Shona Brewster – who was mostly famous for staying at home, looking after the kids and never expressing an opinion about anything - had just walked into a GO meeting. But she couldn't remain in denial forever. There her mum was, giving her an unobtrusive wave that looked exactly like the hand movements for "Twinkle, twinkle, little star", the song she had sung all her daughters to sleep with.

Katie blushed and looked down and rummaged through her folder. But it was too late. Raewyn wasn't paying attention any more. Her husband and son had come in at the same time as Katie's mum and Raewyn had been distracted by Orion, who seemed to have been conducting a survey of his own.

'It was awesome, Mum,' he was saying. 'I asked almost everyone in my class what they thought Lucy was on about and they all came up with totally different answers. Rita Farr reckons Lucy wants to give feminism a new look; Dylan Parker's convinced she's after a better deal for farmers and Lockie Conway says she's going to make sure Asian countries don't corner the global job market.'

'And what's that supposed to prove?' Raewyn asked. 'We all know Lucy's pulling a pretty diverse bunch of people together. Do you have a problem with that?'

She scowled at Orion, who scowled back. 'I'm just interested, okay?' he said. 'I don't have any kind of agenda. As a matter of fact, I haven't even worked out whether I'm going to vote Labour or Liberal or whatever, when I turn eighteen – although I did this online quiz last week that said I was an anarchist. What do anarchists do, Raewyn?'

'Talk a blue streak and never achieve anything,' his mum snapped. 'You'd qualify, all right.'

She ran her thumb down the fold of a GO leaflet, so fast that it tore. Katie was still trying to think of a way to calm things down, when Rocky Abrahams looked up from the pile of envelopes that she was stuffing.

'Never been too keen on politics myself,' she said. 'But Lucy makes it all seem real. Don't criticise her till you've got a bit more experience, boy.'

'I'm *not* criticising Lucy,' Orion said indignantly. 'I was only trying to work out how she does it. Just wait till I'm a famous s.f. writer. I'll put all my ideas into my novels and you'll have to listen to me then.'

'Hey, I'm listening now,' Finn said, leaving his sentry position by the door and coming back to drop an arm round his son's shoulder. 'You're not the only one, Orion. I'm an anarchist too.'

'All talk and no action?' Raewyn said in her school teacher voice. 'Yeah, Finn, you definitely fit into the anarchist category. Are you sure that's the best place to be?'

Finn's eyes travelled round the room in a slow circle and returned to his wife. 'Right now, I reckon the best place for me is in my studio,' he said. 'Come on, Orion. Let's leave them to it.'

As he steered his son out of the room, Raewyn picked up a batch of envelopes, banged them on the table to straighten their corners and dropped them into a shoebox, swearing at the ones that were still out of line. Katie felt sorry for her. It would be a bummer, having to sit through a public demonstration that your family wasn't on side. Not that her family was so much better. Everyone kept congratulating her on the photo of Lockie tracky-decking Maya, which had

appeared on the front page of last week's *Star*, but they didn't know that her dad had knocked back the article she had written to go with it. Again.

Okay, he had used some of her stuff in his article this time, which was an improvement – and okay, her version would have sounded too negative, after the guys had sort of apologised to the Wolf Guard – but Katie still didn't feel great about it. Even when she found a parent-free zone where people appreciated her contributions, her mother had to come along and spoil that too. Katie wasn't usually nervous about speaking in public but, as she flicked through the pages of the survey questionnaire, she noticed that her palms were damp with sweat. It was a relief to see Lucy hurry in and take her place at the head of the table.

'Thanks for coming along at such short notice,' she said. 'We realised a lot of you would be here for the market, so we decided to slot in an extra meeting, but I promise we won't keep you long. Let's start with the latest news. I bet you all know the multi-talented Katie Brewster but you mightn't know she conducts public opinion polls in her spare time. What've you got for us, Katie?'

After an introduction like that, Katie couldn't go on feeling nervous. 'The Wolf Guard handed out a thousand questionnaires this morning and got three hundred and eighty back, which isn't bad going,' she said. 'I kept the questions simple, so I was able to collate the results on the spot. Two hundred and ninety people said they'd vote for Lucy. That includes all the southerners who answered the questionnaire and – this is the best part – two-thirds of the people who've lived here for ten or more years. It looks like Dr Sterne did himself a lot of damage when he told those guys to attack the Wolf Guard – and it looks like Lucy has a really good chance of winning the Lomond seat.'

There was a spontaneous round of applause. Katie figured most of it was for Lucy but she didn't object when Lucy leaned over and patted her on the shoulder, sharing the honours. She sat back and listened while Marie Boyle told the meeting that Harry Walden, one of the Bayview councillors, had been so impressed by talking to Lucy at the market that he had decided to give GO his public support.

'Excellent work,' said Raewyn. 'Now we can count on four of the existing council members - Marie, Fisher King, Josh Abrahams *and* Harry Walden. With a bit of luck, Jane Moondancer'll join them after the election and of course we're relying on Lucy to win Lomond. I have to say that, after Katie's report, it doesn't seem ridiculously optimistic to believe that GO could end up holding six of the nine council seats. Has anyone come across any potential problems? ... No? In that case –'

Katie's back suddenly straightened and her hand went shooting up into the air. After spending so much time worrying about the survey, she had almost forgotten that she had bad news as well.

'Sorry, me again,' she said. 'It mightn't be important but – well, you know how Pat Fahey's been writing those stupid blonde jokes on the board outside the pub? His son Matt sent me a message today and when I went to the drinks tent,

Pat had this whiteboard on the table with a racist joke on it - and he'd used Lucy's name.'

'Damn,' said Raewyn. 'Can you tell us the exact wording?'

'I think so,' Katie said, shuffling the papers in her folder. 'Yep, here it is. "Go, Lucy – toss the boat people overboard".'

Looking at her notes was like touching some kind of magic talisman that had the power to send her back into the past. For a split second, she could actually see Matt's blue eyes and hear a pair of southerners arguing with Pat in the background. Unfortunately, she could also see the girl with dandelion hair and hazelnut eyes and grapefruit breasts, who had come over to flirt with Matt, using the excuse of asking permission to take a photo of the whiteboard. Katie still felt inexplicably annoyed about that.

'Damn,' Raewyn said again, so explosively that she blew away the splitsecond images of Matt and the girl. 'So that idiot actually linked Lucy's name with hate speech against Asians. That's going to look bad for us. We can't afford to be connected with the local loonies.'

Beside her, Lucy's hand lifted – an almost imperceptible movement that had the effect of drawing everyone's attention towards her. 'Pat Fahey isn't a loony,' she said. 'He takes care of his old mum; he brought Matt up on his own after his wife took off; he runs a pub that doesn't cause any trouble. In a way, you could say he's one of the most respectable citizens in Lomond.'

Raewyn shrugged dismissively. 'If you think he's so wonderful, you ought to go and have a word with him. Tell him to keep his respectable mouth shut, at least till the elections are over.'

'You're thinking like a teacher, Raewyn,' said Lucy. 'I don't have that kind of authority. I can't tell Pat what to do.'

In response, Raewyn pushed up the sleeves of her batik shirt and let half a dozen mirror-patterned Indian bracelets drop down to her elbows. Katie recognised the signs from school. She was waiting to see whether Raewyn would be able to boss Lucy as easily as she bossed everyone else, when Rocky Abrahams jumped the queue and got in first.

'Hang about,' she said. 'Bad move to come down too hard on Pat. Not the only bloke round here who thinks like that. Could lose a lot of support.'

A ripple of dissent spread round the table until it reached Serenity at the far end. 'Excuse me, Rocky,' she called. 'Are you saying we're supposed to put up with a lot of racist crap, just to get a few votes? That's so not why I signed up for this campaign.'

'True,' Rocky said, unruffled. 'Lose a lot of support that way too. Just saying it's tricky, that's all.'

Half a dozen people started to speak at once and then stopped to let each other go first. At the same moment, the door opened and Josh Abraham's wheelchair rolled into the room with his brother Mal one step ahead, clearing the Caseys' clutter out of the way. Both brothers had the same eagle-beak nose and determined chin but Mal's eyes had remained clear and curious, while Josh's

eyes were shadowed by chronic pain. And where Mal towered over everyone, Josh's burly arms and shoulders and chest tapered down into a pair of wizened denim legs propped on the footplate of his chair.

As he wheeled himself into a gap halfway along the table, the ripple of dissent ebbed away. All the people who had been about to say something suddenly started to doodle on their notepads or gaze out of the window or examine the new GO logo (an even more splendid bird than the kid's drawing). Katie stared at them, temporarily puzzled, and then realised they were proving Rocky's point. For the first part of the meeting, everyone had assumed that they shared the same values but the arrival of Josh and Mal had changed that. No one (except Rocky herself, presumably) was quite sure how a pair of Lomond farmers would react to the Pat Fahey incident and no one wanted to be the first to ask.

Except Lucy. 'G'day, Josh, good to see you,' she said. 'We were just talking about Pat Fahey. Apparently, he's moved on from blonde jokes to racist jokes and we'd like him to stop. Any chance you could help us there?'

Josh shrugged. 'Sorry, I'm not much of a pub man,' he said. 'Does it really matter that much?'

The silence around him deepened. Serenity was halfway towards a scowl and some of the southerners from the retirement village looked as if they had found an earwig in Raewyn's chocolate chip cookies. Katie grinned to herself. She didn't approve of racism either but she was a country kid who'd seen it all before, so she didn't need to get as worked up as southerners like Serenity.

'I think it *does* matter when someone in our town puts down Asian Australians,' Lucy said, breaking the silence. 'What do you think, Josh?'

'Ah, Pat's always been paranoid about Asians coming over from Bayview and stealing our jobs,' said Josh. 'I reckon he's got tickets on himself. Why would anyone want an old pub out in the sticks, when they could have a restaurant on the beachfront?'

The silence turned into a hum of amused approval, accompanied by a subliminal chorus of relieved sighs, although Katie privately thought the southerners might be relaxing too soon. Oh sure, Josh Abrahams knew that the Vietnamese restaurant owners in Bayview weren't interested in getting hold of Pat Fahey's rundown pub. On the other hand, he was the president of the northern NSW gun lobby, so there was a sporting chance that he might still believe Indonesia or China wanted to get hold of Australia. She made a mental note to ask her dad whether Josh's opinions were on record, then frowned and made another note to find out for herself.

'Josh has a point,' Raewyn Casey said, looking up from a two-column list on her notepad. 'Now I've had time to think it over, I'm not so sure we need to see Pat Fahey as a liability. We can put up with him till the elections and after that Lucy can gradually talk him around. It'll be fine, as long as we keep the whole thing under wraps.'

Katie was relaxing, along with the rest of the meeting, when she had another splitsecond memory flash. 'Wait a minute,' she said. 'Is one of the *Bayview Mirror* reporters a young blonde girl?'

Raewyn looked at Marie Boyle, who nodded. 'That'd be Harry Walden's daughter,' she said. 'Lisa Walden has a cadetship at the *Mirror* this year. Did she see the whiteboard?'

'Worse than that,' Katie said. 'She was taking photos of it.'

Marie actually tutted: Katie had never seen anyone do that, outside of books. 'Oh dear, that's most unfortunate,' she said. 'It's not common knowledge but I happen to know that the editor of the *Mirror* didn't get on with Jack Wheaton. He wants to make sure the next mayor comes from Bayview, so he'd love to run an article saying Lucy condones racism. If he's got photos to back it up, he'll be unstoppable.'

She looked round the table, waiting for suggestions, but everyone's eyes were fixed trustfully on Lucy. Raewyn Casey might run the meetings and keep track of the details but Lucy was the one they all turned to, when there was any real trouble. Lucy knew it too. She smiled like an angel, spreading her hands wide and then bringing them together, as if she was gathering up all their problems and taking them on herself.

'I can fix things in the short term,' she said. 'Lisa Walden's been after me for an in-depth interview but Rae's always been against it, so I should be able to trade an interview for those photos.'

'That won't shut Pat Fahey up,' Serenity objected. 'He'll probably start writing racist "jokes" on the board outside his pub.'

Lucy's hands opened again. 'We could fix that too, by getting some of the blokes to have a word with Pat,' she said. 'But I don't just want to change the way Lomond votes. I want to change everyone's hearts and minds as well. Pat Fahey's a decent sort. I'd be willing to bet he'll back down once he realises he's upsetting people. The timing's our only problem. With the election in five days time, it'll have to happen fast ... and without bringing GO into it.'

She gazed dreamily round the room. As her eyes drifted past Serenity and Jude, one eyelid flicked downwards, speedy as a camera shutter, and Serenity winked back, to let Lucy know that she got the picture. All around the table, people were leaning back and smiling and generally acting as if Lucy had solved the problem, even though she hadn't actually said anything definite. Katie felt pretty sure that only she and Serenity and Jude – and maybe Raewyn and Rocky – had picked up on Lucy's coded message: *this sounds like a job for the Wolf Guard*.

It was kind of cool, knowing more than other people knew. She was still enjoying the sensation when the Caseys' front door opened again, so forcibly that it slammed into the wall, making one of Finn's paintings jump off its hook. Rob Sterne strode in, registered that the room was full of people and made a decision to ignore them.

'Lucy,' he said, focussing on her. 'Thought I'd better come and warn you about Pat Fahey. He had some sort of anti-Asian slogan on display in the drinks tent this morning. I didn't say anything, because it would've only got his back up, but –'

'Not a problem,' Lucy told him. 'I'm on the job – but thanks for letting me know.'

She smiled at Rob, who took a dazzled step backwards and wedged his foot into a carton of Raewyn's political magazines. Raewyn rolled her eyes and jumped up, extricated Rob and led him towards the kitchen, saying, 'Let me get you a beer' in her teacher voice. Getting Rob out of the way should have helped to get the meeting back on track but his passage through the room seemed to have broken the mood, as effectively as a magnet passing under a tray of iron filings. Lucy managed to thank a bunch of people – including Shona Brewster, Katie noted with surprise – but after that everyone started talking to their neighbours and the meeting turned into a series of small groups.

Katie was heading towards Jude and Serenity when her mother cornered her, flourishing one of the leaflets. 'Isn't Lucy wonderful?' she said, pink with excitement. 'I was thrilled when she asked me to design a logo for GO. Do you like it?'

'Um,' Katie said. 'Yeah, sure. So how come she asked you?'

Half a second later, she realised that wasn't very flattering but luckily, her mum didn't seem to notice. 'We got talking in the street the other day and I happened to mention I'd studied art at university, so Lucy snapped me up, just like that,' she said proudly.

Katie studied the flowing line of the blue and white bird at the top of the leaflet. She was vaguely aware that her mum had done a degree in art and design but she'd had an even vaguer sense that Shona Brewster wasn't interested in that sort of thing these days. Apparently, she had been wrong about that – and maybe other things as well.

'What's Dad going to say?' she asked. 'He's always raving on about how the *Star* has to be objective. How will he feel about his wife getting involved with Lucy's campaign?'

'As a matter of fact, I don't feel any need to tell your father,' said Shona Brewster. 'Do you, Katie?'

While Katie hesitated, the room seemed to shudder slightly and tilt a few degrees to one side, as if she could actually feel her family realigning around her. For years, she had been following her father around and - *go on, be honest* - ignoring her mother. It should have taken another sixteen years to get to know her mum properly but, under Lucy's supervision, they seemed to have got through the entire process in three minutes flat.

And if Lucy Dove could achieve that, Katie found it easy to believe that she could change the hearts and minds of everyone in Lomond.

Nine

That night Serenity was sitting on a packing case in the store room above the Wittons' hardware shop, waiting for the moment when she could declare the Lomond main street officially empty. If she leaned forward, she could see Pat Fahey's new slogan, "Lucy Dove Makes It All White." Just as Serenity had feared, he'd gone straight back to the pub after the Happy Valley market and chalked the slogan onto the Royal George's blackboard. Katie had spotted it on her way home and organised an emergency meeting of the Lomond Wolf Guard.

'It'll be a cinch, Ren,' Jacinta Witton had kept insisting. 'Dad stocks this special paint that, like, repels graffiti. I can sneak up to the store room, keep a watch on the main street and when it's all clear – zap! I'll race over and rub out Pat's stupid slogans and slather it with anti-graffiti paint. It'll be cool fun. The only problem is, I won't be able to do it tonight, because of the party.'

'Huh?' said Serenity. 'Who's having a party on *Sunday*?'

'Um,' said Jacinta, looking untypically embarrassed. 'It's Paul Farr's twenty first – you know, Rita's brother. Apparently, today's the only day he could get up to Lomond, in between finishing his exams and taking off to spend summer in Europe. The Farris are so desperate to show off their prize-winning med student that they asked almost everyone in Lomond. Didn't you get an invite, Ren? I thought Rita said she put you and your mum on the list.'

Serenity shrugged. 'Caro was going on about some gig the other day but I wasn't listening. The Farris' property's out in the middle of nowhere, isn't it?'

'Exactly,' said Jacinta. 'None of us can get back into town from there – and even if we could, the entire party would know we'd gone missing at the same time as the blackboard was blitzed. But, um, Jude won't be at the party and -'

'That's not Rita's fault, Jude,' Merian cut in. 'She put your name on the list too but her dad crossed it off again. It's lucky, in a way. You can get your stepdad to drive you over to Lomond and –'

'No need,' Serenity said firmly. 'I'll tell Caro I'm going to the party and sleeping over at Jacinta's. That way, I can doss down in the store room for the night. I'm the leader of the Wolf Guard, after all. I ought to be in on the action.'

And besides, the revised plan would give her a chance to show Lomond she didn't approve of the way they treated the Martins. Now that she was leader of the Wolf Guard, her name seemed to be on the Popular Girls Register. If she started blacklisting parties where Jude wasn't invited, people might get the hint and start inviting Jude as well. Not that Jude seemed to care.

'Good one, Ren,' she said. 'I wasn't too keen on asking Shane to help us with anything dodgy. You'd think it'd be his kind of thing but he always fucks up somehow.'

So Serenity had got what she had longed for, ever since the guys had ambushed the Wolf Guard: a second chance at being heroic. It had felt strange, sneaking into the Wittons' place – exciting and scary and funny, all at once - but sitting beside the store room window for two and a half hours turned out to be less heroic than she had hoped. By half past ten, she was bored out of her brain. Nothing had happened for ages, indicating that everybody in Lomond was already out at the Farris' property.

It was time to make a move. She picked up the plastic bag Jacinta had given her, pulled on the balaclava Jude had lent her (saying, 'I borrowed it from Shane. Just don't ask why he owns one, okay?') and examined her reflection in the mirror. The woolly hat turned her head into a black blob with a pale eye-slit, like a cartoon version of Ned Kelly's helmet. Serenity giggled all the way down the stairs.

She was still hiccuping softly as she let herself out into the back lane, where she dodged a couple of stray cats, circled around some wheelie bins and hurried along another lane that led back to the main street. Light puddled under the street lamps and seeped across the road. Serenity flattened herself against a wall, peered round the corner of the video store and targeted the Royal George. She swallowed a mouthful of cool night air and felt her giggles evaporate.

'Okay,' she whispered. 'Here goes.'

A quick dash across the bright empty space between her and the pub. A quick swipe at the blackboard with a damp rag. Serenity levered the lid off the paint tin, dipped the brush in and covered the surface of the blackboard with long, quick strokes. She was dropping the brush and tin back into her plastic bag when a strip of even brighter light slid across the footpath.

The pub door was opening.

Lockie and Tommo were charging towards her.

There was no time to think. Serenity's feet had started to pound down the street, several seconds before her brain finished processing those two pieces of information. By the end of the block she'd come up with another piece of information. The label on the tin said that the paint took two hours to dry, so ideally she ought to keep Lockie and Tommo away from the pub for two hours. That seemed like a bit of a stretch but on second thoughts Serenity decided that even if the paint was only half-dry, the guys wouldn't be able to wipe it off, in which case an hour would probably be enough.

She began by leading the guys down the main street and out past the supermarket, to get them as far from the pub as possible while they all had their first wind. There was a dusty little park behind the supermarket, where kids could play while their parents did the shopping. Serenity danced Tommo and Lockie round the swings and slides, dodging behind trees and then revealing herself, as if they were playing a game of hide and seek. Eventually Tommo lost interest and tried to talk Lockie into going back to the pub, so Serenity had to almost let them catch her. At the last minute she threw the plastic bag at Lockie's feet and tripped him, dodged Tommo's frantic grab and took off again.

Where next? The part of Lomond that Serenity knew best was the area around Lucy's house but Tommo was already panting so hard that she didn't think he'd make it up the hill and there was an even chance that Lockie would stay with his mate, instead of chasing after her. She considered the possibility of following the route that the Wolf Guard took on patrol but the guys knew Lomond better than she did, which meant that they might be able to get ahead of her and box her in. So she veered to the right and wove in and out of lanes and courts and crescents for a while, until she nearly missed a No Through Road sign and realised she could've been cornered and headed back to the main street.

The last manoeuvre had brought her out uncomfortably close to the Royal George. Serenity pretended to stumble, in order to give Lockie and Tommo an incentive to keep going, then pounded off in the opposite direction, glancing at her watch as she ran. Forty minutes down, twenty to go. Not bad, especially when she was dealing with the two guys who were famous for having the shortest attention spans in Bayview High. If she could keep them on the trail for another ten minutes, then disappear into the scrub at the side of the road, it should take them at least another ten minutes to get back to the pub, which would be right on target.

But running away from the lights and into the darkness kept giving her a sense that she was falling, especially now that she was getting tired. She consulted her watch again – five more minutes – glanced over her shoulder, to make sure the guys were still behind her, and found herself staring into a world of absolute blackness. Serenity froze and freaked: realised that the combination of watch-checking and shoulder-glancing must've twisted the balaclava: tugged it away from her eyes and sped off, with Tommo and Lockie on her heels, closer than they'd ever been before.

Then headlights came tunneling through the darkness and a car pulled up on the other side of the road, its passenger door flapping wildly, as if it was waving to get her attention. An EA Ford. Lucy Dove's car. Serenity hesitated, briefly reluctant to be bailed out by Lucy again. But she'd done much better than last time, when she'd had trouble making it down the main street on her own, so she had nothing to prove and, come to think of it, there was nothing to gain from crouching in the darkness by the road until the guys gave up and went away. She raced over to the car and fell into the passenger seat and the Ford took off,

farting exhaust smoke at Tommo and Lockie. As she turned to say thanks, she drew in a sharp breath and stiffened.

‘Jesus!’ she said. ‘What are *you* doing in Lucy’s car?’

Scott shrugged. ‘She left her keys in the ignition. I’m not stealing it, only borrowing it.’

‘Yeah, but why?’ Serenity demanded, pulling off the balaclava.

‘You’re not stupid,’ he said. ‘I bet you can figure it out for yourself.’

Serenity tried but it wasn’t easy. ‘Are you saying you came back to rescue me from Tommo and Lockie?’ she asked. ‘How the hell could you know they’d be here?’

‘People talk,’ Scott reminded her. ‘In this case, Matt Fahey. He told me Tommo and Lockie got bored and took off, because my dad and Pat Fahey were going on about how we should’ve left some of the militia on guard at the pub. Matt can’t go against his dad, not directly, but he got me on the case.’ He laughed and added, ‘Matt’s totally fallen for Katie. I reckon he’d do anything for her.’

Serenity turned and looked over her shoulder, as if she was trying to locate the exact place on the main street where her moment of boredom had intersected with Tommo and Lockie’s moments of boredom. But all she could see was the warm steady glow of the streetlights and the cool shifting glimmer of the stars, bright against a dark background.

‘None of that explains how you knew *I* was here,’ she pointed out.

‘Like I said, people talk. Katie told me that part.’

‘Jesus, what’s the matter with her? Why tell *you*, of all people?’

‘Count yourself lucky,’ Scott said. ‘Tommo and Lockie reckoned that if they caught anyone messing with Pat Fahey’s blackboard, they’d beat them to a pulp. You’re still in one piece but poor old Katie’s got to hide behind the shearing sheds till I come back, so everyone’ll think we’re together – making up or making out, depending on whether they listen to gossip.’

Serenity didn’t like being reminded that Scott used to go out with Katie and she really didn’t like the idea of Scott and Katie making plans behind her back. She would have gone as far as feeling jealous, if jealousy hadn’t been an unreasonable way to feel about a guy you didn’t actually want. Instead, she stared out of the window and watched the road slide past like an out-of-control conveyor belt.

‘Where are we going?’ she asked, suddenly panicked.

‘Nowhere in particular,’ Scott said. ‘Might as well stop right here.’

The Ford’s wheels slewed and crunched gravel and came to a halt at the side of the road. Darkness flowed in and filled up every crevice of the car – a darker form of darkness than Serenity had ever seen in the city. A few seconds later some of it ebbed away and let a few faint lines of light shine through, marking out the shape of the windscreen and Scott’s profile and the surface of the Danville River, ten metres to the left of the car.

'That's better,' he said into the silence. 'We never get a chance to talk these days.'

'Yeah, well,' said Serenity. 'That's because we don't have anything to talk about.'

Scott's profile turned towards her. 'I think we do,' he said. 'I want to ask – not why you stopped speaking to me, because I reckon I know that – but how I can make it up to you.'

'No,' said Serenity, panicking again. 'Please. I'm serious. I really don't want to talk about it.'

'Why? Because of Jude?'

Serenity thought: *I could say, 'Yeah, you treated her like shit' and Scott would say, 'Give me a chance to do better' and I'd say, 'You don't deserve it' and he'd say, 'So you don't believe in forgiving people' and I'd say, 'Sure, but that's for Jude to decide, not me' and he'd say, 'In other words, you're telling me Jude's in charge of your love life' and I'd say, 'No, that'd be ridiculous': and then we'd kiss, like we do all the other times I've let myself have this fantasy.*

She said, 'If I answer that, I'll be talking about it and we've been talking long enough already. Take me back now.'

Some of the panic had got into her voice. She was scared Scott might take advantage of that but it seemed to have the opposite effect.

'Okay,' he said in a voice which sounded so distant that it was almost like no voice at all.

When he turned the key in the ignition, the noise of the engine made Serenity flinch. She stared out of the side window, pretending he didn't exist, and watched the conveyor belt roll on, carrying them back to Lomond. Scott drove through the streets round the river and pulled up by the lane that led to the back of the hardware store. There was an awkward moment, when Serenity's body tried to insist that it wanted to hug him goodbye, but she managed to force herself out of the car before turning to say, 'Thanks for all that.'

'Any time,' Scott said from the shadows. 'Good luck with the Wolf Guard and see you around.'

If he had been dropping her off at her own front door, Serenity might have gone inside, turned on the telly/found a book/put on her headphones and immersed herself in other people's stories and emotions, until she started to fall asleep. But Caro thought she was having a sleepover at the Wittons' place, so she had to go up to the store room and stretch out on an old air mattress that Jacinta had salvaged, surrounded by towers of boxes, breathing thick dusty summer air and illuminated by lurid orange light from the street lamps.

Since there was nothing else to do, she thought about Scott, going over everything they had said to each other, until she had practically memorised the entire conversation. On the sixth time around, she found herself pausing at the point where Scott had told her that Matt would do anything for Katie. As she repeated his words for the seventh time, she thought she caught sight of a

hidden message. She went over it again, step by step, to see whether she had got it right.

1. Scott thought Matt loved Katie so much that he would be prepared to go against his father.
2. When Scott came to rescue her from Tommo and Lockie, he was going against his dad *and* his mates in the militia.
3. Therefore, Scott had actually been telling her that he loved her even more than Matt loved Katie.

Serenity shivered in the stuffy room. One minute she felt awed by the idea of being loved that much and next minute she was thinking, almost indignantly, 'What did I do to deserve it?' She tried to distract herself by thinking about Lucy's campaign but inevitably she found herself thinking about Scott again. All the arguments against having anything to do with him were still in place but now that she knew Scott was working on it, maybe it would be all right to meet him halfway. Well, not literally halfway – like, she didn't want to be seen making a move towards him – but if he happened to ask one more time if they could talk, she might at least agree to have a conversation with him. That wouldn't commit her to anything ...

Serenity sighed and shifted around on the bumpy mattress and went on worrying about the campaign and Scott. There was only one thing she felt completely sure of. If she had still been living in the city, she wouldn't have had to deal with any of this. And yet, for some reason, she couldn't bring herself to wish she was there, rather than here: not any more.

That was Scott Sterne's fault as well.

Orion was spending the day in his dad's taxi again, because he'd had another bad asthma attack – they tended to come in threes. He and Finn were cruising down the main street, on their way back from delivering a visiting city nephew to the nursing home, when they saw Mick Bates outside the post office with a sheet of white paper shivering in his copper-coloured hand.

'Good news or bad news?' Finn called, pulling into the curb.

'The best,' Mick breathed. 'Just found this in our post office box. I got a grant from the Arts Council, Finn. A one-year job, they reckon, but we're used to living on the cheap, so it'll cover two years easy.'

The piece of paper was still rattling like a door in a high wind. Finn got out of the taxi and took it away from Mick, folded it carefully and tucked it into his pocket.

'Come on, mate, I'll shout you a drink,' he said. 'That'll set you right *and* start the celebrations.'

Mick said something about taking a bottle back to Happy Valley but Finn told him they could do that any day of the week. He hauled Orion out of the taxi and they escorted Mick across the road to the Royal George. The late afternoon drinkers turned to stare as they came in and Finn gave them the thumbs-up sign.

'Guess what?' he said. 'My mate Mick's had a stroke of luck. A year's funding from the government, to work on those beaut pots of his.'

'Nice for some,' said Pat Fahey. 'Wish the government'd pay me to sit on my backside for a year.'

'Picked the wrong parents, didn't you?' Norm Kelly said. 'If you were an Abo or a chink, you'd be on easy street. It's like they said in that leaflet you showed me. None of the money goes to the real Aussies these days.'

'You can't get much more real than forty thousand years of Australian ancestors,' Finn joked – although at the same time he changed course and steered them into a corner, murmuring, 'No point asking for trouble. If I'd realised Pat had it in for Murriss, as well as Asians, I would've bought that bottle instead but I'm blown if I'm going to let those idiots have it all their own way. We'll have to choke down a drink now, if that's all right with you, mate.'

When Mick shrugged resignedly, Orion made a beeline for the seat with the best view. He had never been inside a pub before and he wanted to make the most of it. The room smelt of yeast and sweat. There were pictures of dogs in top hats on the walls, a carpet that looked like floral cardboard and a massive wooden bar across the back of the room. Half a dozen men were drinking at the bar and a dozen more were standing over by the door or sitting at the other tables.

The only woman in the place was Shelley Martin, who was behind the bar, serving beers. Orion noticed Pat Fahey wince as she thumped a clutch of glasses down on the bar's lovingly polished surface, although he didn't tick her off, possibly because Shane and Apeman were standing near by, waiting for her to get off work. Instead, Pat averted his eyes and ordered Cam Parker to carry a carton of spirit out to the store room, while Shelley wiped up the spilt beer and dropped the cloth into the ice bucket.

Orion sighed contentedly and watched his dad walk across to the bar, aiming for the gap between Shane Martin and Rob Sterne. Rob had positioned himself at the exact centre of the bar, where he was doing his lord of the manor act with Dave Conway and Norm Kelly as his lackeys. Finn fended off Apeman's attempts to sell him a (probably stolen) doormat and got a couple of beers from Shelley. When he returned to the table, he tried to start a discussion about art but Mick seemed a bit distracted and Orion was more interested in eavesdropping on the pub talk.

'Should've sent Scotty to a private school, I suppose, but I wanted him to grow up here, where he belongs,' Rob Sterne was saying. 'Trouble is, the Bayview school's run by all those Happy Valley losers who want to turn our kids into fucking hippies. Mind you, it's a hard call these days. They reckon half the

kids in private schools come from Hong Kong or Singapore now – and if you give your kids a taste of city life, half of them don't come back, anyway.'

'Yeah, you can't even rely on family ties any more,' Norm said. 'Look at that aunt of mine. Stupid old cow. I needed the cash and she -'

Rob slammed down his half-full glass, making Norm jump. 'You're not the only one,' he said. 'We all need cash. Hard to keep up your position without it. We need a bit of respect too. Those city politicians, they'd like to forget we exist. There's no one standing up for the farmers now.'

'There's Lucy Dove,' Pat Fahey said on his way past. 'She's all right. She listens to you. Got a good mind, for a woman. Sat down with me and explained about jokes sometimes being a problem. That's more than those snooty bastards like Finn and my bloody son ever did.'

Norm Kelly's eyes flicked towards him, shiny with malice. 'You're going to be in a bind on Saturday, aren't you, mate?' he said. 'Can't vote for lovely Lucy and your old pal Doug. Which one are you going to dump?'

Pat Fahey hurried on, without stopping to answer, and Norm's eyes flicked back to Rob Sterne, who had started to shift from one foot to the other like a bull pawing the ground. Interesting, thought Orion. Norm was obviously getting at Rob in some way - but how? He tried to remember whether anything unusual had happened lately and came up with the GO meeting on Sunday. Rob had been there and, come to think of it, Lucy had gone out to the Sternes' property last week.

Oh yes, very interesting. It looked as though Pat Fahey wasn't the only person in Lomond who was making a choice between Lucy Dove and Doug Sterne. That might explain the level of tension in the pub. Orion wasn't particularly sensitive to atmosphere but he couldn't help noticing that everybody was watching Rob out of the corners of their eyes. Mick and Finn were actually pacing themselves, drinking when Rob drank and making sure the level of their beers stayed exactly the same as his. Norm Kelly seemed to be the only person who wasn't waiting to see what Rob would do.

'Poor old Pat,' he said with a fake sigh. 'He doesn't realise he's making a fool of himself over my niece. Everyone knows it's those sheilas of Lucy's who've been monkeying with his precious blackboard.'

'Is that so?' Dave Conway asked, frowning. 'My Lockie said something about it but I told him Lucy Dove was better than that. I can't be doing with people who won't front up to you when they've got a bone to pick. If Lucy set those girls onto Pat in secret, I might have another think about who to vote for.'

'There's a lot of people starting to feel that way,' said Cam Parker, joining them at the bar. 'I mean, it's a free country, isn't it? Pat ought to be able to write what he wants on his own bloody pub, without some politically correct American chick sticking her nose in.'

Norm nodded and Dave nodded and all three of them looked at Rob. If there had been a tension barometer in the bar, Orion was sure it would have risen five degrees in the next five seconds. He was holding his breath, waiting to

see whether Rob would defend Lucy or agree with his mates, when he heard an insistent ringing, like a fire alarm. Rob Sterne pulled out his mobile, listened and scowled and shoved it back into his pocket.

'You'd think the wife'd be used to farm life by now - but no, everything's still a crisis for her,' he said. 'Gotta go. See you later.'

He turned away, leaving his unfinished beer on the bar. Saved by the bell, Orion thought with a private grin. There was a sudden movement beside him and he looked round, to see Mick sliding his chair back and checking the door into the yard. But Cam Parker had got there first. He was leaning in the doorway, arms folded across his chest, watching Norm and Dave and Pat advance on their table.

Norm took an extra step forward. 'G'day, Finn,' he said, acting as the spokesman. 'We reckon your mate ought to stand drinks all round, on account of him creaming all that money off the taxes we pay.'

The tension barometer hit an all-time high. Orion realised that Rob Sterne hadn't caused the tension, after all. In fact, he might even have been keeping the peace, accidentally if not on purpose. No chance of that now. Norm was standing over them, rolling onto the balls of his feet to make himself look taller, while Cam flexed his hands in the background, cracking the knuckles with a sound like gunshot.

'Lighten up, Norm,' Finn said, in a last attempt at casual. 'Mick's an artist. In other words, flat broke.'

'You really believe that?' asked Dave Conway. 'Don't be a sucker, mate. That's what the Abos want you to think. Pat's got this leaflet that shows how they use our tax dollars doing studies to say they need more money.'

It was the sort of illogical thinking Orion might have expected from Lockie but he'd assumed that Lockie's dad would know better. He was about to explain that Dave was confusing the specific with the general – for instance, Mick didn't get a share of all the money that went into Aboriginal programmes, any more than Dave got a share of all the tax cuts for white businesses – but just in time, it occurred to him that Mick might prefer to do his own explaining. When he turned to check, Mick seemed to be having a discussion with his dad, all in body language, about how to deal with Norm and the others.

'Fair enough,' Finn said, nodding to Mick and pushing his chair back. 'You've made your point, Norm. You don't want us here. I can relate to that. Look, we're going.'

'No, you're not,' Norm said obstinately. 'Not till your mate pays for that round.'

'All right,' Finn said. 'Under the table, Orion.'

It was such an unexpected thing to say that Orion obeyed without question. As he slid down from his chair and sat on the floor with his back to the wall, Cam Parker took a long stride forward and twisted his hand into the neck of Finn's windcheater. While Finn gagged and struggled, Mick jumped up and tried to prise Cam's fingers loose.

'Get your hands off me, you black bastard,' Cam roared: and the fight was on.

Orion was pleased to see that Finn and Mick did plenty of damage in the first few minutes. His dad always said he'd had lots of practice at street fighting, when he was younger and wilder, and it looked like Mick must've gone through the same training programme. They didn't just throw punches at random - they both knew when to aim high or low and how to trip, bounce, sidestep and generally confuse their opponents.

But the numbers were against them. Although the rest of the blokes in the pub hadn't joined in, it was clear that they were on Pat Fahey's side. Mick and Finn couldn't make a getaway dash to the front door, because a dozen pairs of long legs were stretched out, blocking the exit. For once in his life, Orion was actually relieved when Tommo and Lockie walked in, wearing their militia uniforms and shouting, 'All right, break it up.'

'Good to see you,' gasped Finn. 'I haven't been a great supporter of the militia, because I could never see the need for it, but now -'

He broke off as Tommo grabbed his arm and wrenched it up behind his back. Lockie joined him and the two of them started to drag Finn towards the door, so fast that his foot snagged on a passing chair. He crashed to the floor and lay there winded. Tommo and Lockie examined him thoughtfully, decided he was down for the count and turned away. Orion was wedging himself more securely into his corner when his dad lifted his head, just high enough to look him in the eye.

'Can you see how Mick's doing?' he croaked.

Orion leaned out between the table legs, gulped and ducked back to safety. 'Not great,' he reported. 'It's four against one already - and Tommo and Lockie are still on their way. Mick's bleeding and everything.'

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph! I've stuffed up good and proper,' Finn groaned. 'But an Irishman never admits he's beaten. Time to even the odds.' He levered himself onto his hands and knees and crawled off, looking back to say with belated fatherliness, 'Keep an eye on the door, Orion, and make a dash for the taxi, if you get the chance.'

He didn't wait to see whether Orion was going to obey him this time. Orion didn't bother to argue but no way was he leaving before the fight was over. He had never really liked action movies but real life fights were turning out to be way more exciting, partly because you didn't know how they were going to end and partly because ... well, because they were real.

He settled himself more comfortably and watched Finn hook his hand round Cam Parker ankle and tug hard. Cam toppled over, landing on Norm, which took two of them out of the fight in one go. Finn smiled fiercely and surged to his feet, fists flailing. Lockie Conway went down straight away, followed by his dad - which was odd, Orion realised, because Finn hadn't hit Dave Conway yet. He blinked and saw Shane Martin standing in the place where Lockie had been, blowing at his knuckles and dusting them on his shirt.

'Us Happy Valley lot gotta stick together,' he said.

Then he swung round and walloped Pat Fahey, while Apeman thumped Tommo from behind. As Tommo collapsed, Cam picked himself up and came lurching towards them. Finn charged him, yelling '*Erin go bragh*' and '*Caid mille failte*' and a bunch of other words that could've been Irish but might just have been something he had made up on the spot. He sent Cam flying and looked down at a complicated tangle of arms and legs – Pat Fahey and the Conways, down but not out, still laying into Mick.

Three against one was better than six against one but it was still patently unfair. Orion decided someone ought to do something about it. He wriggled between the chair legs and headed for his father's side but, just before he got there, Finn swung away to collar Norm Kelly.

'Steady on,' Norm whined. 'You don't want to hit *me*, Finny. Us Irishmen gotta stick together.'

Finn looked at him for a long moment. 'Gah,' he said in disgust. 'Even with the battle-madness of the Irish heroes on me, I can't bring myself to punch a man with grey hair who's terrified out of his wits.'

He released Norm and let him scuttle off through the door that led out to the toilets. While he was wiping his hands on the seat of his pants, Lockie Conway jumped him but Finn bent forward and flipped Lockie over his head. Orion dodged past them, took a detour to avoid the floor fight and hoisted himself onto one of the bar stools.

'Shelley,' he said, 'you're the only sensible person here. Could you stop them from killing Mick, please?'

Shelley Martin ran a hand through her hair. 'Too bad,' she said, tugging at the blonde spikes. 'I kind of like watching the idiots get stuck into each other but since it's you that's asking – and since Mick Bates is the one who'll benefit – yeah, why not? Here, I'll show you how my mum settles dog fights.'

She climbed onto the counter, picked up the ice bucket and threw a mixture of icy water and melting ice cubes across the crowd. Orion wanted to stay and applaud but a sensible voice at the back of his brain told him to find Finn and make a dash for the back door. They collected Mick on their way, raced past the toilets where Norm was hiding and skidded out into a back lane that led them around to the main street.

'This way,' Finn panted. 'We can go back for our cars later. Right now, we need sanctuary.'

'Sanctuary?' Mick gasped. 'Some sort of whitefella business, eh?'

'Religion, mate. I'll explain later. But trust me, it works.'

The Caff was almost empty. When the three of them burst through the door, Daniel Matheson looked up from the book he was reading and Frank Carretto put down the cup he was wiping.

'Finn,' he said with a resigned sigh. 'What are you up to now?' Then he took a second look and said, 'Mick, you're a mess. How -? No, don't tell me. The Keep Lomond White brigade caught up with you, right?'

Daniel abandoned his book and came hurrying over. 'Where does it hurt?' he asked.

'Everywhere,' Mick said with a swollen grin. 'But I bet the other blokes are hurting worse.'

Orion looked on in surprise as Daniel stretched Mick's arm out and felt his way along the bone, then patted his ribs carefully. Apparently, along with all his other skills, his bodyguard was an amateur paramedic.

'No breaks, at any rate,' he reported. 'Can you get us some water, Frank?'

While he dipped a sponge into the basin that Frank was holding and wiped the mask of blood from Mick's face, Daniel started to apologise for what the blokes in the pub had done. Orion couldn't see the point – Raewyn said white guilt was counterproductive – but Mick didn't seem to mind. Meanwhile Finn was marching up and down between the gingham tables, denouncing everyone and everything, and Frank was staring into the basin, as if he could read the future in the swirls of blood sinking slowly down through the water.

'This is a bad day for Lomond,' he said.

Mick shrugged. 'Ah, don't get too carried away, mate. It's not the first time blackfellas and whitefellas've come to blows around here.'

'How do you know?' asked Daniel. 'I thought there weren't any local Aborigines left.'

'They said that about Tasmania too,' Mick pointed out. 'But we're not that easy to get rid of. Back when I first moved here, there were still a few people in the farms outside Bayview who remembered the old stories. Some of them whitefella settlers wrote about it in their diaries as well and a few of them even tried to stop the worst parts from happening. You're not all bad, y'know. Look at the way Finn hoed into those mongrels, eh? And you fixed me up afterwards, Danny. You got a real professional touch. Planning to be a doctor, by any chance?'

Daniel blushed and nodded. Orion was about to ask why he'd kept so quiet about it, when he heard the clink of knuckles on glass and looked round to see two faces squashed against the window. Tommo and Lockie. Frank tilted the basin, to show them the bloodstained water, and they made gagging sounds and backed away. He bowed his head and carried the basin over to the sink. As he poured out the water, as steadily and ceremoniously as a priest officiating at mass, some drops of water splashed back at him, leaving red stains on his white shirt.

Outside the window Tommo gagged again – for real this time, because seconds later he was doubled up over the gutter. Orion watched him spew, feeling suddenly weightless, as if a huge load had just rolled off his shoulders. Ever since he had been moved up into Year 11, Tommo and Lockie had been getting at him, one way or another, but their biggest threat had been all the hints they had dropped about what they could do if they let themselves go. Now Orion had witnessed real violence for the first time and frankly, he thought he'd coped

way better than Tommo. He had a feeling he would never be truly scared of the bullies again.

‘This is so cool, Dan,’ he said. ‘Don’t you think it’s cool? I reckon it’d have to be one of the best afternoons of my life.’

Daniel had to put up with Orion describing the pub fight, blow by blow, all the way back to Happy Valley. Then he walked into the house to find that Serenity had decided to have one last shot at convincing Caro that Lucy Dove was the best thing since sliced bread. That discussion clearly wasn’t going to end well. He dropped his library book on the table and went straight to the TV, although he couldn’t resist eavesdropping on the conversation behind him. For a while Caro managed to keep her mouth shut and make humming noises but, after Serenity had raved on for five consecutive minutes, she started to argue back.

‘Listen, I’m happy to admit Lucy’s a good speaker,’ she said. ‘I just wish she’d say a bit more about what she’s actually planning to do.’

‘Come off it, Mum,’ said Serenity. ‘You were there at the market. Lucy’s going to fix all the stuff she was talking about then.’

‘Yeah, but how?’ Caro persisted. ‘That’s what I want to know.’

Serenity groaned. ‘You can’t stop criticising, can you?’ she said. ‘There’s no point trying to explain anything to you.’

It was the same old argument. Daniel had sat through it half a dozen times before but this time he decided to intervene. He leaned round the side of his armchair and cleared his throat, to get their attention.

‘Guess what?’ he called. ‘There was a story on the news just now about this old tug boat, packed with refugees, that came all the way from China and landed on the Queensland coast yesterday morning. The reporter reckons it’s part of a people-smuggling racket – like, the Chinese guys hand over their life savings, because they’re convinced they have these fabulous jobs waiting for them. Funny, isn’t it? We think things are tough here but other people are prepared to risk their lives to get a chance at washing dishes in some Sydney restaurant.’

He was sure he had hit on a brilliant way to change the subject but Serenity and Caro just stared at him and went on arguing. Daniel flopped back in his chair and hit the remote, changing channels in time for a current affairs program on some riots in Indonesia. The footage of raised batons and bleeding faces reminded him of the pub fight. He leaned round the side of his chair again.

‘Guess what?’ he said. ‘Some of the guys at the George tried to beat up Mick Bates.’

This time he got a better response. Caro commandeered the phone and rang the Bates’s house, while Serenity went next door to help Raewyn Casey decide what sort of spin GO ought to put on the incident. Daniel felt ninety per cent sure that she wouldn’t come back before she went into Lomond for the Wolf

Guard patrol, so he figured he was entitled to declare the argument officially over and settle down with his library book. He tiptoed back to the table, keeping a close watch on his aunt, who was still questioning Mick's wife. As he reached out towards the book, Caro said, 'Well, that's a relief. Thanks, Jackie', put the phone down and fixed him with a meaningful stare.

'Is that one of your military history books?' she asked. 'While I was vacuuming your room the other day, I saw all those books about war on your shelves. Don't you ever read anything else?'

Ever since he had told her why he had run away, straight after his parents' visit, Caro had been clucking over him whenever she got the chance. Luckily, this time she had also given him a quick and easy way to reassure her.

'Yeah, sure,' he said, acting more indignant than he really felt. 'I've been trying to track down this local history – Lomond from the 1860s to the 1960s. It was in the Bayview library catalogue but I could never find it on the shelves and in the end I had to ask one of the librarians. She told me it was in the bookmobile, which is parked outside The Caff on Wednesdays, so I went over to Lomond this arvo – and look, here it is.'

Local history was the sort of thing adults liked kids to take an interest in. Sure enough, five minutes later Caro had settled Daniel in one of the cane chairs on the verandah with a jug of homemade lemon cordial and a bowl of Greek salad beside him and the local history book on his lap. The sun warmed his bare legs like a superlight blanket. He opened the book and began to read about the settlement of Lomond.

The writer had used lots of extracts from the early settlers' journals – the ones Mick had been talking about that afternoon, which was a weird coincidence. At first Daniel liked hearing the settlers' voices but after a while they started to feel too immediate and urgent, as if the whole story was still being acted out somewhere in the Lomond valley. When he tried to put the book aside for a moment, to get a sense of perspective, he found he couldn't stop turning the pages. He felt hypnotised and horrified, as if he was watching an earthquake or a riot or some other sort of disaster taking place in real time on TV ...

1872. Thomas Danville, son of the explorer George Danville, rides out on a tour around his property with one of his stockmen and comes across half a dozen foundered sheep, legs broken but still alive, as though someone was planning to come back for them. Beside the seventh sheep, he sees what he describes in his journal as "a horde of naked black savages". It's a shock. This particular group of Aborigines moves round a long circuit and this is the first time they've turned up in the Lomond valley since the first herd of sheep were driven down from the plateau.

When Thomas and the stockman try to chase the Aboriginal men away from the sheep, one man throws a spear that wounds the stockman in the thigh. Thomas shoots two of the men on the spot and rides off to consult with his nearest neighbours, the Doves and the Sternes. They get up a hunting party, follow the other men to the bank of the Danville River and massacre them.

On their return they find the rest of the group sheltering under a cliff, near the edge of the Dove property. Since it's not sporting to shoot women and children, they give them flour laced with rat poison instead. A Bayview settler, who befriended the local Aborigines later on, records that some of the Lomond valley group didn't eat the damper and escaped. But, although they remembered, they never returned. The Lomond valley had become a bad place, to be avoided by their people forever after ...

The chapter ended and Daniel finally managed to look away. He gazed out across the navy blue surface of the Pacific, wondering what Winston Churchill would say about all of that. Churchill had never pulled his punches about the American Civil War and in a way the conflict between the settlers and the Aborigines was a civil war as well – at any rate, it was two kinds of Australians fighting together.

On the other hand, the American Civil War had a beginning and an end, starting with a formal declaration of hostilities and ending with peace talks and terms of surrender. Even at its bloodiest, it had followed the established rules of war, at least some of the time. But this Australian Civil War was a secret war, where the white settlers could get away with stuff like attacking non-combatants, because they hadn't openly declared war, which meant the Aboriginal peoples never even knew there was a war on until it was too late.

Daniel sighed regretfully. It looked as though his war analogy wasn't going to work, after all, which was a pity, because he knew more about war than ... whatever this was. He was still looking for the right description when the words "secret war" came back into his head, reminding him of Norm Kelly's secret armies. That sounded more like his sort of thing. If he wanted to understand Lomond properly, it would be a good idea to read up on the secret armies as well.

Although, on second thoughts, he decided to wait till he had recovered from the impact of the settlers' journals. Even the most dedicated witness couldn't really be expected to tackle all the dodgiest parts of a town's history at once.

As Daniel dropped the local history book beside his chair, Katie was walking down from Dove House to the main street, working the crowd. She waved to a woman lifting bags of groceries from her car boot (the CWA vice-president), smiled at a grey-haired man weeding a flower bed (Dr Sterne's campaign accountant) and generally put on an act designed to prove that Katie Brewster, GO representative, had nothing to worry about.

It was true what they said about a day being a long time in politics. This time yesterday Katie would have practically floated along the main street, getting a lift out of being associated with Lucy Dove. Now, when she turned the corner and saw a bunch of guys on the corner outside the Royal George, her heart sank and she had to force her feet to keep moving. The pub was so packed that

people were overflowing onto the footpath and Katie was pretty sure she knew why. As she circled around the guys, she heard a few sentence fragments that confirmed her guess.

‘... show the bastards they had it coming ...’

‘... our taxes ...’

‘... seven great blokes who did it for all of us ...’

Her fists clenched so hard that her fingers almost fused together. The pub fight had only happened a few hours ago but already people were changing the story around, to make it fit their own ideas. It made her mad to see Pat Fahey and the others being treated like heroes, especially when half of them were – or had been – GO supporters. Even worse, as she got closer, she spotted Doug Sterne in the middle of the crowd, making the most of this chance to get back into the spotlight. Katie pulled out her notebook and turned towards him.

‘Dr Sterne, do you have any comments on the fight in the pub?’ she called. ‘You know, the one where seven guys made an unprovoked attack on an Aboriginal man.’

Doug Sterne glanced at the blokes around him. ‘That’s the media for you – or the media’s daughter, in this case,’ he said with a jolly laugh. ‘Always determined to be politically correct, even if it means twisting the facts. This business about “an unprovoked attack”, Katie - it all depends on what you mean by provocation. We can’t go back to the days of the White Australia Policy, even if we wanted to, but we *do* still need to be careful about who we allow into our pubs and our towns and, indeed, our country. I think the Royal George Seven were trying to get that message across – maybe not in the best possible way but very sincerely, all the same. And I think you’ll find a lot of people agree with them.’

‘Can I quote you on that?’ Katie asked, as she scribbled down the last few words.

Doug chuckled. ‘Feel free. I’m only sorry it won’t appear in print until the day of the election.’

She pocketed her notebook and walked off, still furious. This time, however, she was angry with herself for forgetting that the *Star* wouldn’t come out till Saturday – something Doug had clearly worked out in advance, before he made a speech that might have sounded a bit too close to racism for some of his supporters. She crossed the road, to escape the catcalls and laughter from his inner circle, and found herself looking into The Caff.

The sight of its white walls and Christmas tinsel, reinforced by the multilayered smells wafting towards her, made her realise that the confrontation with Doug had tired her out. Maybe a cup of coffee or a takeaway pizza would give her the energy that she would need to proofread thirty pages of the *Lomond Star*. She pushed the door open and saw Lucy Dove at the counter, ordering four large capricciosa pizzas.

‘Supper for tonight’s planning session,’ Lucy was saying. ‘All the GO candidates are meeting at my place. I thought I had enough food in the house but

the girls from the Wolf Guard were there this afternoon and they're as hungry as – well, wolves.'

Frank Carretto reached for a piece of dough and spun it on one finger like a frisbee. 'How's things?' he asked.

'Good,' said Lucy. 'We picked up two hundred new members for Going Overboard at the market last weekend. Okay, some of them were tourists who insisted on joining, even though the girls explained that GO's only a local organization. But if we can keep it up, everyone in Bayview and Lomond will belong to GO in the end.'

Katie stopped, just inside the door, and let a new idea settle into her brain. Somewhere along the line, without any actual discussion, Going Overboard seemed to have turned into the name of a political party, instead of just the slogan for Lucy's campaign. It made perfect sense, of course. Now she thought about it, she could see that the stuff Lucy was talking about applied to the whole of Australia, not just to Lomond – although Frank seemed to be a bit more sceptical.

'Hang about, Lucy,' he said. 'You're not planning to recruit *everyone*, are you?'

'Why not?' she asked, widening her eyes. 'Even Uncle Norm's a GO member now.' She grinned and added, 'Okay, I admit Norm signed up because I'm paying Shane Martin to work for him three days a week. He thinks that proves I want to invest in his property, which gets him off my back for the moment – but actually I hired Shane so the Martins could afford to let Jude leave The Caff and work as my assistant.'

'Interesting,' Frank said. 'You've got everybody's number, Lucy. You're turning into a real politician, aren't you?'

Lucy frowned. 'It sounds like you don't approve. Why, Frank? You wanted to be a priest, didn't you? – and priests are supposed to convert people too.'

'Nah, that's not my style,' Frank told her. 'I was never going to be the missionary sort of priest, just the sort that goes round picking up the pieces.'

'But I feel exactly the same,' Lucy said. 'Lomond's in pieces right now and I'm going to put all the pieces back together. You know those lines on the base of the Statue of Liberty?

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me."*

That's what I want, Frank.'

Her hand lifted as she spoke, grasping for something Katie couldn't see. With her short hair spiked like a crown, her white dress pleating into bright folds and her hand holding an invisible torch, Lucy looked like the Statue of Liberty herself, stepping down from her pedestal into the modern world. In the doorway

of The Caff, Katie rubbed her eyes, dazzled by invisible torchlight, and then turned and walked away. No need for caffeine or junk food, not any more. Lucy Dove had just given her all the energy she needed.

The *Star* office was empty. She sat down in her dad's chair and read through the printouts of classified ads, checking for typos. An hour later she noticed that the words had stopped making sense, which meant it was time for a break. Instead of doing exercises or reading the front page story, the way she usually did, she switched on the computer and ran a search on "White Australia Policy", to see what Doug Sterne had been talking about.

It was a revelation. Apparently, back during the changeover between the nineteenth and twentieth century, racism hadn't just been something a bit embarrassing (like having a phobia about cats) or old-fashioned (like not understanding about gays) – it was something people actually felt proud of. Three websites later Katie had jotted down a page of quotes in her messy shorthand.

A guy called C.H. Pearson, who had been the education minister for Victoria, said in 1893, "We are guarding the last part of the world in which the higher races can live freely." John Forrest, the premier of Western Australia and one of the first cabinet members in the federal parliament, said in 1898, 'It is of no use to shut our eyes to the fact that there is a great feeling all over Australia against the introduction of coloured persons. It goes without saying that we do not like to talk about it, but it is so.'

And in 1901 Alfred Deakin, one of the main people behind the federation of Australia, said, "The unity of Australia is nothing, if that does not imply a united race." The new federal parliament had got to work straight away and passed a series of laws that became known as the White Australia Policy – most notably the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901, which said that anyone who wanted to come to Australia could be asked to take a fifty word dictation test, with a special secret instruction that

All aboriginal inhabitants of Africa, Asia and Polynesia should be subjected to the test... In the case of White Races, the test will be applied only under special circumstances..

'Awesome,' Katie said, staring down at her notes.

All of that stuff had happened more than a hundred years ago. She was prepared to bet that none of the guys outside the pub, with the exception of Doug Sterne, knew anything about it. And yet there they were - acting like they needed to guard Lomond because it was the last part of the world that still had unity of race; feeling like they were entitled to freak about people whose skin was a different colour than theirs, even though they weren't prepared to talk about it, any more than their ancestors had been prepared to talk about it a hundred years earlier.

'Awesome,' she repeated. 'At school they make it sound as if history was over and done with but maybe that's not as true as they think.'

The phone rang beside her and she automatically reached for it. 'G'day,' said a slightly startled voice. 'I wasn't sure anyone would be there. Thanks for picking up. I just want to ask a couple of questions about this election campaign of yours.'

'Uh-huh,' Katie said. 'And who are you?'

'Good question,' the voice said with a laugh in it. 'Nice to know I'm talking to a professional. My name's Marshall and I do a lot of freelance work for *The Australian*. You can check my credentials online, if you like. I'm ringing because someone from – hang on, let me check my notes – yep, someone from the *Bayview Mirror* contacted me to ask whether I'd be interested in a story about racism in country elections.'

'That's Lisa Walden,' Katie said indignantly. 'Her editor wants the next mayor to come from Bayview, so he's trying to make out that Lucy Dove condones racism, but she totally doesn't.'

'I see,' said Marshall. 'What's the real story, then?'

He sounded genuinely interested. Katie found herself talking for the next fifteen minutes, prompted by the occasional question, until she had told Marshall almost everything she knew about GO.

'You're right, that's not a shock-horror example of racism,' Marshall agreed, rather regretfully. He cheered up and added, 'But the campaign sounds like a great story in itself. I might follow up on it.'

'Um,' Katie said guiltily. 'Would you mind not quoting me? My dad – he's the editor of the *Star* – has some pretty strong opinions about how far his family ought to go in getting involved with local politics.'

'That's fine by me,' Marshall said. 'I just need some phone numbers, to get me started. Don't worry, you won't be putting anyone on the spot. They can always say no, if they don't want to talk.'

He ran through a list of key players that showed how closely he had been listening. Katie raided the *Star's* files and read out their numbers out to him.

'This is excellent,' he said, when she had finished. 'You've been a real help. It's a shame about that story on racism in the sticks, because it would've been a surefire hit. Most of our readers are city people and they like to believe racism only happens out in the country. But the information you've given me ought to be just as good, once I work it up into ...'

He went on talking but Katie couldn't hear him any more. She was too caught up in the decision she would have to make in a few seconds' time. Should she dob Doug Sterne in to the national press and risk a big fight with her dad, if he thought she had stepped over the line? Or should she keep her mouth shut and risk letting Doug Sterne win the election on the racism vote?

There was no contest, not really. Katie took a deep breath and said, 'Actually, I could give you a "racism in the sticks" story too, if you like.'

She talked for another fifteen minutes, dictating her transcript of Doug's impromptu speech to Marshall and filling in the background. 'He said it in front of

witnesses, so he can't deny it,' she ended up. 'But he's so in love with himself that if you ask him the right way, he'll probably repeat it all to you anyway.'

'Thanks for the tip,' Marshall said. 'Your dad's lucky to have a home-grown cadet like you.'

Katie laughed. 'Oh, I'm not employed on the paper,' she said. 'I've still got another year of school to go.'

'You could've fooled me,' he said. 'As a matter of fact, you did. Well, Katie, if you're looking for a cadetship on one of the big city papers in a few years' time, let me know and I'll put in a word for you. Now, can you give me Dr Sterne's phone number, please, and maybe some of those witnesses as well?'

After a compliment like that, Katie would have done more than finding a few names and phone numbers. She was reading out Dave Conway's number, when the door opened and her father came in.

'Sorry, gotta go. Goodbye and good luck,' she said, putting the phone down.

'What was that about?' Dick Brewster asked. 'I didn't know Dave Conway had his own fan club.'

He looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to carry on the joke. As Katie looked back, her stomach started to churn. She had never lied to her dad before and she wasn't about to start now but she wished she'd had a bit more time to think it through.

'A guy from *The Australian* phoned,' she said finally. 'I told him what Dr Sterne said about the pub fight.'

'I see,' said her father. 'And what *did* Doug say?'

'That we – meaning people in Lomond – couldn't go back to the White Australia Policy but we didn't want brown people in our pubs,' she said through a tight throat.

Her dad stared. 'And you passed that on to a reporter from *The Australian*? Why the hell did you do that? You know what the nationals'll do with it. They love making us look like racist rednecks.'

Now that her father had raised his voice, Katie found she didn't feel as scared any more. 'Yeah, Marshall warned me,' she said. 'That's why I told him – because I knew *The Australian* would print the story. I don't see why Dr Sterne should be allowed to get away with that sort of thing.'

'I'll give you one good reason,' Dick Brewster said. 'A quarter of the *Star's* annual expenses comes from the Sterne family trust. Rob and Doug make a regular donation.'

Katie gaped. 'They do *what*? I don't believe it! You mean that, all the time you were telling me I was too involved with GO to write about it, the Sternes were paying you to write nice stuff about them?'

'It's not the same thing,' her father said. 'You were just smitten. I've had years of experience in handling conflicts of interest, because the *Star's* had outside funding for a long time. It's not as one-sided as you think, either. The Doves have always matched the Sternes' donation, dollar for dollar.'

'And that's supposed to make me feel better?' she asked. 'So the two most powerful families in Lomond are paying to control the news – so what? It still doesn't look like freedom of the press to me.'

'All right then, try looking at it this way,' said her father. 'Ever since Lomond and Bayview amalgamated, our advertising revenue's been dropping steadily. If the *Star* had to rely on its income from the local shopkeepers' ads, Lomond wouldn't have a newspaper - and I wouldn't have a job. Not in this town, at any rate. Do you fancy packing up and moving on, Girl Wonder?'

'Actually, no,' said Katie. 'But that's your decision, not mine. I'm just saying you're not as objective as you like to pretend.'

'Well, you're a bloody sight more naïve than I thought,' Dick bellowed. 'Everybody has to make compromises, y'know. Just wait till you've been working in this business for twenty years. Then we'll see whether you still want to go around laying down the law to everyone.'

'The way you do, you mean?' Katie asked.

She sidestepped round the desk, took a backward step through the doorway and was halfway down the stairs before her dad realised that she was walking out. As she emerged into the main street, she remembered that she'd landed him with fifteen pages of proof reading but she decided she could care less. She was sick of being a dutiful daughter. If she was going to do other people's shitwork, she would rather do it at Dove House where people appreciated her, way more than her actual family did.

Families. Jude Martin didn't mind hers so much these days, mainly because she hardly ever saw them. When she wasn't at school, she was working on Lucy's election campaign. That didn't leave a lot of room for worrying about whether Apeman's girlfriend looked after Britt and Shana properly while Shelley was working behind the bar at the George or whether Shane and Apeman and cousin Terry had really nicked nine cartons of door mats, after spotting them in the yard of a Bayview warehouse.

Instead, she marched with the Wolf Guard, attended the committee meetings or briefed the latest recruits and then got a lift home with Lucy - and Serenity too, of course. Jude and Serenity were still best friends but they had a quiet wordless fight every night over who was going to sit in the front seat of the Ford, next to Lucy. Serenity was taller and stronger but Jude won two times out of three.

She loved listening to Lucy talk about what GO was going to achieve. She loved making notes about everything and then filing her notes, along with all the other information about Lomond that Lucy was collecting. And she loved being in the Wolf Guard. Jude had her pride – hey, for the last sixteen years it had been all she had - so she'd always pretended to enjoy being an outsider. But now that things had changed, she was happy to admit that it was great to be part of a girl gang. (Well, a gang of girls, plus Matt Fahey. He had been hanging around so

resolutely for the last few days that the Wolf Guard had nicknamed him the Men's Auxiliary.)

On Thursday Rocky Abrahams hijacked the school mini-bus and drove the Wolf Guard over to Bayview for a last round of leafletting. Bayview was three times the size of Lomond but some of the CWA had volunteered their kids as well and, between them, they were able to cover the entire town in four hours flat, from the big shopping mall where tourists were spending money hand over fist, right across to the old weatherboard cottages on the outskirts of the city. Lucy was waiting for them on the seafront, chatting with Raewyn and the geography teacher from Bayview/Lomond Secondary. She bought the Wolf Guard a round of burgers from a cafe by the pier and then Rocky bundled them back into the bus, except for Jude, who stayed on to take notes.

'You're a genius, Lucy,' Raewyn said, after the geography teacher left. 'That bloke used to campaign for the National Party candidates but you had him eating out of your hand. It's like I keep saying – people don't trust party politics any more. They want someone who's prepared to go all out for what they believe in. You're going to win this one. I'm sure of it now.'

Lucy raised a sceptical eyebrow. 'Great-aunt Sibyl would be pleased to hear that,' she said. 'She had big plans for Lomond but I still don't know whether I can do what she wanted. Things can change pretty quickly, even at this stage. Look at Doug Sterne. Yesterday lots of voters were on his side, because he was backing Pat Fahey - and today nobody wants to know him, because a national paper called him a racist. I'd rather keep campaigning right up to the last minute, just to be on the safe side.'

It was the first time Jude had heard Lucy talk about her great-aunt since the funeral. She would have liked to ask what, exactly, Sibyl Dove had wanted Lucy to do but she didn't get a chance, because two seconds later they set off for an afternoon of intensive campaigning - lunch with Marie Boyle in her role as deputy mayor, visits to Lucy's supporters among the Bayview councillors, a speech in the mall and a grand tour down the main shopping street.

Lucy smiled and remembered everyone's names and won new admirers at every step, while Jude tagged along behind her, taking notes. By mid-afternoon her hand ached and her head was spinning but Lucy looked as fresh and crisp as when they had started - not a crease in her white jacket, not a smudge in the glossy heart-shape of her pale lipstick. She even remembered to tell Jude that Pat Fahey had come round to Dove House for a chat, after which he had gone straight back to the pub, chalked an apology on the blackboard and sent a photo of it to the *Bayview Mirror*.

'I think the people who rubbed out the slogans made an impression on him, in the end,' she said with a secret smile. 'I'd say thanks to them - if I knew who to thank.'

Jude grinned back and made a mental note to pass on the thanks to Serenity and the Wolf Guard. Then she scrambled out of the car and followed Lucy into the CWA headquarters, where they ate pumpkin scones and drank

industrial strength tea with the CWA heavies, then took a detour and dropped in on Jude's grandmother. Mrs Brice was one of the most strong-minded women Jude had ever known - 'tough as old boots,' Shane grumbled - but she went to pieces when she opened the door and saw Lucy standing there. They had to eat another round of scones and drink another gallon of tea, while Nanna fussed over Lucy as if she was the Queen.

'You've made a real impression,' she kept saying. 'Everyone's heard of you and that GO lot. You'll give those lazy buggers on the council a run for their money, that's for sure.'

'So you reckon GO might win a few seats in Bayview, Mrs Brice?' Lucy asked.

'Ah, you'll piss it in,' said Nanna. 'I was telling the other ladies at the League club how my grand-daughter works for Lucy Dove and believe me, they sat up and took notice. Said they might even vote for that funny-looking Jane Moondancer, just to liven things up.'

'Well, that's - what? Half a dozen votes?' Lucy said, grateful but not over the top.

Mrs Brice grinned. 'More than that,' she said. 'Lots of people'd enjoy giving the council a bit of a stir and they like you, because you're not one of the usual politician types. You really care.'

She caught her breath and looked startled. Jude felt startled too. Her nanna didn't usually say things like, 'You really care.'

'Thanks,' Lucy said, sincere but not over the top. 'With women like you on my side, I can believe we've got a sporting chance.'

While she was talking, Mrs Brice's mouth moved silently, as if she was repeating Lucy's words, in order to memorise them and pass them on to the League ladies. Jude watched her, amused and touched. She had never seen Nanna look that impressed by anyone. It was the final proof that nobody could resist Lucy Dove, nobody in the entire world.

So, even though they still had some more campaigning to do in Lomond itself, that was the moment when Jude Martin decided that Lucy was definitely going to win.

By Saturday lunchtime, rumours were travelling round the district at twice the speed of light. Everyone knew that the votes had been counted and the results would be announced at the Lomond and Bayview town halls simultaneously. But although the Lomond grapevine was the best in the state, nobody had managed to find out whether Doug Sterne or Lucy Dove would be representing Lomond and whether GO had taken a majority of the seats.

Scott didn't really care, either way. He hadn't got too excited when that business with Pat Fahey's blackboard made it look as if his uncle had a chance and he wasn't too bothered when Uncle Doug screwed up again by talking to

some Sydney reporter, ending up on the front page of a national newspaper and making everyone in Bayview and Lomond feel as if all the city people were laughing at them. As far as Scott was concerned, Doug was just the guy who had wrecked his hope of sorting things out with Serenity by setting the guys onto the Wolf Guard.

Not that he felt any better about Lucy Dove, who had created the whole problem in the first place by making a big deal out of the Jude Martin incident. He sighed and slumped against the wall of The Caff, fighting against the temptation to go in and buy an icy-cold can of Coke and roll it around the back of his neck, before opening and drinking it. The Caff was a dangerous place. Frank Carretto was way too easy to talk to. Scott was glad he hadn't got around to spilling his guts, the couple of times he'd tried. If he had, Frank would know all about him and Serenity. Now no one knew, apart from Katie, and even Katie didn't know everything. Better to keep it that way.

Scott didn't even let himself think about it too much. He had never actually decided whether he should have apologised to Lucy and the Wolf Guard on the night of the ambush or whether he should have found some way of apologising to Jude, right back when he started fancying Serenity. If he had allowed ideas like that to take up space in his head, he would just have felt like shit for more of the time than he already did. Luckily, he had a lot of distractions. His dad was one of Lucy Dove's best mates these days and he was using his influence to give more of the good jobs to the militia.

Today, for example, the militia would be responsible for all the serious crowd control, while the Wolf Guard would just be part of the scenery, acting as Lucy's guard of honour when she entered the town hall. Scott didn't really care about that either. He'd become the leader of the militia because other people expected it, not because he wanted it. As a matter of fact, he would have felt fine about collaborating with the Wolf Guard, especially if it meant regular consultations with Serenity, but some of his troops seemed to have locked themselves into an ongoing competition. Tommo and Lockie, in particular, still hated the idea of girls in uniform protecting the streets of Lomond against – well, against guys like them.

Scott checked his watch and frowned. Brooding was bad for discipline. Absorbed in his thoughts, he had failed to notice that the militia ought to be assembling by now. He nodded to Rita Farr and her mates, who were waiting in a patch of shade near by, then frowned at Tommo, Lockie and some other guys from school, who were straggling down the main street. A couple of minutes later the older guys in the militia, including Cam and Eden Parker, came hurrying out of the pub. Just in time. Scott decided to give them a lecture on punctuality before the next drill. He had turned out to have an unexpected talent for yelling at people until they were reduced to pulp. It was one of the few compensations for taking on another set of responsibilities.

'I thought girls were the ones who were supposed to be late for everything,' he said, as soon as Tommo and Lockie were close enough to hear

him. 'Come on, get moving, all of you. We need to stake out the town hall, before people start to arrive.'

Half a block later he realised he had seriously underestimated Lomond's interest in the election results. The footpaths had already overflowed and the crowd was spilling out across the road. To rub it in, the Wolf Guard had got there ahead of the militia. Under Serenity's direction, they had formed ranks and were moving through the crowd, shifting little kids out of their way gently but firmly, smiling at hulking farmers and saying, 'Excuse me, if you could just move back a step, please ...'

'You said the girls would only be window dressing,' Lockie complained. 'Looks to me like they're doing our job. Tell them to fuck off, Scotty.'

'They're doing our job because we weren't here to do it,' Scott pointed out. 'Let's start now – and remember, we're here for crowd control, which *doesn't* include pushing people around.'

He packed Lockie and Tommo off to a corner of the crowd mainly occupied by sheep farmers, who would keep them in line. After that he assigned the Parkers to the George, on the principle that Cam would wind up there anyway, and positioned the rest of the militia at strategic points throughout the crowd, reserving Rita and her mates for the town hall steps, where Raewyn and Rocky were waiting for Lucy to arrive.

Scott wondered briefly what plans his uncle had made – like, was Doug inside the town hall, ready to pop up like a jack-in-the-box if he won, or was he so convinced he'd lost that he had stayed home in bed, hiding his head under the pillows? Then he took up his own position, guarding the place where Lucy's car would pull in, and forgot all about Doug Sterne. He had better things to think about now – or worse things, depending on the way you looked at it.

Either way, he was standing opposite Serenity.

The crowd had grown so fast that the Wolf Guard had been forced to link hands and form a human barricade, lining a narrow aisle that led to the town hall steps. Serenity was between Jacinta and Katie, leaning forward at an unnatural angle caused by the pressure of the crowd at her back. Her blue tunic was riding up on one side and her ginger hair had gone spiky, the way it always did when she was stressed, but she was sticking her chin out with her usual determination.

Scott's heart swelled like the plastic bag that a little kid was blowing up near by and then burst with an equally spectacular explosion as Serenity's eyes settled on him. For a while there, he wasn't able to register anything, except for those chocolate-coloured eyes, and even when he had convinced himself that the rest of the world still existed, he couldn't work out how long he had been standing there. He would have felt like a total idiot, if Serenity hadn't seemed to be just as unable to look away.

They were still gazing at each other, as if their lives depended on it, when the Sternes' Land Rover pulled up a metre away. Rob Sterne jumped out and raced round to the passenger door, holding it open like a chauffeur while Lucy emerged. Today she was wearing a white dress with full skirts that ended

halfway between knee and ankle, layered with net, and a funny little hat like a beret made of white flowers. As far as Scott was concerned, it looked kind of weird but half the women in the crowd let out a simultaneous soft gasp, so he figured she must have made a good choice, as usual.

She floated down the aisle on Rob's arm, turning her lighthouse smile from side to side and stopping every now and then to say a few words to someone in the crowd. Josh Abrahams reached up to grasp her hand, while his brother Mal shielded his wheelchair from the people pressing in on them. Norm Kelly watched with his knowing, sideways grin, Dick Brewster did his best to look non-committal and Shona Brewster beamed uncontrollably. And, back at the top of the aisle, a dozen people surged forward simultaneously, all of them wanting to get closer to Lucy and touch her or speak to her as well.

Katie and Jacinta stood firm but Serenity lost her grip on their hands and stumbled forward. As the crowd surged through the gap, Scott instinctively launched himself into a long leap that carried him across to her side. He swung one hand out to catch her as she fell, using the other hand to signal to the kids and shopkeepers and farmers and direct them back behind the line.

But before he could say anything to her, Katie and Jacinta grabbed her hands and pulled her into place again. Scott felt another surge of movement in the crowd, rippling all the way through from the outer edges into the centre and pushing him away from Serenity. His hand lifted: stretched forward: reached out.

'Serenity!' he called, his voice sounding twice as loud as he had intended.

She turned towards him and, for a breathtaking a moment, he was convinced that they could solve all their problems just by taking each other's hands and getting out of there. Then his eyes shifted sideways and registered the man standing next to him – a tall, good-looking bloke in his forties with tawny hair brushed back from his broad forehead, tawny eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses, a level mouth and a solid jaw and a dimple-dent in his chin. The guy was waving frantically and shouting to someone.

He was shouting, 'Serenity!'

All right, that explained why Scott's voice had suddenly seemed to double its volume. It also made him wonder whether the problem-solving look in Serenity's eyes had been meant for him or this new guy. While he hesitated, waiting for a sign, the guy dodged around him and went running towards Serenity. At the same moment, Lucy Dove appeared on the town hall balcony above them, stepping through the French windows and gripping the stone balustrade with small, white-knuckled hands.

'Yes!' she said.

Her voice lifted effortlessly above the rumble of the crowd - a light clear note, like middle C sounded on a piano for a choir to take their tune from it. Only one word but everybody got the message straight away and everybody seemed to like it. Scott could see odd couples celebrating together all over the place - Norm Kelly and Fisher King taking turns to thump each other on the back; Serenity clutching the tawny guy's hands and bouncing up and down; and,

oddest of all, his dad hugging Raewyn Casey. In short, everyone was taking Lucy's 'Yes' as a sign that there were good times ahead.

Everyone apart from him, at any rate.

As he watched Serenity dancing with the stranger, Scott realised he must have kept a last little piece of hope hidden in a place that even he couldn't identify, although he hadn't noticed it until it had gone. His jaw clenched so hard that the pain speared up into his temples. It wasn't fair. Somehow that stupid play they had done in English seemed to have got inside his head and convinced him that he and Serenity would find a way to bypass their own Montagues and Capulets and (because the two of them wouldn't have any stupid misunderstandings involving friars and potions and crap like that) get together in the end. But actually, in his own personal version of *Romeo and Juliet*, it looked as if the old enemies were getting together, instead of the young lovers.

Face facts, Scott told himself. It's over. There always have to be winners and losers and this time you lost and Lucy won. She's got Lomond and you've got nothing. If you need proof, just look around you. Everybody's here ...

As a matter of fact, everybody wasn't there. Across the road at the Royal George, Pat Fahey had left Shelley Martin to prepare for the celebrations (if Lucy won) or the wake (if Lucy lost). At the other end of the Danville River, Norm Kelly's wife Valda was riding her motor bike across the paddocks, off to check the dam, and Scott's mother Bethany was sitting on the verandah with her hands folded and her eyes focused on the outline of the escarpment, dark against the summer-bright horizon.

Over in Happy Valley Shane Martin and Apeman were helping Shane's cousin Terry stash piles of door mats under their house, while Caro Cox sat at her computer, reading the Sydney papers online instead of working. A headline caught her eye - THEY LOVE LUCY. She frowned and checked the opening paragraph.

Lomond is a wool town to the north of the state's capital, with a population of less than ten thousand. Marginalised by the decline in the wool industry, it seems like the last place where you would expect to come across the most sustained critique of globalisation and its effects that this country has seen so far. But Lucy Dove, currently standing for council, has started an organisation called Going Overboard, which could have far-reaching effects on ...

Caro's first thought was: dear God, Lucy's gone national. Her second thought was: wait a minute, that style sounds familiar. She looked up, read the byline at the head of the article and made a sound halfway between a gasp and a

groan. No wonder the article had rung a few bells. The writer's name was Marshall Cox, her ex-husband and Serenity's father.

Marshall Cox was, of course, standing in the crowd outside the Lomond town hall but Han Chung – remember him? - was standing on the deck of a boat called the Last Hope, watching the sailors push off from the pier. As the pale banks and the black water and the ring of cranes receded slowly into the distance, he looked back with agonised concentration. It seemed important to carry away as many memories as possible. After all, if everything went as he had planned, he might never see his homeland again.

He clutched the medallion that hung on a red silk cord round his neck – an image of the goddess Guan Yin that he had bought from a peddler on the dock, just before he boarded. As an educated man, Han Chung didn't usually have much time for goddesses. However, his mother used to invoke Guan Yin in moments of stress, because she was the champion of anybody in trouble – and the peddler had called her the goddess of unconditional love – and Han Chung himself knew that Guan Yin was an appropriation from either Hinduism or Tibetan Buddhism, situated somewhere between male and female. She had struck him as a good metaphor for the contradictory, infuriating, infinitely resilient country that he continued to love, even while he was leaving it.

So, as the coastline melted into a blur, he whispered a few words that might have approximated a prayer, before turning away to study the other passengers. He was pleased to see that they were all wearing suits like the one his cousin had sold him – shiny grey with wide lapels and flapping trousers, very odd to a Chinese eye but Han Qing had assured him that they were the latest thing in Australia.

The others were mostly younger men, talking excitedly about the money they would make, working at the Olympics. Some of them hoped to stay in Australia, after they had earned enough to buy the necessary documents, but most of them were planning to take the money straight back to their families. Australia was famous for needing outsiders to do its dirty jobs and Han Chung had no objections to starting where his companions wanted to start, although he intended to go a good deal further. He was preparing to indulge in a few dreams of his own making when the Last Hope reached the open sea and instantly began to pitch and toss, thrashing about like a cow with colic.

That put an end to dreaming, for a while. Han Chung threw up, until he had nothing left to throw, and so did everyone else, even the crew.

Back in Lomond, however, Lucy Dove was making dreams come true. 'We did it!' she told the crowd. 'Going Overboard won five of the nine seats on the Bayview/Lomond council. On this side of the Danville Range, Josh Abrahams was elected unopposed for the third time in a row and Happy Valley re-elected Fisher King - well done, Josh and Fisher. And, as we move into the new

millennium, Lomond itself will be represented by a newcomer you've been generous enough to take into your hearts.'

She touched her own heart, to show that she was talking about herself, and smiled like a bride at the altar, while the crowd applauded till their palms hurt. Then she lifted her hand and waited for silence.

'Congratulations to Jane Moondancer as well. She didn't quite beat the owner of the biggest tourist agency in Bayview but she came close. On the other hand, Marie Boyle and Harry Walden, who'll be celebrating their wins in Bayview right now, have already pledged their support. That gives GO a clear majority on the council. Thank you. Thanks to every single one of you here today. We couldn't have done it without you.'

A roar of delight rose up from the crowd. Everybody was cheering or throwing their hats in the air or hugging the person next to them. It was like a festival without streamers or flags or floats but, just before they really started to party, Lucy Dove called, 'Wait!' in the silence that followed, she leant over the balcony and looked around in a slow circle, as if that would allow her to make eye contact with every single person in the crowd.

'This is only the beginning,' she told them.

Her voice sounded as confiding as a child and as universally audible as an angel's trumpet. The crowd murmured in surprise, except for the Wolf Guard and the members of Lucy's inner circle. They had always known that Lucy had plans. Now the whole world was going to hear about it.

'We won't pull out of the amalgamation with Bayview,' she said. 'But we *will* tell the Bayview mob that we want our share of the rates to go towards our own bus line and medical services, although we might let them off the hook as far as the cop shop's concerned - after all, who needs a police force, when we've got the Wolf Guard and the militia? And there's more to come. Over the next couple of weeks GO will be running a series of public meetings where you can tell us about the changes *you* want to see. We'd like to start by setting up a community bank and creating a bunch of new jobs - but that's only the beginning. After that, we're going -'

She stopped in mid-sentence, inviting everyone to deliver the punchline. The crowd took her up on it straight away.

'Going overboard,' yelled Pat Fahey and Dave Conway and Bluey Thompson. 'Going overboard,' called Frank Carretto, blinking at the sunshine, and Finn Casey beside him, taking mental notes. 'Go, Lucy,' chanted the kids from the primary school, with the principal conducting them. 'Go, go, go!' shouted Orion and Daniel, temporarily caught up in the excitement, and Katie Brewster, scribbling in her notebook, and Jude Martin, clapping till her hands turned scarlet. 'You go, girl,' Serenity whispered with tears streaking down her cheeks. 'Yeah, go for it,' said Scott, because, after all, what else could he do?

'Go, Lucy. Go, GO. Go, Lomond. We're all going overboard.'

PART 3

CUTTING THE CLOTH

Ten

A wedge of sandstone crumbled under the sole of Daniel's boot, reverting to sand. He jammed his fingers into a non-existent crack and kicked till he had created a toehold, then hoisted himself onto the ledge just below the lookout at the highest point of the Danville Range. There was a shallow niche, just the right size for his backpack. He settled the pack beside him, moulded his spine to fit the curve of the rock and let his legs dangle down into empty space.

When he checked his breathing, his lungs were pumping regularly and evenly, no sign of strain. Although the lookout climb was still the best one he had found in the hills round Happy Valley, it was getting too easy. He wasn't really complaining - it was still way better than anything in the city - but he would have liked to try something a bit more challenging every now and then.

Still, the ledge would always be his special place, the place where he came when he needed to think things through. He was here this afternoon because something had been bugging him and he couldn't figure it out at ground level, so he leaned back against the rockface, closed his eyes and studied the images that formed on the darkness.

Huge chrysanthemums of white light. Peacocks' tails whisking through fiery hoops. Showers of stars, green and scarlet waterfalls, meteor trails and multi-coloured novas, flaring up and then collapsing in on themselves. Daniel and Caro had come up to the lookout to watch the New Year's Eve firework display that launched Lomond into the twenty first century. Serenity hadn't been there with them because she had gone down to Lomond with the Wolf Guard, to supervise the crowd in the park by the community hall.

But it hadn't really mattered where you were on New Year's Eve. Lucy Dove's fireworks had lit up the entire landscape, from the escarpment right across to the Danville Range. No one could have helped being impressed by the

way she'd conjured up a spectacular display at a moment's notice, celebrating the new millennium and Going Overboard's election victory, as if they were the same thing.

So, okay, Orion told Daniel next day that some rich guy in Sydney had got so excited about the GO campaign that he'd donated his own personal fireworks to the cause but – hey, in its own way, that was just as impressive as if Lucy had magicked the fireworks into existence. It had made everyone feel as though the whole of Australia was watching Lomond - and now, three weeks into the millennium, Lomond was still being watched and Lucy was still coming up with the goods.

The first sign that Lomond's luck had turned had been a series of unexpected summer showers, soaking into the paddocks and reviving the grass. Daniel, the city kid, still wasn't used to the way every change in the weather had such a big effect on the landscape. One minute the earth was baked brown and next minute a fluorescent green sea was lapping at the wall of the escarpment. Everything looked completely different from the morning when he had climbed up here for the first time, except for the town itself, which still looked like a golden sandcastle in the sea of grass.

But although Lomond looked the same, it had actually changed even more than the plain around it. Back when Daniel had appointed himself to the position of Lucy's witness, it had seemed like a pretty easy job but these days it was getting harder and harder to keep track of everything. He focussed on the golden blob and felt the lenses of his eyes adjusting, turning him into a comic book hero with superpowers who could stare straight down into the Lomond main street and see changes everywhere.

Pensioners planting forget-me-nots and white chrysanthemums around the war memorial. Brigades of little kids picking up litter and Shane Martin and Apeman slapping coats of blue paint onto the iron posts of the shop fronts, to ensure that Lomond would win the Tidy Town award this year. Two new shops had opened on the main street - a delicatessen selling sandwiches to the southerner reporters who kept turning up for their next story and a newsagent selling the full range of papers from every state in Australia, so that Lomond could read all about itself. There was another call centre in the town hall (Lucy had negotiated higher wages for its workers, in return for a reduced rate on the building) and a noticeboard outside the town hall, announcing the next round of meetings for all the groups GO was in the process of setting up - a farmers' group, a shopkeepers' union, groups for kids and teenagers, women on the land and retired people.

And, like a logo that linked everything together, the Wolf Guard in their blue and gold uniforms bustled round, supervising the changes, while the younger members of the militia paraded down the street in khaki and black. (According to the rumours, a lot of farmers had joined the militia as well but you didn't see them around in the same way.) The Wolf Guard were Lucy's lieutenants but no one seemed to have figured out the militia's role, not even the

media mob. Mal Abrahams had been drilling the guys – okay, the guys plus Rita and her mates - even more diligently than his wife drilled the Wolf Guard but if you wanted to find out what they were training for, you had to sign up. Otherwise, it remained a secret.

A sudden cramp in his midriff told Daniel he was getting closer to the problem that had brought him up to the ledge. He switched off his superhero's telescopic vision and looked back into the past instead. The Lomond main street three weeks ago. Some smartarse had come up with the idea of a Badge Week, where everyone was supposed to wear their GO badges and t-shirts for the first week of the millennium. Daniel had thought it sounded pretty harmless, till he noticed Tommo and Lockie strutting around, writing down the names of everyone who wasn't wearing a badge or making the GO sign. When they targeted him, he had shrugged and stared blankly till they gave up but Orion, of course, had to tell them the full story of why he hadn't joined GO. Halfway through the synopsis of his science fiction novel, Tommo and Lockie decided it would be quicker to bash him. Luckily Scott Sterne had butted in and saved Orion again, although this time he stuck around afterwards and said ...

Daniel's stomach started to gurgle. He reached for his pack and got out a cheese and chutney sandwich and his book - Winston Churchill's *The American Civil War*. He always went back to Churchill when he felt hassled, because the guy was so clear and logical that he made everything else seem logical too. Although maybe he'd read the book once too often. While the surface of his brain was occupied by Churchill's description of the Confederate recruiting drive - '*Proud and ardent, their manhood rallied to the newly forming regiments, confident that they would conquer, sure at least that they were unconquerable*' – another part of Daniel's mind went on obsessing about the question Scott had asked him.

'When are you going to sign up for the militia?'

All right then, what *would* he say, next time Scott invited him to join? Because there would be a next time, Daniel was sure of that. He had been convinced that everything would look a whole lot clearer, once he was up on his ledge, but as he let his eyes slide down the bumpy contours of the Danville Range towards the emerald plain, he realised he still didn't know the answer to Scott's question, so he turned away from the plain and the town and the escarpment and looked out across the navy blue furrows of the sea.

He couldn't see the rusty boat pitching and tossing on the choppy waters at the edge of the two hundred mile zone, as it turned straight west to make a run for the coast. It was too far away, beyond the reach of even a superhero's telescopic vision.

But it was there, all the same.

Katie bounded up the steps to Dove House, pushed the door open and looked proudly round the hall. Going Overboard had held a working bee a few days after the election. Everyone had chipped in - dusting and vacuuming, balancing on chairs to poke at the cobwebs that draped the high ceilings, polishing the floorboards, washing the musty sheets and tablecloths stashed in the linen cupboard, painting the walls. Maya Casey had actually climbed up the tallest stepladder, to pick out the ceiling roses in gold, and Josh Abrahams had wheeled his chair up and down the corridors, running a feather duster along the skirting boards. They'd had the best time and now the house glowed. It even had a new name to match its new look.

These days everybody called it The Centre.

Voices drifted towards her from the big front room that had become GO's headquarters. She went in and found Jude Martin, Raewyn Casey and Norm Kelly all talking at once. Jude had a phone clamped to her ear, while her fingers danced across a laptop keyboard. Raewyn was leaning on the mantelpiece, lecturing the latest journalist, with one of her husband's muddy landscapes behind her. (Finn had looked dead startled when Lucy decided to take down all of Sibyl's old paintings and replace them with local art. Katie got the impression that he secretly knew he was a lousy painter.) And over at the far side of the room, Norm Kelly was backing Lucy into a corner and droning on and on.

'So I say, "They may call you Apeman but you're wearing pants like a human being. Stick your hand in your pocket and buy a badge for a good cause." He gives me a funny look and says ...'

Lucy's eyes slid sideways, signalling to Katie. Another funny look: urgent and helpless. Lucy didn't mind fronting up to all the journalists and TV interviewers and academics and politicians who had come buzzing around, asking questions about Going Overboard, but for some reason, grotty old Norm always gave her the shakes. It didn't seem right. Katie bristled and marched over to rescue her.

'Nearly everyone in town's a member now, see,' Norm was saying. 'I run out of badges yesterday arvo - that's why I'm here, to pick up another batch. But that Happy Valley lot, they're all poofers and druggies and single mums. You can't trust them to do the right thing, not like the people in Lomond.'

Katie gave him a blindingly bright smile. 'Don't worry, Mr Kelly,' she said. 'Half the Wolf Guard comes from Happy Valley. We're looking after things over there.' She raised her voice and called, 'Jude, Mr Kelly needs more badges. Can you take him out to the store room and get him some?'

Jude came hurrying over to lead Norm away, giving Katie an approving nod as she went past. Lucy sighed and slumped.

'Thanks,' she said. 'I shouldn't let him get me down but - oh well, family.'

Katie winced. 'Tell me about it. My dad's still mad at me for siding with you against Dr Sterne.'

'Yeah, changing the world takes it out of you sometimes,' Lucy said.

She leaned against the wall and massaged her heart, the way she often did when her energy levels were running low. Katie studied her with a concerned frown.

‘Are you okay?’ she asked.

Lucy lifted her head and looked out of the big front window. ‘Before the election, I felt as if I was carrying everyone’s hopes and dreams on my shoulders,’ she said, eyes fixed on the horizon. ‘That was hard but I could do it. Now I have to take all those hopes and dreams and turn them into something that actually works, which is a different kind of hard. I can’t help wondering whether I’m up to the job.’

Katie felt alarmed and flattered in equal parts. In one way, she didn’t really want to know that Lucy had doubts and fears. It would have been nice to just be a true believer (like Jude) or the public face of GO (like Serenity). Then again, in another way it was great to be a member of GO’s inner circle, along with adults like Raewyn and Jane Moondancer and Rob Sterne. Lucy Dove might admire Serenity and rely on Jude but she could confide in Katie, as if the two of them were equals.

‘Hey, you’re doing fine,’ she said reassuringly. ‘What’s the problem? Are you worried about this afternoon?’

‘A bit,’ Lucy admitted. ‘Remind me why we thought a People’s Court was such a brilliant idea.’

There was a clash of bracelets behind them and Raewyn took over. ‘Because, when we held those public meetings at the start of January, we got a lot of good suggestions - and a lot of complaints,’ she said. ‘Because I told you about this process called “speaking bitterness”, invented during the People’s Revolution in China, where everyone in the villages got together and talked about their problems with the landlords, to get it off their chests. Because most of the hassles in this town could be settled by a bit of common sense, without dragging in a pack of fancy lawyers. And, most of all, because GO’s been so bloody successful that everyone expects us to come up with new tricks all the time. A People’s Court, with Mayor Lucy as the judge, will be such good theatre that it ought to keep the media happy for weeks.’

Katie looked over her shoulder, to make sure the new journalist hadn’t heard that last part. The media was crazy for Lucy, because they knew she meant what she said. If somebody heard Raewyn talking about ‘good theatre’, it could make GO look like a set up. But it wasn’t. Everyone – repeat, *everyone* - believed in Lucy Dove.

Even the Bayview *Mirror* was on her side now. The editor had finally worked out that Lucy wasn’t just trying to make Lomond being proud of being Lomond. She wanted Bayview to be proud of itself as well. With Jane Moondancer’s help, she was encouraging Bayview to stop imitating an international resort and start preserving their old buildings and putting up signs about Bayview’s history, especially its Aboriginal past – which was already

turning out to be good for the tourist business. Lucy's ideas had a habit of working out well all round.

When Katie turned back, another journo had moved in on Lucy – one of the regulars this time. 'So, Lucy, are the rumours true?' Marshall Cox was saying. 'Did Bert King really turn up last night and try to recruit you for the federal Labor Party?'

'Oh dear,' Lucy said, blushing. 'He's a beaut bloke but I was really embarrassed afterwards, when I found out how important he is. I've been out of the country so long that Raewyn had to explain why they call him "the kingmaker". I hope he wasn't offended when I told him I didn't really see myself as a politician - just an ordinary Aussie who wants to do something for my home town.'

'Too bad if he did,' Raewyn said briskly. 'And the same goes for the Liberal Party fixer, who left a message on our answerphone this morning. GO can't afford to get into bed with either of the big political parties. It'd undermine one of Lucy's main strengths - the way she appeals to people from the left *and* the right.'

'She certainly does,' Marshall agreed. 'The People's Court's a perfect example – law and order, the way the conservatives want it, but with a radical twist. Now, let me run through our plan for the media campaign one last time, before we kick off. The only media there today will be the ABC and the print journalists but after we've done a trial run, we'll be aiming for maximum coverage second time around. Katie, can you tell your dad that a major media event's coming up next week, so he can drop a few hints in this Saturday's *Star*?' He winked and added, 'Make it sound like a hot news tip and he'll think you're doing him a special favour.'

Katie grinned back. Marshall totally understood what was going on between her and her dad. Dick Brewster was sticking to his policy of being "objective", reporting the facts about Lucy and GO but never letting the *Star*'s readers know where he stood. He and Katie got into yet another argument every time words like "honesty" or "bias" or "Lucy Dove" came into the conversation at dinner, although she tried to avoid using those words, because her mum and her sisters got upset by the rows – and because these days she wasn't all that interested in hearing what her dad had to say.

Dick Brewster had spent most of his life in the town where he was born, working on a small country newspaper. Meanwhile Marshall Cox had been swanning around the world, writing for the nationals and appearing on telly, and *he* thought Katie had made a good career move by getting involved with GO. After all, he had gone through a similar sort of process himself, dropping everything and coming to Lomond and taking a room at The Centre, in order to become part of the GO campaign, because he thought there could be a book in it. Out of the two of them, the media star and the local bloke, which one was more likely to be right?

‘Okay, Marshall,’ she said. ‘The People’s Court’s starting in three quarters of an hour. Is there anything else we need to know?’

Serenity had been hanging around The Centre for the last hour or so, hoping for a chance to talk to her dad. But when Marshall wasn’t staring at Lucy like a Bayview seagull eyeing a tourist’s fish and chips, he was giving Katie Brewster fatherly advice about the newspaper business. In the end Serenity decided it was all too much.

‘See you in half an hour, okay?’ she said to the room in general and walked out.

The rest of the Wolf Guard were already there in the town hall, lining up chairs in the council chamber, while the ABC camera crew tested the angles.

‘Add another row,’ Serenity told Merian Harper in passing. ‘At least fifteen journalists will be coming, plus a politics professor from one of the unis and a student who’s doing her thesis on GO. Half of Lomond’ll probably turn up as well, hoping to see themselves on telly, like the other half has already.’

She filled a jug with water, positioned it carefully on the long oak table and fitted a cushion into the high oak chair, because Lucy was so small and everyone wanted to look at her. Then she read through the list of people who were bringing cases to the People’s Court or having cases brought against them and went to make sure they had all turned up. Everyone was waiting outside, except for one of the defendants – a guy called Lee Munro, who was a mate of Cam Parker’s.

‘And I don’t see what we can do about that,’ she said to Merian. ‘This is a People’s Court, so attendance is, like, totally voluntary.’

‘Exactly right,’ Merian said, frowning. ‘If Lee doesn’t want to come, we can’t make him, can we? I just assumed everyone would want to see what Lucy thought about their case.’

‘Yeah, that’s what we all assumed,’ said Serenity. ‘It looks like Lee doesn’t agree. Never mind, we can finetune that problem next week.’

She glanced compulsively at her watch and went back inside to run another last-minute check. As she shifted the water jug for the third time, the crowd buzzed loudly and then went silent. Serenity looked up to see Lucy Dove gliding down the aisle, with Raewyn, Jude and Doug Sterne following along behind. Oh, hell. She had been so busy making the room look right that she hadn’t got around to warning the GO team about Lee. Too late now. Raewyn had already planted herself in the front row, Jude was flipping her laptop open, ready to take notes, and Doug Sterne was striding across to the carved lectern beside the table.

He beamed round at the audience and started to make a speech introducing Lucy. It wasn’t the most flattering speech Serenity had ever heard. She got the impression that Doug was hedging his bets, trying to share some of the limelight and, at the same time, distance himself from Lucy by using words

like “young and untried” but – oh well, who cared what Doug was actually saying? He was just there to show that Lucy was generous (and secure) enough to share the platform with her old opponent.

As he wound up, Lucy settled back into the chair, her white shirt billowing out like the reverse image of a judge’s black robes. ‘I’ll begin by reminding you why we’re here,’ she said. ‘We – meaning the people of Lomond - decided at the last election that we want to solve our own problems in future, both the big ones and the small ones. Going Overboard has already started to solve the unemployment problem and reverse the council’s budget cuts and now we’re going to tackle some of our personal problems, because they’re important too. Bryce Henderson, will you and your mum come to the witness stand, please?’

Serenity felt suddenly giddy. Up until that moment, she hadn’t been too worried about the People’s Court, because she had taken it for granted that Lucy would always be a success. But the mistake about Lee Munro seemed to have shaken her confidence. While she listened to Mrs Henderson complaining that Bryce spent all his dole money playing pool at the pub, Serenity unobtrusively slid her hands behind her back and wiped her damp palms on her blue leggings. Bryce Henderson was one tough dude. If his own parents couldn’t keep him in line, how the hell was Lucy supposed to do it? By the time he slouched up to the lectern, she was shivering and sweating, all at once.

‘This is a waste of fucking time,’ Bryce said straight away. ‘What’s your problem, lady? So I like pool. Big fucking deal.’

‘Fair enough, mate,’ Lucy said, pushing her sleeves up. ‘If pool’s that important to you, I’ll ask Pat Fahey to let you play at the pub for free. You’ll have to do it properly, though - eight hours a day, five days a week. If you miss a day or skive off early, you’ll be banned for life. Is that okay by you?’

‘Yeah, sure,’ Bryce said. ‘Sounds cool.’

He was trying to swagger but his eyes already looked a bit glassy. His mother prodded him in the ribs and chuckled like a kookaburra.

‘That’s beaut,’ she said. ‘It’ll get you out of bed in the morning, which is more than I’ve managed to do – and it’ll teach you what it’s like to do a day’s work, as well. Thanks, Lucy. You’re a sport. Good luck with the rest of them.’

While the audience laughed and whispered together, Serenity consulted the list and read out, ‘Mrs Mulvaney and Lee Munro.’ Her heart sank. Oh sure, the first case had gone well but now everyone was going to be doubly disappointed when Lee didn’t show. She stared at the floor, cursing herself for being so slack, until a drum roll of marching feet made her look up and blink in surprise.

Scott Sterne and Cam Parker, both in their militia uniforms, were escorting Lee to the lectern. His shirt had lost several buttons and there was a red mark under Cam’s cheekbone. While it was possible that Lee wasn’t interested in clothes and Cam had walked into a door, it seemed a whole lot more likely that they’d had a stoush when Scott and Cam turned up to drag Lee into the People’s Court. Serenity frowned. So who’d given the orders to bring Lee in – and how

come nobody had told her that the militia would be taking over part of the Wolf Guard's job?

Her skin prickled with angry heat. When Cam tried to push her aside, so that he and Scott could stand guard on Lee, she automatically dropped into a tai chi stance that Rocky had taught them, holding her position until Lucy waved the guys into the front row. By that time, however, her heart was pounding and her ears were making a noise like the sea in a storm. It took her a while to calm down enough to listen to Mrs Mulvaney, a tiny old woman with a face like a depressed pixie, who was telling the court how Lee had got drunk and trashed her front garden, because he was mad about losing his job.

Serenity could relate to that. Right then, she felt so mad that she would have loved to trash that bastard Scott – although on second thoughts she remembered that Mrs Mulvaney hadn't done anything to Lee, so she didn't deserve to be trashed. Lucy saw that straight away, of course. She started by telling Lee to help Mrs Mulvaney with her garden until it was as good as before, to show him how much work the old woman had put into it. Then she asked him to take Mrs Mulvaney around the place like a good grandson, to make up for scaring her. Serenity braced herself, waiting to see whether Lee would react as with the same hostility as Bryce, but he just hunched his rottweiler shoulders.

'Dunno what to do,' he said. 'Don't have no gran.'

'Not a problem,' said Lucy. 'Mrs Mulvaney's perfectly capable of telling you what she needs. You can start by carrying that big bag of shopping home for her.'

Next minute Mrs Mulvaney was trotting out of the court, towing her king-sized new grandson on an invisible leash. The audience cooed like pigeons and both the pixie and the rottweiler looked pleased with themselves. Another happy ending. Serenity sighed with relief and announced the last case for the day - a petition from twenty women, complaining about Miss Everett, the retired principal of the old Lomond Secondary College, who kept stopping them in the street and telling them how to look after their babies, what to cook for their husbands and, in general, how to run their lives. Lucy listened and nodded and produced a card and six sheets of red dots, which she handed to Miss Everett.

'You're trying to be useful,' she said, 'but you don't know where to stop. From now on, whenever you give someone advice they don't want, they'll be entitled to put a sticker on your card. When you've gone for a week without collecting any dots, you can come back and tell the court you're on the right track.'

Miss Everett shook her head sadly. 'Oh, Lucy, Lucy,' she said, peering over the top of her glasses. 'You were such a bright little girl but you're wasting your talents now. You should be fixing the real problems in this town, not bothering an old lady who just wants to help her ex-students.'

As Serenity held her breath, Lucy stood up and walked across to Miss Everett, peeled off a red dot and stuck it onto the card. Miss Everett turned bright pink and a row of twenty women began to cheer. It was a perfect end to the afternoon. Before Lucy had finished saying, 'That's it, folks,' the reporters were

mobbing her. Raewyn and Rob Sterne moved in to shield her; the Wolf Guard started to usher the audience out of the hall and twenty women clustered around Miss Everett, trying to explain how they wanted her to behave. Serenity helped the Wolf Guard with the ushering, then hung around till Jude was ready to leave.

'Some people have all the luck,' she said, as they headed for the door. 'Wish I could work fulltime for GO, like you, or stand round in the background looking wise, the way Katie does. It sucks, being out on the front line with everybody looking at you all the time.'

'Don't bullshit me' Jude said with a grin. 'You love every minute of it.'

'No, seriously, I wish Caro would stop insisting I have to go back to school next week. You're so lucky, Jude.'

'Hey, it's just because Shelley doesn't give a stuff about exams. There's a down side to that too, y'know.'

Serenity knew more about the down side of being Shelley Martin's daughter these days, so she gave Jude a half-smile and turned away to watch Raewyn and Rob Sterne shepherding Lucy to her car. Raewyn opened the door, Rob helped Lucy in and the two of them paused on the footpath to confer about their next move.

'I used to think Rob Sterne was after Lucy,' she commented. 'But he and Raewyn act like they're the presidents of the Lucy Dove Fan Club. I guess he just had a crush on Lucy, same as the rest of the world.'

Jude pulled a face. 'Euw, gross. I don't want to think about Rob Sterne's sex life, thanks very much.'

'Ah, crushes aren't the same as actual sex,' said Serenity. 'Raewyn reckons most of the journos have crushes on Lucy. She says it works in GO's favour, because they can't stop talking about her.'

She heard what she had just said and clamped her mouth shut, realising that she might have given away more than she intended. She wasn't prepared to admit, even to Jude, that she sometimes wondered whether her dad fancied Lucy. Fortunately, Jude seemed to have taken the idea off in a different direction.

'So what?' she was saying defensively. 'Talking about Lucy isn't the same as having a crush on her. Maybe the journos just, like, admire her a lot.'

When Serenity giggled, Jude went bright pink, indicating that she was wide open to being teased about Lucy, so Serenity teased her all the way to The Caff, ending with a round of tickling that she won hands down, because Jude had to keep hold of the laptop. She sighed happily. It was great to get a chance to hang out together, just mucking around and acting like idiots. They hadn't seen enough of each other lately, because there hadn't been much time for personal stuff during the GO campaign.

Although, as Scott overtook them on his way to the car park, Serenity found herself thinking that having no time for personal stuff wasn't always a bad thing. After their talk on the night of Rita's brother's twenty first, she had sort of, kind of decided to meet Scott half way, if she got another chance. But ever since

then he had made no attempt to talk to her on her own. As a matter of fact, he had never done anything more than nod to her in passing.

It was a good thing she hadn't had time to stress about that.

Mal Abrahams had woken up one morning and decided that the militia had reached a point where they needed to show off their new skills, so he had invited a bunch of blokes out to his property, to observe the next practice session. Scott took the militia through a marching exhibition ('Stand at attention! Forward march! Left wheel! Quick march! Slow march! Right wheel! Stand at ease!'), then a demonstration of the crocodile crawl (although his recruits wriggled under a piece of tape, rather than the traditional barbed wire fence) and ended with a run round the paddock (at scout's pace for five kays, to establish their endurance levels).

Scott had always felt weird about giving orders to guys who were old enough to be his father, even before his actual father had joined the militia, and drilling in front of an audience made him feel even more of a fraud. When Rob cornered him after the show and towed him over to the fence where the watchers were sitting, Scott went along willingly. He was hoping that someone would ask why Rob wasn't leading, instead of being led, but as it turned out, all he got was unqualified enthusiasm.

'You're doing a great job, Scotty,' said Bluey Thompson, grabbing his hand and shaking it interminably. 'I used to be on Tommo's case all the time, telling him to exercise and eat properly, and would he listen? Not a hope in hell. Just look at him now. though. The militia's been going for five weeks and he's lost more than five kilos already – closer to ten, I'd say.'

'My Lockie's still the little ratbag he's always been,' Dave Conway said fondly. 'But at least this gives him somewhere to work it off.'

Doug Sterne nodded. 'Exactly. Young men need challenge and adventure. I've been saying that for years. It's good to see people taking notice at last.'

He began to repeat everything he had been saying for years, even though he must have known that nobody was listening. When Tommo bounded over, beaming through his camouflage stripes, Bluey abandoned Doug without even bothering to apologise and started telling his son how to use his elbows properly in the crocodile crawl. Doug turned his attention to Pat Fahey, who was handing out another batch of the leaflets that his American contacts had sent him, and Scott took the opportunity to steer Rob away to an empty corner of the paddock.

'Listen, Dad, I didn't mind being the leader of the militia at first, when it was mostly kids from school and a couple of guys in their twenties,' he said. 'But now it looks as if the older guys like Jeff Parker and Norm Kelly are going to stick around, I reckon you ought to take over.'

'Nah,' Rob said with an impatient glance at the Abrahams' house, where their cars were parked - his Land Rover and Scott's birthday-and-Christmas-

present top of the line Commodore. 'No worries, Scotty. If it's not broke, don't fix it. You're doing fine.'

'Yeah, but what if something comes up that I can't handle?' Scott persisted. 'I've only ever organised stuff like school sports days – and Katie did more than half of that – but you've been one of Lomond's head honchos for ages. Why can't you do it, instead of me?'

'Because I'm telling *you* to do it,' his dad roared.

He had gone straight to full-on anger from a standing start. Scott took an involuntary step backwards and spread his hands out. 'Hey, if it's a problem –' he began.

'It's *not a problem*,' Rob cut in, his voice still so loud that it turned heads at the far end of the paddock. He glanced that way, calmed himself with an effort and said, 'I could do it, if I had to. It's just not my sort of thing. Your call, Scotty, okay?'

For a moment Scott felt as furious with Rob as Rob had been with him but then something - a shadowy expression behind Rob's eyes, maybe - reminded him of his theory about his dad being shy.

'Let's leave things the way they are,' he said. 'It'll be easier on everyone.'

'Good, good,' Rob said, eyes shifting back to the Land Rover. 'Better be getting home now, I suppose. See you there.'

'Actually, I might stay on for a bit,' Scott told him. 'I need to talk to Mal and now's as good a time as any.'

Even before he had finished the sentence, Rob was striding off towards his car. Scott relaxed and went to find Mal Abrahams, who looked pleased to be consulted, especially since it got him away from Doug Sterne. They walked across to the house together and found Rocky sitting at the kitchen table, watching an ice-coated casserole dish labelled Wednesday thaw into a spreading puddle.

'Rough day?' Mal asked.

'Had better,' she admitted. 'You?'

'Not bad,' her husband said, sounding surprised. 'The militia did pretty well and, even before that, it was one of those days when I feel like we made the right choice when we took on the property. It's nice to be working out how to grow things, instead of how to kill people.'

'Hang about,' Rocky protested. 'Never killed anyone.'

'Nah, but we were ready for it. We had to be. You're only pretending you're a soldier, if you can't look that one in the eye.'

'Hmm. S'pose so.' She sighed and added, 'Miss the army sometimes. Oh well, there you go ... Staying for tea, Scotty?'

Before Scott could answer, the floorboards vibrated under his feet and Josh Abrahams' wheelchair trundled into the kitchen. He slapped a magazine on the table and looked round at them, his eyes shining so brightly that the pain shadows were almost obliterated.

‘Done!’ he said. ‘The tenth issue of the Bayview Area Gunowners newsletter. Eighteen hours of designing, proofing, printing and stapling. I’m using that photo of Lucy for the cover - the one you took, Rocky, when she came out to practise on the rifle range - and the lead article’s my interview with her, where she talked about how handling the rifle came really naturally, even though she hasn’t touched a gun since she was a country kid. I tell you what, if we had another election next week, we could double the vote for GO.’

Mal and Rocky smiled at each other over his head. ‘Haven’t seen you look so chipper in ages, mate,’ Mal said gruffly. ‘That Lucy Dove has a knack for geeing people up. I even saw the Martin girl handing out leaflets by the supermarket the other day. You have to be pretty smart to talk a Martin into doing an honest day’s work.’

‘Lay off,’ Rocky said, aiming a punch at him. ‘Can’t lump Jude in with the others.’

Mal laughed. ‘Sorry, I forgot she was one of your pets. But I still reckon that family’s a disaster area. You can’t tell a farmer heredity doesn’t count. I’ve seen it in sheep and I’ve seen it in people. Bad blood, Rocky, bad blood.’

‘Not Shane Martin’s daughter, remember. Don’t think anyone knows who Jude’s real father is.’

‘Including Shelley, I bet,’ Mal said, causing Rocky to thump him again.

He kissed her, for revenge, and they went back to admiring the layout for the newsletter, while Josh studied Lucy’s photo with a distant wistful smile. Scott grinned to himself. Even without the five kids that Rocky and Mal hadn’t got around to having yet, the Abrahams household always seemed to be buzzing with activity and ideas. There were three people in the Sterne household as well but they didn’t generate anywhere near the same amount of energy. Scott was still thinking about that when Mal suddenly slapped the side of his head.

‘Scott, mate!’ he said. ‘I almost forgot. What did you want to ask me about?’

‘Yeah, well,’ Scott said. ‘It’s the militia, right? I was wondering whether you’d ever consider, like, becoming the leader.’

‘Not possible,’ Rocky told him, without missing a beat. ‘Mal’s your drill sergeant. Can’t do that *and* lead.’

‘She’s right,’ Mal agreed. ‘But there’s more to it than that. Frankly, Scott, I reckon you’re doing as well as anybody could. What’s worrying you?’

He roamed round the table, picking up the BAG newsletter and putting it down again. ‘A couple of things,’ he said eventually. ‘For starters, I didn’t expect to be bossing all those old guys around.’

Mal blinked. ‘Fair enough. I can see how that could be a problem – although it never occurred to me before. You carry it off pretty well, but.’

Josh and Rocky both started to speak at once, then both waited for the other to keep going. After they had sorted it out, Josh said, ‘That’s because Scott’s a natural leader’ and Rocky said, ‘No, brought up to lead. Sixth generation Sterne. Not a lot of alternatives.’

'As you might've noticed, we're big on debate in this house,' Mal said with a grin. 'Which side are you on, Scotty?'

Scott shrugged. 'Dunno,' he said. 'I suppose they both come to the same thing in the end.'

There was silence for a moment and then Josh cleared his throat. 'If I can change the subject, there's something I'd like to ask you, Scott,' he said. 'How would you feel about getting permission for the militia to carry rifles? Now you've had time to establish yourselves as a serious organisation, you could apply under "genuine need" - and if that works, I don't see how they can refuse to grant you minors' permits for the kids under eighteen.'

'Not a popular move,' Rocky warned him. 'Lot of GO supporters in Happy Valley. Don't like guns at the best of times. Like 'em even less after the Port Arthur massacre.'

'Ah, that's just a kneejerk reaction,' Josh said. 'Statistics show -'

He was debating again but this time Rocky stuck two fingers into her ears and kept them there until he spread his hands out in a gesture of submission.

'Okay, no stats,' he said. 'Just two words, Rocky. Personal freedom.'

'Actually, freedom can be a dicey concept,' Scott said, starting to get interested. 'Our history teacher keeps quoting this old saying: "My freedom to swing my fist ends at your nose".'

Josh looked up at him. 'I'm sorry to hear you say that,' he said, unexpectedly serious. 'If I was the leader of a militia, I'd be talking about swinging my fist to defend other people's noses. That's why I was so impressed when GO set up its own army - because I happen to think self-defence is one of the most important human rights.'

'Ah, the militia's not an army,' Scott said. 'It's just an accident. None of the guys were prepared to join the Wolf Guard, so they had to set up another organisation, but we're basically on about the same thing.'

'And what's that?' Josh asked.

He leaned back in his chair, letting his body cave in on itself in a way that made it look as if he was about to be engulfed by his baggy t-shirt. Scott realised, with a retrospective pang of sympathy, why self-defence would be so important to a guy in Josh's situation. For some reason, that made him feel twice as vulnerable - on Josh's behalf, as well as his own.

'How should I know?' he said, not even trying to hide the raw edge to his voice. 'I already told you I'm not the right person to be leading the militia.'

The energy levels in the room plummeted. Josh slid further down in his wheelchair, Rocky got up and took the casserole over to the microwave and Mal sat there, rubbing his chin and frowning thoughtfully. Scott was beginning to wonder whether he had been way out of line, when the oven pinged and, simultaneously, Mal looked up and snapped his fingers.

'A couple of things,' he said. 'You told us a couple of things were worrying you. What's the other one? Maybe it'll give me more of a clue.'

Scott reached for the BAG newsletter again, although, even as he began to turn the pages, he wondered what the hell he thought he was doing. He had just spent the last half hour trying to ask for help – first from his dad, then from Mal – and now he was acting as though he hadn't heard Mal's question. He knew exactly what he wanted to say. Why was it so fucking hard to get the words out?

'I can't explain,' he said desperately. 'I need to tell you the whole story.'

Rocky put the casserole back into the microwave and Mal gave him the thumbs-up sign, so he launched into a detailed account of the afternoon – meeting Cam Parker in the main street; finding out that Lee Munro had spent Wednesday night telling everyone in the George that he wouldn't be turning up to the People's Court on Thursday; agreeing to help Cam track Lee down, all of which had seemed fine at the time.

'It wasn't till we were actually dragging Lee into the town hall that I realised how it would look to other people,' he said. (How it would look to Serenity in particular, although he didn't say that. There were limits to this openness and honesty business.) 'Oh, and I knew Lee was on the tear because he'd just lost his job but at the point where I stood back and let Cam get stuck into him, I'd forgotten that the guy who sacked him was Jeff Parker. Fact is, I fucked up bigtime - and I'm not even sure what I should've done. I'm out of my depth here, Mal.'

'Ha!' Rocky said. 'Wondered what was going on in court today. Explains a lot. Thanks, Scott.'

Mal nodded. 'It shows me where the main problems are too. There's no chain of command in the militia, is there? I should've spotted that before. We've been keeping a relatively low profile lately, which means we haven't been taking orders from Lucy, so basically the buck stops with you. You're making decisions on your own - pretty big decisions sometimes – without any help from anyone.'

'Yeah?' said Scott. 'Yeah. Yeah, I guess I am.'

A grin was starting to tug at the corners of his mouth. He felt as light and dizzy as the time when he had let Matt Fahey talk him into sniffing glue. For the last month or so, he had been convinced there was something wrong with him, because he kept having this paranoid fantasy that everyone in the entire town was leaning on him, but now Mal seemed to be saying it was all true. He leaned back against the wall, let his grin expand and waited for Mal to tell him what to do.

'We got a glitch in the system, all right,' Mal was saying. 'I'll give it a bit of thought, talk to a few people, toss some ideas around. In the meantime, you may as well keep on the way you're going. Like I said, you're doing as well as anybody could.'

Scott's grin shrank, so suddenly that it hurt. *Oh, great, he thought. So Mal still thinks I'm the best leader on offer. That's not what I wanted to hear at all.*

After the GO meeting at the Caseys' house, Orion's dad dug out a box of his old university books from the back of a cupboard and started to read up on anarchism. To begin with, Orion had directed him towards some useful websites but he had worked out pretty quickly that Finn's sudden interest in politics was just another way to get at Raewyn. His parents' arguments seemed to be getting longer and more frequent. Sometimes they argued about politics, sometimes about whose turn it was to put out the garbage, but as far as Orion could tell, all the arguments were really about the way Raewyn had continued to work on the latest GO campaigns for the whole of her summer holidays.

In the house next door, Serenity and Caro had already been through the same arguments and settled into a kind of armed neutrality, so Orion took to spending most of the day at the Coxes' place, writing his novel out on the verandah or watching TV with Daniel. That was fine by Finn and Raewyn, although they both got stuck into him if he stayed on for dinner, so he was pretty rapt when, after his parents' loudest argument so far, Serenity rang to say that she had bumped into her father and he was taking her out to dinner in Bayview. Okay, that was bad luck for Caro, who had organised dinner at The Caff to celebrate her birthday, but it worked for Orion, because she sighed and hesitated briefly and then invited him to join her and Daniel.

It was great to be out of the house. Orion felt so grateful that he decided to be really nice to Caro. He retrieved his mother's advice from an underused corner of his brain and asked a series of questions about her job, until Daniel developed a sudden interest in the Aboriginal organisations that Caro worked for and took over from him. Orion looked around and saw Jude running down the stairs that led to the rooms about the café, where Frank and his mother lived. He waved frantically until she noticed him and came over.

'Hi,' she said to the table in general. 'I've been sitting with Mrs Carretto, because she's a bit jumpy – more than usual, I mean. I couldn't get her to tell me what was going on but I think I calmed her down.'

'Are you still working for Frank?' Caro asked. 'I thought Serenity told me you were working fulltime for Lucy now.'

'Yeah, that's right,' said Jude. 'But I like the old bat, so I drop in every now and then.' She lowered her voice slightly and added, 'Frank really ought to move her down the road to the old folks' home but he's such a wuss that he keeps coming up with excuses.'

She didn't seem to mind Frank being a wuss. Orion definitely qualified as a wuss himself, so he found that encouraging. He waited till Caro stopped going on about how kind and thoughtful Jude was, then looked up and caught her eye.

'How's things?' he asked, wishing he could have come up with a more original question.

'Great!' Jude said. 'It's like the song in that stupid musical we did in year 9 – "Everything's going my way". Right now, I wouldn't change places with anyone in the entire world.'

While she was speaking, she had risen up on tiptoe, as if she was about to spread her wings and take flight, although in fact she just said goodbye and headed off. Orion watched her weaving between the tables, sighed inconspicuously and turned back to the others.

'You went on demos and stuff in the seventies, didn't you?' he said, remembering another question that he wanted to ask Caro. 'Did you know any anarchists?'

'I knew a lot of people who claimed they were anarchists, as an excuse for doing whatever they liked,' she said. 'But the serious anarchists reckon that if you really want to get rid of leaders and rules and hierarchies, you have to be twice as rigorous as everyone else.'

'Ha!' said Orion. 'Raewyn must've mostly met the first type of anarchist. That'd explain why she keeps on arguing with Flynn.'

Caro gave him a strange look, almost like the way she looked at Daniel sometimes. 'I'm glad you could come with us tonight,' she said, for no particular reason. 'Feel free to drop around whenever you like.'

Before Orion had time to decode that one, Frank came speeding over to take their order and open the champagne Caro had brought. She filled her own glass, half-filled Daniel's glass and gave Orion a splash.

'What'll we drink to?' she asked them.

'Your birthday, of course,' Daniel said. 'Anything else?'

They clinked their glasses together and drank. Tiny bubbles fizzed inside Orion's mouth and tingled all the way along his tongue. 'The Three Dissenters,' he said, suddenly inspired. 'That's us, see. Like the Three Musketeers. Because we all think GO's a bit dodgy.'

'Oh, I like it!' Caro exclaimed. 'We mightn't be the only three people in Lomond who have problems with Lucy Dove – at least, I hope not - but it's certainly good for a toast.'

'Wait a minute,' Daniel said, just before they clinked again. 'The Three Musketeers had that motto, "All for one and one for all". If we're going to back each other up, we ought to know each other's reasons for being dissenters. What have you got against Lucy, Caro?'

Caro's mouth twisted. 'I suppose I blame her for a lot of my fights with Serenity. Sometimes she seems like a paler version of the Pied Piper – but that isn't really fair. If I can say something slightly more dignified, I think Lucy's first mistake was pushing ahead too fast with the Wolf Guard and then taking the militia on board as a way of patching things up. Can you go along with that?'

'Yeah, sure,' Orion told her. He raised his glass, examined the bubbles and said, 'All for one and one for all. How about you, Dan?'

'I reckon Lucy's biggest mistake was letting Pat Fahey get away with those racist slogans,' Daniel said straight away. 'Oh sure, everyone knows she sooled the Wolf Guard onto him, till he backed down, but I wish she'd just come out and said that she doesn't go along with racism. Your turn now, Orion.'

Orion thought about it while they clinked and toasted each other and drank. 'Remember how I did that survey and found out that everyone in my class thinks Lucy has the same politics as they do?' he said. 'Well, I went on watching her and I noticed she talks to everyone in a different way – slang with the kids, down to earth with the farmers, hippy-trippy in Happy Valley and so on. I don't know whether it counts as a mistake but it strikes me as kind of dangerous, being whatever other people want you to be.'

Daniel and Caro considered the idea, nodded and lifted their glasses for a final toast, saying, 'All for one and one for all' several levels louder than last time. As the people at the table by the window looked round and frowning repressively, Orion recognised Doug Sterne and his family.

'Actually, there was another musketeer who didn't get into the title of the book,' he remembered. 'Should we ask Dr Sterne to join us? He's a dissenter too.'

'Not in the same way as us,' Caro said. 'We're sceptics but we'd be pleased if things worked out for GO. Doug Sterne was on the opposite side in the election. I can't believe he's been converted to Lucyism in less than six weeks.'

Orion thought "Lucyism" was the funniest word he had ever heard. He was still laughing when Mrs Carretto appeared on the stairs in a long, flowery nightie. She'd got a lot skinnier since the last time he had seen her and her white hair hung down in plaits like two rat's tails. As Orion tried to get his laughter under control, she focussed on their table and said something in Italian, then folded at the knees and fell, rolling down the last few steps and pitching forward onto the floor.

There was a crash of plates, hitting the floor half second after Mrs Carretto, and Frank went running towards her, with Doug Sterne close behind. Three people screamed, another three dialled the Emergency Services number on their mobiles and three more went to have a look. Caro jumped up to steer the onlookers away from Mrs Carretto, while Daniel picked up the gingham cushion from his chair and went to slide it under the old woman's head.

And Orion sat there inside a cone of silence, repeating the words she had said, memorising the syllables and writing them down on his napkin.

Then Frank went off in the ambulance with his mother and Orion and Daniel took over the job of serving the food, while Caro made coffees or helped the cook who came in for the evenings. As she said on their way home, 'It wasn't how I planned to celebrate my birthday but, in an odd kind of way, it was fun.' A warm evening breeze was wafting down from the escarpment, so they took the remains of the champagne out onto the verandah. As soon as the others were settled, Orion nicked back inside and dialled the Martins' number. Jude answered, which seemed like a good omen.

'Something happened to Mrs Carretto, about five minutes after you left,' he said. 'Dr Sterne reckons she almost definitely had a stroke. I thought you'd want to know.'

'Shit,' said Jude. 'Oh, shit, shit, shit. Were you there, Orion?'

'Yeah, I had a front seat. Want me to tell you about it?'

'What do you think?' she said, half irritated and half amused.

He went through the story and then took the paper napkin out of his pocket. 'I wrote down what she said – or, at least, the way it sounded,' he told Jude. 'If I read it, will you see whether you can translate it?'

He sounded out the syllables and Jude repeated them. 'Mo ler pray-coo so tray oo karta dah frayker?' she said doubtfully. 'Oh, I see. Mo' l' precuec' so' tre. U quart' t'a da frecà. That means, um, something like, "Three mistakes now. The fourth one will destroy her." Jesus, what was she on?'

Orion's mouth was already half-open when he realised that he wasn't prepared to tell anyone, not even Jude, how spookily close Mrs Carretto had come to the manifesto of the Three Dissenters. Luckily, Jude couldn't see him standing there with his jaw hanging loose.

'Who knows? It was probably just part of the lead-up to the stroke,' he said and decided to forget all about it.

Eleven

By the following week, it had become clear that the People's Court had grabbed the imagination of the whole country, even more than the rest of the Lomond experiment. On Friday, the day after the first court, one of the Sydney dailies printed a garbled report, based on facts that came from Lisa Walden, the *Bayview Mirror* reporter, via her best friend, who was living in Sydney with a guy doing a journalism course. Marshall Cox immediately wrote another report setting the facts straight, which appeared in the Saturday edition of the national paper.

Over the next few days, more people joined in - uni professors and bishops, feature writers and politicians and community workers, all keen to agree or disagree with the decisions Lucy had made. A major TV network was offering megabucks for the exclusive right to film all the sessions and seven other local councils had asked for Lomond's help in setting up their own People's Courts, although they couldn't get past the first and most obvious problem: they didn't have anyone like Lucy to be their judge. As a result of all this activity, Raewyn Casey organised a press conference for the evening before the second People's Court.

'Lucy'll say something vague and general, to keep everyone happy, but our real aim is to tell the journos to behave themselves tomorrow,' she told the GO team, as they went out to face the cameras.

Serenity looked round to see whether her dad was there, then looked away as soon as she had located him. The two of them seemed to be feuding at present. After the last People's Court Marshall had managed to tear himself away from Katie Brewster for long enough to invite her out for dinner. They had talked about small stuff over the main course but then, while they were deciding on dessert, Marshall asked if she would mind answering a few questions for an article on the New Fatherhood that he was planning to write. Serenity had totally

lost it. She had yelled, 'What would you know about being a dad?' and stormed out and got a taxi home.

For the next few days she had kept expecting Marshall to ring but she hadn't even come across him at The Centre and by now time was running out. The first term of her final year at school started on Friday and she'd really wanted to sort things out with him before then. But Lucy had finished her speech, the journalists were halfway through the ten questions that Raewyn had allotted them and Serenity still hadn't worked out how to corner her dad, without losing face. She was scanning the big front room and counting the questions – six, seven, eight, nine, ten - when someone elbowed through the crowd and stopped beside her.

'Need a lift home?' her father asked.

'Don't you want to interview Lucy?' Serenity said, as distant as Antarctica.

Marshall shrugged. 'In this crowd? I can talk to her later. I'd rather talk to you now.'

It wasn't exactly the response she had been waiting for but it would have to do. She stood on tiptoe, waved to Katie across the pack of reporters and announced that she was leaving. As she headed for the door, Pat Fahey thrust a leaflet at her.

'Have a read of that,' he said. 'Lucy's started the ball rolling and now it's time to come up with the next move. A bunch of us've put our heads together and ...'

He looked as though he was prepared to drone on for the next five minutes. Serenity took the leaflet, dodged past him and hurried down the steps to the footpath, where Marshall was opening the door of his hire car.

'Princess Serenity,' he said, bowing like a chauffeur. 'Would you prefer the front seat or the back?'

She had intended to make her dad sweat before she forgave him but they had been playing "Princess Serenity and her chauffeur" ever since she was three years old and the words activated a rush of memories. Riding on Marshall's shoulders through city parks; going to city cafes, where Marshall pointed out politicians and writers; attending book launches and galleries and theatres with Marshall and meeting people she had read about in the weekend magazines; kids at school asking, 'Is Marshall Cox your dad?' It was no use. She couldn't stay mad, not after he had made the first move.

'The front seat,' she said. 'The princess is in a democratic mood today. You can entertain me while you drive.'

They spent the entire trip from Lomond to Happy Valley raving about Lucy. Within five minutes she had worked out that Marshall wasn't about to turn Lucy into her new stepmother. He was just a fan, same as her. However, they'd both seen different aspects of Lucy and it was fun to compare notes. When the car turned into Karma Drive, they were halfway through analysing Lucy's judgments in the People's Court, so it seemed perfectly natural to ask her dad to come in. (For once, Caro wasn't a problem. Marshall had dropped in once before, soon

after he arrived in Lomond, and as far as Serenity could tell, her mother was totally over him.)

She led the way up the steps and walked in to find Caro at the table with an unexpected visitor, a small, solidly plump woman with dark ringlets, milk coffee skin and wary dark eyes. There were introductions all round. 'Trace, this is my daughter Serenity and my ex-husband Marshall. Don't worry, we get on pretty well these days. And this is Tracy, who works with an Aboriginal health centre in southern Queensland. We've been talking about a consulting job they want me to do for them.'

Serenity dropped Pat's leaflet on the table, next to the latest issue of Josh Abraham's newsletter, and went off to make a pot of tea. When she returned with a tray of rattling cups, Daniel had actually deserted the six o'clock news to come and sit with them, pushing the newsletter out of his way with an impatient frown.

'The gun lobby, eh?' Tracy said, picking it up. 'Didn't think you'd be into that sort of thing, Caro.'

'I'm *not*,' Caro was beginning, when Marshall cut in smoothly, 'Josh is one of our local councillors, Tracy. A sad story - injured in a road accident and never walked again, which explains his interest in self-defence. The other farmers round here are only interested in shooting rabbits or foxes.'

'That's not completely true,' said Daniel. 'Norm Kelly told Finn that he buried his semi-automatic when it was made illegal, so he'd have it there if Australia was ever invaded. He reckoned he learnt that trick from his dad - like, apparently Norm's dad buried the local rifle club's ammunition during the thirties, because he was worried about the communists getting hold of it.'

Tracy dropped the newsletter, as if it was self-heating, and Caro shared a grin with her. 'Actually, I read it to keep tabs on our local rabble-rousers,' she said. 'A mob called Going Overboard. Have you heard of them, up your way?'

'Dunno,' Tracy said. 'What are they on about?'

Caro laughed. 'Anything and everything - whatever pops into Lucy Dove's head when she wakes up in the morning. She's not the world's greatest thinker but I have to admit she's pretty charismatic. She's managed to pull together the gun nuts, the Happy Valley hippies, the law and order freaks, the swinging voters *and* my next door neighbour, who's an old Trotskyite - and they don't seem to have noticed that they all disagree with each other. Not yet, at any rate.'

She leaned back and waited for a reaction. Serenity clenched her jaw in an attempt to keep her mouth shut but she couldn't stop herself from going, 'Mum!' Daniel instantly reached for a pencil and started to sketch a map of Australia in a blank space on the back of Josh's newsletter, as if he was anticipating another argument and detaching himself in advance. But this time Serenity wasn't on her own. As she prepared to attack, her dad cleared his throat.

'I think you're missing the point, Caro,' he said.

Her mum hesitated, then shrugged. 'All right,' she said, 'I'll let you have one go at convincing me.'

Having Marshall there made a huge difference. He genuinely wanted to understand everyone's point of view, which kept Caro happy, and now that Serenity had somebody on her side, she was able to see the whole thing as a debate, not a fight to the death. They argued amicably for about five minutes, while Daniel went on sketching and Tracy began to read Pat Fahey's leaflet.

'Enough,' Caro said, glancing across at them. 'We're boring the others and besides, it's time I started cooking tea.'

Tracy fidgeted with one of her ringlets. 'No need to hurry because of me,' she said, whisking her bag from under the table. 'I better take myself off, if I want to get home before midnight.'

'But I thought ...' Caro said and swallowed the next few words, changing them to, 'Sure. Of course, Tracy. I'll see you to your car.'

Serenity watched them go, trying to remember where she and Marshall had got to in their discussion of the People's Court. The minute her mum returned, however, she could tell that something had gone badly wrong. Tension lines were hollowing Caro's cheeks, sharpening her nose and turning her face narrow and witchy.

'Daniel,' she said in a crisp private school accent, 'could I trouble you for a look at that leaflet?'

Her voice was a danger signal. Caro had deliberately changed her accent after she left school, because she had decided she didn't approve of private schools, so she normally tried to sound as Aussie as possible. Marshall, who had lived with her for sixteen years, recognised the warning sign straight away. As Daniel held out the leaflet, he intercepted it and gave it a five second scan before passing it on to Caro. After that, he executed a neat manoeuvre that got him out of his chair and across to the door in one fluid move.

'Gotta rush, see ya,' he said and vanished.

Serenity felt totally betrayed. For a moment there, the three of them had seemed like a family again but now she remembered that, even while they had all lived together, her dad had been good at slithering out of difficult situations. He had done it again, slithering out and leaving her to perch on the edge of her seat, tense and anxious, watching Caro's eyes move jerkily along the lines, as if she had to force herself to keep going. By the time she looked up, her face had changed from witch to ghost.

'Serenity, why did you bring that piece of racist crap into our house?' she said. 'Do you realise that Pat Fahey blames all Australia's problems on Asian migrants and government funding to Aboriginal groups.'

A rush of relief loosened Serenity's muscles. 'Is that all?' she said, collapsing back in her chair. 'Come on, Mum, you know what Pat's like. You don't need to go into one of your politically correct raves. The guy's a complete loser. No one's going to take any notice of him.'

'Oh yes, I know what Pat's like,' Caro agreed. 'But Tracy doesn't. I couldn't work out why she suddenly got up and left, when she'd been talking about staying overnight, but it all makes sense now. When she saw a leaflet headed

Going Overboard, she naturally assumed the group had approved it ... a group my own daughter belongs to. You just ruined any chance of us becoming friends - and I probably won't get any more work from the Aboriginal Health Centre either.'

The breath emptied out of Serenity's lungs, as suddenly and painfully as if her mother had hit her. All the anger that she had been storing up, ever since her father arrived in Lomond, came rushing to the surface. She wanted to hit back and hurt someone else, for a change, instead of being everybody's punching bag.

'Sorry I spoil your sleepover with your new best friend,' she said, as if she was the mum and Caro was the kid. 'Are you sure you're not exaggerating, though? Tracy'd have to be pretty hypersensitive to drop you just because of one lousy leaflet. Why can't you wait and see what happens, instead of blaming all your problems on me?'

She didn't really mean it, not like that. She hated racist crap, just as much as Caro did, and she knew Tracy would have heard the kind of stuff Pat was saying way too many times before. She was just trying to get at her mum, the way she always did, so it came as a shock when Caro - *Caro*, who talked on and on about everything - pushed her chair back and stood up.

'Excuse me, Serenity,' she said. 'I think I'll skip tea. It might be better if I don't speak to you for a while.'

She collected an apple and a book and walked out. Serenity wanted to hurl another apple at her retreating back or, maybe, fall to her knees and crawl across the polished floor and grab her mum's ankles and whimper, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' But she wasn't entirely sorry for trying to protect Lucy by playing down Pat's racism, so instead she turned towards Daniel, who was drawing nuclear mushroom clouds by now.

'Okay, Dan,' she said with an encouraging smile, 'what do you want to have for tea?'

School was starting on Friday and Scott had been planning to sleep in while he could but he was woken by the sound of the four wheel drive, revving furiously, the way it tended to do when his dad was annoyed about something. He checked the clock next to his bed. It was eleven a.m., too early for the People's Court, which wasn't starting till two. And besides, last he'd heard, his dad hadn't decided whether to spend the day out in the paddocks or drive into town for the court.

Scott would be there, of course. Half a dozen guys from the militia were going to line up outside the town hall, in case of trouble, while the Wolf Guard was on duty inside, looking decorative for the cameras. But that was still a couple of hours away. He tried to push himself back down into sleep and, when that didn't work, he got up and went to see whether his mum had ironed his uniform. The khaki tunic and pants were hanging, neatly folded, on the back of a kitchen

chair, with his boots beside them, polished till they shone like antique furniture, but he couldn't see Bethany anywhere.

He showered and dressed and checked the lounge and kitchen again. Still no sign of his mum. He frowned at the row of cereal packets and decided to go into town and have a late breakfast at The Caff. On his way out, he heard a muted sound, like a newborn kitten mewing. He tried to feel puzzled but an image dropped straight into his head – his mother behind a closed door, sitting on the end of the bed and crying into a sodden hanky. Sure enough, his parents' bedroom door *was* closed. He hesitated in front of it for five embarrassing seconds, wondering whether to knock, and then practically threw himself out of the front door.

As he hesitated again on the verandah, he heard footsteps, followed by the double beep of the phone being lifted out of its cradle. Bethany Sterne had never made any real friends in Lomond, so he figured she had to be ringing one of her sisters or daughters. He sighed with relief and went crunching across the gravel to his car. Mum'll be fine, he told himself as he drove off and he kept on repeating that mantra all the way into town.

Just as he had hoped, The Caff was going through the downtime between morning tea and lunch. The only people there were Daniel Matheson and Orion Casey, over in the far corner. That should have made it easy to avoid them but for some unknown reason, the sight of them reactivated his unresolved guilt about his mum. While he ordered the breakfast special, he did a quick calculation and decided that his street cred was high enough to survive being seen talking to the geek boys - always supposing that anybody came close enough to check out the darkest corner of The Caff.

'Mind if I join you?' he asked, heading towards them.

'Fine,' Daniel said, looking surprised. 'We're leaving in a minute, anyhow.'

Scott suppressed a relieved smile. 'Actually, I've been meaning to talk to you,' he said.

'That's a first,' Orion commented. 'Why?'

He let the smile loose, directing it at Orion. 'You don't mess around, do you?' he said. 'Fact is, I thought someone ought to give you a friendly warning. Some of the guys are pissed off because you haven't joined GO,] and I reckon they'll really put the pressure on after we go back to school. It wouldn't hurt to turn up on Friday wearing a GO badge, just to show you're on side.'

'But I'm not,' said Orion, at the same time as Daniel said, 'How do you know it wouldn't hurt?'

Orion was famous for talking the hind legs off donkeys, so Scott figured it would be safer to concentrate on Daniel. 'It's just a badge,' he said. 'What harm can it do?'

'Yeah, right,' Daniel said in a voice that came unexpectedly close to a sneer. 'Ask the Nazis that one and see what answer you get.'

Scott was still trying to work out what the Nazis had to do with anything when Orion grabbed a clump of albino hair in each hand and tugged dramatically,

saying, 'Aaagh! Godwin!' Some of the kids at Bayview/Lomond Secondary reckoned Orion was mental but Scott had never gone along with them, up until now. He glanced sideways and found Daniel laughing at him.

'You haven't heard of Godwin's Law, have you?' he said. 'I guess it's mainly an internet thing. According to Godwin, the first person to mention the Nazis loses – well, unless there's no other way of making the point.'

'And that doesn't apply to you,' Orion said, almost before Daniel had finished speaking. 'You were just dragging the Nazis in as a way of shutting Scott up – which means you were trivialising Nazism and the Holocaust – which means you deserve to be Godwinned.'

'Relax,' Daniel said. 'I agree. I'm nowhere near as anti-GO as you are and I didn't even mean to compare GO to the Nazis. I just don't want to be bullied into joining anything, that's all.'

Somewhere along the line, the discussion seemed to have got out of control. Scott decided he had better bring it back into line. 'If you feel like you're being bullied, the best thing to do is stand up for yourself,' he told Daniel. 'Or is that your problem? Are you scared of getting into a fight?'

Orion sniggered. 'Ever seen Dan climbing?' he asked. 'I have. I sit at the bottom with a book while he climbs everything in the Danville Range. Trust me, Lockie and Tommo couldn't keep up with him. No way does he need to back off from a fight.'

Scott frowned at an old blurred memory of Daniel holding Tommo and Lockie at bay, one in each hand. Maybe he could take care of himself, after all, even though he was a bit of an outsider. Maybe Orion was the one he ought to be warning - the one who was as vulnerable as Scott's mum.

'How about you, Orion?' he asked. 'What scares you?'

'I wouldn't back off from a fight either,' the kid said with sudden dignity. 'I just don't fight the same way as Lockie and Tommo do. As a matter of fact, they'd be just as hopeless at fighting in my way. Tell me something, Scott. Why do you let them go on like that?'

'Me?' Scott said, startled. 'What do you mean? I'm not responsible for those two idiots. You make it sound like I ought to be taking them to Tommo and Lockie Obedience School.'

'That mightn't be such a bad idea,' Daniel said, taking him seriously. 'Those guys would follow you anywhere, y'know. It's a waste to keep treating them like comic sidekicks when you could be showing them how to lift their game.'

Scott laughed. 'Like how, exactly?' he demanded. 'Oh sure, I could tell them to go and read a book or play chess together or talk to you and Orion about the meaning of life but the fact is, they wouldn't be up to it. They're not exactly the greatest brains in the world.'

'I know that,' said Orion. 'I keep trying to explain stuff to them but they just don't get it. As far as I can see, no one ever told them there's more to life than

picking on little kids and looking up girls' skirts. Dan seems to think you could do it ... but maybe you haven't got past that stage yourself.'

If Frank Carretto hadn't been gliding towards them with a plate of toast, bacon, mushrooms and the best scrambled eggs in the world, Scott would have pushed his chair back and walked out. Up until that moment, he'd actually been getting something out of the conversation – the exact kind of thing that he had hoped to get from discussing the militia with Mal, as a matter of fact. But Orion had just put a stop to that. Scott knew what the little freak was hinting at. He must have heard about the Jude Martin incident, same as everyone in Lomond, and like the rest of them, he wasn't going to let Scott forget it.

'Hey, wait till your balls've dropped, mate,' he said, hitting back. 'You'll feel different about a lot of things then.'

Daniel turned to glare at Scott. That didn't make sense at first – after all, he had just insulted Orion, not Daniel – but then Orion drew in a long breath and started talking and within a few seconds, Scott realised that he had let both of them in for a detailed description of the state of Orion's testicles. Luckily, before the kid had got too far, a car honked outside.

'That'll be my dad,' Orion said. 'Here's your book from the Bayview library, Dan. See you later.'

As he went racing out, Scott looked across at Daniel. Maybe, now that the little freak had left, they could continue the conversation in a more sensible, blokey sort of way. But with Orion gone, Daniel seemed to have lost interest. He picked up his book and wandered off, mumbling something about going to see whether his cousin needed any help. Scott shrugged and finished his breakfast and went to look for his dad, although he found his uncle instead, standing on the footpath outside and talking to Norm Kelly.

'Not a problem,' Doug was saying with his froggy smile. 'They owe it to you, Norm. Give Rob time and he'll see it the way Dave does. Even if he doesn't, he's stuck with it now.'

He glanced over Norm's shoulder and caught sight of Scott. For a moment his smile froze in place and then, with an obvious effort, he stretched it even wider.

'Scotty!' he said with a fairly good imitation of enthusiasm. 'Here for the People's Court, are you? Wish I could come and watch but I've got work to do.'

He slapped Scott on the back and winked at Norm, looking so froglike that Scott almost expected to see him hop away down the street. In fact, for all he knew, Doug might have done exactly that. Scott wouldn't have seen it, because Norm Kelly moved in straight away, standing too close and blocking his view of the street.

'There's something I better fill you in on, Scotty, before you go to the town hall,' he said in a confidential whisper. 'Some of the blokes in the militia have got a little surprise for Lucy. We already worded your dad up but, technically speaking, you're supposed to be the leader, so you ought to be in on it as well.'

He gave Scott a smile that was meant to look friendly and helpful but was actually at least eighty per cent pure malice. Scott wasn't too bothered. Norm was one of half a dozen guys in Lomond who had always had it in for him, even though he had never done a thing to them. It was no big deal, just one of the indicators that he was taller and better-looking and more popular than anyone else.

'What's the deal?' he said. 'Come on, spit it out.'

He pushed his hands right down to the bottom of his tunic pockets and leaned back against the wall of The Caff, soaking up the sunshine, while he waited for Norm finish faffing about and get around to explaining. His head felt comfortably empty, no noticeable thoughts knocking around in it and certainly no premonitions of disaster, which (Scott thought later) just proved that he wasn't the kind of guy who had premonitions.

Jude felt lousy, although she couldn't have explained why. She should have been feeling great. All through the week, all sorts of experts had been talking about Lucy and now the crews from three major TV stations were preparing to film the second People's Court, as soon as Lucy had finished her review of last week's cases. There was no reason for Jude to feel so shivery and snuffly, unless she had suddenly become allergic to success.

She swivelled her chair round and looked down the long oak table to where Lucy was sitting. It was no wonder that the media always swooned over her. She looked so small and child-like in that huge pompous chair and yet she could come out with judgments that had been compared to Solomon in the Bible (by one of the bishops) or whatsisname in Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (by one of the professors).

Jude had actually gone to the glass-fronted bookcase at The Centre, found Sibyl Dove's huge brass-clasped family Bible and looked up King Solomon. He turned out to have worked out who was the real mother of some baby by saying he would cut the baby down the middle and give half to each of the two women, at which point the real mother went, 'No! She can have it. Just let my baby live.' Funnily enough, it was exactly the same story as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* - Jude knew that, because she had studied it in English last year - except that in Brecht's play the real mother was prepared to let the baby get the chop and it was only saved by the girl who had nursed it and loved it.

Which, according to Brecht, made her more of a real mother than the biological mother, anyway.

Jude sneezed and the explosion in her sinuses blasted her off that crazy rambling train of thought and back into the People's Court. Bryce Henderson was telling Lucy that a week of playing pool non-stop was enough and his uncle had offered him a job and please, could he take it and just play pool every now and

then for fun? She typed that into her laptop, along with Lucy saying yes, and added Code S, which stood for success.

Lee Munro and Mrs Mulvaney had already scored an S when they had asked if they could unofficially adopt each other as grandson and grandmother, although Miss Everett still wouldn't agree that there was anything wrong with giving advice. Two successes out of three wasn't a bad track record. Jude hoped Lucy would do as well today. She was entering the next three names - all the same surname, indicating that the first case was some sort of family hassle - when Rob Sterne marched down the aisle, looking a bit ruffled, and gave Jude one of his sun-bronzed Aussie stares.

'Mind if I have a word with Lucy in private?' he said.

Jude hated questions that were only supposed to have one answer. It was tempting to say, 'Yeah, I mind' but Rob was one of Lucy's most important supporters, so she shrugged and went to talk to Daniel, who was over at the side of the room, next to the TV crew.

'Big mistake,' she told him. 'You're too close to the cameras. You won't get to see yourself on telly that way.'

'Exactly right,' he said, smiling. 'That's why I'm sitting here.'

He looked nice when he smiled - more relaxed, less mournful and serious - so Jude went on teasing him. '*Defending the National Tuck Shop*,' she said, tilting sideways to read the title of the book balanced on his knee. 'Did you bring that along in case you got hungry?'

His smile broadened. 'No way. I ordered it from the Bayview library and Orion just picked it up for me. It's about those secret armies that used to operate round here.'

That sounded interesting. She would have asked more questions, except that Rob Sterne went past at a jog with Scott following, his face tight with anger. Jude's brain fogged up straight away. Oh yes, she was definitely allergic to Scott. No surprises there. When she looked over her shoulder to find out what was going on, she saw Lucy waving to her, so she said goodbye to Daniel and headed back to the table.

'Listen, Jude, you might want to stand down and let Raewyn take the next lot of minutes,' Lucy said, looking concerned. 'Rob Sterne just told me that the militia's brought two blokes in unexpectedly, because they reckon the blokes would've made a run for it, if they'd been given advance warning. The thing is, it's your stepdad and his mate Apeman.'

Jude's head zinged and her sinuses began to swell. This allergy was really getting to her. 'Don't worry, I'll be fine,' she said thickly. 'Besides, Raewyn can't type for peanuts.'

She hurried over to the laptop, to make sure Lucy didn't get a chance to stop her: or to make sure she didn't have time to think. Dropping into her chair, she deleted the last three names on the list and typed Shane Paul Martin and - Jesus, what was Apeman's real name? When she looked up, Dave Conway and Pat Fahey were shouldering past Serenity and pushing Shane and Apeman

across to the lectern. They all looked pretty battered. It must have been some fight. Jude was surprised that Dave Conway wanted to go another round with Shane, after that fight in the pub just before the election where Shane had -

Oh.

She sat there, stunned, while Shane caught her eye and gave her a thumbs-up sign and said, 'Write everything down proper, won't you, kid?' She sat there while Lucy announced that David Raymond Conway and Patrick Michael Fahey were bringing a case against Shane Paul Martin and William John Marriott. She sat there while Dave accused Shane and Apeman of selling hot doormats in the pub, producing a letter from a Bayview factory as proof. She sat there while Rob Sterne told the court that Lomond needed to take the lead in cleaning up this sort of petty crime.

Her fingers darted across the keyboard, recording every word, but her brain couldn't really take it in. She was much too busy dealing with the truth behind the words. Set-up. It was a set-up. Shane had belted Dave Conway in the pub and this was Dave's way of getting back at him. He and Pat Fahey and Rob Sterne were framing Shane - well, not framing him exactly, because he and Apeman *had* nicked the doormats, but that wasn't really what the other guys were on about. They were really on about revenge.

That made Jude feel more like a Martin than she had felt in ages. So what if Rob Sterne was an important GO supporter? He was just as much of a scumbag as his son: or worse. She wanted to stand up and tell everyone what she had just worked out but if she did that, it would look as though she didn't trust the People's Court, meaning that she didn't trust Lucy.

A no-win situation. What would King Solomon do about that?

Jude was trying to come up with an answer when her sinuses bulged and tickled. As she sneezed politely into her sleeve, someone said something in a loud clear voice that echoed round the court. She blew her nose and looked up gratefully. That would be Lucy, saving the situation again.

But it wasn't. It was Shelley.

Her mum looked as battered as Shane and Apeman - a split lip, one eye puffing up and the beginning of a bruise on her shoulder, displayed by her low-cut top. She must've tried to help Shane fight off the guys from the militia and then she must've followed them to town in the Holden, which was bloody brave, because Shelley hated driving. She hated lawyers and social workers and courts as well but she swaggered down to the front of the room, all the same, posing beside the table with her hip tilted and her breasts pushed out aggressively.

'People's Court,' she said. 'What a wank. Just a fancy name for settling old scores. Well, if Rob Sterne can hang shit on my bloke, I got a right to hang shit on him. The bastard's had it in for Shane ever since I took up with him. Pretty unfair, when Shane brought up Rob's kid and acted like a real father to her, which is more than that prick over there would've done in a million years.'

Jude typed it all into the laptop. She could do eighty words a minute: she had always been proud of that. She went on typing while Rob Sterne said, 'My

kid? You mean *Jude*? What are you on about, Shelley? You never told me you were pregnant.'

'Why should I?' said Shelley. 'You would've just hit me or something. Everyone knows you bash the shit out of poor bloody Bethany, even if nobody's got the guts to say it to your face. Fucking secrets. This fucking town's built on them. I'm sick of it. Time to tell the truth for a change.' She swung round to face the audience and shouted, 'Lomond, you're fucking *fucked*.'

Jude typed, the cameras whirred and Rob lost it. He took a long step forward, pulling his fist back, and Shane made a dive for him, skimming so fast and low that he hit the floor at the same time as he grabbed hold of Rob's arm. Rob shuddered and jerked like a watchdog straining at its chain, until he shook Shane loose. Then he turned to kick Shane in the stomach, which gave Shelley time to pick up the laptop and slam it down onto Rob's head.

After that, Jude couldn't go on typing, so she sat and stared at her hands, lying side by side on the oak table, as pale as dead fish. They looked so strange that it was hard to stop studying them but in the end she managed to raise her head and look around. Pat Fahey was wrestling with Rob, saying, 'Easy, mate. Steady on.' Dave Conway had Shane in an armlock. Apeman had flung his hands up and kept shouting, 'I surrender.' And Daniel had wrapped his arms round Shelley, holding her gently but inescapably, while she struggled and swore at Rob till she ran out of breath.

In the silence that followed, everybody remembered Lucy Dove and turned towards her, including Jude. Her eyes were sticky with allergy juice and at first she could only see a luminous white blur at the centre of the court. Even after she had blinked her eyelashes dry, Lucy still seemed a bit fuzzy round the edges. Instead of taking control, she was looking round the courtroom with lost, haunted eyes, like a little kid left alone in an empty house.

'Please,' Jude whispered. 'Oh, please, Lucy.'

Her voice should have been too soft to hear but it seemed to work, all the same. At any rate, Lucy's eyes cleared and she smiled at the cameras.

'Shelley's right,' she said. 'Every town has its secrets. We've brought some of our secrets out into the open today and, after the dust's died down, I reckon Lomond'll be a better place because of it. Thanks for sharing these people's pain. Thanks for sharing these people's honesty. This has to be the hardest thing we've faced together in the People's Court, so I want to sign off now and send you away to think about what's happened. Just remember, it's easy to judge but it's a lot harder to be sure you know the whole truth.'

It was moving and sincere and heartfelt: and somehow wrong. Shelley recognised that, before anyone else had time to react.

'What a load of crap,' she yelled, wrenching her arm out of Daniel's grip and storming up the aisle. 'You sound like those idiots on American talk shows, telling people their shit doesn't stink. Well, shit *does* stink and I don't want to share my pain with anyone. It's mine, okay?'

It would have been a good exit line, except that Shelley didn't exit. She hesitated at the door, turned and came back down the aisle with her head bent and her feet scuffing the floor. You could tell that every step hurt. You could tell that she wanted to walk out and slam the door in the bastards' faces but she forced herself to keep going, until she reached the table.

'Sorry, kid,' she said. 'Didn't mean to leave you behind. Ready to go now?'

The world slowed on its axis and all the sounds in the courtroom merged into a hiss of white noise. The air seemed to thicken as well, meaning that Jude couldn't see more than a metre ahead. A metre and a half away her fathers were distant grey blurs - Shane an anxious blur and Rob a menacing one. Only two things seemed real. Shelley, so close that Jude could count every hair in the plucked arches of her eyebrows and name every shade of colour in the bruise on her shoulder, and Lucy Dove, shining like a white pillar on the far side of the table.

So, okay, King Solomon knew what to do when two mums were going for the same baby. But what if a baby's asked to choose between two mums?

While Jude's eyes shifted back and forth from Lucy to Shelley, the world started to speed up again. Her diaphragm caved in and pushed the breath out of her lungs, turning it into words along the way.

'Nah, I've still got work to do. Thanks, Mum. I'll catch up with you later.'

As the audience sighed like a footy crowd when the call was too close to cheer, Shelley reached over to smooth Jude's hair. 'Should've told you sooner, shouldn't I?' she said. 'That's the trouble with secrets. You're stuffed if you tell and stuffed if you don't. Never mind, baby, you'll be fine. See you round.'

Then she belted out of the room, guarded by Shane and Apeman, before the journos had time to make a move. The slam of the door was like a signal, telling Jude to start freaking out. Hey, why not? The story of her life had just been taken away from her, in front of half the town and three TV cameras, and she had nothing to put in its place. When she looked at her hands again, pale transparent drops were rolling down between the knuckles. Jude frowned at them, puzzled, and realised that she must be crying. That would explain why, when she felt a reassuring touch on her shoulder and glanced up, Lucy Dove looked pale and transparent too.

'Secrets,' she said. 'They're killers, every time. Come on, Jude, we better go back to The Centre and work out how we're going to make the best of this mess.'

Four in the morning. Daniel still couldn't sleep. He kept remembering Rob Sterne's fist swinging back, Rob's boot aimed at Shane Martin's stomach, Dave Conway grinning as he twisted Shane's arm. If he managed to push those images out of his head, they were replaced by Scott Sterne ordering him, in the nicest possible way, to join the militia. He shuddered in the darkness and

switched on the bedside light, reached for his book and went on reading about the secret armies of the 1930s.

Apparently, it all started when some of the diggers who'd fought for Australia in the First World War got worried about the idea of a massive communist uprising led by the Unemployed Workers' Movement. Before long, the diggers and their supporters had set up several different secret armies across Australia, involving as many as 130,000 men. Brigades patrolled country towns, armed with guns and picks and shovels. Brigades in the cities drew up plans to take over power and water supplies and essential public services, in case of an emergency.

The Protestants suspected the Catholics and the farmers kept a cautious eye on the unemployed men who came tramping across the countryside in search of work. But there were no killings, the way there had been during the conflicts between the first white settlers and the Aboriginal people, because the secret armies never found the enemy they had been looking for. That wasn't surprising, given that, according to the writer of Daniel's book, there were only a few thousand communists in the whole of Australia at the time – although, even so, the top intelligence officer in Victoria reckoned there were moments when the whole business might have escalated into civil war ...

Daniel's eyelids fluttered and drooped. He rested his cheek on the book for a moment and when he opened his eyes again, light was flooding the room and Caro was standing by the bed with a mug of coffee. He yawned, sat up and glanced at the sunlit window.

'Oh no!' he said. 'I better get a move on.'

'No hurry,' Caro said, handing him the coffee. 'You already slept through the alarm. Orion dropped in on his way to the bus and I asked him to tell your form teacher that you're sick. He'll come round after school but he wants me to let you know in advance that he's thought of a genius ending for your novel.'

'His novel,' Daniel said through a yawn. 'I'm just the sounding board. Why did you say I was sick, Caro? I'm not, y'know.'

His aunt shrugged. 'Everyone needs a mental health day now and then. You looked pretty splattered when you got home from the People's Court. I thought you might like to dag around at home for a day, sit on the verandah and watch the sea or whatever.'

Sitting on the verandah sounded like a good idea. Daniel pulled on his tracksuit, collected a tray of food and a detective story from Caro's bookshelves and headed out into the sunshine. Peppermint tea and cheese on toast calmed his stomach, the sun massaged his aching muscles and the detective story's puzzles distracted his brain. When the Caseys' phone rang and stopped and rang again ten times in a row, signalling another GO emergency, Daniel just frowned and went on reading. He had his own problems, after all. There was no need to take on everyone else's problems as well.

Towards the end of the afternoon Caro's printer ran out of ink and she discovered that she'd forgotten to buy a spare cartridge. She gave Daniel a brief

lecture on how menopause destroyed the memory and went off to Bayview, still grumbling. So Daniel was alone in the house when he heard a strange hacking sound like a koala snoring and peered over the verandah rail to see Maya Casey limping up Karma Drive, sobbing convulsively. For a few treacherous seconds he thought about backing away and hiding in his bedroom but then he decided he wasn't quite that selfish.

'Hey, Maya!' he called, leaning out and waving. 'What's the matter?'

She looked up. Daniel had recognised the top of her head, because of all those wiggly yellow curls, but he wasn't sure whether he would have recognised her face. It was scarlet and bloated, her eyes swollen into narrow slits and her mouth trembling so hard that it seemed almost shapeless. She tried to speak, failed and tried again.

'I've resigned from GO,' she said. 'They murdered Orion.'

He took an instinctive step backwards, as if she had thrown a bucket of cold water up at him. 'Huh?' he said. 'Orion's *dead*?'

'Well, maybe not actually dead,' she admitted. 'He could be, though. I just don't know.'

Daniel sighed with relief. For a moment there, he had forgotten that Maya always made a huge drama out of everything. Maybe he was turning menopausal and losing his memory, like Caro. He backed away and went to open the front door, smiling at his own joke as soon as he was out of sight. Jokes were good. They calmed you down and helped you to cope. He took a short cut through the kitchen, putting the kettle on as he went past, let Maya in and sat her down at the table.

'Okay, so you're not absolutely sure what's going on,' he said in a relatively steady voice. 'But someone did something to Orion. How did it all start?'

'It was - they - at lunchtime,' Maya babbled. She stopped and took a deep breath and tried again. 'You were at the People's Court yesterday, weren't you, Dan? So you know Shelley Martin reckons Rob Sterne is Jude's father. Everyone was talking about it before school and Lockie went up to Scott and asked him if it was true and Scott just looked straight through him, like he'd gone deaf or something. And then, worst luck, Jude turned up at lunchtime with a bunch of leaflets for Rocky, so Tommo and Lockie had a go at her - all this stuff about how Shelley's a slut and Jude must be too. Orion got really mad, because he's in love with Jude. Oh, didn't you know? Yeah, for the last two years. It's hopeless, of course. Jude's way too cool to look at a little creep like my -'

She sobbed for a while, a series of mechanical gulping hiccups. Then she knuckled her eyes and sniffed and returned to the story.

'Anyhow, Tommo and Lockie came and stood over Orion but it didn't seem to bother him as much as usual. He actually tried to push Tommo away, which was kind of dumb, because Tommo's always looking for an excuse to lay into him. They got him down on the ground and started banging his head on the asphalt. Scott Sterne usually stops them from going too far - I reckon they sort of

count on it - but he didn't stop them this time. He just stood there, staring at Jude.'

'And what did Jude do?' Daniel asked from a dry throat.

'She just stared at Scott,' said Maya. 'I think everybody in this town's going mental. No one made a move, except me. I bit Tommo and tried to stick my fingers into Lockie's eyes and screamed till Rocky came out of the staff room. They got off Orion then but he looked *squashed*, Daniel. His arm was bent into this weird shape and there was blood ...'

Another break, while Daniel hugged Maya and wished there was someone around to hug him. 'You rang home, trying to get hold of your parents, didn't you?' he said, remembering. 'Are they with Orion now?'

'If only,' she said. 'Mum was supposed to be at school but she'd pissed off, without telling anyone where she was going. I don't have her mobile number, because she's usually right there in the next classroom, and Dad's mobile's switched off. I tried a million times and left a million messages, while they were putting Orion into the ambulance. Then, after I resigned from the Wolf Guard, I started walking home. It took three hours and Dad's taxi isn't even here, so I probably should've stayed with Orion. I mean, you're supposed to keep talking to people in a coma and, like, guide them back into the world again, right?'

'It's probably too soon to know whether Orion's in an actual coma,' Daniel told her. 'Did the ambulance people say what was wrong with him?'

'Fractured skull, concussion, broken arm, minor cuts and bruising,' Maya recited. 'But they were like you – they kept saying it'd be a while before they could tell me how bad it was going to be.'

Daniel gulped. He had read a lot of stuff about concussion on his favourite medical websites but he didn't feel like remembering it and applying it to someone he knew: not right now. He was tossing up between taking Maya next door to search for Raewyn's mobile number (except that she didn't look like she could move a step further) and going himself (except that he didn't like to leave her), when a car pulled up and doors slammed and Finn came hurrying in.

He swung Maya off her feet and the two of them started crying into each other's necks. That wasn't quite as reassuring as it might have been but at least Finn was an adult, which meant that Daniel wasn't in charge any more. He went to make a pot of tea, because people always made tea in a crisis, and by the time he got back, Finn was explaining why his mobile had been switched off.

It turned out that he been driving Bethany Sterne and five suitcases over to her sister's place in Bayview. Someone must have passed on the latest gossip, because Bethany knew about Rob and Shelley and Finn had to do as much counselling as driving, so it had seemed a bit tactless to take calls on his mobile as well. On his way back from Bayview he had dropped into the Royal George, where he had heard about Orion, left messages for Raewyn at school and on her mobile and set off to look for Maya.

'I hope Raewyn's all right,' he said, frowning. 'It's not like her to disappear that way. I might just give her another call.'

But as he stood up, the front door opened and Raewyn walked in. They stared at each other for ten seconds, Finn tugging at a handful of his smoke-grey hair, Raewyn rattling her bracelets.

‘So where were *you*?’ they said in unison.

Ten seconds later Daniel was stranded in the middle of a family row. Finn was furious with Raewyn for rushing off to The Centre without letting anybody know, just because Lucy Dove needed help with the media after the People’s Court. In return, Raewyn claimed that Finn had switched off his mobile because he fancied Bethany Sterne. Finn said Raewyn had been neglecting the family ever since she joined Going Overboard. Raewyn said Finn had been neglecting his kids ever since they were born. Maya told Raewyn she had to resign from GO and got hysterical when Raewyn told her not to be silly. Finn screamed at Raewyn. She screamed back. Maya just stood in the middle of the room and screamed.

And Daniel yelled, ‘Shut up, the lot of you. I want to know if Orion’s okay.’

Raewyn turned white. ‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘Well, he’s alive, at any rate. I rang the hospital, as soon as I got Finn’s message. The doctors say Orion should regain consciousness somewhere in the next twenty-four hours and they’ll know then whether there’ll be any permanent damage to his b-brain.’

Maya wailed, Finn groaned and Daniel walked out, leaving them to it. He stood on the front steps, gripping the rail tightly to stop his hands from shaking, and watched the sun sink down through a sludge of grey cloud. On a better day he would probably have described it as a ball of fire but right at that moment it seemed more like a spinning ball of blood, held together by centrifugal force.

He looked down the hill into the Martins’ junkyard and thought of Jude, denying Shelley in front of the People’s Court, and Scott, denying Jude in the school yard. He looked over his shoulder at the mirror-blank glass door and thought of Serenity fighting with Caro, Finn and Raewyn and Maya lashing out at each other. Then he looked into the veiled sun and thought of Orion.

Orion, who never fought with anybody. Orion, who believed you could solve everything by being reasonable and logical. Orion, who was flat on his back in the Bayview hospital with tubes sticking out of him and a machine registering the electrical impulses of a brain that might never be able to reason or debate or write the last chapters of novels ever again.

Daniel realised his lips were moving. He heard his voice say:

*‘Brothers will fight
and kill each other,
men will know misery;
an axe-age, a sword-age,
shields will be cloven,
a wind-age, a wolf-age,
before the world’s ruin.’*

The sun sank behind the escarpment, the sky briefly glowed peacock blue before fading to grey and darkness spread out across Lomond. In a house down by the river, Katie Brewster went to bed early. She hadn't had much sleep the night before, because she had been doing some intensive work on the *Star* with her father, to make sure that when the paper came out on Saturday, it would be taking the right line about the balls-up in the People's Court. It was the first time Dick Brewster had really acknowledged that his daughter was entitled to check everything he wrote about GO. Katie fell asleep easily and slept well.

Scott Sterne had gone to bed early too - partly to get out of sitting in front of the TV with his father, who was determined to pretend it was a normal evening by avoiding any reference to Scott's mum, Shelley Martin, Jude or anybody connected to them; partly because he felt as shivery and achey and tired to the bone as if he picked up some sort of virus at the People's Court. But the virussed feeling followed him into his dreams, waking him at regular intervals from endless narratives of being hunted or hunting, chasing or being chased, before plunging him back into the morass of sleep again.

Meanwhile, over in Happy Valley, Serenity Cox was staying up late, blasting music through her headphones till her brain felt as if it had been industrially cleaned. She unplugged herself, pulled the sheet over her head and fell asleep straight away, without even getting close to thinking about any of the complications surrounding her mum or Jude or Scott: she had always been good at sleeping.

On the other hand, Daniel Matheson, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling in the next room, saw sleep as a problem, not a solution. When he got stressed, he wanted to stay awake forever and keep an eye on everything. Over time, however, he had noticed that this approach tended to leave him feeling even more stressed, so he had found a way around it – turning his light back on and reading till he fell asleep on the book, without having to admit that he was going off guard duty.

Jude Martin, conversely, didn't even try to sleep. She lay on the bed in Sibyl Dove's old room, as silent and immobile as Orion Casey in the Bayview hospital. There was nothing she wanted or needed to think about. She just counted the cracks on the ceiling and watched the changing patterns that the moonlight made on the white walls – which, as she kept telling herself, was more than Orion would be able to do.

And downstairs, in her own room at The Centre, Lucy Dove closed her eyes and allowed her spirit body to rise up into the air, pausing to look back at her physical body, which was tethered to it by an infinitely extendable white rope. A sigh, heaved from the bottom of her lungs, sent her eddying out of the room, following a winding trail that glittered on the air like the Milky Way and led her past all the children in turn. She frowned over Orion, touched Jude lightly, nodded to Daniel, admired Serenity, smiled sympathetically at Scott, saluted Katie and

acknowledged all of them as the ones who had been there right from the beginning of the enterprise.

Then she left Lomond behind her, soaring above the town and tacking out to sea. A wind riffled across the Pacific, churning the waves, and the moon ducked in and out of banked-up storm clouds. Thirty kays out from the coast, she came across a rusty boat with twenty four men huddled together on its deck. As her spirit body dipped down towards them, the captain looked out across the ocean and back at his mate.

'I can't tell you that,' he said, replying to a question that Lucy hadn't heard. 'We've blown right off the map. Your guess is as good as mine.'

'Does that mean we'll miss Australia altogether?' demanded one of the passengers (also in Chinese but Lucy's spirit body had no difficulty with that).

'No!' said another passenger with barely controlled terror. 'No, that can't happen! I want to get off this stinking bucket of bolts.'

'Me too,' sighed a third man. 'I want it more than I ever wanted anything.'

The mate looked out along the broken line that the moon had drawn on the water. 'You know as much about where we are as we do,' he said. 'When we sailed in closer an hour ago, we saw nothing but cliffs – nowhere we could possibly land.'

'And we can't keep going in and out to check the coastline,' the captain told them. 'We're at the mercy of the tide ... and no one ever says the tides have any mercy.'

Each time he said "mercy", Lucy heard a shimmering sound, as if someone was shaking a cluster of silver bells. The third man seemed to hear them too. He looked round and clutched a medallion on a cord round his neck, tipped his head back and stared straight up at Lucy.

'Guan Yin!' he said in a thin voice, stretched tight between doubt and belief. 'The goddess of mercy! She's here. She's come to save us.'

'I can't see her,' the captain objected. 'If the goddess wants to be useful, you'd think she'd show herself to the man in charge of the boat.'

'Yes, but you're not the one with the medallion,' said the first passenger. 'The goddess has appeared to Han Chung because he's the one who believes in her.'

'I wouldn't say I was the lady's most faithful believer,' Han Chung said apologetically. 'But I can see her as clearly as I see you – pale face, long flowing white robe, floating in the air above us, waiting to answer our call for help.'

'It's true that Guan Yin's supposed to protect fishermen and sailors and people out at sea,' the mate said. 'My father told me that, back in his day, they used to pray to her for safe voyages.'

'I did that, when we were leaving Chao Zhou, although I don't think I meant it very seriously,' Han Chung admitted. 'Maybe she's answering my prayer, all the same.'

'Maybe,' the second passenger said dubiously. 'On the other hand, my mother always said Guan Yin was the protector of women and children and there aren't any women and children here.'

They stood and stared at each other, until the captain swung away and took a firm grip on the wheel. 'No disrespect to the lady in white, but I'd feel more comfortable following a map than a goddess,' he said. 'Still, right at this moment Han Chung's vision is all we've got. Han Chung, would you please ask the compassionate one to give us further directions?'

When Han Chung looked up at Lucy again, his eyes were full of abstract nouns – doubt and belief, longing and cynicism, hope and fear. The intensity of the connection frightened Lucy. She turned and fled back across the ocean but the rope that connected her to the sleeping body at The Centre kept tangling into knots, impeding and delaying her. By the time she arrived at the mouth of the Danville River, the rusty boat was only a short way behind her, jolting across the waves and running aground on a hidden shoal.

Twenty-four men scrambled out and waded to the shore, while the captain examined the battered hull, wondering out loud why he had ever thought that this was a profitable venture. Lucy Dove's spirit body flittered across to a clump of trees further up the river and perched there, hidden in the shadows. She watched the captain point to the outline of the escarpment, massive against the starry sky, as though he was indicating that they would only run up against it if they followed the course of the river.

But Han Chung peered into the night and found her in the darkness. He gathered the passengers together and gestured towards her, as if he was offering a counter-argument. The men debated for a while and then split into two groups. Nine of them headed down to the south, following a narrow strip of beach that hugged the base of the cliff, and the remaining fifteen set off up the path beside the Danville River. Lucy backed away but, when she tried to escape altogether, she found that she couldn't leave them. The connection forged by Han Chung's gaze remained too strong for that.

At four in the morning the men passed through the riverside suburb and looked around for a public phone, hoping to ring their contacts in Sydney. When they failed to find a phone box, they decided to keep walking and crossed the bridge, continuing on along the opposite bank of the river. As the dawn light spread out behind the escarpment like a flock of galahs, pale grey and rose, they hid behind a screen of bushes, shared their food and water and settled down for a nap. Through his half-closed eyelids, Han Chung saw the white lady soar into the sky, trailing a line of white light like a comet.

'Thank you, Guan Yin,' he said sleepily.

A few seconds later Lucy Dove sat up in her room at The Centre and knuckled her eyes, grinding the lashes into her pupils over and over again in an unsuccessful attempt to erase all the images they had recorded during the night: and the day before: and the days before that.

'What next?' she said. 'Oh hell, what next?'

Twelve

Caro Cox saw them first. It was ten in the morning and she was driving back to Happy Valley after dropping Daniel at the foot of the escarpment, just outside the boundary of the Kelly property. He had been miserable at breakfast, so miserable that it actually showed, which was unusual for him, and when Caro had asked what would cheer him up, he told her he would like to climb something more challenging than the hills around Happy Valley.

Well, all right. Climbing worked for him. Caro had seen that over the last few months. On the other hand, she couldn't help wondering whether she had done the right thing. She knew there was no point in spending the day sitting at the bottom of the escarpment with her fingers crossed but what the hell was she supposed to say to her brother and his overdressed wife, if she came back later to find that Daniel had fallen off a cliff?

'Sorry, Phil and Fay, I broke your son ...'

She turned her head, searching for something to replace the mental image of a broken toy. When she scanned the edge of the road, she saw curves of ochre earth, like fossilised sand dunes; low-slung scrub and gum trees scabbed with flakes of grey bark, clinging desperately to the soil; occasional glimpses of the Danville River, a heavy relentless mass of brown water cutting a channel through the hard brown land ... and a row of round ochre faces that peered out from the scrub and then vanished like scuttling rabbits, there and gone too fast for her to be sure she had seen them.

That was enough of a puzzle to occupy her mind for the rest of the way. As she drove into Lomond, she was still trying to decide between kids adventuring out into the countryside (because the figures had looked fairly small), Pat Fahey's Asian invasion (wouldn't he just love that?) and a vision of the Aborigines who used to camp by the river (except that their skin was mahogany, not ochre, and besides, she wasn't the sort of person who saw visions.)

It was slightly unnerving to look up and find herself halfway around the roundabout leading into the main street. Caro switched her concentration onto the traffic and noticed Finn Casey waving to her from the other side of the road. All of a sudden, she was hit by an urgent need to talk to another adult. She semaphored to Finn – not quite the SOS signal but a close equivalent - and they parked their cars and met in the middle of the street, under the war memorial.

‘I just left Daniel out at the plateau,’ she said. ‘He swore he’d be fine and I know he’s a careful climber but ... please tell me I did the right thing.’

‘Sorry, mate, I’m not the best person to ask,’ Finn said. ‘Not today, at any rate. After what happened to Orion, I feel like I want to trail around two steps behind my kids for the next twenty years. But yeah, of course you’ve got to let them run their own risks and live their own lives. I’d say you did good.’

‘Thanks,’ Caro said with a sigh that drained most of the tension from her body. ‘Thanks a lot.’

She felt so grateful that she decided to reward Finn by passing on her ochre faces puzzle, including the joke about Pat’s Asian invasion, but that turned out to be a mistake. Finn seemed to have lost interest in being first with the latest and, even more disconcertingly, Doug Sterne appeared from behind the war memorial and took over the conversation.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Cox, but I couldn’t help overhearing some of that,’ he said with a cursory attempt at a charmingly rueful smile. ‘It’s probably better to ask you about it than go away with the wrong impression. Did you really say you’d seen a group of Asians out on the road to the escarpment?’

‘No,’ Caro told him. ‘I said I wasn’t sure what I’d seen.’

‘But it *might* have been a group of Asians?’ he persisted.

‘Well, perhaps. It *might* have been all sorts of things.’

‘In other words, it’d be perfectly reasonable to act on that supposition,’ Doug said, satisfied. ‘Thank you, Mrs Cox, you’ve been a great help. Could I trouble you for one more thing – the exact location of the area where you saw these, ah, people?’

‘Sorry, I can’t remember,’ she said, without bothering to pretend that she had tried.

‘Never mind,’ said Doug. ‘Somewhere between here and the escarpment – that should be enough. Oh, and, Finn, here’s your daughter’s prescription. You left it behind on my desk.’

He handed Finn an envelope, nodded to Caro and crossed the road, heading back to his surgery. Finn ripped the envelope in half and dropped the pieces into his pocket.

‘What’s going on?’ said Caro. ‘Don’t tell me there’s something the matter with Maya, as well as Orion. That hardly seems fair.’

Finn sighed heavily. ‘Ah, it’s all part of the same thing,’ he said. ‘Maya’s pretty upset about her brother, having been there on the spot when it happened and all. I brought her into town, so Doug could have a look at her, but he just wants to give her a dose of tranks, which seems too extreme for my liking.’ He

cracked his knuckles thoughtfully and added, 'Listen, Caro, maybe you could help me out. I want to pick up Raewyn and drive over to the hospital and sit with Orion but I don't think Maya could handle it. Would you mind looking after her for a bit? I'll come and collect her, just as soon as -'

'Not a problem,' she cut in. 'Take your time. I'll be working at home anyway. Maya can laze around, watch a couple of videos or whatever and then come along for the ride when I go over to the escarpment to pick Daniel up. How does that sound?'

'Terrific,' Finn said, relieved. He ran across to the taxi and came back hand in hand with Maya, who was clutching a bald Barbie doll and sucking her thumb. 'Are you sure you'll be okay, kiddo?' he asked, crouching down beside her, as if she was two years old and knee high.

'Sure. Caro's nice,' lisped Maya. 'She hates Lucy too, not like my horrible mum.'

On Saturday mornings Dick Brewster always cooked a huge breakfast for the whole family because, as he said, 'It's my only real moment of peace, in between putting the paper out and starting to get the letters of complaint.' By now, the whole thing was as carefully organised as a factory process line. Emily fetched the eggs and bacon from the fridge; Hannah counted out the slices of bread and lined them up beside the toaster; and Isobelle, as the oldest and most responsible of Katie's sisters, was allowed to slice the mushrooms and start heating the enormous frying pan.

Meanwhile, Dick and Katie leafed through the paper, to see what the citizens of Lomond would be complaining about. This week they only found one major misprint. In the small paragraph about the incident in the schoolyard at Bayview/Lomond Secondary College, Orion Casey's name was spelt "Arion". Dick Brewster looked up "Arion" in his favourite reference work, *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, and told Katie that Arion was an ancient Greek poet who had escaped from a shipful of murderous sailors by riding off on a friendly dolphin.

There was a moment of silence – a bit tearful in the case of Emily, the youngest and most tenderhearted – while everybody wished that Orion could have jumped onto a dolphin's back and escaped from Tommo and Lockie. Katie took the opportunity to nick the first slice of toast.

'That reminds me,' she said, reaching for the peanut butter, 'I have to be at The Centre by half past ten. We're having a meeting to decide what sort of spin we're going to put on this business about Tommo and Lockie.'

Emily looked round, wide-eyed. 'You're not staying for *breakfast*?' she said, wide-eyed. 'But we *always* –'

Her father gave her a warning look and she subsided, although she went on watching Katie intently, in case she was about to do something even more

unorthodox. 'It's all right,' her father told her. 'Katie's busy, that's all. You'll have things to do on Saturday mornings too, when you get to her age.'

'No, I won't,' Emily said with total conviction. 'I'll *always* have Saturday breakfast with you and Mum, even when I'm a *hundred*.'

Dick Brewster laughed and went across to the kitchen bench and counted out five slices of bacon. It looked as though he was going to let Katie leave without any dramas – not that she needed his permission, of course. She folded the peanut-buttered toast in half, dropped it into her pocket and went to collect the folder that she had already stashed on the bench near the door. As she pushed the door open, her mum looked up from the crossword that she did with great concentration every Saturday to stop herself from noticing the mess the others were making.

'It just occurred to me that Raewyn might be at your meeting,' she said. 'I was assuming she'd be over at Bayview Hospital with her boy but come to think of it, she's the sort of person who feels better when they've got something to do. Anyway, if she *is* there, tell her we were all so sorry to hear about Orion, won't you, Katie?'

Katie nodded and thought, 'As if' and went out into the bright cloudless morning. She took a shortcut through the back lanes and climbed the hill up to The Centre. The other regulars were there already – Marshall Cox (as usual), Raewyn Casey (proving her mum's point) and, rather more surprisingly, Rob Sterne (but he had to start making public appearances again at some point, so why not now?)

'Where's Lucy?' Katie asked. 'She'll want to be in on this, won't she?'

'I think she had a bad night,' said Marshall. 'She came into the kitchen this morning, made a pot of coffee and took it back to her room, without saying a word. Not that I blame her. The last few days have been pretty hard on all of us. Jude Martin's been staying here over the last few days and she hasn't even emerged from her room yet.'

His eyes veered towards Rob Sterne, hesitated and moved on. 'Might as well start without Lucy then,' Rob said. 'We can run through all the options and tell her which one's most likely to work.'

Raewyn sat up straighter and shook out an armload of Indonesian wooden bracelets, making a sound like the fat wooden sticks in a children's orchestra. 'So,' she said, brisk and businesslike. 'Our main task is to figure out how to downplay yesterday's incident. Any ideas?'

'I reckon we need a distraction,' Rob said, as promptly as if the two of them had set it up in advance. 'Another story we can throw to the mongrels from the press, if they come sniffing around – begging your pardon, Marshall. It so happens that I know something that'd be just the ticket. My brother Doug gave me a call ten minutes ago to say that some of those Chinese boat people may've turned up in Lomond. Apparently, your missus spotted them on the road out to the escarpment.'

Marshall blinked. 'Are you serious?' he said. 'That sounds highly unlikely. If it was anyone else, I'd want more proof but – hmm, Caro's never been one to exaggerate. As a matter of fact, she's more likely to play things down. I might give her a call in a minute and get for the details.' He paused and frowned and added, 'But before we go any further with this boat people story, I want you to tell me how it's supposed to stop the press from noticing that two of the boys in the militia beat a younger boy senseless.'

'Thought you were meant to be the professional here,' Rob said with a grin. 'How come you need me to teach you your job? Here's the way it goes. We send the militia out for a look-see and, with any luck, they'll find these buggers hiding out in the scrub and become instant heroes. Not bad, eh? Doug's ringing around right at this minute, telling the blokes to meet in the park next to the community hall.'

'Without consulting Lucy first?' Katie said, alarmed.

'No need,' Rob said. 'Not yet. Like I told you before, we'll just check it all out and then get Lucy's say-so, before we actually make a move.'

He sounded convincing but Katie wasn't convinced. Oh sure, she could see why Rob wanted some good PR for the militia – after all the drama in the People's Court, he could use a bit of good PR himself – but the plan seemed a bit too clever for him. Then she remembered that he had been talking to his brother and things started to make more sense. According to her father, Doug Sterne had spent the last ten years angling to become mayor. Even if he'd had no luck so far, he must have learnt a lot about politics along the way.

'It might work,' she conceded. 'But what if the mongrels from the press are too well-trained to go chasing your bone?'

'You've done a good job in the *Star* already,' Marshall pointed out. 'You hid the report of the schoolyard incident in a dead spot on the page and made it sound as uninteresting as possible. I'd be surprised if any journos made the connection with the militia, although Rob's right when he says we need to be prepared, just in case.'

'I don't know why you're all making such a fuss about it,' Raewyn said irritably. 'Tommo and Lockie have been bullying the smaller kids for years. It's an old problem, exactly the sort of thing that GO's on about. Lucy can deal with the pair of them in the People's Court next week.'

No one seemed to know how to reply to that. After half a minute of silence, Katie realised the others were all staring at the doorway. She turned and saw Finn Casey propped against the door frame, as pale and heavy-eyed as if he hadn't slept for a month.

'That's an interesting way to look at it, Raewyn,' he said. 'Funny, I thought Orion was our son, not a political issue.'

Before Raewyn could reply, Rob rose to his feet and looked down his handsome nose at Finn. 'Rae's upset,' he said. 'She's putting on a brave face but don't let that fool you, mate.'

Finn's mouth twitched. 'That's nice of you, taking the time to explain my wife to me,' he said. 'Especially when you're so good at handling your own wife.'

Even at a moment like this, when things in general were deeply serious, Katie couldn't be sure whether Finn's mouth was twitching with suppressed emotion or whether he was making a bitter joke. Fortunately, those kinds of details didn't register with Rob.

'I'll let that pass, because I can see you're upset,' he told Finn. 'Why don't you go home and have a lie-down, mate?'

'Thanks for the suggestion, mate,' said Finn. 'But as a matter of fact I'm on my way to the hospital, to be with my kid, and for some reason I thought my wife might want to come along. I'll wait outside in the taxi, Raewyn. If you're not there in five minutes, I'll go on my own.'

He dragged his hand across his eyes and blundered out, obviously upset about Orion. Raewyn sat and played with her wooden bracelets, obviously upset by their fight. Rob Sterne stared out of the window, trying to look remote and above it all, although the tic at the corner of his eye made it clear that he was reliving the last few days. Marshall shifted uncomfortably in his chair, as if he couldn't help empathising with their pain.

And Katie frowned down at her notebook, feeling guilty because she felt fine. Oh sure, when she thought about it, she was sorry for the Caseys – and the Martins too, of course - but things were hotting up again, which was kind of exciting. She wasn't about to do anything insensitive, such as bouncing up and down like a toddler watching the Wiggles, but she couldn't help feeling pleased to be right there in the middle of the action.

'I'd go to the hospital, if I thought it'd do any good, but I can't see how it'd help Orion,' Raewyn said suddenly, in a thin high voice that sounded oddly like Maya. 'Does that make me a bad mother?'

'Of course not,' Rob said. 'Finn's just trying to upset you, that's all. Don't take any notice.'

They weren't flinging themselves into each other's arms or, for that matter, even touching but Katie started to feel as though she was in the way, all the same. She glanced across at Marshall, who was already glancing at her, and they were about to sneak off to the kitchen for coffee and gossip when Lucy Dove appeared, dressed in cream leggings and a long white shirt.

'Raewyn,' she breathed. 'Any news about Orion?'

In the street outside a car revved loudly for a few seconds and then took off. 'Nothing we didn't know already,' said Raewyn. 'We just have to keep waiting, I'm afraid.'

Lucy flickered across the room like the shadow from a candle flame and took Raewyn's hands. 'Is there anything I can do to help?' she asked.

Raewyn started to shake her head, then glanced over Lucy's shoulder and met Rob's eyes. 'Come to think of it, there is,' she said. 'It's not directly related to Orion but you could clear up another problem that's been developing over the last hour or so. Caro Cox spotted a group of Chinese guys out along the Danville

River, who might be some of the boat people that the media have been carrying on about lately. Rob thinks – and I agree – that the militia could score a few brownie points by going out and investigating. But they need your approval first, of course.’

‘Chinese?’ Lucy repeated, as if that was the most important part of the story. ‘A group of Chinese men? Here?’

Her hand lifted, as if she was trying to ward off that piece of information. Katie wasn’t sure that a single gesture counted as agreement but all of a sudden everybody else in the room went into overdrive. Rob was saying, ‘Smart move, Luce. You won’t regret it.’ Raewyn was telling Rob to look after himself and he was telling her to hold the fort and cover their backs and a few more military metaphors that Katie didn’t quite catch. Marshall was saying, ‘You’ll need a journo with you, right?’ and Rob was saying, ‘Yeah, sure - if he’s ready to move in thirty seconds.’

Thirty seconds later they had all gone, except for Raewyn, who went over to sit at the big desk, beginning the process of fort-holding and back-covering. Katie wasted five seconds wishing she’d asked for an old car, instead of a new computer, for her last birthday. Then she headed across to the smaller desk, where Jude usually sat, and dialled the Faheys’ place – their private line, not the pub number.

‘Hi, Matt,’ she said, instinctively dropping her voice, so that Raewyn couldn’t hear. ‘Any chance that you could borrow your dad’s car?’

‘Can’t see why not,’ he said. ‘What for?’

‘I’ll explain when I see you,’ said Katie. ‘Meet me at The Caff in about twenty minutes. That’ll give me time to go home and get my camera.’

And maybe tell Dad what’s going on, she thought, although half a second later she realised she’d cut her father out of the loop when she opted for phoning Matt. Oh well, too bad. Dick Brewster would find out soon enough – this was Lomond, the gossip capital of New South Wales, after all – and in the meantime it would be a cinch to climb in through her bedroom window and grab the camera, without anyone seeing her.

Scott was sitting on one of the swings in the park, pushing himself back and forth. The guys from the militia were gathering by the community hall but there was no point in going over there till they were almost ready to move. At this stage he would have to hang around and make casual conversation, which was a hard act to pull off when you were twenty or even thirty years younger than half of your troop. Better to be a mysterious figure in the distance, right up to the moment when he had something leaderish to do.

He was concentrating so hard on looking remote and mysterious that he didn’t notice Tommo crossing the park, tacking this way and that like a yacht

driven by a high wind. When he veered towards the swings at the last minute, Scott jumped so violently that he lost his balance.

'Jesus!' he said, trying to pretend that he had deliberately pushed the swing harder. 'Why the fuck are you sneaking round like that?'

'Um,' said Tommo. 'Can I ask you something, Scotty?'

'Yeah, of course. No need to make a big drama out of it.'

That didn't seem to satisfy Tommo. He stood there and scuffed the ground for a while, then said suddenly, 'If Orion dies, will they put me in prison?'

'Oh, shit,' said Scott. 'Never thought of that. I wouldn't get too worried, but. It's not like you *meant* to kill him.'

'You're not wrong,' Tommo said with a sigh that would have scored ten out of ten on a sincerity meter. 'It doesn't look that easy on TV. I never realised you could top someone just by hitting them. The principal was, like, 'We won't call the cops *yet*' but that was before she knew the little geek had gone into a fucking coma. If I rock up on Monday, she'll probably dob me in.'

He gazed trustingly at Scott, as if he genuinely believed there was something Scott could do to save the situation. It was particularly irritating, because Scott didn't remember a thing about it. Okay, his body had been in the schoolyard but his attention had been somewhere else - somewhere even worse. Since he didn't want to go there again, he hauled himself out of the past and back into the present.

But the present wasn't that great, either. Scott knew he had been too zoned out to have prevented the schoolyard incident but a voice at the back of his brain kept repeating, 'You should've told Tommo there's more to life than picking on little kids.' As if things weren't crazy enough already, he recognised the voice. It was high and insistent and unmistakably the voice of Orion Casey.

'Look, that's your dad over there,' he told Tommo, saying the first thing he could think of, to silence the Orion-voice. 'He must've come to wave you off.'

'Or have one last go at me before I go out of range, more like,' Tommo said.

'Hmm,' said the Orion-voice. 'That's very interesting.'

Apparently, now that Orion wasn't around, Scott was under the impression that the little weirdo had taken up residence inside his own head. He listened helplessly while the Orion-voice informed him that Bluey Thompson's non-stop criticism explained why Tommo had given up on the idea of being good and decided to settle for being bad - like, if he wasn't going to be the kind of freckle-faced kid Bluey was in the fifties, he might as well become a bully.

'Tommo thinks the only thing going for him is his strength - his physical strength, I mean,' the voice in Scott's head concluded. 'His dad's convinced him that he doesn't have any intellectual or emotional strength, so he relies on you to be his conscience or whatever.'

'Oh, great,' Scott said. 'Why me?'

Half a beat later he realised he had made a mistake. He looked round to find Tommo watching him solicitously. 'Are you okay, Scotty?' he asked. 'It looks like the militia's about to head off but if you're not feeling the best –'

'Nah, I'm fine,' Scott said. 'Let's go.'

He set off towards the hall, doubling his usual stride in an attempt to leave Orion behind. It seemed to work. At any rate, he couldn't hear the Orion-voice any more, which was a relief, because it was hard enough to act like a leader when he *wasn't* talking to people who weren't there. In the process of getting away from Orion, however, he had gone too fast for Tommo, who was puffing and wheezing by the time they reached the hall.

Bluey Thompson pounced on him straight away. 'Still out of condition?' he said. 'I'm disappointed in you, Tom. I keep telling you that a boy your size needs to do Mal's exercises three times a day, not just once. Now, listen, I've been asking around, to see whether the Caseys would be entitled to sue you for –'

'Hey, Tommo!' Lockie called. 'Over here! Quick, mate!'

As Tommo hurried off, Scott turned to see whether there was some sort of emergency that required a leader's attention. No one else seemed to be in a flap, however. Lockie must have put it on, to rescue Tommo from his dad. Come to think of it, he had always been pretty loyal, backing Tommo to the max, even when it hadn't done either of them much good. Lockie's loyalty and Tommo's strength – in a weird kind of way, their best qualities and their worst qualities were the same thing ...

'We're lucky to have Tommo in the militia,' he told Tommo's dad, before that thought could turn into something even more Orion-like. 'He's one of the youngest guys but he's one of the strongest too. We'll be relying on him if we run into any trouble.'

Bluey looked sceptical but instead of continuing to criticise his son, he started to explain that he couldn't join the militia himself because of his bad back. Scott didn't feel obliged to listen to his excuses. He took a step sideways, so he could look over Bluey's shoulder, and scanned the crowd until he caught his father's eye and signalled to him.

'Everything ready now?' he asked, when Rob hurried over.

'Pretty much,' his dad said. 'Some of the blokes cried off, because they're busy with one thing and another, but there's eighteen of us here, which should be enough. Oh, and Doug wants to say a few words before we go, if that's okay by you. I know he's a pain sometimes but it might be good for morale.'

'Yeah, why not?' Scott said. 'I don't have any problem with that. Where is he?'

'Good question,' said Rob. 'He reckoned he'd wait for us over by his surgery – ah, on the steps of the war memorial, as a matter of fact.'

They tried to keep a straight face, failed and burst out laughing. Rob said, 'Oh well, that's Dougie for you' and Scott said, 'Who does he think he is – Winston Churchill?' and they went off to round up the militia. Scott concentrated on directing the most sensible people into the front row – Mal Abrahams, Rita

Farr and Norm Kelly's next door neighbour but definitely not Norm. Unfortunately, his dad headed straight for the back row but Scott didn't feel like he could pressure him into moving. It made sense that Rob would want to keep a low profile after ... um, all of that.

Once everyone was lined up in formation, he marched them out of the park and over to the war memorial, where Doug had already positioned himself on the top step, imitating the stance of the bronze soldier. As they assembled on the median strip, with Marshall Cox taking photos from every angle, Scott stepped back to study the overall effect. Some guys hadn't had time to go home for their uniforms but the general impression was pretty good.

'Well, this is a sight for sore eyes,' Doug said, taking a firm grip on his lapels. 'Lucy Dove can't make it – women's problems, I suppose – so it's up to me to give you a good send-off.'

A few of the men started to cheer but Doug hadn't finished yet. He gave them a quelling look and continued.

'As I stand here, I'm reminded of all the other Australians who have gone marching out to defend our country in two world wars, not to mention Korea and Vietnam. We've done a great job, all things considered, and we've made a name for ourselves as a bunch of good little Aussie battlers but now we need to put a bit more thought into the business of defending ourselves on the home front. We've got a lot to defend – a beautiful country and, of course, our Australian way of life. I know you'll do what's needed today to maintain that way of life, nothing more and nothing less. Just remember that, wherever you go, our thoughts will go with you.'

Scott's history teacher, Dr Ravel, would've marked Doug down for that. He had spent several periods complaining about the way Australia had kept fighting Britain's and America's battles for them, even when it wasn't in the country's best interests, and how the Australian army was mostly famous for heroic defeats. But even though Scott felt pretty sure that Dr Ravel knew more about history than his uncle, he couldn't help getting stirred up – partly by Doug's speech and partly by the cheering and clapping, which seemed way louder than last time.

He looked round and discovered that a crowd of Saturday morning shoppers had gathered to listen to Doug's speech. Bluey Thompson was out on the road, holding the cars back, so Scott gave him the thumbs-up sign and marched the militia down the middle of the street. Little kids ran along beside them, girls blew kisses and blokes called, 'Goodonya, mates'. Most of the time Scott kept his eyes fixed on the escarpment, rising up at the end of the street, but when he glanced quickly from left to right, he saw his first primary school teacher, on the verge of tears – Dylan Parker, watching his brothers enviously - Lee Munro and Mrs Mulvaney, trying to explain the parade to each other –

And the bus shelter at the side of the road.

Between one breath and the next, Scott found himself thinking all the things that he had been trying not to think for the last two days. Well, not thinking,

exactly. The feelings came first – as nauseous as the time when he'd had food poisoning; as dead in the head as the morning of his worst hangover; as sore as he felt after the footy match where he had been trying for one of his trademark passes and Tommo had charged straight into him and knocked him into a goal post. Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, it turned out that the feelings were just a warm-up act for his thoughts.

Here they came.

Oh Christ, I almost and Dad always said Martins are sluts, like he was giving me permission to and I couldn't've fancied Jude, not really, not if she's and oh Christ, I almost fucked my sister.

Time passed. Scott marched on like a clockwork soldier, while he concentrated on pushing the thoughts back into the place where he'd been hiding them. By the time he had succeeded, he looked back to find the militia jogging in double file along a rabbit track that wound through a waist-high forest of thorny bushes, with the Danville River flowing steadily in the opposite direction. They scraped past the final bush and fanned out across the bank, searching methodically, jumping every time a twig snapped.

There were ten pairs of them, as well as Scott in the lead and Marshall Cox trotting along in the rear. Norm Kelly was the oldest, Lockie Conway was the youngest. Cam Parker strutted along, so intent on playing soldiers that he could have stepped on an illegal immigrant and never noticed. His brother Eden kept looking over his shoulder every five seconds, massaging the muscle that twitched in his cheek. Rita Farr and her Bayview mate prowled on ahead, checking the powdery dirt for tracks. Mal Abrahams had dropped back to the rear, where he was making notes for the next training session and muttering, 'Bloody amateurs. My old captain would make mincemeat of this lot.' Dave Conway marched beside Lockie, eyes bright with pride. Norm Kelly was panting like a sheep dog. Rob looked dour and distant.

Some of them were wishing they were back home or on their properties or lounging outside The Caff. Others were hoping they would get a chance to come to grips with the enemy they'd been searching for all their lives. Scott wanted both things at once. He wanted to forge ahead and do what they had come here to do and at the same time he wanted to go back – not just back into town but back in time, so he could undo some of the choices he had made at a few key moments about a few key people.

Serenity. Tommo and Lockie. Jude.

Why, for instance (to take one of the least complicated examples), had he been convinced there weren't any guys of his age in Lomond who came up to his standards, when he could have been hanging with Daniel and Orion? It was true that they could hardly be less cool but then, how cool were Tommo and Lockie? As he thought about an alternate universe full of challenging discussions about interesting issues, a polaroid snapshot started to develop in his mind, slightly distanced, as though it had been taken through the window of The Caff. It was a picture of himself sitting at one of the gingham-covered tables with Daniel and

Orion, shifting uncomfortably, while Tommo and Lockie heckled them from the footpath.

Yeah, that said it all. Even Scott's looks and status and general cool levels weren't enough to let him survive prolonged exposure to the geek boys, without losing his place in the Lomond hierarchy. It was an impossible scenario, as impossible as apologising to a Martin or believing that Martins weren't sluts, so he would have to settle for the easy option, after all - finding the enemy and becoming a hero.

He turned to inspect his troops and spotted Tommo in the next row, dragging his feet and hardly bothering to look around. 'Cheer up, mate,' Scott called. 'If we do well today, it might get your old man off your back.'

'Yeah, sure,' Tommo said. 'I wish.'

Scott told himself to leave the poor bastard alone and swung round to check the path ahead of them, letting his gaze slide quickly past Norm Kelly, who was hanging around and trying to get his attention, like some reject kid desperate to be teacher's pet. When he looked back a few minutes later, Tommo's head had lifted and his eyes were searching every centimetre of the river bank, alert and hopeful. While Scott was congratulating himself on another brilliant piece of leadership, Marshall Cox caught up with him, picking thorns from his shirt sleeves.

'I just called the Bayview cops on my mobile,' he panted, wiping a hand across his sweaty forehead. 'It's all true. There *is* a bunch of illegal immigrants on the loose somewhere round here. The cops just picked up half of them, meandering down the coast. I need to know what you're planning to do with the other half, if you find them.'

Scott raised an eyebrow at him. 'We'll round them up and take them to the cop shop in Bayview, of course,' he said. 'What else did you expect?'

Marshall stared down at a bright red streak across his palm. He'd just been scratched by the thorn bushes – Scott could see the mark above his left eyebrow - but for some reason the blood made his nostrils dilate and his eyes open wide.

'Judging by Pat Fahey's leaflet, some of the blokes in the militia are fairly anti-Asian,' he said. 'I was wondering whether they'd take the chance to -'

'Shoot the lot of them?' Scott said bluntly. 'You're getting paranoid, mate. Look, no guns.'

'That's a start,' Marshall agreed. 'But I could use a few more assurances. I've put my career on the line, backing Lucy like this, and I don't want to see it go pear-shaped, just because -'

He grunted and disappeared. When Scott looked back, he realised that Norm Kelly had been edging Marshall towards a hollow in the dirt, into which he had obligingly fallen. While Lockie was helping Marshall to his feet, Norm fell into step beside Scott.

'I heard what that city bloke was saying about guns,' he began. 'More's the pity, I say. We ought to be armed, Scotty. I saw that program on the telly where

the bloke reckoned the reffos just want a go at the good life but I'm not so sure he's right. They're a tricky lot, those chinks, y'know. These boat people could be the advance guard for an invasion, trying to catch us napping, and if they are, there's only one answer. We all know what that is, don't we? Guns, mate. Guns.'

Scott groaned softly. It was typical. Just typical. Here he was out in the bush, leading the militia into an actual adventure, and what was he saddled with? On one side a city journo, fussing over whether they were going to be polite to the invaders, and on the other side a raving loony who wanted to shoot first and ask questions later. He would have liked to push both of them into the river, splish and splash, so he could forget about them and get on with the job.

The Asian invasion had never meant much to him. It had always seemed like a playground for losers like Pat Fahey and nutters like Norm. But, although he still didn't really believe in the red or yellow peril from Pat's leaflets, Scott found himself hoping, all of a sudden, that they were headed for a confrontation with some kind of army. It would be awesome, like walking into the fifth *Star Wars* movie. They would practically be saving the world. That ought to be enough to redeem every single one of them. Enough to get Tommo in good with his father, make Lomond forget about Rob having it off with Shelley Martin and cancel any connection that had ever existed between Scott and Jude.

Jude thought she had woken up because she heard Lucy calling but when she pulled on her jeans and a GO t-shirt and made her way downstairs, there was no one in the kitchen, so she made a cup of coffee and continued on to the front room. That seemed to be empty as well but, as she walked in, she heard a familiar male voice.

'... Chinese boat people sighted by holiday makers on the coast, five kilometres south of Lomond, have been taken into custody by the Bayview-Lomond police. A qualified interpreter will be flown up from Sydney later today but preliminary discussions indicate that another fifteen men are still at large in the area. That was the eleven a.m. report. For more news, tune in to 5BL every hour, on the hour.'

Jude grinned. The voice was familiar because she had spent a lot of time monitoring the local radio station during Lucy's election campaign. By now, she knew the announcer's style well enough to translate "preliminary discussions" as "the cops got someone from one of the Vietnamese restaurants to have a chat with the guys". Then, while she was crossing the room to switch the radio off, another fact clicked into place.

Fifteen guys still on the loose. Omigod. What if they run into Pat Fahey or some other maniac who reads his newsletter and believes every word?

The phone seemed to jump into her hand, as if it and her palm had been magnetised. Seconds later, she heard Rocky Abrahams' voice saying, 'Lucy? That you?'

'Nah, it's me,' Jude said. 'Have you caught up with this story about the Chinese guys?'

'Three times in the last ten minutes,' said Rocky. 'Been expecting someone to call. Wolf Guard should do something.'

'Don't worry, Lucy's on the job,' Jude said, winking it. 'She wants to know if you can get hold of the school mini-bus.'

'Take a while,' Rocky said but, before Jude even had time to frown at the phone, she added, 'Can do better. Borrow the bus from the old folks' home. Having a cuppa with Matron right now.'

'Oh, brilliant!' said Jude. 'I'll phone around and tell the Wolf Guard we're going out on patrol. See you at the community hall in half an hour, tops.'

As she dropped the phone into its cradle, the room started to rotate slowly on its axis, until it had achieved a forty five degree tilt. Jude gripped the edge of the desk, rigid with panic, but the computer didn't slide off and the filing cabinet didn't come crashing down and the dish-shaped light overhead didn't slam against the ceiling and shatter, so she figured it must have been an optical illusion, not an actual earthquake.

What had she done to bring that on? Oh yeah, she had been pleased that the Wolf Guard was going to see some real action. That was weird, in a way. After yesterday and the day before, you might think she would be hoping for a bit of peace and quiet. Then again, she didn't want the kind of action that she had witnessed in the People's Court and the schoolyard - emotion and drama and all that crap. She wanted something physical. Something to do.

Something to lash out at ...

'What was that about?' a voice said behind her – a woman's voice this time.

'G'day, Raewyn,' Jude said. 'I was checking with Rocky to see whether the school mini-bus was available. We're getting the Wolf Guard together, to go and look for those Chinese guys.'

She scanned the desk, searching for GO's address book, found it and reached for the phone. Raewyn's hand came down on top of hers, heavy with the weight of seven wooden bracelets.

'There's no need for that,' she said. 'Rob's got everything under control. Did you tell Rocky that he and the militia are out there already?'

Jude watched the room tilt and steady itself again. 'How could I, when I didn't know?' she said. 'When did Rob start making all the decisions for GO, anyway? I thought Lucy gave the orders round here, not him.'

'Lucy okayed it,' said Raewyn. 'Besides, this is an emergency. As soon as things go back to normal, we'll go back to our usual way of doing things but right at this moment we have to rely on local knowledge. In the final analysis, Rob Sterne knows more about this town than Lucy does. I think we ought to trust him, Jude.'

A dozen reasons for disagreeing rose up into Jude's throat, tasting as sour as vomit. They lumped together and curdled and choked her into silence. What

was going on? Had Raewyn forgotten what had happened in the People's Court? It had been bad enough, having her entire life history taken away from her, but it would be even worse if everybody in town was going to pretend they had selective amnesia.

'Trust Rob Sterne?' she said, while the room lurched and her stomach churned. 'Yeah, right. Like I'd be prepared trust the guy who screwed my mum and me over.'

Raewyn's hand settled on Jude's shoulder, tightening into a grip that was meant to be reassuring but felt more like a cop making an arrest. 'Oh, Jude!' she said. 'Don't tell me you believe that story. Shelley's not the most truthful person in the world. She was trying to put the blame on Rob, as a way of protecting your stepfather. I wish you'd told me you were upset. I would've got Rob to explain that he's definitely not your father.'

Jude waited for the room to go into freefall but this time it remained stable. Raewyn's version of reality appealed to her so much that she was almost tempted to go along with it. After all, she didn't want Rob for a dad, any more than she wanted Scott as a brother. (No, half-brother. He had some of that weak Bethany in him as well.) But unfortunately, thinking along those lines reminded her of yesterday and the schoolyard and Scott staring at her across Orion's body. Scott thought she was his sister, for sure, and he knew Rob better than she or Raewyn did, so it was bound to be true.

Besides, Rob had never actually denied it. He had just called Shelley names, as usual, and then disappeared for the next twenty-four hours. As for Shelley – well, Jude didn't know what her mum would say, because she had spent the last two nights at The Centre. It wasn't a permanent arrangement. She was definitely planning to go home and talk to Shelley. Eventually. Just as soon as she had worked out whether her mum had betrayed her or whether she'd betrayed Shelley.

In all the flux and uncertainty, however, there was one thing Jude was sure about. Shelley didn't lie. (Except to the jacks and the social workers, which was different.) Her mum might break most of Lomond's rules but she stuck to her own rules - like, for instance, 'don't shit in your own nest'. She would never have lashed out at Jude, just to score off an enemy, and Rob Sterne was the enemy here, no doubt about it. His son was a rapist, which made him a rapist-trainer. He was separating Jude from Shelley and turning Raewyn against Lucy. He was poison.

He was her father.

Jude drew in a long deep breath and looked round the room. Everything was still in place. As a matter of fact, all the shapes and colours looked sharper and brighter than before. The air hummed. She could practically count the pinpoint specks of dust spiralling down a shaft of sunlight and feel every pulse of the blood pumping through Raewyn Casey's fingers, which were still digging into her shoulder. She wriggled free and smiled up at Raewyn.

‘You’re right, I’ve just been working myself into a state,’ she said, lying like mad but – fuck it, that was exactly what Raewyn expected from a Martin. ‘We’re out of milk again. I might walk down to The Caff and get another carton, to give me a chance to clear my head.’

Raewyn nodded her approval and Jude scooped some change out of the petty cash tin with one hand, while her other hand slid the GO address book into the back pocket of her jeans, making a bulge that matched her mobile in the opposite pocket. She borrowed one of the GO baseball caps from the merchandise corner, to convince Raewyn that she was really going out, and headed for the door, making a deliberate clatter on the steps.

The minute she hit ground level, she crouched down, sneaked past the front windows and ducked round the side of the house into the back garden. The colours of the leaves and the sky were so bright that they hurt her eyes but a salt breeze, blowing in from the coast, scoured the sour taste out of her throat. As she looked round for a place to sit, Jude became aware of a mysterious blur at the edge of her vision. When she finally focussed on it, the blur turned out to be Lucy Dove, down at the far end of the garden, her white shirt and cream leggings inexplicably blending with the vivid blues and yellows of the flowerbeds beside the old Moreton Bay fig tree.

There was something appallingly sad about the way Lucy was standing. Jude wanted to go over and say something comforting but her plan would work better if it looked as though she hadn’t noticed Lucy till later, so she let her eyes move on till they located a comfortable niche in the rockery. She settled herself in the niche and dialled Jacinta Witton’s number.

‘Don’t panic,’ she said, the minute Jacinta answered, because that was the best way to start people panicking. ‘There’s been another crisis. The militia seems to have gone on a rampage and Lucy reckons the Wolf Guard needs to get out there and take charge. She says it doesn’t matter how we go about it, just as long as we stop the guys from fucking up. She says we can totally go overboard.’

While Jacinta gasped and panicked and talked herself into believing that Lucy had to be right, Jude caught herself feeling a minor twinge of guilt. She told herself it was irrelevant. Okay, Lucy hadn’t actually said any of that yet but she felt sure Lucy would have said it, if she’d been feeling angry this morning, instead of sad. Jude herself (she realised as she dialled Merian’s number) felt angry enough for two people, possibly enough for an entire troop. As soon as she had contacted the rest of the Wolf Guard, she would return to the house and change into her uniform, then go down to the bottom of the garden and tell Lucy what to say.

Serenity rolled over and let the sun soak into her back. During their first summer in Lomond, she had enjoyed staying at home and complaining about how stupid

Caro had been, buying a beach house without a beach, but this year she had decided it would be worth making an effort to find a place where she could sunbathe. While she was scouting around, she had discovered that hardly anyone used the Happy Valley market site in between markets, apart from Fisher King and his wives. Okay, the three of them were nudists, which probably explained why nobody else came there, but they always sat on the far side under the gum trees, so Serenity didn't see that as a problem.

The sun was massaging the spot between her shoulder blades that always tensed up when she was stressed – like, for example, when she'd had to stand there in the council room on Thursday and watch the People's Court blow up in everyone's faces. Yesterday hadn't been that great either. Serenity recognised the image flashing across the screen of her brain (Scott and Jude staring at each other across Orion's body) but she refused to look at it too closely.

The sun was pummelling her harder now, its rays sinking deeper into her muscles than hands could ever go, and she wanted to relax and let it do its stuff. She jettisoned all her thoughts and memories, leaving her so light that the sun was able to pick her up and deposit her on a bed of cloud and stroke her from head to foot. She floated there for a while, feeling warmer and more protected than she had felt in ages, but as she drifted on, the feeling began to change shape and she found herself imagining arms as warm as the sun, hair as golden as the afternoon light and a green cave folding around her, replacing the bed of cloud.

Omigod, she thought. Scott. In spite of everything, I'm still having fantasies about Scott Sterne.

The image (Scott / Jude / Orion's body) reappeared but she pushed it away. The Scott she had just been imagining wasn't the Scott she saw in the schoolyard. He was the might-have-been Scott who lived in the willow cave beside the river where they had spent one secret afternoon that had nothing to do with anyone or anything else. Serenity made herself picture the two Scotts, might-have-been Scott and everyday Scott, standing side by side. Having established the difference between them to her own satisfaction, she allowed herself to slide back into the golden warmth again.

Scott's warmth.

Scott Sterne, the sun of Lomond.

Or the son of Lomond.

Or –

A phone rang. Shocked into action, Serenity sat bolt upright, looked round wildly and made a grab for her mobile, saying, 'What is it?'

'More problems,' said Jude.

She started to rave on about some Chinese guys who had been seen near the Danville River but Serenity didn't pay much attention to her words. Jude's voice was enough of an interruption, dragging her down from the clouds into the world where she and Scott were separated by acres of history. Serenity didn't like

it there. She wanted to go back up into the clouds, where everything was always possible.

'Listen,' she said, cutting across Jude, 'if some of the girls want to go and play hide and seek round the river, that's fine by me. Tell them to go right ahead but leave me out of it. I'm off-duty this afternoon, okay?'

'Uh-huh,' Jude said. 'Ren, are we still friends?'

It had been so long since they had spent more than a couple of hours together that Serenity had to stop and think about that. But if she wasn't friends with Jude, what friends did she have?

'Yeah,' she said. 'Yeah, sure.'

'Then don't make me go through all the reasons why the Wolf Guard needs you here,' Jude said. 'Just come into town now. Please.'

She hung up, leaving the dial tone to purr in Serenity's ear. Serenity sat and stared at the mobile for a few seconds, cursing Jude for wrecking her peaceful morning. As she switched the phone off, she remembered with a sudden rush of hope that Caro and Daniel hadn't been around when she left the house. Maybe they had gone off on some sort of sightseeing expedition or, at the very least, into Lomond for the weekly supermarket shopping, which would mean that she wouldn't be able to ...

Before she could finish that thought, a long strip of shadow stretched towards her, blocking out the sunlight. 'I'm going into town now,' said Fisher King, standing over her, dressed in his caftan. 'Lillah and Kaarin told me to come and see whether you want a lift.'

She could say no, of course, but they all lived in Happy Valley. There was a reasonable chance that Jude would find out and if that happened, they definitely wouldn't stay friends. Serenity gathered her things together and followed Fisher back up the hill, stopping off at her house to change into her Wolf Guard uniform and retrieve a note from Caro saying, 'Gone to Lomond, back soon XXX', which had blown off the table and ended up in the corridor.

Serenity thought about leaving a note of her own but if Caro knew where she was, she would probably ring and ask her to do half a dozen errands on her way home. On consideration she decided that the world had already dumped enough responsibilities on her for one day, so she left her mobile half-hidden behind the fruit bowl and raced out into Karma Drive, where Fisher's rainbow-painted combi was already waiting. Fisher wasn't the communicative type. The only things he said on the way into Lomond were, 'You're getting very brown' and 'Dolphins are a more highly evolved species than humans' and Serenity said, 'Uh-huh' to both of them, which gave her plenty of time to think.

By the time Fisher dropped her off at the park, she had thought herself into a state where she was almost as annoyed with Jude as she used to get with Caro. The Wolf Guard were gathering by the community hall, some in uniform, others looking as if they had been called away from the Saturday morning shopping or preparing a big family lunch. Serenity shouldered through the group and spotted Jude in the distance, standing under the biggest tree in the park with

Raewyn and Lucy Dove beside her. She stopped short, feeling even more annoyed. Unless she was prepared to tackle all three of them at once, she would have to put off her fight with Jude until later.

While she tried to make up her mind, she went on walking towards them. Jude was peeling the bark off a curved silvergry branch, like an Amazon stringing her bow before a battle; Raewyn was saying, 'No harm done, two militias are better than one' to nobody in particular; and Lucy was leaning against the tree trunk, looking unexpectedly small and shrunken. They reminded Serenity of something she had seen or heard, not so long ago, and she was still trying to identify the memory as she arrived at the tree.

'What were you saying about two militias?' she asked Raewyn, less grumpily than she had intended.

'The militia's already searching the Danville River area,' Raewyn told her. 'But for some reason your mate Jude thinks the Wolf Guard ought to be there as well. I can't see how that'll help but, as I was just saying, I don't think it'll do any harm either.'

Serenity's annoyance boiled up again, condensing into undiluted rage. 'Oh, for God's sake!' she said. 'Ever since GO got started, people have been talking as if the Wolf Guard and the militia were on opposite sides. So far, we've managed to avoid a really serious confrontation but this could blow the whole thing out of the water.'

Raewyn said, 'Yes, I agree. I've always –' and Jude said, 'Fuck you' and Lucy raised one hand and silenced them both.

'You're right,' she said. 'I've made a lot of mistakes, Ren, too many to reverse all of them in one go. Right now, my first concern is to protect those Chinese guys – and to be sure we're doing our level best, I need to know that someone's keeping an eye on blokes like Pat Fahey and my uncle Norm. I can't go myself, because there's one more thing I need to do here, but if you take my place, that'll be just as good or even better. You're the kind of person I wanted to be when I was a little kid, growing up in Lomond. You're my benchmark, Serenity. My role model. My guideline. My barometer. The bubble in my theodolite. Do you believe in me enough to do this for me?'

Serenity had been staring at the ground, refusing to meet Lucy's eyes, but now she found herself thinking of a play that Marshall had taken her to ages ago. A lady in green tights – Peter Pan, she was meant to be – had asked the audience to clap their hands if they believed in fairies, to save the life of Tinkerbell, this little fairy whose light was going out.

'Yeah, sure,' she said in a rush, looking up and bringing her hands together. 'Not a problem. I can do that.'

As she turned to go back to the Wolf Guard, she nodded to the three women – Jude, staring back with a gaze that could have split wood, as sharp as a battleaxe in the hands of a Viking shield maiden; Raewyn, smiling blandly like a mother refusing to side with any of her children against the others; Lucy, hunched over as if she had all the troubles of the world on her shoulders. Jane

Moondancer's triple moon goddess – maiden, mother and crone. That was what she had been thinking about before.

Serenity grinned and saluted them and went speeding off to do all the things that needed to be done – consulting with Rocky Abrahams, counting heads, working out who was missing and whether they were still on their way to the park. There was so much to organise that it took her a while to notice Lucy Dove, waiting patiently beside her, so pale that she seemed almost transparent in the sunshine.

'Do you know where Daniel is?' she asked.

'Not at home,' Serenity said, as telegrammatic as Rocky. 'Maybe out shopping or at The Caff, especially if the bookmobile's there.'

Lucy reached out and touched her lightly, as if she didn't have the energy to thank her in words. Serenity wondered briefly why Lucy wanted to find Daniel, right at that moment – like, for instance, was Daniel supposed to help her with the "one more thing" she needed to do in Lomond? - but she was too busy to wonder for long. After all, she was Lucy's representative now. It was a big job and she had to make sure she got it right.

As Matt Fahey put the phone down and stubbed out the joint, his mate Jayden yelped in protest. 'What's with you?' he said. 'I didn't hitch all the way over from Bayview for one puff.'

'Too bad,' said Matt. 'I gotta go out, and plus I need to make some sort of gesture. That's the last joint I'm ever going to smoke.'

'Yeah, right. Heard that one before.'

Not from me, Matt thought, while he gathered up his wallet and trainers. A relay of social workers had tried to steer him towards groups called Breaking Your Addiction or whatever but, although he hadn't had much control over his own life, he had at least been able to dig his heels in and refuse to be steered. But it was different now. Katie Brewster had asked him – *him* – for help and he had to be up to the job.

So, no more mull. Ever again.

'You can have my stash, Jay,' he said, to prove it. 'I'm not sure when I'll be back but feel free to stick around for as long as you like. Make yourself at home and all.'

'At home,' Jayden echoed. He drifted off into a stoned haze for a couple of seconds and then added, 'Sounds good to me.'

Matt knew what Jayden's home was like and why, although he wasn't technically homeless, he spent as much time as possible in other people's houses. He told Jay there was half a cold pizza in the fridge and handed him the remote for the little telly at the end of the bed, to save him from having to get up. Then he headed off to borrow his dad's car. The front bar seemed to be empty,

apart from the half dozen regulars. As Matt glanced round, puzzled, the oldest regular came tottering over.

'Looking for the boss?' he said. 'I'm running the place today. Pat got a phone call ten minutes ago and him and Cam hopped into the van and went haring off, God knows where. Your dad phoned Shelley Martin first but Shell's still in a snit with everyone, after that Barney in the People's Court, so he had to leave me in charge. If you see him, tell him he'd better not be gone too long or me and the lads'll drink all the profit.'

He proved his point by starting to cough, enveloping Matt in a cloud of whiskey breath. Matt backed away, noting that his dad would rather leave the pub in the hands of the biggest alkie in Lomond than take ten steps down the corridor to his son's room. Yesterday that would have sent him running back to retrieve the joint but it didn't seem to hurt so much today. After all, Katie trusted him, even if his dad didn't.

'Any of you lot happen to have a vehicle you could loan me?' he asked, looking round the bar.

The regulars all shook their heads, which was a bit of a blow. On the other hand, when he thought for a moment, Matt realised that if Cam and his dad had gone off together in the van, Cam's car had to be available. He walked round the block and found it in a back lane but he couldn't manage the coathanger trick Jayden had taught him for opening car doors, which meant that he never found out whether he would have been able to hotwire the ignition. And by that time he was running twenty minutes late, so he hurried across to The Caff and met Frank Carretto on the footpath, taping up a sign saying, 'Closed due to family illness.'

'Oh, wow,' he said, startled. 'What's the problem?'

'It's Mum,' said Frank. 'She took a turn for the worse this morning. Dr Sterne reckons it was probably another stroke. I got her an appointment at the hospital, first thing tomorrow morning, but I want to sit with her for the rest of the day, just in case.'

'Bummer,' Matt said. 'Wish I could help but I'm supposed to be meeting Katie and – oh shit, I don't know whether –'

'Yeah, she's here,' Frank told him. 'Come on in. That notice is only meant for the customers. It doesn't apply to my regulars.'

The transition from sunshine to shadow made Matt blink. He rubbed his eyes and saw Katie sitting in a patch of sunlight over by the window. As he turned towards her, Finn Casey appeared out of nowhere, pushed past him and crashlanded on his usual stool by the counter, demanding his usual macchiato.

'Oh, mate, I just did something really stupid,' he said. 'I've come to Father Frank for confession - me that's been a committed atheist ever since I left school and escaped from the priests' clutches.'

He was sending himself up, so successfully that Matt couldn't help laughing, although, as he got closer to Katie's table, he tried to turn it into an apologetic smile.

‘No car?’ she said, reading his mind. ‘Oh well, it was a longshot. Never mind, the militia only went past ten minutes ago. It’ll be easy to catch up with them, if we can think of someone else to ring.’

‘The militia?’ Matt said. ‘That must be where Dad’s gone. What the hell are they up to now?’

They took a break from the car problem, while Katie filled him in. Then Frank called him over and gave him two coffees, pushing a third cup towards Finn, who was in the middle of a long story about being worried about his son and taking it out on his wife. By the time Matt got back to the table, Katie was switching her mobile off.

‘That was Jude,’ she said. ‘She reckons the Wolf Guard’s been called out too. Rocky’s driving them over to the escarpment, to get ahead of the militia.’

‘Good one,’ Matt said, trying to hide his disappointment. ‘You’ll be able to get a ride with them, then.’

Katie shook her head like an excited Pekingese. ‘No way,’ she said. ‘When it comes to the crunch, I’m a journalist, not a marching girl. I’m going out there for a story, so I can’t afford to be tied to the Wolf Guard. Let’s see if we can rustle up a car.’

The news about the militia knocked out most of the potential car lenders on Matt’s shortlist but he was so pleased by Katie’s “we” that he tried them anyway. Judging by his random sample, half of the mothers in the town knew exactly what was going on and the other half didn’t know a thing – and then there was Mrs Parker, who insisted on telling him what she imagined her husband and sons were doing, even though she clearly didn’t have a clue. Katie got the giggles and passed them on to Matt, which made it even harder for him to get away from Mrs Parker.

‘Okay, that’s it,’ he said, after he had hung up and they had finished laughing. ‘Can you think of anyone?’

‘I suppose I’ll have to let my dad in on the deal,’ she said reluctantly. ‘I just wish –’

At that moment, Finn drew in a long breath, causing him to expand visibly and sit up straighter on the stool. Matt and Katie instantly turned towards him, as if they had both been hoping for a distraction.

‘Hey, this confession stuff works,’ he announced. ‘I feel better already. Come on, Father Frank, give me a really good penance. You could make me swear off gossip for a month or -’

‘No, you’ll have to do something harder than that.’

It was the sort of thing Matt would have expected Frank to say but it wasn’t Frank’s voice. He swung round and saw Lucy Dove standing in the doorway, wearing a skirt and t-shirt and long shirt, white upon white upon white, turning her into the ghost of a ghost.

‘I was looking for Daniel,’ she said. ‘I need a witness and I thought he’d be here but – oh well, I suppose you’ll do.’

'Me?' Finn said. 'Why would I want to help *you*, Lucy Dove? You're responsible for the state my boy's in right now.'

Lucy reached out to steady herself against the door frame. Matt's mum would have said she looked tired to her bones. 'Ah, Finn, I'm only a catalyst. I don't actually do anything. I just bring out what's already there.' She passed her hand across her eyes, focussed with an effort and added, 'You better go with him, Frank. He's too cynical to make a good witness on his own and you're too idealistic. It'll take the two of you to get the right balance.'

'Oh, no,' Frank said. 'Sorry, Lucy. Can't be done. I'm not leaving Mum on her own.'

'No need,' Lucy said. 'I can sit with her. Trust me, Frank. I'm good with old ladies. I'll take care of your mum.'

She ran her hands through her hair till it stuck out like a blonde halo and smiled persuasively. Matt, who hadn't been to mass for years, found himself thinking *our Lady of Lomond* but Frank Carretto had never trusted anyone else to look after his mother for more than an hour or two, so he just shrugged and stared back, level and unshakeable.

Lucy stood in the doorway for a moment, swaying slightly, as if she was gathering all her strength together. Then she swung her arm up, so fast that it seemed to take an arc of white light with it, and pointed in the direction of the escarpment. Matt, still in a religious mood, thought she looked like one of the avenging angels who drove Adam and Eve out of Eden with a fiery sword or brought the book sealed with seven seals on Judgment Day, to save or damn the whole of humankind.

'Go,' she said, blazing with light. 'Find the militia and the Wolf Guard - but don't get involved. Just watch from a distance and bear witness. *Go now.*'

The two men went, awed and dazzled and obedient. Matt watched them walk out to Finn's taxi, thinking: *Lucy did that, she made them go.* When he turned back, however, all the light seemed to have drained out of her. She looked too drab and shadowy to convince anybody to leave their parents or children and go off to do whatever she wanted, against their own will.

'Come on, move it,' Katie said, prodding him in the back. 'Weren't you listening? We can get a lift with Finn and Frank.'

He glanced at Lucy, to see whether she approved, but she showed no signs of having noticed that he and Katie were there. On reflection, Matt decided he was grateful for that. He edged around her, grabbed hold of Katie's hand and left The Caff without looking back.

Caro switched on the TV to watch the midday news – not the national news but the regional news on BCN. Right from the first time she had seen it, she had become addicted to its stories about prize pigs, lottery-winning farmers and posties celebrating forty years on the job.

'I don't like it because I think it's funny, either,' she had said to Marshall, when he'd dropped in at lunchtime one day. 'I like it because it's *real* news - ordinary things that happen to ordinary people.'

That wasn't her ex-husband's idea of real news, of course. Marshall preferred grand-scale dramas and people who were larger than life. He would have been pleased to see the square beefy face of Sergeant Russell Draper from the Bayview/Lomond police station appearing on the screen. Caro, on the other hand, just shrugged and turned away to check on Maya, who was sitting cross-legged under the table with her Barbie in her lap. She kept insisting that she was meditating but Caro thought she looked like a toddler hiding in a makeshift cubbyhouse.

'... boatload of illegal immigrants, whose rusty vessel ran aground on the coastline near Happy Valley, as they were about to sail up the Danville River,' said the TV.

Caro's head swivelled round, in time to see Russell Draper again. 'Yeah, we picked up nine blokes on the coast but according to a local interpreter, there's still about fifteen of the bug - the illegal immigrants missing,' he said. 'We're mounting a search party and we'd be real pleased to hear from anyone who's spotted them.'

As the announcer nodded seriously, the cameras cut to a paddock full of baby lambs but for once Caro wasn't interested in hearing about ordinary people and their cute livestock. She hit the remote, frowned at the empty screen and pinched herself, as a reality test.

'Ouch,' she said. 'That's me. I might've spotted them.'

Apparently, you could be married to a reporter for sixteen years and still be startled to discover that you were part of the news. Caro started to pace up and down, wondering what she was supposed to do next. She could ring the cops, of course, but since she didn't have anything definite to report, they might think she was one of those nuisance callers. It seemed a bit ridiculous to ask a thumb-sucking Barbie-clutching kid for advice but since there was no one else around, she hitched up the tablecloth and said, 'Maya, did you hear that?'

'Boat people in Lomond?' Maya said round her thumb. 'Yeah, sure. Maybe they were planning to sail along the river and climb up to the highway on top of the escarpment.'

'The escarpment?' Caro echoed. 'Oh, hell! Daniel! That's where he - if the refugees are headed - Maya, we better get moving.' She fumbled for her car keys, dropped them on the floor and stared down at them, adding, 'Although perhaps we ought to ring the Bayview cops before we go. If Pat Fahey's mob find the boat people first, GO could end up in serious trouble.'

Maya's thumb jerked out of her mouth with a vicious pop. 'Good,' she said. 'They deserve it. They wanted to make their own laws. Let them live with it.'

Caro's hand hesitated above the car keys, moved towards the phone and froze in mid-air. It had been weeks since she had thought about Jack Wheaton - consciously, at any rate - but all of a sudden she found herself wishing he could

walk in and sort everything out, not just for her but for Lomond as well. Jack was dead and gone, however, so she would have to make her own decisions. She could understand why Maya wanted to get revenge for Orion and even more importantly, she wanted to rush off and whisk Daniel out of the danger zone but on the other hand -

‘Serenity,’ she said. ‘She wasn’t here when I came back from town. What if she’s got involved somehow? She usually does, you know.’

Maya’s eyes clouded. She crawled out from under the table and butted her head against Caro’s leg, like a disconcerted cat. Caro reached down and pulled her to her feet, wrapped both arms around her and held on tight, as much for her own comfort as for Maya’s.

The children. Oh Christ, the children. How on earth could you protect all of the children at once?

Thirteen

Daniel wriggled his hips, eased his spine a few centimetres further up a sandstone plane and pushed out with both feet. The heel of his left boot kicked too hard and sent a handful of stone crumbs rattling down to the bottom of the cliff. He sighed and tried another wriggle but, as he'd already guessed, he had to stretch his legs out dangerously far in order to make contact with the opposite wall.

Too bad. Back before he started the climb, he had spent ten minutes examining the chimney - a vertical tunnel down the side of the escarpment, over near the gorge, where several centuries of rainwater had dug a trench in the sandstone before seeping away into the Danville River. Daniel had counted on the chimney staying much the same width all the way up but it was definitely getting wider, a lot wider than his legs would be able to reach.

He wedged himself securely across the gap, so he could take a rest while he switched his internal monitor from the up program to the down program. The return trip would be a cinch, because he knew the chimney now. Besides, chimney climbing wasn't all that demanding at the best of times, not until you got to that breath-catching point right at the top, where you had to let your feet drop and twist around in mid-air and grab hold of the edge and pull yourself up to safety.

Where you had to know you could trust yourself and your reflexes, totally and completely.

It was a bummer, having climbed two-thirds of the way up the cliff and still missing out on the trust moment but – oh well, climbing was about learning to accept things as they were, rather than trying to impose your will on the landscape. Zen and the art of rock climbing. Daniel sighed and switched on the down program and started to edge back the way he had come.

The chimney wall slanted away under his backside, opening out again as it neared the ground. He let his foot drop onto a ledge and tested it cautiously, then settled his weight on it, straightened up and went scrambling down the last few metres of sandstone. Because he had guessed wrong about the chimney, he had a few hours to fill in before his aunt came back to collect him. He strolled across to the end of the road where Caro had dropped him off, hesitated for a second and ducked under the Kellys' fence. There was plenty of time – enough to let him go for a bit of a wander and see whether he could find another short climb.

He cruised the nooks and crannies of the cliff and nodded to a mob of sheep in the distance, suppressing a queasy memory of the ewe that had been picked. After a while he realised he was watching out for something and, at the same moment as he came to that realisation, he found it. A rocky ridge sheltering a sandstone bay that was crosshatched with the ochre lines of the Aboriginal map. The place where he had stood six weeks ago, listening to Norm Kelly talk about a cave higher up in the cliff. He shaded his eyes, and studied the cliff face, examining a series of bulges and runnels, running his eyes down sheer sandstone drops and frowning at the places where water had patterned the rock like rabbit tracks. Then, under a jagged overhang, he found a tiny triangle of pure darkness.

Yep, that could be a cave, all right. At any rate, it couldn't hurt to climb up and have a look.

The river bank was a world of its own, miniature cliffs and valleys modelled in breadcrust-coloured clay, overshadowed by thorny thickets and sprawling gum trees and an occasional tuft of bright green grass. The taxi nosed along the road to the escarpment, tilting at every bump. Finn was concentrating on his driving, Katie and Frank were looking out of the side windows, and Matt was leaning over Katie's shoulder, absorbing her Katie-smell and occasionally remembering to check the bank for boat people.

'What are we doing here?' Frank said for the third time. 'I ought to be back home with Mum.'

'Hell, I ought to be at the hospital, sitting with my son,' said Finn. 'But apparently Lucy needs us as witnesses, so we're stuck here till we find something to witness. Talk to me, Franco. I could use some kind of distraction.'

'Same here. Ask me a question, to get me going.'

Matt rolled his eyes. Frank Carretto had no sense of self-preservation. He had just issued an open invitation to the biggest gossip in Lomond. Sure enough, when Matt checked the rear vision mirror, Finn looked as if he was rummaging through his scrapheap of information, in search of something that would wind Frank up.

'All right,' he said, finding it. 'Tell me, Franco, why didn't you go back to the city with that teacher from Bayview/Lomond Secondary? I saw you and him kissing out the back after the deb ball, y'know.'

There was silence for a long moment and then Frank said, 'Yeah, I know. Thanks for not spreading the news all round town.'

'Hey, I can keep my mouth shut,' Finn said, then added with a sudden attack of honesty, 'Well, sometimes. Anyhow, the point is, you're gay, so why bury yourself in Homophobia City? Why not take off with your teacher mate and get a life?'

'He asked me,' Frank admitted. 'But Mum needs me. And ... well, if I'm being honest, I suppose I was scared.'

So it's really true, Matt thought, letting it sink in. Frank Carretto was a poof. For the last few years he had been asking a fag to give him advice about life. It wasn't hard to imagine what his dad or Cam Parker would say about that – 'Just trying to get into your pants, Matty' – but, come to think of it, Frank's advice had always been pretty good and he had never tried anything on and what with one thing and another, Matt decided he didn't care whether Frank was into guys or girls or red geraniums. He nudged Katie, in order to confirm this new open-mindedness by sharing it with someone, but she was leaning out of the window and pointing up the road.

'That's Norm Kelly,' she said. 'Looks like he needs a lift.'

'That miserable bastard?' Finn said. 'No, thanks. I don't want his vibes polluting my taxi.'

'You're supposed to be Lucy's representative,' Katie reminded him. 'Norm's her uncle. I reckon she'd want you to help him out.'

'Uncle or no uncle, Lucy's not mad keen on him, if you ask me' Finn said. 'I'd rather leave him where he is. But, if you insist ...'

'Yes, I do,' Katie said. 'Stop the taxi, Finn.'

Matt hadn't bothered to vote, because his opinion didn't usually count for much, but a few minutes later he knew which side he would have been on. Despite being a head shorter than Matt, Norm insisted that he had to sit in the middle of the back seat, to allow enough room for his legs. After he had wedged himself between Matt and Katie and made himself comfortable, he proceeded to take over the conversation, giving them a rundown on everybody else in the militia and explaining in detail how hopeless each of them was.

'As for Scott Sterne – well, I can't see the point of being led by a kid who's only just started shaving,' he finished up. 'I'll show him what's what, if I ever get the chance. I've read those pamphlets of your dad's, Matty. This Asian invasion business is bloody real, not some fancy-schmancy excuse to dress up and go marching around. If you ask me ...'

Since Matt hadn't asked him anything, he figured he was entitled to escape into his own thoughts, although, as it turned out, that wasn't much better than listening to Norm, because he found himself trying to work out when his father had started going on about the Asian invasion. Not while Matt's mate John

Nguyen was still coming for sleepovers at the pub: he would have remembered that. He had a feeling that it might have been around the time when Pat had begun to lock all the doors and windows every night, going right round the pub two or three times before he was prepared to go to bed.

And his dad's obsession with security had kicked in soon after his mum walked out. Matt could remember lying in bed and worrying that, if she came back during the night, she wouldn't be able to get in. Maybe those two things were connected. Maybe his mum leaving had made his dad afraid of everything – burglars, invasions and (Matt added, with a sudden leap of logic) even his own son.

He was so excited by this new idea that he found himself trying to catch Katie's eye, even though Norm was sitting between them. Evidently, it was his lucky day. As he turned, Norm leaned forward to tap Finn on the shoulder, so their eyes met, after all, and Katie smiled so warmly and sympathetically that, against all the odds, Matt was convinced she knew exactly what he wanted to tell her.

'Slow down, Finny, or you'll miss the turn-off,' Norm said, slumping back. 'Call yourself a taxi driver, when you don't even know the way to my place! The old bloke who used to drive the taxi before you, he knew the area like the back of his hand and –'

He went on grumbling all the way along the dirt track that led to his property, while the others took turns at jumping out to open the gates. When the taxi came to a halt, he practically pushed Matt out and went loping off, wary and determined as an old grey wolf. The minute he disappeared round the back of his house, everyone started talking at once, as if they were making up for lost time. Frank asked Finn for all the details about Orion and Katie asked Matt why he had been looking at her.

Normally, he would have made some sort of smartarse reply but because it was Katie, it seemed perfectly natural to explain his new ideas about his family and while she was asking questions, her hand somehow wrapped itself around his. By the time they had decided that he ought to hitchhike up the coast and pay his mum a visit some time soon, they were leaning companionably against each other.

Katie shifted position, settling her head more securely on Matt's shoulder, and started to tell him how she had been there in the room when Lucy came to visit Sibyl Dove, just before Sibyl died, although she had missed the part where Sibyl asked Lucy to make some important-sounding promise and she still wished she knew what the promise had been. Matt listened with one ear and, just in case, kept the other ear tuned to Finn and Frank.

'That stuff I told you just now,' Frank was saying, 'is it okay by you, Finn?'

Finn thumped the steering wheel, startling a blast from the horn. 'Jesus, you're a hopeless bastard,' he said. 'Of course it's okay. Why do you even have to ask? That's the biggest problem with this bloody town. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.'

'Not bad,' Frank said. 'Never realised you had such a way with words.'

'I don't,' said Finn. 'I nicked that from William Butler Yeats, the Western world's greatest poet - and an Irishman, of course. Still, it's the truth, even if it's secondhand.'

Frank laughed. 'Okay, if we're on about the truth, it's your turn to answer a question of mine,' he said. 'Why do you keep painting all those terrible landscapes, when everybody knows you're more interested in people than trees?'

'That's below the belt,' Finn protested. 'But I suppose my question was a low blow as well, so here goes. I used to paint portraits before I got married. Not sure why I stopped. Scared, maybe. Found I was showing more of myself than I wanted to show. Is that enough for you, mate, or will we go on playing truth and dare?'

Matt said a soundless "yes" but Katie, who had been shifting restlessly ever since Finn had started quoting Yeats, sat up and let go of Matt's hand and opened the car door.

'Norm's taking too long,' she said. 'It'll all be over before we catch up with the militia and the Wolf Guard. I'm going to hurry him up.'

She was out of the taxi and halfway across the dusty space between them and the house, before Matt could say, 'Hang on, I'll come too,' so he sat back and listened to Finn Casey, crooning quietly:

*'Oh, you take the high road and I'll take the low road
And I'll be in Scotland before you.
But me and my true love will never meet again
On the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond.'*

Valda Kelly was lugging a basket of washing to the back door when she heard noises outside. Something clanking and thudding and gasping. She dumped the washing and went to fetch Norm's rifle, pushed the door open with her foot and swung the barrel up.

'Norman,' she said, sounding almost disappointed. 'What the aitch do you think you're doing? You gave me a real fright.'

Norm slammed the spade into the earth, recoiling as it jarred against a wedge of stone. 'I'm digging up the semi-automatic,' he panted. 'Reckon I just might need it. Better safe than sorry, anyhow.'

He leaned on the wooden handle for a couple of seconds and then drove the spade down again. Valda propped herself against the verandah post and studied him dispassionately. He was a nasty colour, no doubt about it, dirty grey under his tan. What's more, he kept stopping work to give his left arm a rub, which was funny, seeing he was a right-hander. It reminded Valda of something she'd read not so long ago. What was it, now? No, she couldn't quite get it.

'You want to be careful, at your age,' she warned Norm. 'Can't go running all over the place like a chook without a head. Remember what the doctor said, Norman. You won't make old bones, if you keep carrying on like that.'

'Look who's talking,' he jeered. 'You're nothing but a bag of bones yourself. I know my limits, Val, better than you do.' He thumped his heel onto the shovel and paused to clutch his arm again, saying, 'Stupid cow. You've never been any use. Why don't you mind your own bloody business and let me mind mine?'

Valda turned away without a word and hoisted the basket onto her hip. As she pegged the second sheet onto the line, she caught sight of her husband, framed between two white rectangles, and remembered a white page from a magazine - the article about heart attack symptoms in the *Reader's Digest* that she had read straight after the doctor told Norm he needed to watch his heart. A sudden pain in the left arm had been up there at the top of the list. Valda wondered whether Norm had taken his pills today. Probably not, because he couldn't stand swallowing them first thing and Doug Sterne had phoned just before morning tea, so Norm had rushed off in a tizzy.

She could ask him, of course. But he had said to mind her business and wives were supposed to obey their husbands, weren't they?

Valda felt for another peg and another lump of wet sheet. When she finished hanging out the washing and looked round the white wall, the yard was empty again - nothing left, except a dusty dog yawning at the sky and a hole in the middle, the size of a child's grave.

Katie saw the hole in the ground too, although it came as more of a surprise to her. When she had jumped out of the taxi and headed towards the Kellys' house, she had felt so lopsided that she'd almost tripped and fallen. It had taken her a few seconds to realise that she was missing the reciprocal pressure of Matt's arm and even after she'd worked that out, she still found it hard to believe. It was a ridiculously romantic reaction and she wasn't a romantic person. After all, she'd gone out with Scott for three years and she had never really fancied him, had she?

The whole idea was so disconcerting that she actually preferred to think about Norm Kelly. Why on earth had she insisted on picking him up from the roadside, when she knew what he was like? She thought back and realised with an embarrassed blush that the answer was: *to prove I could*. Now that she was part of the GO inner circle and practically co-editor of the *Star*, she wasn't used to hearing people say no to her, so she had gone up against Finn and won. Now she was stuck with the job of hurrying Norm up, which basically served her right.

She dodged round an ancient motor bike propped against the side of the house and turned the corner into the back yard, where a row of sheets was billowing out from a rope slung between two trees. Against their white

background she could see Norm kneeling down in the dust, lifting a dusty bundle from a hole in the ground. The bundle was wrapped in layers of oilskin but Katie only needed half a second to recognise its shape and after that she didn't even need another half second to turn and run for her life. She sped past the house, avoiding the bike, and flung herself into the taxi

'Norm got caught up,' she said, automatically reaching for Matt's hand. 'He reckons we ought to go on without him.'

Just as she had expected, none of the others had any problems with that. Finn started the taxi straight away and they drove off, back to the road and then on to the point where they had encountered Norm.

'Nearly at the escarpment now,' Finn said, sounding relieved. 'We must've missed the Wolf Guard and the militia.'

'Unless they went past while we were dropping Norm off,' said Frank. He twisted round in his seat and added, 'Hang on a minute, I thought I saw ... Did you happen to notice anything on your side of the road, Matt?'

'Um,' said Matt, who had been busy polishing Katie's thumbnail with his thumb. 'Sorry, I wasn't looking.'

Frank grinned and told Finn to reverse for a few metres. While Katie was asking him what he thought he had seen, Finn slammed on the brakes. No need for any more questions. She rested her chin on Matt's shoulder and looked out at the huddled group crouching behind a screen of tattered scrub. She could identify a windcheater elbow, a pair of bare ochre feet, a quiff of intensely black hair and a dark wary eye. That was all. But it was enough.

Finn whistled softly. 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' he said. 'What do we do now?'

'Well, Lucy reckoned we were her witnesses,' Frank said. 'I suppose we should just keep our distance and -'

'No, bugger that,' Finn cut in, with a sudden burst of energy. 'I'm not going to sit back and watch this whole business turn into a bloodbath. I want to try and warn, um, those people. It's a pity I forgot to learn Chinese or whatever they speak - although, knowing my luck, if I *had* studied Chinese, it'd probably be the wrong dialect.'

For some reason, that seemed to cheer him up. He got out of the taxi and strode towards the bushes, flapping his long arms. The little group squawked and scattered like worried hens. Most of them headed across the road and down towards the river, calling to each other in sharp plangent voice, but a small stocky man with a full moon face and a half moon moustache froze in mid-crouch and stared up at Finn from tawny-black eyes.

'Oh mate,' he breathed. 'This has to be the weirdest thing that ever happened to me. My name's Finn, okay? I know you can't understand a word I'm saying but please, get the hell out of here. Go. Run. Hide.'

His hand tapped his windcheater as he introduced himself and then pointed towards the river bank, stabbing the air harder with every word. The moon man chatted back, grinned unexpectedly and went scampering across to

the hollow where his friends were waiting. Finn's shoulders relaxed and he staggered slightly, panting as if he had just completed a marathon.

'Did I do the right thing?' he asked, turning back to the others. 'Maybe we should've loaded them all into the taxi and driven them over to Bayview.'

Katie didn't know what to say. It had all happened so fast. She hadn't even reached for her camera. She had just sat there, staring at Finn and the Chinese guys.

'Hey, you couldn't fit fifteen guys in here,' Matt said reassuringly. 'At least this way they've got a sporting chance. If you want to keep an eye on things, we could always climb that hill over there.'

When Katie looked back, she saw another of the sand dune formations that lined the river bank, although this one was higher than most, so it would give them a good view from the top. Climbing the hill was the sort of suggestion she would have made herself, if spying on Norm hadn't shaken her so badly. No question about it, she and Matt were a good team.

Their hands linked, so naturally that she couldn't have said which of them moved first, and they led the way across to the dune. As they started to climb, the ground below them dropped away sharply. It looked as if the Danville River had flooded a long time ago, taken a huge bite out of the land and then slipped back between its banks again. Katie traced the shape of the hollow with her eyes and realised that it was almost the same shape as the Lomond valley, with the dune replacing the escarpment and the Danville River standing in for the sea.

It was a harmless comparison. She wasn't sure why it made her shiver and turn away and look back down the road – and having done so, she wasn't sure why she didn't tell the others about the ancient motor bike that came speeding towards them.

Then again, she hadn't told them about the gun Norm Kelly had taken out of that hole in the ground, either.

Rocky parked the bus in the shade under the overhang of the escarpment. 'Steady on,' she barked, as the girls surged out. 'Gently does it. Supposed to protect these people, not scare them out of their wits. Serenity, you're the leader. Take charge of the search, while I keep an eye on things.'

Serenity grinned and saluted. She felt a hundred per cent fabulous, tall as a gum tree and fizzing with life. The last week had been ratshit - for her, for Jude, for that poor little bastard Orion, for Lucy and for GO - but now there was a chance to redeem themselves. It was almost too good to be true. She could hardly wait.

While the others lined up, she studied the river bank and then organised them into a human chain that ran from the road to the river and sent them moving steadily forward. The Wolf Guard looked excellent. Totally disciplined. A blue and silver ribbon threading through the bushes, between the glossy fawn band of the

river and the sandpaper strip of the road. If anybody was hiding there, Serenity would tie them up in a bow and give them to Lucy as a present. Not a problem. She could do anything. It was one of those days.

The Wolf Guard checked the bushes and poked into the land's folds and crevices, while Serenity walked up and down the line, encouraging them on, making sure they didn't break formation and miss something. They worked well together. Merian Harper paced like a greyhound, highstrung and nervy, practically sniffing the air for invisible clues. Jacinta plodded along, frowning at the ground, as if she was prepared to turn over every grain of river sand, in case a boat person was hidden underneath it. Jude thwacked a length of silvergrey gum branch against her thigh, looking grimly determined.

Some of the girls were wishing they were back in town. Others were hoping they would get a chance to come to grips with the guys at last. Serenity didn't really care what happened, just as long as they proved, once and for all, that Lucy could trust the Wolf Guard to take care of Lomond. As she marched her troops to the top of a rise like a wave sculptured in sand, Merian gasped and stopped short, a few steps ahead of others. Serenity hurried over to her, looked down the slope and gasped even louder.

'Come here, Rocky,' she whispered, staring at a random pattern of black scalps. 'I think we've found something.'

Rocky shouldered through the line of girls and peered over the crest of the sand-wave. She gasped loudest of all, lost her balance and went rolling and tumbling down into the middle of the group below. Fifteen small sturdy men leapt to their feet and spread out in a star shape as Rocky sat up, clutching her ankle.

'*Ni hao*,' she said through gritted teeth.

This time everybody gasped, both the men and the girls. The men giggled and clustered together and thrust a moon-faced man forward to say '*Ni hao*' in a far more impressively twangy accent, followed by a long rush of words that Serenity couldn't even begin to understand. It was impossible to feel scared of a bunch of guys who weren't much taller than Jude, dressed in badly-fitting seventies style suits that looked as if they came from a Brotherhood of St Laurence bargain sale.

Within seconds, the whole thing was turning into an impromptu party. The girls slid down the sand-wave, saying '*Ni hao*' as they landed, and the men helped them to their feet. Somebody shook hands with one of the men, so they all did that. The moon-faced man turned to Rocky, bobbed his head and rubbed his hands together like he was washing them, so they all did that as well. After that, the men started teaching the Wolf Guard how to pronounce *ni hao* properly and trying to say the girls' names. Jacinta became "Zha Tsin", Jude became "Zhou" and Serenity's name caused so many problems that she took pity on the guys and strolled over to Rocky.

'Hey, you never told us you speak Chinese,' she said.

'Studied it for a year at the defence academy,' Rocky said, prodding her ankle and wincing. 'Never know when that sort of thing might come in handy.'

Didn't expect to use it today, though. Thought this was another of Lucy's wildcat schemes. Got the shock of my life when I saw those blokes. Not usually this clumsy, I swear, but by the feel of it, I've broken my bloody ankle.'

Serenity laughed, because it was always funny when you realised your teachers were human. The moon man came over and squatted down beside Rocky, examining her foot with a professional frown. He tore a strip off his candy-striped seventies business shirt and started to bandage her ankle, while he talked to her in Chinese. Rocky talked back, between groans, and they went on repeating words until they had figured out each other's accents, then got stuck into the business of asking questions. Rocky was beginning to translate what Moon Man had been saying, when Serenity heard a muffled shout, somewhere in the bushes.

She looked up and saw a line of khaki uniforms heading downhill towards them.

Afterwards, Serenity spent hours / days / months making endless lists of all the thoughts that might have gone through her mind at that moment. She thought about the way Rocky's drill sessions had trained them to obey orders. She thought about how, once she'd decided that Lucy was on the level, she had been prepared to do anything to back her up, no matter what. She thought about how she had told her mum she was prepared to overlook Pat Fahey's racism and how Caro had hardly spoken to her since. She thought about Rocky telling the class that human beings were wired for co-operation and Daniel quoting that poem where the world came to an end in a fight between brother and brother. She thought about how she'd basically had half a second to decide whether she was going to protect the Chinese men or abandon them.

But at 15:01 on the bank of the Danville River, there wasn't time for any of that. Serenity just jumped to her feet and strode forward, shouting, 'Form *ranks. Stand firm.*'

And, of course, the Wolf Guard obeyed.

Scott led the militia over the top, feeling invincible. Forget about the doubts that had been bugging him earlier. He was on an unstoppable high. One glance into the hollow had told him that the boat people were real, after all.

So they would all be heroes now.

He was yelling as he charged the invaders, fizzing with life. Adrenalin fired every neuron, pumped every muscle and powered up his heart. Everything was simultaneously hazy and detailed. Scott knew where he was heading – a mob of small black-haired men over by the next dune - but he wasn't really interested in anything that came between him and them. Didn't matter. Whatever it was, he could handle it, no problem. It was one of those days.

Then a voice cut through the haze around him. It only said four words and they weren't particularly significant ('Form *ranks. Stand firm*') but with a sudden

twist, like a hand turning a giant kaleidoscope, everything changed. Now the small black-haired men were hazy and the people standing in front of them came clear. Scott could see every detail of Serenity's face - the pale grey shadows in under her chocolate eyes; her hair, soft as a ginger kitten's fur; the rounded curve of her upper arms, braced to protect her troop. So beautiful: so real: so Serenity: and in a few seconds, unless he did something about it, she would be knocked down, trampled, bruised and broken and bleeding.

He dug his heels into the hard earth. 'Troop, *halt*,' he roared and, of course, the militia obeyed. But what was he supposed to do next? Within seconds, he could hear Eden Parker saying, 'Jeez, Scotty, let's show the chicks we mean business.' The other guys were joining in too, which was fair enough, in a way. After what Mal had taught them in their practice sessions, they knew how to power through the Wolf Guard and get stuck into the real enemy.

There was only one problem. Ever since he had seen Serenity - not just looking at her but really seeing her - a new thought had been gradually taking shape in his head. *Jude's not a slut. She's my sister.* and if that was true, then at least half the things people had ever told him weren't true either, which meant that he had to go back and start all over again. He braced himself and spread his arms wide, as though he could hold back the entire militia all on his own, like that king who tried to hold back the sea.

'Slow down, guys,' he said. 'We need to talk.'

Serenity gazed at Scott, seeing double at first and then watching the two Scotts merge. Scott gazed back at Serenity, understanding at last that it would be easy to make changes if she was there beside him, backing him up. The sun shone down on everybody gathered by the river but the two of them seemed to soak up more of its rays than anyone else. Finn Casey wanted to reach for his brush and a canvas and start painting them, then and there. Frank Carretto, who never swore, bowed his head and whispered, 'Jesus Christ.' Marshall Cox swallowed hard and looked away, to give his daughter her privacy. Katie kept a tight hold on Matt's hand and looked from the Wolf Guard on one side of the hollow to the militia on the other side.

All round the hollow, people stood and stared, caught up in the moment. For the space of a collective heartbeat, the world seemed to balance on its axis, suspended in time. Then everyone's blood went on pulsing through their veins and everyone's hearts beat faster and the world continued to turn.

'Talk?' Tommo said from behind Scott. 'What's the matter, Scotty? Gone soft or what?'

'Ren?' Jude said from behind Serenity. '*Ren*. Jesus, she's zoned out or something. Okay, team, forward march.'

Rocky was trying to struggle to her feet but the moon man pulled her back, pointing to her ankle and looking worried. Lockie Conway threw his weight

against the row in front of him, trying to get through to Tommo. Rita Farr was trapped between Cam Parker (who was supposed to be on the same side as her, although she couldn't stand him) and Merian Harper (who was supposed to be on the other side, even though they'd been best friends in primary school). Jacinta Witton had been trying to tuck a folded hanky into the heel of her shoe, to stop it from rubbing her blister, so she missed most of what happened next. Rob Sterne was lurking in the background because, if there was more trouble ahead, he didn't intend to cop the blame this time.

'I can't see,' he said, elbowing Eden Parker. 'What's going on?'

The sun continued to shine down impartially as the Wolf Guard took its first step, the militia braced themselves and Norm Kelly came panting up the ridge with his semi-automatic tucked under his arm.

'Fuck me, the lesos are helping the chinks,' he yelled. 'Come on, boys, let's get the bastards.'

Scott shouted 'No' and Serenity shouted 'No' but their troops couldn't hear them. The militia surged forward and the Wolf Guard surged on. They clashed together, shouting and flailing and kicking and punching. From the top of the dune, Matt saw a silvergrey stick lift high above the surging mass of heads and Katie heard the echo of a shot ricocheting away down the river.

But they all heard the scream.

It was like nothing that any of them had ever heard before. Nothing like the screams on TV cop shows, where the actors were yelling their lungs out. Nothing like the screams in the schoolyard, when kids were splashing water at each other or trackydacking or snapping bra straps. It reminded Katie of the way her mother had screamed, when she was giving birth to Emma at home. It reminded Matt of an eagle he had once heard, dropping out of the sky with a pure high feral wail, ready to kill. Jacinta thought of ghosts, Pat Fahey thought of banshees and Cam Parker thought of rabbits screaming as the trap snapped shut but no matter how they reacted, it stopped them all in their tracks.

There was a small empty circle at the centre of the mob, where Scott and Serenity had been standing. The militia and the Wolf Guard backed away in unison, widening the circle. In the middle of the empty space, Scott was lying still on the ground: very still indeed: and Serenity was kneeling beside him with her hand wrapped round his wrist. She looked up and frowned like a little kid trying extra hard in first aid class.

'That's weird,' she said. 'I can't find his pulse.'

Fourteen

Daniel hitched one knee up, pushed hard and heaved his other leg onto the ledge. He twisted around, wriggled backwards and sat there for a couple of minutes, enjoying the pleasant ache in his muscles, the warmth of the stone under his buttocks, the sun-sparkle along the bends of the river. A perfect moment. He had always been the kind of kid who examined his birthday presents from every angle before he unwrapped them, because they lost some of their magic once he knew what they were. Even though this cave looked like the best he had ever found in all his years of climbing, he wanted to wait on its doorstep for a while, holding onto the feeling of anticipation for as long as possible.

Below him, the Lomond valley was spread out like a patchwork quilt, brown and green squares tacked together by threads of fences and the tinsel string of the river, with a sea-blue band around the hem. When he looked closer, he was able to pick out tiny farmhouses, tinier cars and a scurry of black ants across the beige stripe of the river bank. The ants – well, people probably - irritated Daniel, because he had been pretending he was the only person in the world. He hunched his shoulder, to shut them out, and turned to look at the cave.

It was a narrow wedge driven deep into the rock, as if Thor, the Norse thunder god, had hurled his hammer at the cliff while he was practising for the gods' last battle against the giants. An overhang of sandstone, crumbling at the edges, shielded the opening from the wind and the rain. There were no shadows or cobwebs or lichen, just a sharp clean cut that could have been made yesterday, framing a triangle of two-dimensional blackness.

Like a door from midday into midnight. Magic.

Daniel shivered in the sunshine and watched the hairs prickle all the way along his bare arms. Without pausing to think or plan, he dropped down onto his hands and knees and crawled into the cave. Darkness claimed him straight away, cancelling out the sunlight. The sandstone floor slanted downwards - a

fairly gentle sort of slope but disconcerting, just the same. He had to keep patting the ground ahead of him as he crawled, running his hands across small round stones, symmetrical as billiard balls. When he laughed at the thought of finding a stone pool cue next, the laugh echoed back at him, magnified and deadened by the rock.

Okay, no more jokes. Time to show some respect.

While he shuffled forward, the walls started to close in on him. Before long his shoulders were jammed between two opposing slabs of stone. He angled his shoulders sideways, stretching out to see whether he could touch the end of the cave, and his hand plunged down through empty space. A brief spurt of panic surged through him and then his fingers touched the rocky floor, slid across a sandy patch and clattered into a pile of - what? Not stones this time, the things were too light for that. Dry sticks, maybe, but how on earth had a pile of old twigs found their way up here?

He retrieved one of the stick-things and sat back on his heels, running his thumb up and down its surface. It was smoother than he would have expected, no splinters or dents where the twigs had broken off, and when he weighed it in his hand, it bounced exuberantly on his palm, as if it was honeycombed with tiny pockets of air.

A mystery. Daniel balanced the stick on his knee, slipped his pack off and felt for the box of matches, feeling as if he was cheating. It would have been more satisfying to guess the answer in the dark but this wasn't one of his better days. The match scraped across the side of the box and a flare of light burned a bright dot onto his retina. Then the light spread out, pushing the blackness away, and tall figures loomed over him. He yelped and dropped the match, remembered what Norm had told him and blushed in the darkness.

Oh, yeah. Come to think of it, there were supposed to be more Aboriginal paintings in the cave.

In the upstairs bedroom at The Caff Lucy Dove was falling apart. She paced round the room, so fast that she left optical illusions behind her at every step. One minute there seemed to be Lucies in each corner of the room, except for the one occupied by Mrs Carretto's bed – a little-girl Lucy over by the door; the Lucy that Lomond knew, standing at the window; a Lucy as old as Sibyl Dove in the corner closest to the bed. Next minute she had disappeared altogether but a minute after that she was standing in the middle of the room with her face contorted and her hands clasped over her heart, like the star of a silent movie overacting distress and misery.

'I haven't been any use to anyone,' she said. 'Not in all the time I've been here. If I could just believe I'd done something to help one single person ... but not *you*.'

She paced over to the bed and frowned down at the small skull face on the pillow, eyes like milky marbles wedged into its sockets, wrinkled skin sagging away from the bones.

'It's my birthday today,' she said. 'You're supposed to spend your birthday with your family. Welcome back, Great-aunt Sibyl.'

The old woman looked up at her. 'Mo' le precuec' so' quatre,' she said. 'U quart t'a frecat. Ciao, Lucia.'

'Oh, I know, I know,' Lucy said, beginning to pace again. 'I should never have let the Wolf Guard *and* the militia go out looking for the Chinese guys. But it all went too fast for me to stop it and besides, I was really upset about this dream I'd had. It's all very well for you wrinklies. You've made your mistakes, so you think you're entitled to sit around, bellyaching about the past. I hate the past. It always gets in the way. I thought I could push it aside and move on but it keeps holding me back and dragging me down, like a crazy old mother who won't let her son go off to seek his fortune or an even crazier old spinster who wants her grand-niece to take over where she left off. Well, guess what? That's over now. I'm over it, okay?'

She came back to the bedside and picked up a pillow that had dropped onto the floor, hugging it to her chest like a lumpy baby. On the bed, the old woman tossed and muttered and clawed feebly at the sheet.

'Don't worry,' said Lucy, taking a step forward. 'It'll all be fine. You'll be nice and comfy in a minute, I promise you.'

'Murderers,' shouted Lockie Conway. 'Those bloody bitches killed Scott. They ki-'

His voice cracked in the middle of the word. His chest heaved, his mouth gaped and his forehead puckered. Jude Martin, propping herself against a nearby gum tree, thought he looked as if he was about to burst into tears but at the last minute, he spun round to face the militia.

'Do something,' he said. 'You can't let them get away with it. *Do something.*'

Jude could have turned and wandered off but she waited around to see whether anyone would take Lockie up on it, although she didn't really care either way. She would have cared once. Even fifteen minutes ago, she would have been going, 'Typical macho bullshit' but now it all seemed kind of irrelevant. She just wanted ...

Yeah, what did she want? She wasn't sure, which was funny, because she wanted it really badly.

Lockie knew what he wanted, at any rate. He wanted revenge. When none of the other guys in the militia made a move, he bellowed like a sick calf and rushed at the Wolf Guard with his head down, ready to butt. He was aiming for Jacinta, who might have looked like an easy target, because she was wiping tears and tear-sticky wisps of hair away from her cheeks with the back of one

hand. But Jacinta wasn't one of the little kids Lockie used to bully in the schoolyard. She sidestepped, stuck out her foot out as he went past and tripped him.

'Oh, sure,' she said, scowling down at him. 'You'd know all about murderers, after what you and Tommo did to Maya's little brother.'

That was borderline accurate but it wasn't anywhere near smart. Right at that moment, everyone was looking for an excuse to blame somebody else. They all started shouting at once, accusing Jacinta and defending Lockie, accusing Lockie and defending Jacinta.

Then, somewhere along the line, it got more general. The farmers began to dredge up stuff that happened twenty years ago, before Jude was born. 'Wittons have always been cheats, ever since Joe Witton tried to shift those boundary lines.' The kids began to dredge up stuff from primary school. 'Lockie Conway wet his pants and it ran right down the aisle.' Words flew through the air like stones - 'bitches', 'jocks', 'lesos', 'pricks'. Some of the farmers turned fatherly and tried to break it up, saying, 'Now then, young ladies.' The Wolf Guard jeered at them. The younger guys in the militia jeered back.

And Serenity released Scott's hand and stood up. Her ginger hair bristled and her eyes were dark as flakes of dried river mud.

'Do you really want to know whose fault this is?' she said. 'It's your fault, all of you. It's this fucking town's fault. You should've given him something better to do than hassling chicks and bashing slants and marching round in uniform. Well, he changed his mind at the last minute - you all saw that. Don't kid yourselves that you'll turn into heroes by starting a fucking fight over his fucking body.'

That shut everybody up. Jude leaned on her gum tree and sighed admiringly. Serenity was a bit of a hero herself, the way she kept saying things that people didn't want or need to hear. She had always wanted to be like Serenity, although that had changed too, along with everything else. Now she just wanted ...

Um. Something. She would remember in a minute.

While she had been thinking about Serenity, the mob had begun to stir again - a slow sluggish movement, like a ripple across a bowl of half-set jelly. It started with Pat Fahey, muttering to himself as he looked across at the Chinese guys, travelled through half a dozen of Pat's supporters and ended by lifting Cam Parker's fist as high as an executioner's axe. For a moment it seemed as though Serenity was going to be massacred, as well. Jude looked around for Norm Kelly, who tended to tip the balance at times like these.

But Norm appeared to have vanished, which, under the circumstances, had to count as a smart move. Instead, she saw Rob Sterne pushing through the crowd, with everyone trying to get out of his way, in case bad luck was contagious. Rob didn't look tall and blond and handsome any more. He looked hefty and awkward and ugly, like Jude on a bad day, which was odd, because he didn't seem to have worked out what had happened yet

'Body?' he said, picking up on Serenity's last word. 'Scott's dead? My son? You killed my son?'

He humped his shoulders and swivelled his head like an angry bull. Everyone scattered, except for Serenity. That made her the only person who was standing near Scott, so Rob went over to stand next to her, looking bullishly protective.

'Good on you, Dad,' Jude breathed. 'You've done something right for a change. She'll be safe from the bloody lynch mob now.'

A sudden rush of tears scalded her eyes. She sniffed and lifted her right hand to wipe her nose and remembered, just in time, that she was holding a stick. Oh. No, as a matter of fact, she wasn't. Her hand was empty. Apparently, she must have dumped the stick at some point in the last five minutes. She wondered vaguely where it had gone, then forgot about it and went on watching while the girls and guys in the militia and the Wolf Guard hesitated and made their individual decisions and moved forward.

They merged together, forming an unbroken circle around Rob and Serenity and Scott. Rob's eyes were dry but his broad shoulders heaved and shuddered. Serenity was blinking fast and chewing her thumb. And Scott lay on his back, staring up at the sky from empty eyes, while flies settled on the trickles of drying blood from his nose and ears. Everyone stared down at him in shock, as though they had only just realised that he was really dead.

It had taken them long enough. Jude had known that, right from the start.

The air was so quiet and still that the buzz of the flies sounded as loud as an organ playing a funeral march. Jude could hear the hum of a car engine up on the road and Marshall Cox saying, 'That's Caro's station wagon!' At the sound of his voice, Serenity broke away from the circle of mourners and went running past Jude.

'Mum!' she called, not sounding like a hero any longer, more like a little kid lost in an enormous supermarket. 'Where is she? Why didn't she stop? I want my mum.'

The full impact of the last five minutes settled into Jude's body with such crushing force that she had to spend the next sixty seconds reminding her lungs how to breathe and her heart how to beat. After that, everything seemed to have changed irrevocably. She didn't hate anybody, she wasn't afraid of anybody and she didn't love anybody either – well, only one person, at any rate. She straightened up, dodged around the tree that she had been leaning against and set off along the river bank, heading back to Lomond.

Of course. Got it, at last. Thanks for telling me, Ren. That's what I want too.

Daniel leaned into the sandstone curve of the cave and worked on the pieces of his puzzle in the dark. Those Aboriginal paintings on the wall, with a bunch of

small dry sticks underneath them ... or, perhaps, a bunch of small dry bones. If they *were* bones, were they as old as the massacre beside the Danville River or even older? Were they the bones of a wounded survivor who had come crawling up here to die in private or had they been placed as part of some ancient ritual? He didn't know and he wasn't sure whether he wanted to light a second match and find out.

As a matter of fact, he wasn't sure he should even be here.

He had been concentrating so hard on the puzzle that he hadn't registered the sound of pebbles rattling down the cliff. When the pebble-sound was followed by the harsh heavy sound of someone breathing, Daniel lifted his head and listened but even then he didn't really emerge from his puzzle-solving trance, until the darkness rippled and the toe of a boot thudded into his shin.

'Ouch,' he said. 'Who's that?'

Silence, broken by the clatter of boots backing towards the entrance.

'Good question,' a voice said. 'Who are you? And what the blue blazes are you doing here?'

'I'm Daniel Matheson. I came out to have a try at the cliff.'

He waited for the voice to introduce itself. After the silence had stretched out for half a minute, he scraped a match across the box and watched the light flare up, gleaming on the underside of Norm Kelly's blob lip.

'Jesus!' he said, staring past Daniel at the back of the cave. 'What's that you've got there? Looks like someone finally found Lucy girl's bones.'

The match scorched Daniel's fingers and went out. As darkness settled over them, he started to shake. He clenched all his muscles, to hold his body still while he tried to make sense of what Norm had said, but his heart was pumping so loudly that it drowned out his thoughts.

'*Lucy's bones?*' he said. 'Not possible, Mr Kelly. For one thing, they're just little, like a kid's skeleton. And for another thing ...'

The next part of the sentence seemed way too obvious to be worth putting into words. Daniel crossed his fingers and waited for twenty seconds. It was a huge relief when Norm chuckled.

'Yeah, you're right,' he said. 'Lucy's alive, isn't she? Can't trust my own memory these days. Somehow I got the idea that I killed her, the afternoon of her fifth birthday when we went for a climb and her pretty dress got dirty and I took it off and she started screaming and ...' He stopped and cleared his throat and added, 'Anyhow, I haven't thought about that much for the last twenty years. It's not the sort of thing you want to dwell on, is it? And besides, Lucy came back, so I couldn't've topped her after all, could I?'

'Of course not,' Daniel said firmly. 'You're not the murdering type, Mr Kelly.'

Norm chuckled again. 'I wouldn't be too sure about that, sonny. I got a nasty feeling I might've just shot Scott Sterne. Not on purpose, mind. I was aiming at that bloody cousin of yours - stupid little bitch, butting in where she isn't wanted, protecting this fucking great mob of Asians who come sneaking in to

take over our country. I would've fixed her, good and proper, if that idiot Scott hadn't got in the road, but - oh well, like they say, the only good hero's a dead hero. Never thought much of Scotty, anyhow. Too full of himself, same as his bloody dad.'

Daniel's scalp twitched and his fingers jerked, in a sudden spasm that sent the box of matches flying off into the darkness. Oh, shit. Norm must have sunstroke or something. At least, he hoped so, because the alternative was way worse. He sifted through the last few minutes, trying to pick something that would be safe to comment on.

'Those Asian guys you were talking about,' he said. 'They couldn't have been, like, invading Lomond. There has to be another explanation.'

'How would you know?' said Norm. 'You weren't there, sonny. You didn't see them.'

'Don't need to. I'm a military history freak and Australia's famous for being virtually impossible to invade. Oh sure, there's been a few random strikes. like in World War Two, but how could anyone possibly take over a country this size, all in one hit?'

He talked on for five minutes, keeping his voice level and logical in the hope of calming Norm down, explaining that, even if you got hundreds of small boats together and went island-hopping across from South-east Asia to Darwin, you would still be faced with the problem of marching your army through several hundred kilometres of desert, without being spotted along the way. There was no way an enemy army could get anywhere, unless they had an enormous (and enormously expensive) fleet of troop-carriers and big boats and planes, in order to hit all of the capital cities at once - and even then they'd need lot of luck on their side.

'This country's too big for traditional methods of invasion,' he finished up. 'Basically, we won't be in any real danger till they invent some sort of science-fiction-type matter transference machine.'

Talking about his favourite subject had made him feel better but the minute he stopped, the silence came rushing back, heavy with suspicion. 'So you're calling me a liar?' Norm said after a while.

Daniel bit his lip. Damn. The logical approach might have been a mistake. Norm wasn't exactly open to logic right now.

'Nah, you're not lying,' he said. 'You're upset, that's all. You feel guilty about what happened with Scott - and maybe Lucy as well - so that makes you want to shift the blame onto someone else. This psychology book I read last year, while I was trying to understand my parents, it said people invent enemies out there, because it's easier than facing the enemy within. I think the writer meant we all feel like -'

'Ah, shut up,' Norm snarled. 'That's a load of old codswallop. I couldn't give a flying fuck about Scott. And why the hell would I feel guilty about Lucy?'

Double damn. What was he supposed to do now - backtrack or give Norm an honest answer? Daniel hesitated briefly and decided to go for broke.

'Well, when you told me that story about taking Lucy for a climb, you reckoned she got upset because you pulled her dress off, to keep it clean,' he said. 'Maybe you were worried that people would think you, um, molested her. I mean, you can get the guilts about things you *didn't* do, right? Sometimes they feel worse than the things you actually *did* do.'

He was expecting another snarl but instead he heard another chuckle. 'You're a funny kid, sonny boy,' Norm said. 'Full of ideas but you don't know much about the real world. Take this business about molesting little kiddies. There's nothing wrong with looking for a bit of affection, y'know. My granddad, for example, he had Sibyl for his special daughter. Mum was always carrying on about how close they were, like she was jealous or something, but I thought it sounded like a bit of all right - only my missus turned out to be a dud in the breeding stakes, so I had to make Lucy my special girl. She calls me Uncle Norm but her dad and me was just cousins, not brothers. You can't call it incest or anything, when she's not really my niece.'

There was sunshine a few metres away, Daniel knew that, but it felt as though his body was coated with a thin film of ice. He shuddered, a long painful spasm that rattled his bones in their sockets. The darkness must be getting to Norm. He had told Daniel way, way too much.

'You're having me on, aren't you?' he said hopefully. 'Just kidding, right?'

The silence swelled slowly until it filled the entire cave and sent chilly currents swirling through the black air, smelling of anger and resentment. Daniel was starting to make plans for a dash to the exit, when Norm yawned theatrically.

'Ah, what would you know, son?' he said. 'You've had a cushy life, the best of everything, not like it was back in the old days when kids did what they were told - or else. Fact is, I just came up here to hide the semi-automatic somewhere safe. I wasn't planning to hang around yakking with a stupid kid. What say we go back to my place and have a cuppa and forget the whole thing? I was probably pulling your leg, anyhow, just like you said.'

Daniel heard metal clank against stone as the gun rolled down to the back of the cave, scattering the dry sticks. Seconds later the sandstone walls echoed with the sound of Norm's boots, marching up the slope. The tension drained from his body, so fast that for a moment he thought it had actually given him the bends.

'Sounds good to me,' he said, standing up and flexing his cramped joints. 'By the way, it worked. I almost believed you ... but not quite.'

He stooped down, to guard his head, and followed Norm out of the darkness and into the light. The ledge was wider than he remembered but presumably that was just the result of being out in the open again. Daniel blinked till his eyes cleared and went to peer over the edge, wondering where to start the climb and how he could help the old bloke down the cliff.

Behind him, Norm said, 'You really are a bloody idiot. As if I'd let you get away, knowing what you know.'

Then he settled his hand between Daniel's shoulder blades and pushed him off the ledge.

Lucy Dove stood at the window, staring straight into the sun, which hung suspended over the escarpment. Her face was soft and dreamy. Her eyes looked like fragments of sky. Brightness fell from the air and paved the Lomond main street with gold dust, transforming a small country town into a city of dreams. Her head lifted, as though she was listening to some distant difficult sound.

'Oh, no,' she said. 'Not my witness. That's the wrong way round. One thing. Just let me change one thing ...'

Her eyes narrowed into triangles of two-dimensional blackness, like a pair of doors leading from midday into midnight and back again. She held her hands out and the sun filled them with light, the colour of sandstone. As she raised her hands higher, the light silted down behind them, forming the shape of a rollercoaster's arc. Lucy stayed in that position for a moment, just long enough to imprint the arc's outline on the air. Then she dusted her hands and let a breeze carry the golden particles away, over the rooftops of Lomond, across the river and on towards the escarpment.

Norm Kelly had done a good day's work, defending his farm against slants and snoopers and settling a few old scores into the bargain. He should have felt pleased with himself but for some unknown reason a black cloud seemed to be spreading through his brain. Dread, they called it. A feeling of dread. He had read that somewhere, not so long ago - an article in one of Valda's *Reader's Digest* magazines, maybe.

And the feeling of dread wasn't his only problem. His face was hot, *burning*, and his chest felt as though someone was trying to hammer a stake through it. Too much excitement, running around all morning and then climbing a hill on top of that, no good for a man in his condition. It was Doug Sterne's fault, ringing up when a man was in the middle of his morning tea, making him dash off straight away, without even time to take his -

The pain in his chest interrupted him, slamming down like a giant fist. Norm clutched his heart, trying to control the pain, but it was already radiating out through his entire system. With a last shout of protest, he sagged and wavered and collapsed, falling so heavily that the sandstone ledge fractured beneath him. His body rolled sideways, dropped down into a gulf of air, and chunks of stone fell with him and onto him, piling high and higher into an impromptu cairn.

Lucy smiled. 'Goodbye, Uncle Norm,' she said.

She wiped her palms on her white dress, closed the window and returned to her vigil beside the old woman lying silenced on the bed.

The last of the rocks were still rolling down from the place where the cave had been when Maya and Caro came running across the paddock. As they reached the stone cairn, Maya stopped short and pointed.

'Omigod!' she said. 'Look! There's a boot sticking out of it.'

Caro swayed and clutched her shoulder. 'Daniel was wearing climbing boots,' she whispered.

'Yeah, but that's a workboot,' Maya told her. 'The sort farmers wear, not the ones you buy from special camping shops. Let's keep looking, okay?'

They continued on around the cairn, with Caro still leaning on Maya's shoulder. Maya felt quietly proud of herself. *Some* people thought she could cope in a crisis, even if her parents wouldn't let her visit her own brother in hospital. She steered Caro round a stack of boulders, stood on tiptoe to look over a slab of sandstone: and screamed.

Daniel was lying on his side, knees drawn up to his chest like a foetus in the womb. The back of his shirt was shredded into blue and red streamers and the skin underneath had been shredded as well. Maya said, 'Caro, don't -' but Caro was already looking. She knelt down beside Daniel and lifted his wrist, checking for his pulse.

'He must have slipped while he was climbing and gone sliding down the cliff on his back,' she said, unnaturally calm. 'There's been a landslide too, by the look of things. It's lucky he didn't end up with that slab on top of him.'

'Is he going to die?' Maya said around her thumb, which had somehow found its way back into her mouth.

'*No!*' Caro shouted. When the cliff hurled the word back at her, she flinched and lowered her voice and said, 'At least, I hope not. We better not try to move him, though, in case there's any internal injuries. How are you feeling, Maya? Would you mind staying with him, while I go and get help?'

Maya's thumb popped out straight away. 'Sure I will,' she said, becoming adult and responsible again. 'Be careful, Caro. Like, y'know, don't drive too fast or whatever.'

She went on feeling confident while she watched Caro hurry back to the car and drive off but the minute she sat down beside Daniel, the cairn of stones started to loom at her. She looked away from it, caught a glimpse of Daniel's raw back and decided that the sky was the safest place to look. Her eyes drifted across a blue field full of woolly clouds, until she came across a small dark speck. After frowning at it for a while, she decided it was probably a bird riding the thermals round the rim of the escarpment.

The bird was too far away for her to see what sort it was but she knew she didn't like it. Its slow circular movement reminded her of vultures circling over people in the desert or those giant roc-birds that swooped down and carried you off - although, of course, vultures weren't interested in you, unless you were dead, and you only came across rocs in fairy tales or computer games. Maya giggled slightly hysterically, thinking: *oh, great. What a lot of useless information I've picked up, living with Orion*, but she decided to stop watching the bird, anyway. She fixed her eyes on the ground at her feet and moved closer to Daniel, reaching for his hand and hanging onto it.

'Please,' she said, looking at Daniel but seeing Orion. 'Oh please, don't die.'

Forty kilometres away, Orion's eyes opened. There was a powder blue blur floating beside his bed. He blinked and turned it into a nurse's uniform.

'I'm hungry,' he told the nurse. Then his brain started to process information at its usual speed and he added, 'Oh right, I must be in a hospital. The Bayview hospital, I bet. You've got a McDonald's here, haven't you? Any chance of a Big Mac? My parents are vegos but me and my sister eat meat, whenever we can.'

The nurse's mouth dropped open and her eyes started to bulge but people often looked like that when Orion was explaining things, so he didn't let it bother him. He just studied the tube in his arm with interest, while he went on trying to talk the nurse into lending him the money for a burger. Okay, he had obviously had some sort of near-death experience but he could think about that later on. In situations like this, it was important to get your priorities straight.

And right now, he was starving.

Fifteen

Sergeant Russell Draper of the Lomond-Bayview police station pushed his hat back and rubbed the dent around his hairline. 'Where are the bloody media when you really need them?' he asked himself.

It seemed like a fair question. Those city reporters had been swarming round Lomond for months, with occasional sidetrips to Bayview, encouraging normal sensible people to go troppo and start rambling on about things they didn't understand. (Like politics, for example. Face it, nobody understood politics, not even politicians.) The articles they wrote might have impressed the rest of Australia but Russell had grown up in Lomond and he couldn't see that wool-brained mob suddenly turning into a model for the rest of the world. It looked as if he'd been right too, although he was sorry about that.

Very bloody sorry for poor old Rob Sterne, who had looked as if he'd had it made, back when him and Russell were at school together.

Anyhow, getting back to the point, this time the media seemed to have missed most of the action. They were here now, hooning around, shoving mikes into people's faces and generally making nuisances of themselves, but a fat lot of good that did. Where was the perfect-focus footage that would have settled everything nicely when it got to the Coroner's Court? All Russell had was people's memories of the unfortunate incident, which was the equivalent of a dozen or so home videos from hand-held cameras, jolting around and focussing on all the wrong places.

He ran through the facts he had managed to establish so far. Someone had shot the kid in the back - long distance, because there was just a neat little hole, no exit wound - and someone else had smashed his skull in with an unknown weapon. And nobody in the entire mob seemed to have seen it happen,

which would have sounded bloody suspicious, if he hadn't known from first-hand experience how hard it was to keep track of things during a stoush.

As he pulled his hat into place again, the crowd shifted, opening a corridor between Mal and Rocky Abrahams. They looked up and realised for the first time that they had been on opposite sides of the confrontation. Mal went racing across to where Rocky was sitting, with her foot propped on a footstool-shaped boulder, and they started to check each other for damage.

'Bloody civilians,' they kept saying. 'They should leave this sort of thing to the professionals.'

Russell Draper turned away to hide a grin, thinking: *too right. Couldn't agree more.* Then his grin faded as he noticed the paramedics loading Scott Sterne into the ambulance, with his dad hovering around and warning them to go easy, as if they could still bump the kid and hurt him. They seemed to have everything under control, so Russell went for a wander, ears flapping as he moved through the crowd.

The first person he came across was Pat Fahey, staring across at the Chinese blokes and muttering, 'They don't *look* like soldiers, not in those crappy old suits.' That little ratbag Tommo Thompson was sitting on the ground near by, crying his eyes out in front of everybody, while Lockie Conway patted one of his shoulders and Rita Farr patted the other.

Further down the bank, the Wolf Guard was sharing three clean hankies between them, taking turns to mop themselves up, and Cam Parker was sidling up to all the blokes and asking whether they happened to have a hip flask on them. Then one of the teachers from Bayview/Lomond Secondary arrived and cornered Finn Casey - Finn's missus, presumably, come to tell him about that kid of theirs in the hospital. Judging by the way Finn shouted, 'Yes!' and hugged the teacher, it must have been good news but, judging by the way the two of them backed off from the hug, the business about the kid hadn't been great for their marriage. That happened sometimes. You might think a tragedy would bring families together but, from what Russell had observed, it often had the opposite effect.

Then Dick Brewster from the *Star*, the only media bloke Russell had much time for, came barrelling down the track from the road. Russell dropped the pretence of wandering aimlessly and made a beeline for him. Dick hadn't been there at the time but he had undoubtedly started to put all the reports together and turn them into a coherent story, which would save Russell a lot of time.

'G'day, mate,' he said. 'You got here pretty quick. I -'

But Dick didn't seem to hear him. He walked straight past Russell and stopped in front of a small stocky girl with a face like an unaccountably attractive pug dog - his daughter, the one who wrote for the paper, Russell remembered belatedly, wishing he had got to her first and pumped her before her dad turned up. Oh well, better late than never. Any conversation between the two of them would have to be worth hearing. He dropped back into wandering mode and strolled casually towards them.

'What are you doing here?' the girl was asking. 'If you came for the story, I'm sorry I haven't found out -'

'Bugger the story,' Dick said. 'I came to make sure you're okay. All the mobiles in Lomond have been buzzing like flies for the last few hours but after the militia moved out of range, the only news came from Valda Kelly, who heard a shot while she was out in the paddocks and called the cops. I'd been planning to leave you to it – after all, it's your story - but as soon as I knew there were guns involved, I jumped in the car straight away. I thought – but thank God it wasn't –'

He swung the kid off her feet, as effortlessly as if she was still five years old. 'Daddy,' she said into his neck. 'Daddy, it's all my fault. We passed Norm Kelly on the road and I made Finn give him a lift but he was going back to his place to dig up a gun and I saw him and didn't tell anyone and –'

'There, there,' her dad said, just as things were getting interesting. 'It's all right, Katie. There's no need to blame yourself.'

'But there *is*,' Katie insisted. 'Back when everything got started this morning, I was feeling totally detached and above it all, like it had nothing to do with me. That's why I didn't guess about Norm.'

Her father set her down and grinned at her. 'Don't beat yourself up, Girl Wonder,' he said. 'It's not a bad thing to realise early on that journos can get a bit of a God complex but in this case, I reckon you're off the hook. What you did with Norm doesn't count as interfering or manipulating or whatever. It was just plain bad luck and nobody's immune to luck.'

'I'm not so sure,' Katie said. 'What if ...'

They started to yabber on about the responsibilities of being a journo, which was fun for them but not much use to Russell Draper. He made a mental note to get the full story from Katie later and moseyed on towards the leader of the Wolf Guard, a tall ginger-haired kid who seemed pretty calm, considering what she had just been through, except that she kept rolling a silvergrey branch back and forth under the sole of her shoe. The city journo who was living at The Centre had got to the girl first and started to interview her, so Russell steered closer, in order to get the benefit.

'Chill, Dad,' the kid was saying. 'You're just a journo. The militia wouldn't have listened, even if you *had* tried to stop them.'

'Thanks, Ren,' the bloke said, hooking an awkward arm round her shoulders. 'But isn't this is the wrong way round? Shouldn't *I* be comforting *you*?'

The kid gave him a Mona Lisa smile. 'Hey, I'm not Daddy's little girl any more. I can look after myself, y'know. Been looking after a whole town for the last few months.'

She nudged the stick with her foot and watched it roll down the bank, drop into the river and go floating away. Russell sighed. Nothing useful there either, just another father-daughter routine. He was about to wander off when the kid yelled, 'Mum! It's Mum! She came back!' and went running towards the road, with the journo pounding along behind her. Russell followed them and saw a plump grey-haired woman in a dusty tracksuit getting out of a station wagon.

'Officer,' she called, one arm round the kid and the other arm round the journo. 'Officer, can you hold that ambulance, please? There's been another accident or - wait a minute, I forgot about that boot! - maybe *two* more accidents.'

Russell Draper sighed even more heavily. Bloody hell. He wasn't a betting man but, given a choice between one or two accidents, he was prepared to bet on two. After all, he was already investigating a spot of grievous bodily harm and, in his experience, trouble always came in threes.

Matt got out of the taxi and turned to look back. It was a pretty stupid thing to do. No way could he stand in the middle of the Lomond main street and see as far as the bank of the Danville River. He knew he had done the right thing by leaving Katie there. Her dad was the best person to reassure her about that business with Norm Kelly and Matt wanted (would always want) what was best for her. But after two hours of her warm, steady grip, his hand felt cold and bare. He allowed himself to gaze at the escarpment for a moment longer and then followed the others into The Caff.

'Any chance of a macchiato, to reactivate my brain cells before I head off to see Orion?' Finn was saying with his starving-puppy look.

'Hold your horses, mate,' Frank told him. 'I gotta go and check on Mum first.'

As he ran upstairs, Finn circled round the counter and went to study the espresso machine. 'I've sat here often enough while Franco was making coffee,' he commented. 'I ought to know how to do it by now.'

Somehow Finn didn't exactly inspire confidence, except when he was behind the wheel of the taxi. Matt watched anxiously, to make sure he didn't destroy Frank's precious Gaggia, but the can of ground beans almost jumped into his hand and the dispenser came away easily. Finn was packing the coffee into its cup when Matt felt all the hairs along the nape of his neck prickle and stand on end.

He looked up to see Lucy Dove gliding down the stairs, so light and silent that her feet barely seemed to touch the steps. She floated past them, eyes fixed intently on an invisible goal, and paused in the doorway to smooth her white skirt. Pale sunlight swirled around her, adding another layer of white like a bridal veil. Finn leaned across the counter and nudged Matt.

'Do you see her there?' he whispered. 'It's Brigid the Two-Faced that my old granny used to tell me about - one side of her face white and beautiful, the other side dark and ugly.'

He was exaggerating, as usual. Oh sure, there was a shadow across the half of Lucy's face that was turned towards them but no one could ever have called her ugly. Matt took an impulsive step forward, partly to prove a point to Finn and partly as a way of maintaining contact with Katie, by asking the question she had wanted to ask.

'Lucy,' he said, loud and clear, to get her attention, 'what did Sibyl Dove make you promise to do?'

She frowned down at her skirt until she had adjusted its folds to her own satisfaction. Then she looked round at Matt, swivelling the sunlit side of her face though a 180° turn that brought it back into shadow.

'Sibyl told me to save Lomond, if I could,' she said. 'Or destroy it.'

'And which have you done?' Finn asked from the background.

'You were my witnesses – you and Frank,' said Lucy. 'You tell me.'

But instead of waiting to be told, she swung away and stepped out into the late afternoon. Orange clouds billowed across the sky and a shaft of sunlight slid between them, landing at her feet like a stairway to heaven. Light snagged on floating specks of dust and turned the air gold. Matt frowned and rubbed his eyes.

'Goodbye, Lucy,' he said, although she had already gone, disappearing into the afternoon light.

When he went back into The Caff, Frank was coming down the stairs. His white shirt and black pants looked impeccably neat, even after a day beside the Danville River, and his perfect Roman profile was as regular and even and superior as an emperor embossed on some ancient coin. He took the dispenser out of Finn's hand, tamped the grounds down and turned to slot the metal cup into the machine, moving as mechanically as a robot.

'Hey,' Finn said, 'what's the matter, Franco?'

'Mamma's dead,' Frank said, without turning, 'and I'm not sure what to do next. Are you supposed to call a doctor for dead people or what?'

Matt's legs folded underneath him. He had to grab the edge of the counter to hold himself upright. Somehow it seemed all wrong that he had walked into The Caff without realising straight away that someone was dead. He looked across at Finn, hoping for some clues on how to react, but Finn was frowning at Frank's back.

'I think you're supposed to cry, mate,' he said.

He took Frank by the shoulders, spun him round and pulled him into a hug. Frank resisted at first but after a few seconds he fell forward, grabbed a handful of Finn's shirt and started to make strange hiccuping noises. Finn gazed across the top of his head into the shadows on the far side of The Caff.

'Mama Carretto,' he said affectionately, as if he could see her standing there. 'We used to have a good time together whenever I dropped in, joking and flirting and carrying on together. She was a tough old bird, back before the Alzheimers got her. Give Doug Sterne a ring, will you, Matty? He'll know how to handle this.'

Matt remembered the red phone over by the drinks fridge and headed towards it, relieved that he didn't need to walk into the ghost-infested shadows Finn was studying. He dialled the number for the surgery and Doug answered so fast that Matt got the impression he had been practically sitting on the phone.

'I'll come round straight away,' he said, after Matt had filled him in. 'You say you and Frank and Finn were there on the spot for this unfortunate business about poor Scotty? Oh, that's excellent. There's been a lot of rumours flying around, as you can imagine, but it hasn't been easy to find a genuine eye witness. I've been keeping out of it, because Lomond needs at least one politician who isn't tarnished by scandal, but obviously I'm keen to get all the facts.'

Matt put the phone down and wiped his hand on the back of his jeans, as if it had been slimed. When he turned to tell the others that Dr Sterne was on his way, Frank was still hiccuping on Finn's shoulder and Finn was still studying the shadows.

'Jesus,' he said. 'I can't believe Mama Carretto's gone. First Sibyl and then her. It's like the end of an era. This whole town's falling apart.'

Daniel travelled down to the Bayview hospital with Scott Sterne on one side of him, Norm Kelly on the other and Serenity, Maya and Caro following in the station wagon. For the first few hours Serenity just sat in the waiting room and hung onto her mum's hand, empty-headed apart from the occasional memory, which she always pushed straight out of her head, because she wasn't ready to remember yet.

Then a surgeon came and showed them a set of X-rays and after that Serenity pulled herself together and started conning Caro into letting her see Daniel first. There was nothing she could do for Scott, not any more, but that made it even more important to know that Daniel would be all right. When she walked into the room, he was propped against a stack of pillows, eyelids sagging. She stalled in the doorway, fighting a childish desire to throw herself on the floor and scream. His eyes opened, blank and glassy to start with and then filling up with a familiar Daniel-expression.

'Ren,' he said. 'What are you doing here?'

'Making sure you're okay,' she snapped. 'Looks like you still need a bloody baby-sitter. How could you go and fall off a cliff?'

'Didn't,' he said indignantly. 'Norm Kelly pushed me. Not too hard, luckily, or I might've fallen forward and snapped my neck, but hard enough to -' He stopped and thought for a moment and said, 'Damn, I wasn't going to tell anyone about that. It's the drugs, I guess. The doctors gave me some seriously powerful painkillers. I must be stoned off my face.'

'It suits you,' Serenity said. 'I like you better when you're not totally cool, calm and in control. So why the fuck did Norm Kelly push you off a cliff? Did you catch him trying to hide the gun or something?'

'In control? Me?' Daniel said, a couple of beats behind her. 'Yeah, I was looking for this cave Norm told me about, when I went out to his farm with Lucy. It

must've been his favourite hiding place, because – hang on, how do *you* know about the gun?’

Serenity's eyes shadowed. ‘Long story,’ she said, collapsing onto the chair beside the bed. ‘I'll tell you later, after the drugs have worn off. The main thing is, you survived, no broken bones or anything. Except ...’ She took hold of his hand and started to count the fingers, separating them out and lining them up neatly. ‘Listen, the doctor showed Caro your X-rays and there were half a dozen old breaks, some on your ribs and two fractures in your arm. Who did that to you, Dan? Was it your dad?’

Daniel blinked at her several times, as though he needed to work at keeping the room in focus. ‘My mum, actually,’ he said.

The world lurched. Serenity felt as if someone had grabbed her by the ankles and turned her upside down, although in fact it was only her ideas that had been inverted. She knew women could hit their children, of course, but she had always thought they were heroin-addicted single mums or whatever, not women like Fay Matheson.

While she dangled in mid-air, a memory shook itself loose – one of Marshall's favourite stories about the time when he had been on the childcare roster for a feminist conference and twenty women had come racketing in to collect their kids, high on talk and sisterhood, and one of them had given him a pat on the arse in passing and, just for a moment, he had realised what it was like to be up for grabs. So women could do the same things as guys, if they got the chance: it was just that they didn't get the chance as often as guys. In which case, given a bit more time, the Wolf Guard might have ended up where the militia started ...

‘Oh, Dan,’ she burst out. ‘Why don't you hate me? You really should.’

‘Why?’ he said, puzzled. ‘You're nice.’

‘No, I'm not. I'm a bossy bitch, just like your mum.’

‘Well, Dad never tried to stop her either,’ Daniel pointed out. ‘I'm a great disappointment to them both.’ He giggled and added, ‘Funny, they're a disappointment to me too ... Oh hell, that's the drugs talking again. Don't usually tell that story either.’

He patted the pillows and Serenity went over to lie down beside him, just like when they were kids watching videos together on the couch, although this time she needed to make sure she didn't bump Daniel's back. She yawned and tucked her fist under her chin and let her eyes slide shut, blotting out everything. The darkness inside her skull felt comfortable and cosy - a safe place at last, after the longest, hardest day ever.

Above her head, Daniel's voice murmured, ‘I love you, Ren. Always have. Probably always will.’

Apparently, the drugs were still having an effect. He had said it at last and Serenity had heard it but neither of them had to admit it, which was probably a good thing, given that it wasn't likely to go anywhere. Serenity waited until the last echoes of his voice had been absorbed into the hospital walls and then sat up, to

find that he had dozed off again. That was annoying, because she hadn't finished talking about men and women, and even more annoyingly her father was standing at the end of the bed, splendid in his city suit.

'Oh, good,' he said. 'I thought you were both fast asleep. Can you give this to Daniel when he wakes up? He's the historian of the family and there's a piece of history that I've been keeping to myself but I'm leaving now, so I thought someone else ought to know.'

He held out a long manilla envelope. 'What's that?' Serenity asked, eyeing it dubiously before she took it.

'Some documentation about Lucy Dove's background – or lack of background,' Marshall said. 'I did a bit of research for a story I was planning to write. Lucy's parents moved interstate twenty years ago, when Lucy would've been five, and they died a few months later - some sort of accident with a leaky gas heater. The funny thing is, from the moment she left Lomond, there's no public record of Lucy Dove - no school enrolments, nothing. I suppose she might've been fostered or adopted, in one of those semi-legal arrangements that you could get away with back then, and she could've changed her surname back to Dove just before she came to visit her great-aunt. But –' He broke off, looked at her more closely and said, 'You're not interested in any of this, are you?'

Serenity slapped the envelope onto Daniel's bedside table. 'Not really,' she said. 'Sorry about that, Dad. You would've liked to have a son you could do stuff with, wouldn't you?'

Marshall launched into a muddled rave about (a) being glad to have a daughter and (b) not caring about gender but Serenity didn't bother to listen. When she hitched herself up on the pillows to take a closer look at him, her dad seemed like a big stone statue blocking the doorway or (if she had to compare him to something human) like Rob Sterne, whose handsome regular features always made him look as if he had been sculpted.

'You know that article about New Fathers that you wanted to write?' she said. 'You ought to start by writing something about the old kind of fathers – the ones who drop in every now and then to fuck their kids up, then go back to the office or wherever.'

She was expecting her dad to walk out at that point, so it was almost a shock when he gave her an apologetic smile that turned him back from a stone statue into Marshall Cox.

'I have to leave today,' he said. 'They're sending me down to Victoria for a six-months-later opinion piece about the Bracks government. But I've got time for a coffee before I go. What do you reckon, Ren?'

Serenity pulled a face. 'The hospital coffee's crap,' she said. 'Make it a Coke and you're on.'

They linked arms as they went out, turning sideways to go through the door together. Daniel stirred uneasily and muttered in his sleep but a few seconds later Caro came tiptoeing in to sit with him, which seemed to calm him down again.

The last person in Lomond to see Lucy Dove, this time around, was Han Chung.

When the girl they called Zhou left the group gathered round the dead boy and went across to a narrow dirt track along the river's edge, Han Chung had hurried after her. The other men from the boat were like migrating birds that could only move in a group, following a leader. He knew they would just go on standing and staring until the round-eyes stopped fighting each other and turned on them. Since he didn't want to be around when that happened, it made sense to latch onto the only person who knew the area, wanted to be somewhere else and was going there on foot.

Han Chung had never really felt as though he fitted in, back in his home town, so he had become accustomed to blending into the background. Here he began by opening himself to the contours of the land and the texture of the light, the vacillations of the wind and the shapes of the bushes and trees and grasses. Observing the patterns that those things made together showed him how to move in the way the afternoon shadows moved across the brown earth, as secret and unobserved as the little animals he was beginning to sense in the scrub around him.

The girl Zhou clearly had no idea that anyone was following her, although she might just have been too upset to notice. She talked to herself as she walked - too fast and too English for Han Chung to understand but he felt reasonably sure talking to the empty air meant the same thing here as in China. She tripped and fell and grazed her knee and didn't seem to register the pain but then, when she looked down and saw the blood, she stood and whimpered for a while, before hurrying on. And, as the track took them through a cluster of tall trees, she picked up a fallen branch slammed it into the tree trunk, so hard that it broke in her hand. Then she flung her arms round the tree and pressed her cheek against its smooth silver bark.

'No,' she said. 'No, no, no, no.'

Han Chung recognised "no" because it had been one of the half dozen English words that the men had practised on the boat. He felt ashamed of that now. How arrogant he had been, assuming that English would be easy to learn, because it only had twenty six characters. Already he could see that he would have a lot of work to do, if he wanted to understand and make himself understood by Pin (his first Australian, that extraordinary man who looked like no one else he had ever seen). Han Chung's dreams had a new focus now. He wanted to come back here - after he had made his way to Sydney and found the network of illegal immigrants and earned enough money to pay a lawyer for advice about making himself legal - and see Pin again ...

He glanced up, to check the next stretch of the path, and realised he could no longer see Zhou. They had been following the river for a long time, long enough to taken them from late lunch to early dinner (supposing there had been

anything to eat). Somewhere along the way Han Chung had become lazy and lost track of Zhou. His heart lurched in his chest. When he looked back over his shoulder, he discovered that the track had split in two as it passed between the silver trees.

The half that he had followed continued on beside the river but the other half led up the bank towards a dusty road and a narrow bridge. Zhou was running across the bridge, chest thrust out like a runner making a last effort to finish the race and break the tape. Han Chung climbed the bank and froze, doubly unnerved by the sight of the road stretching back towards the escarpment and the pyramid of rooftops that rose up on the far side of the bridge.

While he and Zhou had been down beside the river, the town seemed to have gradually been closing in around them. Ah well, too late to worry about that now. He looked both ways and went running across the bridge in his turn. There was a giddy moment of feeling as exposed and vulnerable, like a scuttling mouse waiting for an eagle to drop from the sky and carry it off, and then he reached the other side and hid behind a spiky bush dotted with tiny flowers like coils of red wire.

By the time he summoned the courage to raise his head, Zhou was disappearing into a narrow laneway at the base of the pyramid. Han Chung hesitated briefly, summoned more courage and followed her. They climbed the hill together. Zhou panted and groaned and pushed her hands down onto her knees, to keep her legs moving, and Han Chung padded along behind her. He didn't make any effort to hide himself now, because she never looked back.

The houses in this country appeared to have no gates, only high wooden fences. Han Chung was wondering how the people went in and out when Zhou circled around the trunk of an enormous tree and vanished again. He approached the tree cautiously and found that its lower branches were as solid and evenly spaced as a flight of stairs, making it easy to climb from branch to branch.

When he reached the third branch and pushed the glossy leaves aside, he saw Zhou running across the grass, calling, 'Lu Tze, Lu Tze.' Someone's name, he guessed. Someone who might come out of the house at any minute and see him there in the tree and report him to the army or the block surveillance agents or whoever they reported you to in this land. Clearly, it was time to stop following Zhou and turn away and take a different path.

But while his brain was telling his feet to jump down into the lane, his instinct moved him from one branch to the next. He edged along a branch overhanging the fence and lowered himself down onto the grass, hurried past the flower beds and opened a door that Zhou had opened five minutes before. The house was the emptiest place he had ever been in. From the moment he entered, he was aware of a silence so intense that his body sounded as loud as an orchestra, complete with breathy *dizi* pipes and sonorous *tanggu* drums. He tiptoed selfconsciously along a corridor that ran down the middle of the house, expecting someone to come out at any moment and complain about the noise he was making.

The second last door to his right was open. When he looked in, he saw a chair piled with clothes – blue jeans, a t-shirt with English writing, a baseball cap with the same writing and a pair of trainers on the floor below. After seeing the round-eye men by the river, Han Chung knew this was the sort of thing he ought to be wearing, instead of the suit that his con-man cousin had sold him. He couldn't bear the thought of becoming a thief but he couldn't bear to leave the clothes either, so he hovered in the doorway, examining the rest of the room.

When he looked up, Guan Ming was smiling at him from a poster pinned to the wall. There was writing on the poster, the same writing as the t-shirt and the baseball cap. That seemed to solve the problem. Apparently, Guan Ming wanted him to have the clothes and although he still wasn't sure that he believed in her, Han Chung had become accustomed to following her directions. He darted across to the chair and retired behind the door with the bundle of clothes, emerging a few minutes later with a springy stride that was only partly due to the trainers.

The final door at the end of the corridor took him out of the house and a long gravel path steered him through a forest of shaggy bushes and strong-smelling trees to an iron gate. He giggled behind his hand, realising with belated embarrassment that the laneway must have led him past the backs of the houses, which explained why he hadn't come across any gates before. As he let himself out, he saw Zhou halfway down the hill. Although she was limping badly by now, she kept pushing herself on, shading her eyes and checking the road every few minutes. He looked into the dazzle of afternoon sunlight and focused on the person she was following, as far ahead of her as Zhou was from him.

It was Guan Ming, dressed in her traditional white flowing garments. One look at her and Han Chung abandoned all his previous reservations and, in his own way, became a believer. He followed her and Zhou down to the bottom of the hill, where Guan Ming crossed a wider road and led them into a maze of smaller streets. A few people on the porches or in the gardens looked up as the three of them passed, as incurious and accepting as if they were watching a traditional parade – not the kind with firecrackers and dragons but the white clothes and (if Han Chung's internal orchestra counted) sombre music of a funeral procession.

After a while they came to an even wider road with a grass strip down the middle and the statue of a soldier. Guan Ming walked confidently across the road, as if she had been promised that no one would stop her, but Zhou hesitated on the corner of the side street and waited till the road was empty before she crossed. That made Han Chung nervous too. He had been relying on Guan Ming to protect them but maybe her magic was starting to wear off.

He glanced up at the soldier, to give him courage, tugged his cap down and went scurrying across the road, keeping his face turned away from the cars. Although he reached the opposite footpath safely, he felt so flustered that he hurried straight down the next street and up a flight of steps to a high bridge, without checking to see that Zhou was still ahead of him. When he paused for a

moment to look back across the roofs of the town, the height and distance made him feel so light and free that he almost expected to spread his wings and go circling down the thermals

Then he remembered Guan Ming and went hurrying on to the far side of the bridge. As he ran down the steps, he glanced over the railing and realised he had just crossed a railway line. Seconds later, he was standing on a station platform, looking across at the opposite platform, where Guan Ming bloomed against a brown wall like a white orchid in an old clay pot. Zhou came through the entrance and walked over to her.

'Take me with you,' she said.

Han Chung didn't understand her then, of course, but the sound of the words sank in deep enough for him to remember them when someone said the same thing to him a few years later on. At the time, however, he just stood and watched while the sky darkened and a late bird circled over the town, squawking angrily at the night, and the train came travelling towards them from Bayview - a dozen separate squares of yellow light, like the Festival of Lanterns at new year. It left the flat brown plain and pulled into Lomond Station. When it pulled out again, the platform was empty.

Guan Ming and her faithful servant Zhou had gone.

Han Chung threw himself at the steps, ran across the bridge and arrived, minutes too late, at the place where they had been standing. Guan Ming had left him one last gift - a wallet full of Australian money and a piece of card that looked like a traditional lantern riddle but (considering that there were half a dozen others scattered on the ground) was probably a train ticket. There would be no more help: Han Chung knew that and accepted it. He took off his medallion and placed it reverently on the spot where he had last seen Guan Ming.

Then he looked around for somewhere to hide while he waited for the next train, blending unobtrusively into the land he had already learnt to love.

4

SPINNING THE YARN

Sixteen

Out at the farthest edge of the Lomond valley, a desultory waterfall flattened itself against the rock, trickled down the gorge beside the railway line and turned into the Danville River. Halfway between the falls and the road, Daniel Matheson wedged himself into a sitting position at the bottom of a sandstone chimney with his feet stuck straight out in front of him and his buttocks cushioned on empty air. He tested his balance and began to shimmy up the chimney in a series of small repetitive movements, using his hips and ankles as fulcrums.

It was all fairly predictable, because chimney climbing wasn't exactly challenging, but then, being here at all was a challenge in itself. They reckoned that, when you fell off a horse, it was important to get back on as soon as possible and, presumably, the same thing applied when you fell off a cliff. Daniel had been putting it off for weeks but somehow today had seemed like the day, so he had sneaked out here after school, without telling anyone, on a motorbike that he had borrowed from Shane Martin.

He could still remember the moment when Norm Kelly's hand landed between his shoulder blades and sent him hurtling out into nothingness. Okay, he could also remember the moment when a sandstone ridge materialised beneath him, changing his fall from a death-drop into a rollercoaster ride to the ground, but the memory of nothingness remained a lot more powerful. It was an effort to keep on shifting position and wriggling up the chimney, easing himself a bit higher every time, but once he had started something, he liked to finish it. Unless this chimney widened on him like the last one, he wouldn't turn back.

A breeze went past and wiped the sweat from his forehead. A bird called to him from the clouds, a thin emotionless cry, stripped clean by distance. Daniel

decided he felt confident enough to risk a quick glance down at the toy-sized motorbike parked under the cliff, the flat brown plain, looped by a shiny brown ribbon, and Lomond, a golden city dusted with glitter from the afternoon sun. Height brought another kind of perspective, as well. For the first time since he had talked to Norm Kelly in the cave, Daniel took an even bigger risk and let himself think about Lucy Dove.

The beginning of the thought was easy enough. He had read the file that Serenity's dad had left for him and he knew what Marshall intended him to think but maybe Marshall was making a fuss about nothing. Maybe Lucy Dove had moved in with the family next door when her parents died, changed her name, lived in the States for a bit, came back to Lomond and left again: end of story. On the other hand, there was a different way of looking at it, which made things way more complicated. What if Norm Kelly had been telling the literal truth? What if he really *had* killed Lucy in that cave twenty years ago and she had somehow managed to come back again?

As he hoisted himself further up the chimney, Daniel considered the implications of the second option. Suppose you had been abused, even murdered, when you were a little kid, would you want to make all the people in your home town love you, as payback for what you had been through, or would you want to destroy the lot of them, because they had stood back and let it happen? Hard to tell. After all, you could just as easily want both those things at once. Lucy Dove had wanted everyone to love her, for sure, from gun freaks to Trotskyites, from racists to aging hippies.

And she had nearly torn Lomond apart in the process.

Daniel shrugged, grinding his shoulders into the stone. The fact was, no one would ever know the real truth about Lucy. It was buried in the sandstone wall that guarded the Lomond valley. When the ledge collapsed under Norm Kelly, the roof of the cave had folded in on itself, hiding all the evidence deep in the darkness, where no one would be able to uncover it and run tests on it and tell Daniel whether he had found a bunch of dry sticks - or bones left there by the indigenous people of the area - or the bones of a twenty-years-dead girl child.

So, really, there was only one thing left for him to think about while he edged towards the top of the chimney, although that just happened to be the most difficult thing of all. The time when Lucy Dove had said, 'I get the feeling we're linked together.' The way Norm Kelly had kept calling him "son" while they were talking in the cave. Daniel didn't fancy the idea of being linked to either Norm or Lucy but he had to admit there was something about both of them that he had recognised, something in the way they stood or moved or - no, he couldn't define it, apart from saying there was some sort of secret signal that passed between people who had been treated badly when they were kids.

That frightened Daniel, more than anything else that had happened since he had arrived in Lomond. He hated the thought of turning into Norm or even Lucy. He preferred studying wars to starting them. He didn't want to go round hurting everybody else, just because his parents had hurt him. He believed that

the best revenge was living well, so he wanted to do something new and different with his life, instead of getting stuck in -

Ouch.

His shoulders were scraping across a line of pebbles embedded in the sandstone, which meant that the chimney was getting narrower. He was there at last. He had almost reached the top. As he inched towards the chimney's edge, the pebbles raked his newly healed skin, startling a gasp of pain from his lungs, and at the same moment a wind came hurtling across the plateau and buffeted the back of his head. Daniel's knees shook, threatening his balance, and a rush of panic shivered through every muscle in his body. Here it was. The moment of trust. The moment when he was supposed to let go and turn in mid-air and latch onto the edge of the chimney and pull himself up. It would never have been easy but after falling off the cliff, it was fucking terrifying.

Daniel thought he might just take one last look at this bird's eye view of Lomond, before he made his move.

Three months after Lucy Dove had disappeared, Lomond was losing its high gloss look. The paint on the shop fronts was starting to be chipped and scratched and generally dulled by the weather. The forgetmenots and white chrysanthemums round the war memorial had given up the ghost and been replaced by half a dozen hardy all-purpose rosemary bushes. Plastic bags and chip packets flapped idly down the street, wrapping themselves round lamp posts and rubbish bins. Men leaned against the wall of the pub in their singlets, scratching their chests, and women dashed into the supermarket, thongs flapping, tracksuits bagging at the seat. They didn't look as if they thought the whole world was watching them any more.

The Lomond postie, halfway through his thirty-first year on the job, stopped outside Casa Mia and flicked a postcard at Orion Casey like a frisbee. 'Another card from the States,' he called. 'That bloke gets around, all right.'

Orion caught the card, polished it on his sleeve and examined the picture - a photo of the Castro in San Francisco which made it absolutely clear that this was the city's gay district - and then turned it over to read the message on the back: '*Hi, Finn. Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here. Franco.*' He was taking it over to his dad when he felt a dot of heat between his shoulder blades and turned to find his sister staring at him.

Maya didn't say anything. She just stood there, looking like one of those manga girls with big black empty eyes in a pale pointed face, which meant it was one of the bad days. Luckily, their dad knew what to do. He reached her in three strides, swung her off her feet and whirled her round like a toddler, until she started to giggle and hammer at his shoulders.

'Dad!' she yelled. 'You are *so* childish. Put me down!'

Finn dropped her and collapsed onto a stool, coughing and wheezing so badly that Maya ran to fetch him a glass of water. A smart move on his dad's part, Orion thought. When you were feeling wretched, it usually helped to help someone else. Maya watched Finn, to make sure he emptied the glass, and then clasped her hands behind her back.

'Are you still mad at Rae?' she said, not quite casually.

'Now, why would you think that?' said Finn. 'I was never mad at your mum. I just don't feel like I know her any more. I mean, her son almost dies and, instead of hanging round to take extra good care of him, she pisses off to comfort a bloke whose son *has* died. Like I always said, that's bloody weird behaviour.'

Orion grinned. To some extent, Finn was rewriting history. At the time, he had actually assumed that his wife was just giving Rob a crash course in how to deal with grief, because she knew he was one of those typical Aussie blokes who wouldn't recognise a feeling if it jumped up and bit him. Orion felt sorry for his dad, of course, but it was kind of funny that the gossip champion of Lomond had been the last person to realise that Raewyn Casey was having an affair with Rob Sterne.

'So it's cool, me visiting Rae and Rob at ho – at Karma Drive?' Maya was saying.

Finn laughed and ruffled her hair. 'So that's the real worry. Nah, of course it's fine. Drop in on her as much as you like, mate. No need to feel guilty or anything. Okay, I'm still avoiding Rae myself, for the moment anyhow, but I want you to -'

'Yeah, yeah,' Maya cut in. 'I get the message, Dad. You don't need to go on and on.'

She pulled a copy of *Girl* out of her school bag, sat down at the nearest table and disappeared into a world of pop stars, fashion, girltalk and romance. Orion decided it would be safe to make a move now, without running the risk of being sucked into some kind of family drama. He carried the postcard across to Finn, who read the message and taped the card onto the side of the espresso machine, underneath a postcard from the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

'Frank could be a bit more informative,' he commented. 'But he's seeing the world at last. Good luck to him.'

He looked up at the painting on the far wall and Mamma Carretto looked back at him, as tetchy and energetic and interfering and generally alive as she had been back in the days when Finn had first met her. Finn had painted it on the night she died and everyone said it was his best work ever.

'You ought to do more stuff like that,' Orion told him. 'People might even pay you, y'know.'

His dad squirmed. 'Ah, I dunno. I did it for Frank, really. Wish I could've talked him into taking it with him when he left but – oh well, maybe he'll come back for it some day. Hope so. I'd like to have a squiz at the new-look Franco – and, while I'm giving myself three wishes, I'd like to know what happened to that Chinese guy, as well. I never did hear back from any of those government

departments - although it was hard to ask the right questions, when I don't even know his name.'

'And what's your third wish?' Orion asked, mildly curious. 'Money? Sex? Power?'

'Jesus, you've got me there,' Finn said, mildly surprised. 'Can't think of a thing. We're not doing too badly, are we? I mean, you're Bayview Hospital's biggest success story. Maya's still a bit nervy but she's pulling herself together. Rae seems - God knows why - to be happy with Rob. Bethany Sterne's settled in a Bayview condo, joining book groups and working as a volunteer for the Survivors of Domestic Violence phone line. And I'm doing a passable job as a single dad myself.'

He paused to give his son the chance to insert a compliment but Orion had lost interest by then and was already half way up the stairs.

'Don't forget it's your turn to cook dinner tonight,' Finn called after him.

'Yeah, sure,' Orion called back. 'I'll be back in a minute.'

He sat down at the computer, let his hand hover briefly over the link to his favourite science fiction chatline and then clicked on a folder labelled My Novel. There was no need to hurry. When he had turned on the stairs, he had seen Eden Parker approaching The Caff with that familiar I-need-to-talk-to-Frank-I-mean-Finn expression on his face. That would probably keep Finn busy for at least half an hour.

He leaned back and started to read through his plot outline, sighing with pleasure as he scrolled down the page. Opening with a near-death experience was an awesome idea, although unfortunately he would have to get most of the details off someone's website, because he couldn't remember a thing about his own NDE. Even worse, he couldn't remember the genius ending for the novel that he had thought up, on the morning that Tommo and Lockie had clobbered him. Orion could sometimes sense the shape of it at the edge of his brain, just out of reach, and he dreamed about it occasionally but he could never remember the dreams.

Oh well, too bad. Either it would come back eventually or else he would think of something even better.

He stretched and stood up, which took longer than it used to do. While he had been in hospital, he had grown five centimetres, which, as far as he was concerned, had made the whole experience totally worthwhile. Being taller seemed to have had a big effect on Tommo and Lockie (although the guilt-tripping probably helped as well) and working behind the counter of The Caff was teaching Orion how to talk the Lomond talk - 'How's things? Nice day, isn't it? Reckon we've got a chance at the interschool footy championship?' and all that crap. He didn't really understand why his dad had been so keen to take over The Caff but it seemed to be working for all of them.

Although it was still a bit of a shock to look out of his window and see the Lomond main street, instead of gum trees. He leaned against the window frame and studied the street, while he decided what to cook for dinner. In the doorway

of the abandoned picture theatre near the video store, a guy was swinging a girl's hand back and forth, then pulling her into a clinch. A pang pierced the stainless steel defences round Orion's heart. He gave the pang a name - *Jude* - and pressed his hot cheek against the cool glass, wondering where Jude Martin was and what she was doing.

While he had been in hospital, the staff had found out that he and Daniel were friends and moved them into a two-bed ward. One night they had stayed up late, talking by torchlight, and Daniel had shown him Marshall Cox's documents, told him Norm Kelly's story and confessed that he sometimes wondered whether Lucy Dove might have been a ghost. Orion couldn't go along with that. Lucy had eaten pizza and smelt of frangipani perfume and worn cool modern clothes and, as he'd tried to explain to Daniel, ghosts didn't do that sort of thing.

If Daniel had read any s.f. at all, he would have known that Lucy was more like someone from an alternate universe where things had worked out differently. According to that theory, she'd been living the life she might have lived if Norm Kelly hadn't put a stop to it. Orion wasn't sure whether he believed in his own theory but it was interesting, in a spooky sort of way, and it got even more interesting when you applied it to Jude Martin. After all, Jude had disappeared at the same time as Lucy, suggesting that they'd gone together. What's more, the cop investigating Scott's death had wanted to find and interview them both but he'd been unable to trace either of them.

If Lucy Dove really had dropped in from another dimension, where did that leave Jude? Off in Never Never Land with Lucy and the other lost girls? Living on the streets of Sydney or wherever, too freaked out to come home? Or lying dead and broken somewhere under the wheels of a train? It was impossible to guess and, for once in his life, Orion wasn't particularly keen on finding out the facts. Last week, while he had been browsing the Net, he had come across a link to a site called *Dovewatchers.com* but he hadn't clicked on it yet and maybe he never would. Better to go on believing that Jude was out there somewhere, still helping Lucy, still trying to change the world.

He would never forget Jude Martin. Never, ever.

The couple in the doorway of the picture theatre were straining closer, as if they were trying to climb into each other's skin. Orion sighed and repaired the gap in his defences, shut down the computer and went off to make vegetable lasagne.

Matt Fahey heard someone go past, chuckling quietly, and Katie Brewster opened her eyes to see Rocky Abrahams disappearing into the video store. She looked up at Matt, wet-mouthed and gasping.

'Oops,' she said, easing out of the clinch. 'Better take *Phantom Menace* back while I remember. My bloody dad landed me with it when I was leaving the

house. He hasn't played that trick on me for ages. Guess it shows things are back to normal.'

'Uh-huh,' Matt said warily. 'If things are back to normal, does that mean you're going back to your old idea of working on the *Star*? Me personally, I want to get out of this bloody place.'

'Actually, I wouldn't mind sticking around these days,' Katie admitted. 'But hey, we'll be in Sydney or Melbourne or wherever for the next few years, while I'm studying. We can wait and see what happens after that.'

A smile lit up her girl-next-door face, turning her freckles into gold. 'We,' Matt breathed, still in love with the word, and kissed her again, to celebrate.

Katie kissed him back and then dodged the next kiss. 'The video,' she reminded him. 'Now, Matt!'

As they headed into the store, Rocky Abrahams was dumping an armload of videos onto the counter. Arnold Schwarzenegger looked up at them from one of the covers, flexing his muscles; Harrison Ford raised a quizzical eyebrow; Sylvester Stallone glowered and turned his best bruise towards the camera; Keanu Reeves looked gawky but cool and Jackie Chan struck a pose that simultaneously demonstrated his ability as a kung fu master and sent it up.

The kid behind the counter laughed. 'You're really into action movies, aren't you?' he said.

'Been studying heroes lately,' Rocky told him. 'Making a list of hero qualities. Strength. Courage. Endurance. Cracking jokes under pressure. Fighting on against the odds. What's *your* idea of a hero?'

'Dunno,' the kid said. 'The guy who played Superman, he's all right. Like, he had that accident and got stuck in a wheelchair but he hasn't given up.'

Rocky frowned. 'Good point. Thanks for the reminder. I'll add it to my list.' She nodded to Katie and Matt and said, as if they had been part of the conversation all along, 'Enlisted in the army to learn that sort of thing. Tried to teach the Wolf Guard to be brave and strong, as well.'

'Yeah, sure,' Katie said. 'I was there, remember. We thought you knew it all – the real thing, not the Hollywood version. How come you need to watch the movies?'

'Ah, movies can be useful,' said Rocky. 'Lots of images. Helps you to think. Pregnant now. Need to think about what I want to tell my son.'

'Hey!' Matt said, instantly delighted. 'Congratulations, Rocky! I thought you'd decided to wait till Mal got the farm totally set up.'

'Did,' she agreed. 'Waiting for the best time. Changed our minds, though. No such thing. Last six months convinced me of that.' She glanced across at the Action Movie section and added, 'Josh resigned from the gun lobby, y'know. Wants to concentrate on this online group called Future Focus – bunch of people all round the world, trying to work out what's going on and what they can do about it. Makes me feel as if everyone was always braver and stronger than I realised. No need to go round fighting aliens or looking for the Holy Grail. Should all get points just for staying alive.'

A guy hurried in and tossed *Superman III* onto the counter. As Rocky pounced on it, Katie dropped *Phantom Menace* beside it and headed for the door. 'So how many kids are we going to have?' she said over her shoulder

Matt's heart still melted every time she treated him like a responsible adult who could make plans about his own life. He tried for a sensible answer but it ended with the two of them backing into the doorway of the picture theatre again. Some time later he heard someone shouting, 'Get a room.' When he looked round, he saw a bunch of kids from Bayview/Lomond Secondary kicking a football along the median strip.

'Thanks for the advice, Lockie,' he called. 'Remind me not to be there, next time your team's playing.'

Lockie grinned. 'Actually, it was Rita that yelled at you,' he said. 'But she's on the same team, so it comes to the same thing.'

Lockie Conway, Rita Farr, Merian Harper and Tommo Thompson were all on the school footy team this year. For the first time in a decade, Bayview/Lomond Secondary had a really good line-up and the kids couldn't stop practising. While Matt studied their form, Rita caught the ball and sidestepped smartly but Tommo hesitated for a fraction, instead of boring in.

'Hey!' she said. 'No need to go easy on me. Tackle, dude. Tackle me.'

Tommo's boot scuffed the grass. 'Yeah, well,' he mumbled. 'Don't want to hurt you, okay?'

'You won't, if you do it properly,' Merian pointed out. 'Besides, Rita won't break. She's tougher than you think.'

'She can't be,' Tommo said. 'I already think she's mega-tough.'

'Good one,' Rita said, beaming at him. 'Keep that up and we'll be winning the first equal opportunity premiership cup at the end of the season ... Oh bugger, your dad's waving at you. Looks like he needs you in the shop.'

Tommo flinched, then squared his shoulders and turned his back on the butcher's shop. 'My dad can get stuffed,' he said. 'I told him I'd come and help in the cold room at six and he can fucking well wait till then.'

'What's the matter with him, anyway?' said Lockie. 'You'd think he'd be happy, now you're the most unstoppable goalie in the entire history of Lomond.'

'Ah, some people are never happy,' Matt said from the sidelines.

That scored a grateful look from Tommo, seconds before Rita ended the discussion by passing the ball to him. Tommo passed it to Lockie, who ran with it. Eden Parker jumped down from the steps of the war memorial and tried to tackle him but Lockie threw the ball back to Rita. As Merian intercepted it and sped off, Katie reached for Matt's hand and squeezed tight.

'It's like everyone's forgotten Scott already,' she whispered. 'I think I'll be glad to get out. This place has changed way too much.'

Matt leaned forward and watched Merian barrelling along, till Lockie burst through a gap and took the ball from her at top speed. 'It's okay,' he said, recognising a pair of classic Scott Sterne manoeuvres. 'They haven't forgotten. They're just expanding to fill up Scott's space. Hey, I know how that feels. I never

even bothered to fancy you before, because I thought it was Scott for you. Hmm, maybe I *could* handle this new version of Lomond, after all ...'

'Idiot,' Katie said fondly. 'So Scott and I went out for a while – so what? I was never really interested in him ... and he was way more interested in Serenity.'

They'd had this conversation before. Matt still wasn't entirely sure whether he believed her but he was glad she thought it was true, because he wasn't keen on the idea of competing with Scott Sterne, even (or especially) now that Scott was dead. And besides, Katie was smiling at him like she meant it and the footy mob had moved on and no one could see them, apart from Serenity Cox over in the bus shelter, so he pulled her back into the doorway and they started kissing all over again.

'Stop it,' Katie said after a while. 'We were supposed to be at your dad's place fifteen minutes ago, for an early tea before the pub gets busy.'

Matt shrugged. 'I'm in no hurry. The later we get there, the less time Dad can spend going about how things are going really well for him, now he's Doug Sterne's right hand man, and how him and Doug are the only ones who really understand that this country's, like, practically under siege.'

'Hey, you're doing pretty well yourself,' Katie said. 'You've got the job at the Bayview youth centre, a room in a share house down the road and your own car - and you didn't have any of that six months ago. Your dad ought to be really pleased.'

'I don't think he knows how to be pleased,' Matt said. 'Living here doesn't help, either. Let's get out, soon as we can.'

Katie looked at him thoughtfully, adding a few more details to the big reconciliation scene that she had been planning for him and his dad. 'Oh, I don't know,' she said. 'I'm not in *that* much of a hurry.'

They had changed positions again. They did that all the time. It didn't matter. They would sort it out in the end. She grabbed Matt's hand and dragged him across the street, changing course midway to avoid Doug Sterne's Mazda, as it pulled up at the bus stop. Serenity Cox was waiting there, probably because she had stayed on the school bus with Merian and Jacinta, instead of getting off at Happy Valley. (The three of them, plus Katie, were an established girl gang these days.)

Doug leaned out to offer her a lift and she frowned back, obviously trying to refuse. Katie wondered whether to stop and tell Serenity that she might as well give in. For one thing, the bus driver was slacker than ever these days and, unless she was lucky, she might have to wait there for the next hour - and for another thing, once Doug Sterne decided he wanted to do something, he never let up.

As Katie and Matt ran across to the Royal George, hand in hand, and Doug Sterne drove down the main street with Serenity Cox in the passenger seat, the bronze soldier leaned on his bronze rifle, watching from the war memorial. Nothing surprised him. He had seen it all before.

'It's lucky I left the surgery while you were still at the bus stop,' Doug was saying, indulging his favourite habit of stating the obvious. 'With my brother living next door to you these days, I can combine visiting him with giving you a lift. How are your studies going, Serenity – oh, and what about the Wolf Guard? Any plans to take it out onto the streets again in the future?'

'No way,' said Serenity. 'You're the first person to even ask me about it. I think everyone decided the Wolf Guard and the militia were finished after - y'know, Scott.'

Doug looked pleased, which made her wish she had kept her mouth shut. It wasn't his fault that he had automatically stepped into the Lomond electorate's seat on council, after Lucy disappeared, but it hadn't made Serenity like him any better. At least he didn't seem to have any more questions. They travelled across to Happy Valley in silence, with Doug thinking his own thoughts and Serenity trying not to think about Scott. (That was another strike against him. It was the first time she'd had to say Scott's name in weeks.) As the Mazda pulled up outside her house, she leapt out and went racing next door, to warn the others that Doug was on his way.

Rob Sterne was lying on the couch, reading yesterday's paper. 'G'day, Ren,' he said. 'How's things?'

Serenity, who was busy freaking about Doug, just stared at him blankly. It was a tactical error. Rob put the paper down and turned towards her, like a bloodhound following an interesting scent.

'I know how you feel,' he said in the new slow-and-serious voice that he had developed over the last few months. 'I still get pretty depressed myself sometimes - and not just about Scotty, either. There was a hell of a lot of stuff that I'd been bottling up for years, till Rae got on my case. Been seeing this therapist bloke in Bayview - the talking cure, he calls it. It feels good to get things out in the open at last, except that I can't help thinking that if I'd only done it sooner, then Scott ...'

His face shifted and changed. For half a second Serenity was scared that he was about to crack up, right in front of her. Then she realised that his eyes had focussed with the precision of a laser microscope and his mouth was softening into a helplessly adoring curve. Raewyn – no, Raelene now, although most people just called her Rae – was coming in from the kitchen. She looked like every second farmer's wife in Lomond these days, dressed in loose pants and an open-necked shirt with short grey hair brushed back from her tanned face. It suited her better than the hippy image and the matching look of adoration in her eyes suited her as well.

'Thought I heard a car,' she said, hurrying over to Rob, as though they had been separated for hours, not minutes.

‘You did,’ said Serenity. ‘Doug gave me a lift over from Lomond. He wants to talk to you about something.’

As she spoke, Doug Sterne insinuated himself into the gap between her and the door frame and came bustling in. ‘I want to talk about the Sterne property, to be specific,’ he said, without wasting any time on formalities. ‘What are your intentions, Rob? Are you going to sell it or start running it properly? I’ve been giving you a lot of leeway, because I know things haven’t been easy for you lately, but frankly, you’re letting the side down. That’s not good for my reputation. Just remember, when people say “Sterne”, I’m the first person they think of these days.’

Rob said, ‘Hang about’ and Rae said, ‘For Christ’s sake, Doug’ and Serenity stared at him with her mouth open but he didn’t seem to be interested in their reactions. He rubbed his hands together, polishing the palms till they shone, while he considered the next item on his mental agenda.

‘That’s all I want to say to you, Rob,’ he began. ‘But there’s something I need to say to Raewyn, as well. It’s about that ridiculous organisation of Lucy Dove’s. You’ve been keeping it going for the last six months, more or less single-handed, but I’m afraid it’s time someone told you to close it down.’

‘Thanks for the advice – and I’m sorry you had to drive all the way out here for nothing,’ said Rae. ‘I’m not going to stand back and give you a free run at the mayor’s position.’

Doug smiled froggily. ‘Oh, I don’t need any help from you,’ he said. ‘Marie Boyle will be stepping down next week. She has her hands full with the CWA, so she never wanted to be mayor – she only took over for six months, to help us out of a difficult situation. Fisher King and Jane Moondancer are both a bit anxious about the new restrictions relating to the Happy Valley market that I suggested at our last meeting, so I think they’ll cooperate. Harry Walden and the other do-gooder on the council were pretty alarmed by the extremists in GO and the National Party’s new boy wonder is happy to scratch my back, if I’ll scratch his. Oddly enough, Josh Abrahams is the only person I can’t count on but I expect to be elected mayor almost unanimously ... especially after the *Bayview Mirror* publishes the article that young Lisa Walden’s been researching, all about Raewyn Casey’s past history as a member of the Socialist Workers’ Party.’

‘Do what you like,’ Rae said. ‘I honestly don’t care about the council or the mayorship or any of that. I’ll be happy to put in the work to keep GO going, just as long as I know I’m making people think.’

Doug’s smile doubled in size. ‘Good luck with it,’ he said. ‘People aren’t too good at thinking when they’re frightened and I intend to keep turning up the fear levels. When the Asian invasion runs out of steam, I’ll find something else for Lomond to worry about – and if I can find a way to discredit the slogan “Going Overboard”, your whole organisation will collapse. Don’t say I didn’t give you time to close it down of your own accord.’

He turned and walked out but Rae jumped up and followed him onto the verandah, shouting, ‘Piss off, you bastard’ just before the Mazda’s door

slammed. She came back into the room, laughing like a kid who had aimed a water pistol at his least favourite teacher and scored a direct hit.

‘Sorry, Rob,’ she said. ‘I know he’s your brother but I couldn’t resist –’

‘No worries,’ he told her. ‘Just wish I’d been quicker off the mark myself.’

He stood up and kissed her, long and hard. They weren’t exactly Romeo and Juliet, too old and scarred for that, but Serenity liked watching them, all the same, although she refused Rob’s offer of a cuppa and went hurrying home to tell her mother about Doug’s visit. But Caro wasn’t at her computer or out in the patch of winter sun on the verandah. Serenity was left alone with her thoughts, which weren’t very good company. They kept circling the inside of her skull like vultures, ready to rip shreds off everything she used to believe in.

You could know that everyone had to die and yet you could still believe you would live forever, until somebody died in front of you. No, worse than that. Until you looked at a person and there they were, fizzing with life, and then you looked away for a second - just one second, that’s all it took - and when you looked back, the person was gone. Over. Finished. Done with. Never again, no matter what you thought about it and how many tears you cried, which made you realise just how fragile and breakable and transitory everybody was.

How easy it would be to lose all the people you loved.

A car door slammed out in the street. Seconds later, the glass doors between the lounge room and the verandah hissed along their tracks and slid open. Serenity jumped up and hurtled into her mother’s arms, butted her head against her pillowy breasts and held on tight. Caro stroked her hair while she sniffed and whimpered.

‘Scott?’ she asked and Serenity nodded. ‘Okay, fair enough - but make sure you don’t get stuck in that groove. Like it says on the war memorial, “They shall grow not old, as we who are left grow old.” Scott’s going to stay young and tall and handsome forever. Don’t let that stop you from getting on with the rest of your life.’

Serenity examined the silver-framed photo of Scott that she kept on a shelf at the front of her brain and realised that, in a way, it did look a bit like the bronze soldier on the memorial. She searched her pockets, found a tissue and blew her nose.

‘You’re pretty smart for an oldie,’ she said. ‘I guess I’m kind of lucky.’ (Luckier than Jude or Daniel, for instance.) ‘Does that mean I have to be grateful for having you as a mum?’

‘No!’ Caro said, looking alarmed. ‘I can’t stand the idea of a grateful kid. We’re Australians, Serenity. Australians don’t go round saying, “I love you, Mom,” “I love you, honey,” like a family sitcom. We’re meant to be laconic and emotionally inarticulate, thank Christ.’

‘So I can keep on arguing with you?’ Serenity asked in a baby voice.

‘Bound to,’ said her mum. ‘Your hormones are gearing up at the same time as mine are gearing down, which is a recipe for trouble – but never mind, I

reckon we'll still like each other when we come out the other side. What do you reckon?'

'Reckon we might,' Serenity agreed. Then her eyes glistened like chocolate in a department store display case and she added, half teasing and half truthful, 'I love you, Mom.'

Caro swatted her. 'I love you too, honey,' she said in a bad imitation of an American accent, as she turned to go inside.

'Oh, by the way,' Serenity said supercasually, 'have you heard anything about what happened at the inquest this afternoon? I forgot to ask Rae and Rob.' When Caro made a humming noise, meaning yes, she braced herself and said, 'Okay, how was Scott killed, exactly?'

'Do you really want to know?' Caro asked and Serenity hummed back. She sighed and said, 'All right, then. Apparently, Scott would've died from the head wound, if the shot hadn't killed him, and vice versa. The coroner brought in a verdict of "murder by persons unknown" and I get the feeling Lomond's happy to leave it that way.'

The glass doors hissed shut behind her. The sun balanced on the edge of a cloud and then toppled over, like a kid collapsing onto the white woolly blanket in a cot. Serenity stood up and went to stand at the edge of the verandah, rolling her foot back and forth, the way she had rolled Jude's silver-grey stick underfoot, before kicking it into the river and destroying the evidence.

She propped her elbows on the verandah rail and looked down into the Martins' backyard, as if, against all the odds, she still hoped to see Scott and Jude standing there, side by side: brother and sister. For a moment she longed to call them back but she wasn't sure what she would say to either of them if she had the chance, so in the end she pushed the memory-photos into a back corner of her brain, next to her memories of the Wolf Guard. There would be time to think about all of that later on, when it was less raw, when she was older and smarter, like Caro.

And in the meantime, a dark earthy smell, seeping out through the doors, indicated that her mum was making coffee in the espresso machine. Serenity yawned and stretched, sighed at the sun and went back into the lounge, to try and scam a cup.

Some kids liked building cubbyhouses but Brittany Martin didn't get the point of shutting yourself into a box, even if you had made it yourself. She preferred to climb the tower of tyres in her front yard. It was better to be up high in the air, keeping tabs on everything. Right now, she could see her dad levering at the worn-down heel on his work boot, swearing even harder than usual when the knife slipped, with Apeman on stand-by holding a hammer and nails, like a nurse in that hospital programme on telly.

Britt's dad could fix anything. He was famous for it. Mr Sterne had told Mrs Kelly so.

'Shane Martin could mend a dud tractor and keep it running for a year, with nothing more than two paperclips and a rubber band': that was what Mr Sterne had said.

Apeman's crazy German Shepherd went pounding across to the house, chasing a fly or whatever. When Britt turned to see out whether the stupid dog had actually caught anything, she noticed her mum in the front room with Anakin, sorting through a pile of bills. Bills with red writing on them were the bad ones. There were a lot of them today and Shelley was frowning so hard that her nose wrinkled. Watching Shelley made Britt feel warm and fierce, deep down inside. Mums were supposed to look after kids but she often wanted to look after her mum. It wasn't easy, because she was still only small, but Nanna often said, 'There's a lot of thinking going on inside that little head' and Nanna was right, as usual.

High on her tower, Britt was thinking up a storm. She picked another scab off her knee and studied the pink stretched skin underneath, while she thought about the most interesting thing that had happened that week – Mrs Casey dropping in on Monday with Mr Sterne, who was living with her now. Apeman had tried to set his dog on them and her sister Shana had bitten Mr Sterne's leg before Mrs Casey managed to lure Shana and the German shepherd out into the yard, to play ball, buying Mr Sterne time to have a word with Britt's dad.

'Before you get stuck into me, Shane, just let me say I'm here to apologise,' he had said. 'I missed my chance with Jude but I want to set things right with Shelley. Here's the plan. First off, I'd like to settle some of the money from the sale of my property on your kids, for their education. And secondly, I had a talk with Valda Kelly, Norm's widow, and there's a place for the Martins on the Kelly property, if you're interested.'

Britt lowered her bum into the hollow of the topmost tyre in the tower, letting her arms and legs dangle over the edge as if she was floating in a pool. She gazed up at the chlorine-blue sky, humming the theme tune from *The Simpsons* and watching her latest collection of ideas settle into place. Yeah, got it. Now she knew why Dad was swearing and Mum was frowning. They didn't trust Rob. They reckoned he was having them on. That was why Shane kept going, 'I'm not letting Rob Sterne pay you off, like you were a working girl or something.'

And that was why Shelley kept going, 'Don't worry, I've never taken nothing from no one and I'm not starting now.'

But it wasn't as simple as that, because the two of them couldn't leave it alone. Next minute her mum was, like, 'If we could've helped Jude with her school stuff, maybe she wouldn't've taken off like that' and her dad was, like, 'Valda Kelly's all right, y'know. She could make a go of that property, now she's got rid of that old bugger Norm.'

So there would be something for Britt to work on, if she decided it was worth the work. Floating on her tyre, she thought about Mrs Kelly and the farm. It would

take a fair bit of pushing to get Mum and Dad out there. They weren't great at staying in one place and keeping regular hours, which was what most people seemed to want you to do. On the other hand, Britt liked farms and she reckoned the Kelly farm would suit Shane and Shelley, once they got used to it. Plus it would be good for Shana and Anakin as well.

That seemed to settle things. Britt spat on her lucky medallion and polished it with a corner of her t-shirt, while she tried to decide on the best way to go about things. The medallion was small and silver, with a picture of a lady in a floaty dress. Shane had picked it up on the station platform, the night he had gone there looking for Jude, so it sometimes reminded Britt of her sister. This was one of the times, and plus the medallion seemed to have helped with her decision too, because everything seemed pretty clear now.

Next time there was nobody around, she would ring Nanna and tell her the news. It would be easy to get Nanna on side and between the two of them they could talk her folks into moving out to the Kelly farm, easy as. She smiled contentedly and sat up straight, to get a better view from the tower. Everyone used to say how smart Jude was but Britt was smarter. Jude had never really figured Mum and Dad out. She couldn't stop wanting them to be different, which was a waste of time. Shelley and Shane were fine the way they were. You just needed to know how to handle them.

Britt could handle them.

As a matter of fact, as she looked out across the wide brown land between her house and the escarpment, she had a feeling that she could handle just about anything that came her way.

And out on the escarpment, at the top of a narrow chimney, Daniel Matheson balanced precariously over a long drop into nothingness with his heart beating harder than it had ever beaten in his life. He hung there for a while, wondering whether he was up to it, wondering whether he could bear to turn around and climb down again, without having tried to get what he had come for. Then, before he had a chance to ask himself any more questions, he let his feet drop down, twisted in midair, grabbed the edge and pulled himself up to safety.

Ha. Fooled you that time, Death. Can't catch me.

He sprawled forward and lay full length on the warm stone, enjoying the sensation of being alive. Eventually he raised his head and looked back the way he had come. Wide brown plain, glossy brown river, Lomond shimmering like a mirage and the Pacific Ocean expanding outwards in silverblue ripples, reaching out from the coastline to the horizon and then continuing on, right across the planet.

Yes, that was it, all right. That's why he was here.

He could see everything.

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