

CENTRAL QUARTET 4

Sundogs

JENNY PAUSACKER

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For B and K and BK - and thanks to Gareth as well.

sundog /sʌndɒg/, *n.* a small or incomplete rainbow

ONE

RHETT AND ZAN

The first time Zan O'Connell saw Rhett Foley, he was standing on the edge of a cliff, staring at the sea. Just a small black speck in the distance. She glanced at it and kept walking, feet scuffing the sand, leaving a deliberately messy trail.

Beside her, waves slopped like half-set grey jelly, sliced into long thin strips by a knife-sharp wind. Above her, dark grey clouds were smothering the pale grey sky. Gulls surfed the thermals, spiralling down towards the small black speck. As she got closer, she realised the speck was a person. A guy-type person. A guy round about her own age.

That was a change. Zan hadn't seen many guys under seventy for the last few days, so she paused beside a handy rock pool and looked up at him. The cliff made her giddy. She had to blink wind-tears from her eyes before she could focus on baggy black pants, black t-shirt, black jacket, black hair pushed back from a broad forehead. Hands deep in his pockets, as though they were anchoring him. Chin lifted, eyes measuring the horizon.

The wind puffed his jacket out like a black sail and flicked strands of hair across his cheeks but he stood as still as a cast iron statue, a monument to the Unknown Caffè Latte Drinker.

Zan thought: *What a poser.*

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The first time Rhett Foley saw Zan O'Connell, she was in the Bayside bookshop, being kind to an old lady. Definitely a city kid on holiday, because she was wearing the standard inner city girls' uniform for that year: retro shirt over retro mini-skirt over retro flares. But the skirt had been carefully ironed and all the colours matched and her brown hair shone like an ad for

somebody's shampoo, which meant she was a nice girl. A good girl. Not Rhett's type at all.

As his stare brushed across her back, her shoulder blades twitched. She edged closer to the old lady and pulled another book from the shelf.

Then, before Rhett's stare could move on, she turned and looked at him and through him. It wasn't personal, although it felt that way at first. When he checked, Rhett could tell she hadn't even registered him. Diamond cuts glass, he'd read somewhere, and this girl's diamond eyes wanted to slice a piece out of the shop window, so she could scramble through the hole and run for it, heels striking sparks off the highway. Not a good girl, after all, but one of the wild girls.

He was stepping forward to say, 'Take me with you,' when she changed again, turning away and bending over the old lady and starting to read the book's back cover out loud in a kind, patient voice.

Rhett thought: *Nah, I'm making things too complicated, as usual. She's a good girl.*

*

The next time Zan saw Rhett, he was back on the cliff. Rocks and sea below him, wind and sun above him. Still in black, still a poser ... but there was something about him that got to her. He looked the way she felt and Zan hated him for that. Hadn't anybody ever told him that if you let people know you're miserable, you're practically begging them to have a go at you? Like chooks in a chook yard, pecking the weakest hen to death.

But the guy on the cliff didn't seem to give a stuff about the pecking order. He just stood there, out on the edge where everyone could see him, like a black hole sucking in misery. Zan hated that too. He'd probably say she should've acted the same way when the kids at Central Secondary went for her, which showed how much he knew.

Maybe guys could get away with being posers but if you were a girl, you had to watch what people thought. Not that it made much difference in the long run. They'd gone ahead and done her over, just the same. Zan whimpered and started telling herself the whole story for the hundredth time, to see if she could make it end some other way. Forget about the guy on the cliff. She had enough problems of her own.

Zan thought: *Besides, I'll never see him again.*

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The next time Rhett saw Zan, she was talking to his sister Solange, out at the end of the pier, heads together, tugging chips from a white paper bundle.

Rhett paused on his way to the cliff and took a second look. Solo collected rejects, being a reject herself, but this girl seemed remarkably normal. An ordinary human being, not a hippo like Solo. (His little sister - what a joke. Nothing little about Solange Foley.)

Rhett admired the girl's bright-dark hair and the way she was standing, one foot turned in towards the other, hip tilted sideways, lifting neat round breasts. He decided he might even go over and say hi. Why not? It'd be something to do. He was halfway across the gap between them, when the girl lifted her head and looked back at the road, sighing like a stranded hitchhiker, eyes pale and hard as diamond studs.

The girl from the bookshop, Rhett recognised her now. He veered away from the steps to the pier (quickly, before Solo spotted him), even though it meant he'd have to walk along the beach and get sand in his trainers. Rhett didn't like sand. Didn't like the sea in autumn. Didn't like being dragged down here for a family holiday that was obviously supposed to be good for him, when he just wanted everyone to leave him alone. Didn't like the look of Solo's new friend, either.

He thought: *She's trouble. I can always tell.*

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The first time Zan met Rhett was outside the ice-cream parlour. She was waving a chocolate cone and saying something to Solo over her shoulder when she bumped into him. Literally. One minute her mouth was oozing warm juice, getting ready for the comforting taste of chocolate. Next minute the cone was crumpling in her hand and the ice-cream was a brown blob stuck to someone's black t-shirt.

Zan laughed but the t-shirt owner didn't join in, so she watched the blob slide slowly down and splatter on the footpath, while she stammered, 'Uh, sorry about that.'

The t-shirt owner said, 'Shit happens.'

And it was true. Zan's comforting chocolate icecream looked like a dog turd now. She stared at it and muttered, 'Yeah, I bet you make it happen,' which was the wrongest possible thing she could've said. But, of course, she didn't know that then, so she wasn't expecting the t-shirt owner to step around her and walk away, just when she was gearing up for a fight. As she watched the black rectangle of his back disappearing down the street, Zan realised she'd splattered the guy from the cliff.

She thought: *Right, I knew I hated him.*

*

The first time Rhett met Zan was at the postcard rack in front of the newsagents. Solo gave the rack a shove and made it spin so fast that a waterfall view flicked out of the hands of the old lady from the bookshop and went fluttering to the ground. The old lady bent forward, joints creaking. Rhett's stepmother Jeanette hurried over, babbling, 'Oh no, please! Let me do that!' She whisked the postcard off the footpath, scraping parallel lines across its glossy surface, and presented it to the old lady.

Peered over the old lady's shoulder and said, 'Oh! It's Zan, isn't it? Zan O'Connell! You came to our house once, to bring Solange a history assignment.'

Zan O'Connell? As Rhett's stomach lurched, the girl from the bookshop - the girl who'd been talking to Solo on the pier - said, 'Hi, Mrs Foley. I can't believe you remember me.'

Rhett could believe it, no problem. Jeanette remembered everything. People's birthdays, the name and age of every kid in her street, the girl he'd gone out with two years ago, the food he wouldn't eat when he was fifteen - and it'd probably take an Act of Parliament or an ad on the front page of the paper to convince her that he actually liked curry these days. Jeanette lived in a world where facts ruled, okay?

She was having a great time now. Finding out that the old lady was Zan's grandmother (called Mrs Hartwell, not Mrs O'Connell, because she was Zan's mother's mother, which was Jeanette's idea of world-shatteringly fascinating information). Introducing Zan and Nan to her darling husband, Greg, and her adorable little boy, Tate, and her lovely grown-up children, Rhett and Solange - well, stepchildren, really, but she thought of them as her own children.

The old lady squeezed her wrinkles into a vague, polite smile that said she was too old to waste time memorising a bunch of strangers. Tate said, 'Mum, you tore that lady's postcards.' Rhett's dad told everyone within a radius of three metres that he was pleased to meet them. Zan and Solo rolled their eyes at each other, going 'Adults' in girl code.

And Rhett started to back off, like someone who'd spotted a mysterious brown paper parcel on a bench in a war zone, hoping to get away before it exploded. He thought he was trying to escape from the inevitable story about how Jeanette met his dad at a singles party and fell in love with his two wonderful children. But it was worse than that.

'O'Connell!' Jeanette exclaimed, still chasing facts. 'I wonder if you're related to - No. No, probably not.'

She meant Mick, of course, and she'd snapped her mouth shut because Mick was dead, which meant that no one was allowed to mention him any more. Rhett's stomach lurched even harder. It was the going-down-in-a-lift feeling again - an express lift this time. Around him, the others had all started talking at once to cover up Jeanette's latest mistake. The Zan-girl and her

grandmother didn't even know what they were covering up but they could tell something was wrong, so they were joining in. Rhett could see that, although he couldn't actually hear any of their words.

He was falling so fast that his ears were ringing and, at the same time, in a parallel universe, he was still standing next to the postcard rack in front of the newsagency. He grabbed hold of the rack to steady himself and spilt more postcards across the footpath. The Zan-girl pounced, lifting the postcards carefully. ('See, *she* didn't hurt them,' Tate said to Jeanette.) She leaned past Rhett and tucked the cards into their slot.

'Are you okay?' she asked, arm brushing against his arm.

Stupid question. What would she do if he said 'No'? Unbutton her retro shirt and let him rest his head on those neat round breasts, until the lift stopped? Rhett didn't think so. It was just another of those meaningless things people said. Amazing how meaningless everything was, once you started looking for meanings.

'Is anybody okay?' he said, turning it back on her. 'Are *you* okay, Zan O'Connell?'

The girl with Mick's name opened her eyes wide, as if he'd kicked her and she was trying not to show how much it hurt. Well, at least that was real, more real than Jeanette's babble. Rhett focussed on Zan's diamond eyes and felt the lift hit bottom, shudder and settle. As he stepped out of his parallel universe, back into the everyday world, he heard Jeanette babbling, 'What a coincidence! We'd just decided to go on the waterfall walk tomorrow. Why don't you and Zan come with us, Mrs Hartwell?'

Rhett thought: *Trouble's following me around. As usual.*

*

Zan woke up early next morning, which proved she must've gone to sleep in the end. Her grandmother was still snoring like a goods train: *rattle clunk hoot rattle-rattle-rattle*. Zan couldn't stand it any longer. Well, she hadn't been able to stand it all night but she could do something about it now - like sliding out of bed and wriggling into yesterday's clothes, writing 'Gone for a walk' on the back of Nan's bridge score-sheet and tiptoeing out into the corridor.

A floorboard creaked under her feet and the snoring stopped. Zan froze, fingernails digging into her palms. Then the snores revved up - *rattle clunk hoot rattle-rattle-rattle* - and Zan let herself start breathing again. Even after she eased the door shut, she could still hear the rattles and clunks. Gross. As gross as Nan's thick woollen singlet and the wormy purple veins on her legs and her false teeth in the glass on the basin. Normally, none of those things mattered but normally, she wasn't sharing a room with Nan. Right now, they were driving her crazy.

The guest house was magically silent and empty. A distant clatter of plates from the kitchen but that was all. Zan glided along the corridor and down the main staircase, pretending she was wearing a long, white, swirly muslin dress. She skated across polished boards, swirling faster, and heaved the front door open. The sunshine stung her eyes. She threw her arms wide open and filled her lungs with cold, clean air.

‘Another early bird,’ croaked an old voice. ‘Thought I was the only one up and about. You don’t sleep too well when you get to my age, so I like sitting out on the verandah and watching the sun rise.’

Zan’s arms dropped so fast that they banged against her hips. So much for getting away from the oldies. ‘Good morning, Mr Morell,’ she said, fists clenching behind her back. ‘Just going for a walk before breakfast.’

‘Wish I had your energy,’ the old bloke said contentedly. ‘You’re a real tonic, Suzanne. Bring a bit of life into this place. Your nanna’s been worrying herself sick, what with your mum being stranded overseas and all, but you cheer her up no end.’

Zan’s smile came unstuck. She said ‘Yeah, well’ and ‘See you later’ and bolted. Feet pounding the footpath, arms pumping, lungs stretching as she gasped for breath, but she didn’t stop till her heel hit a crack and twisted, flinging her against somebody’s front fence. She hung onto their letter box and watched the morning spin in giddy circles around her, with Mr Morell’s creased, puzzled face reflected across the whirlpool.

So now there was one more person in the world who reckoned she’d gone mental. Like that guy yesterday, Solo’s brother, going, ‘Are *you* okay, Zan O’Connell?’ just when she thought she’d been acting normal for a change. Some hope. Her idea of normal seemed to have missed a road sign and got lost, round about the start of the year.

For example, Zan would’ve said it was normal to feel freaked if your mum and stepdad went off on the honeymoon they’d never had and your stepdad had a stroke on the Bridge of Sighs in Venice and they rushed him to a hospital but things kept going wrong and four months later he still wasn’t allowed to get on a plane, which meant you were left here all alone. But according to Mr Morell, Nan was supposed to freak and Zan was supposed to cheer her up. So who was supposed to cheer Zan up?

No one, that’s who.

A car whizzed past, five centimetres away from her toes. Zan blinked and realised she wasn’t leaning on the letter box any more. Somehow she’d managed to walk all the way down to the corner of the main road, without even noticing. Maybe she *was* going crazy, just like Mr Morell and Solo’s brother thought. In which case, she might as well get some fun out of it. Zan pulled a crazy face and went dancing across the road, between two more cars speeding in opposite directions. Sand crunched under her soles. She pulled

off her shoes and ran barefoot to the sea's edge, yelling, 'Crazy, crazy, crazy' into the wind.

The sky was pearly grey, like the inside of an oyster shell. Waves rolled in steadily, broke and spread, leaving a silvery gloss of water that mirrored the sky and the clouds. Zan walked across the mirror's surface, sand massaging the pads of her toes, wind rummaging through her hair and massaging her scalp.

Sea spray hazed the air, too early for the sun to steam it away. It blurred the morning into misty watercolours, although for some reason the hills behind the beach looked greener than they looked at midday. Bright green paddocks and dark green patches of gum trees folded together into a repeating pattern of valleys and ridges. A green wall, shutting out the rest of the world. Zan smiled and turned her head and let her eyes go exploring across the bumpy grey-green sea.

As she searched for the horizon line, a wave lifted itself up a few metres from the shore, already higher than the other waves, swelling till it became impossibly tall. For a second it hung there, glassy green, marbled with swirls of sunshine, solid as an iceberg, transparent as bushfire flames. Perfect. Zan stopped and stared. Her heart swelled like the wave, impossibly full of feeling. She arched her back and jutted her chin, shaping her body into the wave's shape, imitating its new-moon curve. Then the mass of water toppled and smashed into a million fragments of foam.

Zan thought: *No, don't. Please. I was happy.*

The minute she thought about being happy, all her muscles clenched. She checked the time and hurried back along the beach, watching out for another perfect wave. But the first wave was too small and the second wave was murky with sand stirred up by the wave ahead and none of the waves that followed had the same gravity-defying height or the same smooth curve, like a protective arm settling round her shoulders.

It was typical. Happiness never lasted. Zan had been happy living with Mum and Barry in their big new house up in the hills around the city, just like she'd been happy at Central Secondary College to begin with. Why did things always have to change? When had the kids at Central started hating her?

Zan shivered and rubbed her arms. She turned away from the water and went plodding up to the road, telling herself the whole story for the hundred and first time, to see whether she could make it turn out some other way.

When she opened the door of room 23 in the Seaview guest house, Nan was doing up the last button on her grey jacket. 'Did you ask at the desk to see if there was a call from your mum?' she said straight away.

Zan felt like a bad daughter. 'Forgot,' she mumbled. 'Why can't they have phones in the rooms, anyhow?'

'Because this isn't a swish new hotel, like the ones in the main street. It's

still the same as when your grandfather and I used to come here, year in and year out. Although heaven only knows how much longer this place can keep going, now Bayside's got so popular. They could pull the Seaview down and build a big concrete tower and make a mint, you know. Every time I come back, I always think it'll be the last time.'

That was a sad idea but Nan didn't look sad. She twitched her woollen jacket into place and headed for the door, strutting like a plump grey pigeon. Pigeons thought about food all the time and so did old people, as far as Zan could tell. Breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner, and a biscuit with their last cup of tea for supper. It made her stomach churn, just thinking about it.

Her stomach churned even faster when she sat down in front of a white plate crowded with baked beans, bacon, wrinkled tomatoes and two poached eggs, like a pair of cataract-filmed eyes. Zan stabbed the eggs with her fork and gagged. She couldn't eat another Seaview breakfast, couldn't couldn't couldn't. This time she was definitely going to tell the oldies that she only ever had a bowl of muesli in the morning.

But while she was practising her lines, Mr Morell said, 'Just the stuff for a growing girl,' and Mrs Cage said, 'That'll put the roses in your cheeks,' and her grandmother said, 'Eat it up for your nanna,' as if Zan was still four years old.

So she ate it up. For her nanna.

After breakfast they sat in a line on the verandah: Zan and Nan and Mrs Cage squashed together on an old wooden couch, Mr Morell in a wobbly wicker chair that creaked every time he breathed. The Seaview guest house didn't have a sea view any more. You could only see the backs of the big hotels on the main street, so they looked at the hills instead.

Nan told the others that the Foleys were taking them on the waterfall walk that afternoon and they got into a long rave about how back in the old days there was only a narrow rabbit track leading down to the falls, a real adventure, not like all those walkways the council had built over the last ten years, although, mind you, they'd done a good job. Zan tuned out and watched splotches of autumn sunshine rippling across the hills as the clouds moved. Her stomach heaved like a washing machine in rinse cycle and she squeezed her buttocks tight, trying not to fart.

Then something happened. Zan could tell even though she wasn't watching, because all the oldies swung their heads round like cows in a paddock. She peered down the street and saw an old woman marching towards the guest house, towing a suitcase.

'Peggy,' Nan said happily and then to Zan, 'Go on, you lazy lump. Get up and help her with that case.'

Zan's breakfast-drugged brain had to send separate messages to her

arms and legs before she could push herself off the couch. She stumbled down the steps, paused at the gate to let the fart out and went hurrying over to meet Peggy Molloy.

Peggy was her favourite member of the oldies gang. She was different from the others - she'd never married, although Nan said she'd had lots of 'gentlemen callers', and she'd been the secretary in the physics department at the university for thirty years, until the uni stopped having secretaries and switched over to computers. The gang used to feel sorry for Peggy, because she was on her own. But now Grandad and Mrs Morell were dead and Mr Cage was a geriatric baby in nappies, parked in front of the TV all day, so Peggy probably felt sorry for Nan and Mr Morell and Mrs Cage.

Zan gave her a hug and wrestled the suitcase from her. As she tucked her fingers through its plastic loop, the case tried to run away down the street. 'Jesus, it's heavy,' she said, startled. 'What've you got in here? Bricks?'

'Books,' Peggy told her. 'I'm planning to sit on the verandah and read for a week. That's all I'm good for these days.'

'Oh, crap. I bet you're still running round to a zillion meetings, same as always.'

'No, I've had to slow down. Truly, Zan. I just go to my yoga class once a week - and the East Timor coalition, of course - and the book club once a month and my residents' action group. But that's all, apart from learning Vietnamese at the community centre - oh, and a watercolour class as well. I've got my paints in the suitcase.'

'That explains it. You're lucky you haven't ripped your arms out of their sockets.'

'Good weight training,' Peggy said. 'I'm going to have wonderful biceps, like the girls in that new pop group.'

Zan giggled, looking at Peggy (tall, gaunt, grey, a smudge of mauve lipstick, slacks and cardigan) and seeing B Complex (tanned, taut, gloss-red lipstick, rainbow hair, minis and midriff tops). She paused to flex her wrists and then started to bump the case up the steps. The guest house loomed over her, balanced uncomfortably on the hillside, as if a good hard shove could send it sliding off its foundations, down the street and into the sea.

The last time ... was that what Peggy was thinking now? Probably not, because she was already climbing the steps and waving to the others, so Zan thought it for her. *The last time*. Tears blinded her eyes and plugged up her sinuses. Crying over a dying guest house: stupid, crazy. She gritted her teeth and jerked the suitcase onto the first step. Its back wheels creaked and whirred, spinning crazily in mid air.

By the time she'd lugged the case onto the verandah, Peggy was wedged between Nan and Mrs Cage, so Zan went off to find another chair. Her wrists ached but the rest of her felt better than before, partly from the exercise, partly

from seeing Peggy. She listened to the oldies teasing each other and joked along with them. ('Off to Vietnam after this, Peg? What's wrong with Australia?' 'Don't get me started.' 'You think too much, Miss Molloy. You need a man to look after.' 'Are you offering, Fred?')

But then Peggy said, 'How's things?' and they all started describing their symptoms - Nan's arthritis, Mrs Cage's bladder problems, Mr Cage's bowel cancer and Alzheimers, Mr Morell's Parkinsons, Peggy's diabetes. Piss, shit and death, that's what they were talking about. Zan's stomach went back into rinse cycle. She sat and churned for five minutes, then muttered, 'Back in a sec,' and made a dash for the downstairs toilet.

It didn't help. Three days of bacon and eggs and roast lamb and potatoes and puddings were jammed inside her, packed so tight that it would've taken dynamite to blast them out. So Zan cried instead, elbows propped on her knees, tears dribbling down the sides of her nose.

Barry. All that sick-talk made her think about Barry. Her stepdad was in an English hospital now, which at least meant that her mum could understand what the doctors were saying. But he kept getting worse, not better. First the stroke and the coma, then they put something called a shunt into his brain, and now the brain tissue had got infected. He couldn't come home yet. He couldn't even talk to her on the phone.

Zan thought: *He could still die.*

She sobbed and burped and laughed at herself. That gave her enough energy to propel herself out of the toilet and back to the verandah, where Nan was saying, '... might go and have a lie-down before lunch, seeing we'll be going out this arvo.'

'Yes, you do look poorly,' Mrs Cage said approvingly. (Mrs Cage loved symptoms.) 'It's the strain, I expect, worrying about your Sandra and that poor husband of hers. Still, I'm glad Peggy talked you into coming down here. The sea air'll do you the world of good.'

'And a lovely granddaughter to take care of you,' Mr Morell added. 'She's a real tonic for us all. Brings a bit of life into this old place.'

He looked at Zan and smiled. Mrs Cage looked at Zan and smiled. Peggy looked at Zan and smiled. Then they all turned to look at Nan, struggling out of the cushions, one hand shoving at her hip joint to make it work. A few seconds too late, Zan realised that the oldies weren't congratulating her on being an ace granddaughter, after all.

She thought: *Emotional blackmail. They reckon it's my job to haul Nan up from the couch and help her back to our room.*

*

Zan can tell what will happen, if she gives in. Nan will climb the stairs so

slowly that Zan could run rings around her to pass the time. She'll sit down on the end of her bed and gaze at Zan like a cocker spaniel begging for a walk, only Nan's eyes will be begging Zan to read to her. When Zan picks up the book, Nan will say, 'Your pop used to read to me every night.' While Zan finds the right page, she'll say, 'I was born on the same day as that girl, you know.' And when Zan starts reading, Nan will flop back on the bed and fold her hands over her stomach and fall asleep, except that she'll wake up every time Zan pauses for half a second and say, 'Just one more page,' in a pathetic, last-time, old lady voice.

Zan's not going to end up like that. She'll never let herself get so old that she has symptoms and keeps repeating herself. It needn't be a problem, though. After all, Anne Frank might've been born in the same year as Nan but she was dead before she got to be Zan's age.

The Diary of Anne Frank. Why did Nan have to pick that sad, sad book? Zan had heard the name, of course, but somehow she thought it was just one of those old stories like *Jane Eyre* or *Little Women*. If she'd realised what she was in for, she would never have let Nan buy it. Too late now. She sat up for most of her first night at Seaview, after she found out that Nan snored like a goods train, speeding right through to the end of the book.

So even while she's reading the early parts where Anne's chatting about the kids at her school, then moving into the Secret Annexe to hide from the Nazis, Zan knows that in the end the Nazis are going to find them and send Anne to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where she'll die. Bad enough if it had just been one of those old stories. Even worse, knowing that it's all true.

How can Zan feel bad about being stuck in a guest house with the oldies for a week, when Anne was shut away in a couple of upstairs rooms with seven other people for more than two years? How can she wish she was dead, when Anne desperately wanted to stay alive? Reading about Anne doesn't make Zan feel any better; it just makes her feel guilty about feeling bad. She'd like to jump up and race back to the beach. She'd even settle for visiting Solo Foley.

But she'll help Nan up the stairs and then read aloud to her all the same, just like the oldies expect.

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Rhett leaned beside the door to the balcony and watched his sister and his father and his stepmother and his half-brother mill round the holiday house, getting in each other's way. It was one of those open plan, split-level houses - a high wooden ceiling with the beams showing, like a modern cathedral; a breakfast area and a TV area and a circle of brightly-patterned lounge chairs;

floor-to-ceiling windows full of grey light and grey-green gum leaves and a narrow strip of grey sea. Very clean and very new and very Jeanette but somehow when his family started milling, the house turned into one of those Escher drawings where weird twists of perspective linked all the landings and staircases together and the little Escher people bustled round in an endless circle, going nowhere.

'Now, if I sit in the front with Tate on my lap,' Jeanette was saying, 'the kids can scrunch up in the back and -'

'Hold on, what about Mrs Hartwell?' Rhett's dad cut in.

'Oh, dear! Thanks for reminding me, Greg.' Jeanette again. 'All right, if Mrs Hartwell sits in the front - have you got the picnic basket, Solange?'

'No. You never said.'

'Well, she's saying it now. Snap to it, Solo. Find the bloody basket.'

'Dad said "bloody".'

'I know, Tate. That was naughty, wasn't it? No, not the shopping basket, Solange. The picnic basket. The one I packed this morning.'

'Can't see it.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake. Does Jeanette have to do everything herself?'

'Why don't you make Rhett do something, for a change?'

'Because Jeanette asked you. Here, I'll get the damned basket. That means five people in the back seat, you know.'

'You said "damned", Dad.'

'Got me there, Tate. So I did. That was naughty, wasn't it?'

'Well, Solange can sit on Rhett's knee.'

'No way. I'd rather walk.'

'Solo's fatter than Rhett. She'd flatten him.'

'Don't be rude, Tate! Hmm. Maybe Zan could sit on Rhett's knee. She seems like a really nice girl.'

'Yeah, maybe they'll fall in love and get married and have three wonderful children.'

'Oh, Solange! That's not what I meant. No, Greg! The other basket. The one I packed this morning.'

Rhett sighed and stroked a match across the side of the matchbox, nostrils flaring at the sharp sulphur smell. He held the flame at eye level and breathed deep, watching the tip of his cigarette turn into a round red coal. Smoke filled his lungs and nicotine raced through his bloodstream, making him feel like a diagram from an anti-smoking commercial, which was better than feeling like nothing at all. At least this way he knew his lungs and veins were real.

'You're smoking a cigarette inside the house,' said a voice at knee height.

'Right, Tate. Thanks for reminding me. You'll make a good cop when you grow up.'

He strolled out onto the balcony, leaving a scrawl of blue smoke behind

him. Tate followed, saying, 'No, I'm going to make Barbie dolls when I grow up.'

'Fair enough,' Rhett told him. 'It's a dirty job but someone's got to do it.'

Tate shook his head, straight dark hair flying out like Funeral Barbie's skirt. 'It *isn't* a dirty job,' he said. 'I think it would be a very clean job.'

Rhett grinned and tried to explain 'dirty job' to a five-year-old, then gave up and propped himself on the balcony rail, with Tate leaning companionably against his leg. He sucked on the cigarette, wondering where Tate picked up those precise grammatical sentences, wondering how long the kid would be allowed to keep on liking Barbie dolls, wondering whether it'd help if he could go back to Tate's age and start learning the world all over again, the way Tate was learning things now.

Breakers boomed on the far side of the ridge and a wind made sea noises in the gum trees. Rhett stubbed out his cigarette and tossed the dead butt into the bush. He lost track of his lungs and veins and drifted off into grey emptiness, feeling like nothing at all, until someone coughed behind him.

When he turned, Tate had gone and his father was hovering in the doorway. A tall, lean man with a lined brown face, deep creases between his eyebrows and beside his mouth. Rhett had described the creases for his VCE writing folio and now, every time he noticed them, he thought: 'This might give you the impression that my dad thinks a lot and laughs a lot but you'd be wrong.'

He couldn't write a sentence like that now. Couldn't write any sentences at all, without crossing out the words, one by one, till he had nothing left, which meant that he'd be in big trouble once the tutors in his creative writing course noticed. Some day he'd really have to get a life.

But not today.

'Having a good holiday so far?' his dad asked. 'Everything okay? I mean, if there's anything I can do.'

Greg Foley's sentences weren't as grammatical as Tate's sentences but Rhett got the message. Jeanette's message, of course. His dad would never think of something like that on his own, not in a million years. Rhett could practically hear Jeanette saying, 'Go on, Greg! Rhett's out on the balcony by himself. It's the perfect chance for a father-and-son talk!'

He thought about getting mad at his stepmum for interfering or getting mad at his dad for being so hopeless but he didn't have the energy. Besides, it wouldn't be fair. They were nice people, both of them. Kind people. Reliable people. Good people.

It was just that, for some reason, nice and kind and reliable and good didn't do much for him.

'I'm fine,' he said, which made his dad look relieved that they didn't need to have a father-and-son talk (although, because Greg was nice and kind, he

looked a bit sorry as well). 'Time to get this show on the road. We're running late, Dad. I bet Zan and Mrs Hartwell have been waiting for ages.'

He was right. As the Toyota turned the corner into Seaview Road, Rhett could see a plump grey pigeon and a tall egret-girl out on the nature strip, waiting in a patient sort of way that said they'd been standing there for at least fifteen minutes. The car pulled up and the Foley family piled out and began to mill around again, so Rhett backed off and lit another cigarette. Luckily, he'd bought a new packet that morning. Something told him they wouldn't be making a move for a while yet.

To start with, Jeanette and Mrs Hartwell had a long argument about the front seat. ('You should have it.' 'No, you should have it.') Zan and Solo whispered together and Tate helped his father repack the boot to make a space for Mrs Hartwell's queen-sized handbag. Rhett took long, slow drags on his cigarette and tried to stay calm. Hard to believe that anyone could make such a drama out of driving ten kilometres down the coast road but then, Greg and Jeanette couldn't go to the toilet without discussing it first.

'How many Foleys does it take to change a light globe?' he muttered, with the sound turned down. 'Four - and they'd probably tread on the globe, before they got it into the socket.'

He must've said that out loud, because Zan O'Connell glanced at him and giggled. Rhett waited to see whether he'd get the going-down-in-a-lift feeling again but the grass stayed steady under his feet. He didn't feel like nothing either, because strangers always made you feel visible, but on the other hand he didn't feel completely real. A plexiglass screen had dropped into place, separating him from the bunch of people around the car.

The screen came from one of Mick's stories about a sixties TV commercial where one bloke stood behind a plexiglass screen and another bloke threw tennis balls at him to prove that somebody's toothpaste gave you invisible protection. Mick thought that was hilarious. 'As if toothpaste could stop people from throwing tennis balls at your teeth,' he used to say with his screechy cockatoo laugh. Rhett had laughed too, the way he'd always laughed at Mick's jokes. But these days invisible protection sounded like a smart idea.

He thought: *The plexiglass screen feeling. The lift feeling. The nothing feeling. I ought to write a book called How To Make Friends With Your Depression. Chapter One - start by inventing cute nicknames for all the different stages.*

The last three centimetres of his cigarette flew out of his hand, curved through the air in a perfect arc and lay smouldering in the grass. A second later, Rhett realised that someone had touched him on the shoulder and made him jump. He spun round and found his father behind him, rubbing the crease at the left side of his mouth.

'Earth to Rhett,' he said. 'We're ready to go, mate.'

Jeanette was in the front seat with Tate on her lap, which meant that Zan's nan must be pretty strong-minded - not many people managed to win an argument with Jeanette. Mrs Hartwell was tucked into the far corner of the back seat, with Zan huddled beside her, and Solo was loitering by the open door.

'I'm supposed to sit on you,' she said. 'You needn't look at me like that. It's not my idea of fun.'

'Mine either,' Rhett told her. 'How far is it to the falls, Dad? And do you happen to know how long it takes to die of suffocation?'

'It's just a ten-minute drive,' Greg yelled across the top of the car. 'You can always sit on Solo's lap, if you like.'

Actually, Rhett didn't see why skinny Zan couldn't sit on hefty Solo. But Jeanette probably thought guests should have the best seats and he'd never managed to win an argument with Jeanette and he definitely wasn't going to make an idiot of himself by perching on Solo's knee. So he slid into the back seat, buckled his seat belt and huffed out an indignant breath as Solo toppled onto him.

'You weigh a ton,' he said. 'Start driving, Dad. With a bit of luck, we'll get there before I'm squashed flat.'

When the car swung out from the curb, Solo tilted sideways. She grabbed the back of Jeanette's seat and hung on tight but by the time Greg had taken them through a three-point turn, she'd bounced off Rhett's knee and slammed into his chest, bearing down hard on his right lung. Rhett wished he hadn't made those cracks about suffocating. Another of the feelings had started up - claustrophobia, the fear of being close.

He'd felt it for the first time on the way to Mick's funeral, in the back seat of his mum's two-door Hyundai, with Mick's father breathing heavily beside him and Mick's mother snivelling in the front seat. It was too much. Too much weirdness, when he'd never even realised Mick had parents. Too much sadness oozing out of everyone and filling the matchbox car. If he'd been sitting next to a door, Rhett thought he might've dragged the handle down and thrown himself out onto the road. But there were only two doors, so he'd sat there feeling trapped, while his breath whistled through his lungs without touching the sides, and the muscles down his neck turned into high tension cables, and his heart tried to tear its way out of his chest, and ...

No. Not a good time to think about that, not with Solo belting the air out of his lungs at every bump in the road. Rhett clenched his teeth and tried to exit his body. He could do that sometimes, floating free at ceiling level and watching himself talk or lean back in a chair or light another cigarette.

But the Toyota was too small and too packed. Solo was as tense as he was, thigh muscles twitching every time the car tossed her around, and worse still, the Zan-girl kept edging towards her grandmother, trying to put a gap

between them. Why couldn't she just pretend, the way he and Solo were pretending? None of them actually enjoyed being crammed together like this, breathing each other's breath, smelling each other's smell.

Rhett thought: *Oh Christ, can Zan O'Connell smell the fear sweating out of my armpits? Is that why she keeps trying to wriggle away?*

His claustrophobia climbed up to level nine on a scale of ten. Any minute now, the scream stuck inside his chest would come tearing out through his throat. He was counting the seconds – *fifty one, fifty two, fifty three* - when the Toyota stopped.

He peered round Solo's elbow to see a car park and a barbecue area and a map on a board. As Solo fumbled with the door handle, Rhett's knees jerked and flung her up and out. She rolled and hit the door, which burst open, tipping her onto the ground.

'You bastard,' she shrieked. 'You pushed me.'

Rhett laughed like a kookaburra. It was relief, of course, because he'd managed to keep the claustrophobia hidden, but Solo thought he was laughing at her. She went into one of her daily tantrums about how it wasn't fair and she'd twisted her ankle and Rhett had been picking on her ever since the day she was born.

The Zan-girl looked scornful. Mrs Hartwell said, 'There, there.' Tate said, 'I remember being born.' Jeanette bossed Greg into getting some ice from the eski for an ankle icepack. And Rhett lit a cigarette and drifted off to study the area map and the sign post. He sometimes thought he'd taken up smoking because it was a good excuse to get away from other people.

Or maybe it was solidarity with his mum. Meredith looked like those beautiful pre-Raphaelite damsels on classy birthday cards but she smoked like a chimney.

Over by the barbecue area a boy and girl were locked together, kissing and swaying. The girl wore a red parka, same as Zan, and the guy had Rhett's dark hair. Rhett watched them, half jealous and half cynical. He'd never been that wrapped up in anyone - not Nicole, even though they'd gone out together for months; not Anna Parente, even though he'd fancied her from a distance for years.

Sometimes he thought he must've missed out on the love hormone. Other times he thought other people were just better at talking themselves into things. Either way, he kind of envied the Rhett-twin and the Zan-twin. At least they were having fun, instead of spooking each other like him and Zan.

He was rinsing his mouth with smoke, to get rid of the taste of fear, when Zan O'Connell appeared at his elbow. Rhett dribbled the smoke out, slowly enough to look polite, fast enough to give her a lungful and drive her away. But Zan didn't seem to have read the articles about passive smoking. She sniffed the air and said, 'My stepdad smokes that brand too.'

‘Yeah?’ Rhett said. ‘And does he prefer emphysema, lung cancer, heart problems or strokes?’

His scare tactics worked. Zan said, ‘Solo’s right, you *are* a bastard,’ and went marching back to the car. Rhett leaned against the board, puffing out a smokescreen and grinning at Zan’s stiff spine. Some friend. Why wasn’t she fussing over Solo like the rest of them? Oh well, everyone got the friends they deserved, which meant that paranoid whingers like Solo probably deserved sulky princesses like Zan. He’d tried to make friends with his sister, a few years back, but then Mick died and Rhett realised he wasn’t interested in talking to anyone who didn’t like Mick.

Besides, Solo couldn’t let go of the little sister thing. She ought to become a union rep like their mum, because she got a kick out of telling everyone how unfair they were.

Rhett stubbed out his cigarette and stretched, fanning cool air across his arm pits. When he tugged at the neck of his t-shirt and sniffed, the fear smell had dried up and gone, only a faint bitter smoky smell left behind. The fear had gone too. He could hardly even remember how it felt. Meredith said the same thing about women giving birth: ‘Your hormones get together and wipe out the memory of the pain. Otherwise, nobody’d be stupid enough to do it a second time.’

Yeah, well, he wouldn’t ever feel claustrophobic again if he could help it. But he couldn’t help it. There was no way of guessing when it was going to hit. Sometimes cars were okay. Sometimes lifts were okay. Sometimes seats in the middle of the row at movies were okay.

And sometimes they weren’t.

He glanced round the clearing, automatically checking the exits. Behind him, a wide gap in the circle of gum trees, exposing the black band of the road. In front of him, a narrower gap that framed a flight of steps hammered into the hillside, blond wood coated with streaky green paint like tarnished copper.

There was a signpost beside the steps, telling him that it was 2 km to the Cobbleigh Falls, 4 km to Finnegan’s Cave and Falls, and 10 km to Bayside, with another sign underneath warning him that the walkway beside Finnegan’s Cave was being repaired. Rhett sighed and stretched till his bones cracked.

He thought: *Great. When we get to the cave, I’ll tell Dad and Jeanette I’m walking back to Bayside. That way, I won’t need to get into that claustro car again.*

*

Zan hated everyone. She hated Peggy Molloy, who’d cornered her after lunch,

saying, 'Sorry, Zan. I thought a holiday would be good for your nanna but it's not much fun for you, is it?' Zan had been longing for a bit of sympathy but as soon as she got some, it made her want to cry, so she'd had to scowl back at Peggy and say 'I'm fine. Totally fine.'

Peggy had nodded politely but then she started telling a long string of Barry stories - how he worried about everybody while his divorce was going through, even if he didn't always know how to show it; how he used to help Zan with her homework every night; how he sometimes came across as Mr Perfect, except that he couldn't resist bringing home squishy Italian cakes from Lygon Street or sneaking out the back for a cigarette when he was stressed. It was like the farewell speech at a funeral. Zan almost hated Barry for making her feel so sad and she really, really hated Peggy Molloy.

She hated Nan too, because Nan had announced at the last minute, while they were getting changed after lunch, that her arthritis was playing up, so she'd just sit at one of the picnic tables and enjoy the fresh air, instead of going on the walk to the falls.

Zan didn't want to have to cope with the Foleys on her own. She'd sneaked *The Diary of Anne Frank* into the pocket of her red parka, planning to sit with Nan and read to her - she was sure Nan couldn't resist that. But then bloody Solo had fallen out of the car and sprained her ankle, which meant that bloody Solo would be staying behind with Nan.

So now Zan hated Solo as well, just like she hated Greg Foley for saying, 'Don't worry, Mrs Hartwell, we'll look after Suzanne,' and Tate Foley for saying, 'Why doesn't that girl want to come walking with us?' and Jeanette Foley for saying, 'Oh, Suzanne, you have to come along and keep Rhett company.' She hated the way Nan and Jeanette were beaming at each other, as though they'd done something brilliant by pushing her and Rhett together. And she hated Rhett Foley most of all for that nasty crack about her stepdad's smoking, like it was Barry's fault that he'd had a stroke.

Zan thought: *Nan and Jeanette can skip the matchmaking. For one thing, I reckon the guy's a world-class poser. For another thing, he twitches when he's forced to sit next to me. Romeo and Juliet, not.*

Now Jeanette was making her husband unpack the entire boot, so she could leave some biscuits and a thermos of tea for Nan and Solo. Rhett strolled over and said, 'Aren't you ready yet? I'll go on ahead,' like he was itching to get away. But Jeanette was a match for him.

'Rhett!' she said. 'Just the person I need! You can help Solange over to the picnic table, while Greg repacks the boot.'

Even Rhett wasn't enough of a bastard to say he wouldn't help his lame sister, especially when it was his fault in the first place. He had to let Solo lean on his shoulder while she hopped across the car park, gasping and groaning. Zan grinned. She didn't like Solo much but she liked Rhett even less, so it was

fun to watch Solo scoring off him. If she'd had a pen, she would've been making notes on the back page of Anne Frank's diary, to remind her how to score a few points off Barb, her equally horrible big sister.

By the time Rhett got back, the boot was packed, the thermos was on the picnic table and Tate was scrambling up the steps. That got Jeanette moving at last. She went racing after him, singing out, 'Tate! Be careful!' The kid didn't take any notice, which gave Zan her first clue about dealing with Jeanette. Once you listened to her, she'd got you but you could sidestep her as long as you didn't listen. Tate had worked that out already. Rhett hadn't, even though he thought he was so smart.

Right now Jeanette was calling over her shoulder, 'Rhett! Can you bring something for us to sit on? The blanket from the back seat, maybe, or -'

'Yeah, sure,' Rhett said to cut the list short, when he should've just pretended he hadn't heard.

Zan grinned and wandered over to the car, feeling more friendly towards Rhett now she knew he wasn't as clever as a five-year-old. Friendly enough to wait while he fossicked through the boot and stuffed a rolled-up sleeping bag into his backpack.

'Smaller than a blanket,' he explained and Zan said, 'It's okay. You don't have to tell me all about it. I get enough of the blow-by-blow stuff from Nan.'

Rhett looked up at her. It was the first time Zan had seen him smiling and it changed his face so drastically that she almost backed away in surprise.

'You too?' he said. 'Adults are bizarre, aren't they? I reckon they like organising things better than they like doing things. Me, if I'm going somewhere, I want to go.'

He slammed the boot shut and went striding over to the steps. Zan followed, reconstructing the smile on a computer graphics program at the back of her brain. Mouth stretched so wide that it filled up the hollows in his cheeks. Eyes looking at her as though they actually saw her and wanted to share the joke.

She thought: *Nice smile. I could even like him, if I didn't already know he was a bastard.*

There was a walkway at the top of the steps, wooden planks and a chunky railing on both sides, like a bridge without a river. As Zan's foot hit the first plank, the sun rolled out from behind a cloud and the afternoon lit up. She felt as though she was stepping onto a stage, blinking at the spotlights and trying to remember her lines.

'So,' Rhett said. 'You're at Central with Solo, right?'

That was her cue, for sure. She told him how she'd gone to Central till she was fourteen, then shifted to the house in the hills with her mum and stepdad, and now she was back at Central, living with Nan while Mum and Barry were overseas. In return Rhett told her how he used to go to Central too, except

Solo couldn't hack it, so their parents sent them off to trendy alternative Kingston Hall. But Solo couldn't hack Kingston either. She reckoned she'd rather be the school weirdo than go to a school full of weirdos.

They laughed and said 'Typical Solo' and split up to let a bunch of hikers in shorts and noisy boots go thudding past. And after that they fell into step again and went on asking each other ordinary questions and listening to each other's ordinary answers.

'I got into a creative writing course when I left school but I put it off for a year and went travelling round Australia with one of my mates instead. Manny Theostratis - do you remember him from Central?'

'I think his brother Con was in the same year as my sister Barb.'

'Barb O'Connell? Right, of course. She was friends with the leso, Leith Dunbar.'

'I like Leith.'

'Yeah, me too. Well, she was a year ahead of me, so I didn't really know her, but I talked to her at a party once. Barb, though ...'

'Go on.'

'Nah, you won't like it.'

'Try me.'

'Fact is, I thought she was up herself.'

'Truly? Most people think Barb's wonderful.'

'But you don't?'

'Come off it. I'm her sister.'

The walkway carried them down the hill like a slow-motion rollercoaster and tipped them off onto a sandy path beside a sluggish stream. Tate crouched in the long grass, with Greg and Jeanette hovering on the sidelines. He looked up and whispered 'Lizard', then went on frowning at the path.

Zan and Rhett glanced at each other and tiptoed over, peering into the crisscross of grass stems until they were as still and silent as Tate. Zan adjusted the focus of her eyes, shutting out green hills and blue sky, sorting out the subtle shades of brown earth and wispy yellow grass and - yes! - a tiny brown and yellow lizard, flattened against a beige rock.

Tate's hand shot out and scooped the lizard up. As it ran frantically round the cup of his fingers, Zan found herself automatically turning towards Rhett. She'd guessed from the slant of his shoulders that he'd be smiling at her again - and he was. The smile looked just as good as before or better. Zan relaxed and started to smile back.

'There!' Jeanette said, pleased. 'I knew the two of you would get on.'

Zan's smile dimmed and her heart shrank into a tight ball. She wished she was back at the guest house - no, back at Nan's house, where she could shut the door of her bungalow room and keep everybody else out. It was the only way to be safe. As soon as you went anywhere, people always said

something that reminded you of stuff you'd rather forget. Like now, for example. She'd felt normal for ten minutes, talking to Rhett, but Jeanette had turned it into a boy-girl thing and Zan knew where that ended up. Drama. Disaster. The whole world hating you.

Well, that's what had happened at Central, anyway.

*

It had been okay at first. More than okay. Standing in the crowd at the airport, waving to Mum and Barry as they disappeared through the doors, feeling very grown up because she was genuinely glad they were heading off on the honeymoon they'd never had time for. She and Nan had treated themselves to coffee at one of the airport cafes before they caught a taxi home, so they could watch people trundling past with heavy suitcases and pretend they were flying off to New York / Paris / Venice / London as well.

Not that Zan really needed New York or London or wherever. Staying with Nan was fine by her. A chance to be fussed over full-time, instead of every second Sunday. A chance to take possession of the bungalow down at the end of the backyard, which used to be her grandfather's workshop - and Barb's bedroom too, when they'd lived there before Mum married Barry, and she'd always envied Barb then.

The bungalow was a treasure cave packed with silver cups and trophies and shields, waiting for Grandad to engrave the winner's name on them. He'd been the last hand-engraver in Melbourne. He'd done the Melbourne Cup every year. That didn't have quite as much magic now as it'd had for Zan aged ten but it was still special, all the same.

And then there was Annalise, Zan's best friend for five years at Central. They'd gone on being friends even after Zan shifted to the hills and Jarawa Girls' School, where everyone called her 'Zan', instead of 'Sue'. Okay, she and Annalise only met once a fortnight when Zan and Mum and Barry came to visit Nan, plus a sleepover every now and then, but they talked on the phone in between.

Annalise wanted to know all about Jarawa, from the brand of laptop that the Jarawa girls had to lug around, right through to the colour of the carpets in the posh houses where Zan went for her friends' birthday parties. And she told Zan all about Central, all the gossip and all the guys she went out with, starting at Joe Spandarakis, the heartthrob of Central Primary, and ending with Ashley Ferris, who rocked up in year 11 and instantly became the coolest guy at Central Secondary.

'But I'm over Ashley now,' she told Zan the day after Mum and Barry left, as they lolled on her bed under a life-sized poster of Jed Johnston, the lead singer from Silicon Fish. 'He was getting way too serious. I said, "Ashley,

you're a great guy but I'm not ready for this - like, I've got places to go and things to see," and he really lost it. Got out of the car and went storming off. Didn't come back for twenty minutes. I thought I'd have to teach myself to drive on the spot but luckily he came back again, just when I was starting to fiddle with the ignition.'

Zan smiled dreamily. Stories about guys sounded as mysterious and romantic to her as stories about private girls' schools sounded to Annalise. Sure, she'd borrowed her friends' brothers or the sons of Barry's friends for Jarawa school dances and a couple of them had asked her to their school dances in return. Then there was the guy who'd stared at her one day in the local library: she kept hoping she'd run across him again some time. But it wasn't the same as going to a school that was fifty percent guys, so you could study them when they weren't putting on an act and then pick and choose.

'You're lucky,' she said, and Annalise said, 'Why? I'd rather be you.'

'Hanging round with a mob of girls all the time? My friends at Jarawa seem like kids, compared to you lot.'

'But you've got your own PC and great teachers and a chance to learn the rich kids' rules. You can catch up on the guy stuff when you get to university. And you *will* get to uni, Sue. I wish I was so sure.'

Actually, Zan wasn't sure of anything back in those days. She just drifted along from one day to the next, doing things to annoy her big sister or get on her stepfather's good side. It seemed like a waste, having all those opportunities that Annalise wanted, when Zan didn't really care whether she went to uni or not.

Still, she and Annalise had probably stayed best friends because they were different enough to keep on being fascinated by each other's lives. Zan had friends at Jarawa but they were all like her, scatty and ordinary and easygoing. They weren't energetic and ambitious and passionate like Annalise.

So it was great to get more time together, while she was staying in Nan's bungalow. Zan spent the first two weeks of the holidays listening to Annalise's Silicon Fish CDs and watching Annalise's music videos and visiting Annalise's friends.

Then Annalise's parents hauled her off to Western Australia for Christmas with her grandparents, leaving Zan on her own, but that turned out okay too, because Annalise told her friends to look after Zan. She was invited to two birthday parties and a New Year party, and at that third party she met Lee.

He was hanging in the kitchen doorway, so tall that he could hook his hands over the top of the door frame and let his body dangle. Zan was tall too, which meant she had to duck under his arm in order to squeeze past. As she straightened up, his head turned and their eyes met.

Blue eyes with flecks of brown, like autumn leaves against a cloudless sky.

Zan realised she was staring and dragged her gaze down to a small neat mouth, the twin peaks of the upper lip balanced by the smooth curve of the bottom lip. She wanted to kiss him, then and there, but instead she blushed and went elbowing through the kitchen crowd to stash her bottle of cider in the fridge and rub an ice cube across her scorching cheeks.

For the rest of the evening she tracked him round the party. Not on purpose - in fact, it gave her a shock every time she found herself looking away, just before he could catch her watching him. She might've even gone over and tried to start talking to him, except that for some reason a series of guys kept cornering her and telling her long boring stories about their cars or their favourite websites or how drunk they'd been at the last party.

At ten minutes to twelve, Zan remembered you were supposed to kiss everybody at New Year. She didn't feel like kissing any of the boring guys, so she asked the latest guy in the line-up to point her towards the bathroom and then slipped out through the back door, into the night.

Warm air settled round her shoulders like a protective arm. Zan leaned back and looked up at shadowy leaves and a cloudless sky. The stars blazed. Inside the house, voices shouted the countdown - 'Five, four, three, two, one, happy new year!' - and then started bellowing, 'Should auld acquaintance be forgot.'

'Shouldn't forget new acquaintances either,' someone said behind her. 'Happy New Year.'

Suddenly, kissing everybody at New Year didn't seem like such a bad idea. Zan smiled into autumn eyes, while the guy closed in and wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. Like diving in at the deep end, tumbling and turning and drifting up lazily through thick green water, then gasping for air. He held on tight and whispered 'Wow' into her hair.

'Lee,' yelled the voices from the kitchen. 'Where's bloody Lee gone?'

'Tomorrow,' the guy - Lee - said. 'No, it's today already. A movie or something. I have to see you.'

As Zan nodded, Lee grabbed her hand and towed her back to the kitchen. Three guys tackled him straight away, breaking his grip, and one of the boring guys headed for Zan with a New Year look in his eyes. Zan didn't intend to kiss anyone else - not then, maybe not ever - so she dodged into the lounge room and went to stand beside Annalise's friend Siobhan, whose father had driven them to the party.

'Oh, there you are,' Siobhan said. 'Dad turned up early. We've got to go.'

Zan would've gone without even looking back. Why spoil something perfect by hassling about details? But halfway down the front path, while Siobhan was bitching at her dad, a hand reached out of the shadows and stopped her.

'The address,' Lee said. 'You need to give me your address and tell me

your name.'

She dreamed about bodysurfing through mile-high breakers and spent the next day waiting for Lee. He was as beautiful as she remembered. Wrong word for a guy? No, not for him. As well as the autumn eyes and twin-peak mouth, Lee had ash-blond hair, thick enough to hide your hands in. Zan found that out while they kissed all through a movie, twisted sideways in their seats, bodies straining so hard against the arm rest that she discovered a bruise on her midriff next day.

Lee tasted like fresh bread and honey. Lee smelt like sea-grass and salt. When he slid his hand under her shirt and stroked her skin, Zan wanted the seats to dissolve and turn into a king-size bed, the way one scene was dissolving into another scene up on the screen.

'This is so weird,' she said, as they blinked at the bright lights in the foyer. 'I feel like I've known you forever but I don't even know your full name.'

'It's Ferris,' he said, laughing. 'Ashley Ferris but the guys call me Lee.'

The dream fell apart.

'Ashley?' Zan said. 'Annalise's Ashley?'

'Well, not exactly. Annalise gave me the flick after - wait a minute. Since when do you know Annalise?'

'Since we were ten years old. I met her on my first day at Central Primary, in Year 5.'

'Zan,' he said. 'Short for Suzanne? You mean you're Sue O'Connell?'

The funny thing was, it was still perfect. Lee didn't go 'So what?' and try to grab her again. He looked as freaked as Zan felt. They drove home in total silence, turning to stare at each other every time the car stopped at a traffic light but saying nothing.

Under the plane trees outside Nan's house, Zan whispered, 'I can't, not when Annalise is my best friend,' and Lee said, 'Yeah, I know.' Then her head was butting into the hollow of his collar bone and his fingers were digging into her shoulder blades, clinging as tight as though they were drowning. Zan cried for half the night and Lee turned up halfway through the morning, saying, 'Listen, we have to talk.'

Annalise came back from Perth a week after that - seven days of meeting and kissing and saying 'We can't' and kissing again. Zan went straight round to Annalise's house and told her the whole story. By the time she finished, her palms were sticky with sweat and her stomach was heaving. She waited while Annalise frowned at her hands and nudged a cuticle into place with her fingernail.

'I told you Ashley and I broke up,' she said. 'You're acting like you want me to give you permission to go out with him or whatever. But it's your life, Sue. It's got nothing to do with me.'

Zan didn't believe her at first. How could anyone let go of Lee that easily?

But after three hours of stories about Christmas in Perth, she decided that Annalise meant what she said. She ran all the way home and dialled two wrong numbers, because her hands were shaking.

'It's fine, Lee,' she said. 'It really is. She doesn't mind.'

Lee rang the front door bell five minutes later. Zan was waiting two steps down the hall. A third step took her into his arms. No more guilt, just the taste of fresh bread and honey in her mouth and the smell of sea-grass and salt. So everything was okay. Well, more than okay.

Or, at least, that was how it had seemed then.

*

Rhett scowled at the empty space he'd just been smiling at. The Zan-girl was twenty metres away by now, feet pounding the path like she was grinding guys under her heels.

For a moment there he'd felt as though he could see into the future - the sort of future where he could relax and talk about ordinary stuff, without having to fight off the lift feeling and the plexiglass screen feeling and the claustrophobia feeling. And the hollow feeling. That was the way he felt now, as empty as the space where Zan had been standing. As empty as if someone had reached inside him and scooped out his guts and dumped them on the ground at his feet.

'Me and my big mouth!' Jeanette said. 'Sorry, Rhett.'

'Why?' he asked, surprised. 'It's not your fault if she can't stand me.'

Jeanette was opening her big mouth again when Tate rose and poured the lizard into her hands. She said, 'Tate, thank you!' and 'Greg, go and make sure Zan doesn't get lost!' Then she turned back to Rhett, hands tilted to stop the lizard from climbing her wrist and disappearing up her sleeve.

'I wanted something nice to happen for you,' she said. 'But I always push too hard.'

Rhett shrugged. 'Not a problem. Anyway, I don't think "nice" is the right word for Zan O'Connell.'

'She's very pretty,' Jeanette said, juggling the lizard. 'But she's got a temper. Still, I was hoping she might stir you up a bit. You can be too laid back for your own good.'

Rhett's eyebrows shot up so fast that his forehead hurt. 'Me?' he said. 'Too laid back? Come on, Jeanette. I thought you were supposed to have married Dad because his kids were practically perfect.'

The lizard's tiny ticklish claws scabbled at Jeanette's palm. She giggled and said, 'You were, compared to some of the horrors I met while I was dating. Little princesses, flirting with their daddies. Little thugs who tried to feel me up. Spoilt brats who had to be bribed with a new Nintendo game every

time their dad went out with someone. You and Solo aren't perfect but you're better than that.'

Rhett decided he liked Jeanette when she was being honest. 'Well, you're okay, compared to some of the other stepmums we could've scored,' he told her.

'Uh-hmm,' she said, still concentrating on the lizard. She aimed a vague smile in Rhett's general direction and knelt down at the side of the path, lowering her cupped hands. Tate said, 'No,' and Jeanette said, 'Yes.' As she spread her hands, the lizard darted out between her fingers and hesitated for a nanosecond, checking for traps. Tate reached out automatically, then glanced at his mum and let the lizard flick into the long grass.

'They die if you take them home,' he explained to Rhett. 'We can't work out what they actually eat.'

Jeanette stood up, dusting her knees and patting her hair. 'I'm so glad we had that talk!' she said. 'We should talk more often, Rhett. About, well, everything. Any time there's a problem you can't discuss with your mother, just remember I'm always here.'

Instantly Rhett's plexiglass screen slotted back into place. Jeanette was babbling again. Worse still, she was criticising his mum. Worst of all, she was dropping hints about Mick. He scowled at her through the screen. Why couldn't people say what they meant, instead of going round in circles? Was death really that scary?

He thought: *And if it is, why aren't I more scared?*

No point in asking his stepmum for answers, at any rate. Honest Jeanette seemed to have vanished along with the lizard. Rhett looked her up and down - powder-blue tracksuit, carefully blowdried hair, concerned frown - and laughed, to show her what he thought of offers to talk about 'everything'. Then he walked off, pacing himself carefully, going fast enough to leave Jeanette and Tate behind but not so fast that he was likely to catch up with Greg and Zan.

The path burrowed into a fold of the hills, with lizard grass rustling beside him, a bushy cliff to his right and a rampart of rock to his left. Rhett tried to feel pleased about being on his own but within seconds he realised that Jeanette was still bugging him.

How could his dad go for someone like her, after being married to someone like his mum? Meredith Marshall, the pin-up girl of the left. Always staring with dreamy concentration at the middle distance - or waving her long thin hands around to help explain her latest idea - or clutching at her forehead while she tried to remember where she'd left her briefcase. Always the centre of attention, although she never seemed to notice or care.

That's what he'd said about his mum in his writing folio and it was still true. Jeanette fussed over picnic baskets and Meredith worried about the state of

the world. Jeanette talked in cliches but you could never guess what Meredith was going to say next. Jeanette was so plastic. Meredith was so real. Why would anybody choose Jeanette, after Meredith?

A snaky tree root, half-buried in the path, snagged his foot and tripped him. Rhett lurched forward and yelped, as though he'd banged his head on an invisible screen. A memory jolted to the front of his brain: Jeanette giggling at the lizard, a different Jeanette than the one he usually saw. Maybe that was Greg's Jeanette. Maybe his dad wasn't just a typical boring businessman who liked plastic better than real. Maybe he'd got them both totally wrong. How could you tell? These days, he sometimes wondered whether he knew anything about anyone.

He rubbed his forehead and thought: *Hell, I was sure I knew Mick O'Connell.*

Mick. Bloody Mick. He couldn't get away from the guy, even out in the middle of nowhere. It was like Mick was haunting the inside of his skull. The plexiglass screen didn't help. If he dropped the screen into place, it just shut Mick in there with him. No wonder he kept feeling claustrophobic, with bloody Mick taking up so much space.

'You're dead,' Rhett said, walking faster. 'Piss off, mate. Get lost. I'm not interested. You're dead. Dead, dead, dead.'

He wheeled round a bend and came face to face with three middle-aged women, wearing waterproof jackets and sensible shoes and terrified smiles. When he smiled back and said 'Lovely day' in his best Kingston Hall voice, they relaxed and chorused 'Beautiful weather' and went striding past.

Rhett grinned. Two words in the right accent and they were convinced that he was a nice boy from a nice school, not a maniac on the loose. It was good to know that he could still fool most people most of the time, even when they'd just heard him yelling 'Dead dead dead' at a ghost.

The path had veered uphill while he'd been thinking about Mick, corkscrewing into a tangle of bushes and gum trees. Rhett looked round, trying to smile at the sight of woolly grey clouds piled on the woolly green slopes or the flowers wobbling on skinny stems, small and pink as Tate's fingernails.

But it was no use. Okay, he could see through the plexiglass screen but he couldn't connect with anything that he saw. Scenery was wasted on him. He might as well have been strolling through the local tip, for all the good it did him.

The empty hollow in his gut had filled up with something grey and sludgy. Rhett studied it as it sloshed around and finally found a name for it. Sadness. He'd shouted at Mick and now he felt sorry. Oh, great. Apologising to a dead guy was about as stupid as it got. Four months of this shit and he was still totally out of control - obsessing about Jeanette, yelling at Mick, peering

through the plexiglass screen and then turning sad and sludgy, all in the space of ten minutes. If only he could take a break every now and then. If only he could forget the whole thing, just for an hour or two ...

His foot hit the ground so hard that his arms swung back and his chest thrust forward, like a waterbird getting ready for take-off. Rhett charged at the hill, breath rasping through his dry throat, knees grinding in their sockets, eyes fixed on the rollercoaster line of the path - up and down, up and down - until all he could think about was the pain in his calf muscles and the sweat tracks stinging his forehead and the wheezy ache of his lungs.

That was one thing he'd learned over the last few months: if he could walk far enough and fast enough, sometimes he could manage to outdistance the nothing feeling, the plexiglass screen feeling, the going-down-in-a-lift feeling, and the hollow feeling, and leave them all behind for a while.

He slogged up the next rise, watching his feet move in and out. When he paused on the crest and peered over the edge, he saw a steep cliff plunging dizzily towards a jumble of treetops, showing him how far he'd climbed. Stone shelves jutted out of the hillside, reassuringly solid. As he headed downhill, Rhett trailed his hand along the rock. It felt as grainy as the side of a matchbox and for a moment he almost expected his fingertips to burst into flames.

Sea noises were booming in his ears. After a while he remembered they'd left the sea a long way behind, which meant he must be listening to the sound of his heartbeats, echoing so loudly that he would've missed the sound of voices if he hadn't happened to hear his own name.

'Like Rhett, you mean?'

It was the Zan-girl, nearby but invisible. Rhett glanced around and found another sign post, labelled 'Cobbleigh Falls 500 m', pointing at a clump of spiky bushes with leaves as small and sharp as tacks. When he peered through the leaves, he spotted a blur of red (Zan's parka) and a blur of brown (Greg's jacket). He slumped against the post, deciding to stay where he was and listen.

'Hey, don't be too hard on Rhett,' his dad's voice said. 'He's had a pretty rough trot, the last few months. Meredith - his mum - she's been out of it for a while now, which is why we asked Rhett and Solo down to the holiday house, to give her a bit of space. But I wasn't talking about him, y'know. I was asking whether you felt okay.'

'Me?' Zan said. 'I'm fine.'

A short silence and then, 'Fair enough. It's none of my business.'

Rhett frowned and groped for his cigarettes. It sounded as though Greg had been doing his fatherly number on Zan, without Jeanette being there to prompt him, in which case, maybe his dad had really meant it when he pulled that father-and-son stunt on the balcony this afternoon. On the other hand,

maybe Greg found it easier to be fatherly to people who weren't actually his kids. Rhett could believe that, because it cut both ways. After all, he'd always found it easier to talk to Mick than to his actual dad ...

A match that he couldn't remember lighting burnt his fingers. Rhett blew the flame out, stuffed the fingers into his mouth and sucked hard, trying to suck the pain out of his hot skin. His ears boomed. By the time the sea-noises had cleared, Zan was saying, 'Okay, what's the problem with Rhett and Solo's mum?'

'Yeah, what?' Rhett breathed. 'Go on, Dad. Tell her.'

Greg cleared his throat. 'Don't get me wrong,' he said. 'Meredith's a wonderful woman. Very smart. Very beautiful. She can charm the birds out of the trees and she doesn't even know she's doing it. Lives in a world of her own most of the time, although, mind you, she's very good at her job. What's that old saying - something along the lines of "God made her and then broke the mould"? That's Meredith, all right. Hard to believe somebody like her could marry an ordinary bloke like me. Then again, it didn't last long, once Mick came back on the scene.'

'So was that the problem?' Zan asked, sounding bored.

Rhett thought: *Fair enough too. People usually get bored when they have to listen to long speeches about how perfect someone else is.*

'Um,' Greg said. 'If Solo hasn't filled you in, it's not really my place. Family business and all that. Better to let her tell you about it herself.'

Rhett snorted and blew out the match he'd just lit. That showed how much his dad knew. Solo's ideas about their family were totally stuffed. If the Zan-girl got her side of the story, she'd be getting a fairytale, not the real truth. Time to break up this conversation before his dad said something even stupider.

He stuffed the cigarettes back in his pocket and strolled round the corner. 'Caught up with you at last,' he said. 'Where's this waterfall?'

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Rhett's dad wasted five minutes trying to work out whether they ought to wait for Jeanette and Tate, before Rhett solved the problem by groaning dramatically and slouching off down the track. Greg wittered for a few more seconds and then followed him.

Zan sighed and shrugged. Greg was an okay sort of guy - like, it'd been nice talking to him - but he let everybody push him around. He wasn't a proper sort of father, not like Barry. A funny way to think of Barry, when he was actually her stepdad, except that right from the first time Mum brought him home, he'd made Zan feel safe. Barb couldn't stand him because he kept laying down the law and telling them what to do. But that was why Zan liked

him.

A bird trilled in the trees. A long ringing call, just like a phone. Zan flinched and swung round, seeing a haze of gum leaves, remembering Nan's tiny lounge room. She shouldn't be here. She should be back at Nan's house, waiting for the phone call that would tell her Barry was finally okay.

Or dead.

Her foot slipped, scraping a muddy yellow stripe across the brown path. Zan teetered and flung her arms wide. It felt like an omen. If she fell, that meant Barry was going to die. If she kept her balance, Barry would be all right. So she braced her legs and flapped her hands and stiffened her spine but the good luck charm didn't work. Even though she'd managed to stay on her feet, she still wasn't convinced that Barry would survive.

She sighed and shrugged and kept walking, avoiding the soggy grass at the edge of the path, just in case. Apparently, she didn't believe in good luck but she *did* believe in bad luck.

Zan thought: *Shit happens. That's what Rhett said when I splattered him with my ice-cream and he was right.*

Half a metre ahead, Greg Foley was striding along, singing to himself. Some old fifties number, by the sound of it. Zan didn't know the song but she recognised the general style, because Barry always used to tune into the Golden Oldies station on the kitchen radio. Barry sang along with his favourites too, although he didn't have as good a voice as Greg. Zan listened to him belting out the chorus.

*'Four million, three thousand, two hundred, twenty one years from now,
Maybe I'll forget
That we ever met.
Four million, three thousand, two hundred, twenty one years from now,
Maybe then I will finally have got you out of my heart.'*

Her eyes opened so wide that the wind started to dry them out. Zan blinked and felt a few leftover tears gather in the corners and trickle down her cheeks.

Songs could be a real giveaway. She'd gone round humming Silicon Fish's 'I'll play Romeo, if you'll play Juliet' for the whole of that week when she and Lee were saying 'We can't' to each other. And right now, something told her that Greg Foley was still half in love with smart, beautiful Meredith, even though he was married to Jeanette.

That reminded her of Mum and Barry, only in reverse. They were totally in love, except that they'd married the wrong people first, so it'd taken ages before Barry could get a divorce and marry her mum. They couldn't even fit in a honeymoon, because Barry's kids had been whingeing so much that he had

to stick around and be nice to them, even though they all had husbands / wives and kids of their own. And now, just when things were finally sorting themselves out, Barry was flat on his back in an English hospital with a shunt in his brain.

Sad. Everything was so sad. Zan couldn't bear it. When she bumped into Rhett's dad, who said, 'Careful or you'll walk straight into the pool,' the waterfall was sad too. Huge blocks of black stone with water dripping off them, like tears. Why had they walked two kays for this, when she could've been back at the guest house, waiting for her mum to phone? It seemed even more pointless than the rest of this stupid holiday.

Luckily, before Zan could start dripping like the falls, Jeanette turned up with Tate. There was no need to worry about bursting into tears while Jeanette was around. She didn't give you time to feel depressed.

First she bustled round looking for a table-shaped rock, so she could unpack the sandwiches and drinks from her powder-blue backpack. Then she asked Rhett for the blanket and freaked when she found he'd brought a sleeping bag instead. They played five rounds of 'Sorry, I thought it'd be easier to carry than a blanket' and 'But Rhett, it's our *new* sleeping bag!' After that, Rhett went off to smoke a cigarette and scowl at the scummy bubbles swirling round the black pool, while Zan talked Jeanette into sitting on the table-shaped rock.

The minute she sat down, Jeanette started dealing out sandwiches. Zan was still stuffed full of Seaview guest house lunch, so she wandered off to take a photo of the falls and hide her sandwiches in her pack. As she wandered back, Jeanette glanced at the sky and noticed a grey cloud, which meant she spent the next quarter of an hour wondering whether it was going to rain.

She'd just decided that the rain would probably hold off for a few hours, when Rhett came slouching back to say, 'We'd better make a move if you want to see Finnegan's Cave.'

'Finnegan's Cave?' Jeanette echoed. 'Oh no, Rhett! We won't have time for that. Besides, Tate's little legs are much too tired.'

'My legs aren't little,' Tate said indignantly. 'They're two and a half centimetres longer than Benjy Goldman's legs. We measured them last sleepover.'

'And my legs are even longer,' Rhett said. 'Now you've dragged me out here, I wouldn't mind seeing something a bit more interesting than this stupid trickle. You don't need to hang around and wait for me. The sign reckons the track goes all the way to Bayside, so I can walk back.'

Zan swallowed a groan. Sure enough, Greg and Jeanette launched into a boring discussion about how long they'd taken to get to Cobbleigh Falls and how long it'd take to get to Finnegan's Cave and how much longer it'd take to

get to Bayside, with some detours into discussing the rain and Tate's legs and Nan and Solo waiting at the car park with the afternoon tea. Rhett thought he was smart but he didn't have a clue about how to manage his dad and stepmum. If he really wanted to walk to Bayside, he should've started selling them on the idea at breakfast this morning.

They were still carrying on about the rain as they straggled up to the main path. Jeanette turned to the left and Rhett turned to the right.

'See you later,' he said. 'I'm going to the falls. (A) I'm wearing my japara, so I don't care if it rains. (B) It won't take long, because I won't be stopping every time I see a lizard. (C) I'd be there already, if you hadn't spent half the afternoon pissfarting around.'

'Well!' Jeanette said. 'You've got it all worked out! Off you go, then. Just make sure you're back at the car park by five thirty, at the latest.'

Zan changed her mind. Rhett was a brilliant Jeanette-manager. Give her a chance to rave on and then do exactly what you were planning to do in the first place. Now Zan had seen it in action, it seemed totally obvious. She tossed a Kids vs Adults grin at Rhett but Jeanette caught it.

'Oh, and Rhett, take Zan with you,' she added, without missing a beat. '*She* won't slow you down, not like us littlies and oldies! And I'm sure she's dying to see the cave.'

She swung a smile towards them, bright as a searchlight. Before they had time to react, she gave Tate a gentle shove, tucked her hand through Greg's arm and shunted her family off down the path, without looking back. So Jeanette could move fast when she wanted to. Zan frowned at her powder-blue back, not sure whether to laugh or spit. Big mistake. She'd assumed Jeanette was stupid, because she babbled non-stop, and now Jeanette had got her revenge by stranding her with Rhett.

As she turned round, Rhett was tugging another cigarette out of the pack. No surprises there. As far as Zan could see, he always lit up whenever anyone else would've got mad.

'I warn you, I'm not going to be packed into that sardine-can car again,' he announced. 'You can do what you like. Me, I'm walking to Bayside.'

Zan gasped, sucked down a mouthful of smoke and started coughing. 'Are you crazy?' she spluttered. 'What'll Jeanette think when you don't turn up? She'll throw a whammy and call out the helicopter rescue squad.'

Rhett drooped his eyelids at her. 'No, she won't,' he said, as if he was explaining $2 + 2 = 4$. 'Trust me, I know Jeanette. She'll talk a blue streak and then remember I told her about Bayside. But if you're desperate to be a good girl, you can run after them and tell her yourself.'

He obviously wanted to get rid of her, so Zan decided to stay. 'No, thanks,' she said. 'You heard Jeanette. I'm dying to see the cave, okay? Just don't slow me down.'

She dodged round Rhett and sprinted off down the path. After ten strides, she knew she'd made the right decision. It was great to be on her own. (Well, practically on her own, seeing she didn't need to be polite to Rhett.)

Up until this year Zan had always thought she liked people but then, she'd always thought people liked her. Not any more. Ever since she'd found out how cruel people could be, without even trying, she'd been grabbing at any chance to get away from them and hide.

Her stomach gurgled and churned. For half a second she wobbled on the edge of telling herself the Central Secondary College story all over again. But her ears were filling up with bird noises and tree noises, her eyes were climbing to the top of a silvery gum trunk and the mountain air was folding protectively around her.

Zan smiled at the grey boulder squatting by the path, like the Aboriginal rock spirit she'd read about in a kids' book Barry gave her. What was it called? Yeah right, a nargun. Eucalyptus air in her lungs, the land's history in her mind and all her muscles working together, smooth as pistons.

She thought: *It is - yep, I really believe it - good to be alive.*

Then a coil of smoke wound past her nostrils and Rhett's voice said over her shoulder, 'Why do you bang when you walk?'

Zan had forgotten he was there. She jumped and said, 'I don't,' and *The Diary of Anne Frank* thudded against her hip. 'Oh, right,' she remembered, 'there's a book in my pocket. Not that it's any of your business.'

'A book?' Rhett said, like it was news that she could read. 'What is it?'

'Anne Frank's diary,' Zan told him. 'It's this really depressing true-life book about a Jewish girl hiding from the Nazis in the Second World War. My nan picked it because she was born on the same day as Anne and I'm supposed to be reading it to her on account of Nan sitting on her glasses in the bus. Personally, I reckon she broke them on purpose. She loves being read to.'

Rhett laughed. 'You think *The Diary of Anne Frank* is depressing? Wait till you get to Primo Levi's *Is This a Man*. Levi spent a year in one of the Nazi death camps, then he spent the rest of his life trying to make sense of the way people screw each other around.'

Anne Frank made Zan feel guilty but she wasn't going to let Rhett run Anne down. 'Yeah, well,' she said, 'Anne didn't have much time to make sense of things, because she died in Bergen-Belsen when she was only fifteen.'

'So? In the end Primo Levi threw himself down his own stairs.'

A short silence while Zan tried to hold back a burp. She felt as though Rhett had just slammed his fist into her gurgling stomach. It was a horrible story. She hated the idea of this poor guy brooding about one bad year forever and getting nowhere. But even more than that, she hated the way Rhett seemed to be boasting about it, as if the Primo Levi team that he

barracked for had beaten her Anne Frank team.

'What's your problem?' she asked. 'Do you get off on stuff like that?'

Rhett sucked on his cigarette. 'Forget it,' he said. 'You wouldn't understand.'

Zan turned her head away and gulped a mouthful of mountain air. The back of her throat was burning - a bitter oily taste that coated her tonsils and paralysed her tongue. She couldn't speak. Four days of eggy breakfasts and fatty roast dinners were surging up her gullet in steady, nauseating waves. If she tried to say anything, she'd end up on her knees in the grass, spewing her guts out. So she swallowed the words and clamped her mouth shut and walked faster, leaving Rhett behind.

Starting to tell herself the Central story for the hundred and second time.

Trying to make sense of the way people screwed each other around.

*

Lee Ferris. He and Rhett were both guys but that was all they had in common. Lee didn't laugh at her or contradict her or tell her she wouldn't understand. Lee wanted everybody to be happy, everybody in the entire world.

He always asked Nan about her arthritis and her bridge games and the book she was reading for her book club, even when Zan was fidgeting in the background, trying to lure him out to the bungalow and kiss him again. If they went to a pub where some local indie band was playing, guys were always popping out of the crowd going, 'Lee, mate, guess what happened?' and Lee always listened. One of his ex-girlfriends phoned him from Sydney every time she had a crisis - like, once a week. He bought two tickets for the Cool Fools concert and then asked Zan whether she'd mind if they spent the evening with his mate Jacko instead, because Jacko's girlfriend had just dumped him. His little sister told Zan that Lee was the best brother and his mother told her that Lee was a wonderful son.

People said guys were only after one thing but that just proved they didn't know Lee Ferris. He could kiss Zan till her bones were melting and still remember to phone Jacko and check that he was okay. Lee made everybody feel special. Everybody in the entire world.

He was there when Zan's mum phoned from Venice to tell her about Barry's stroke. Nan said she didn't know what they would've done without him and Zan agreed. The worst ten minutes of her life. Mum sobbing and whispering, 'I thought he was dead'; Zan sobbing and yelling, 'He can't die. You have to do something.'

But when she thought about it afterwards, she mainly remembered Lee rubbing her cold hands and making cups of tea and phoning his doctor father to get a proper medical definition of strokes and how you recovered from

them. Zan was still shaking at the end of the evening but Lee had convinced her that Barry would be fine. So when her mum rang the following week to say that Barry was still in a coma and Zan would have to stay with Nan for a while longer, her first thought wasn't *Barry can't die*; it was *Great, that means I'll be going to Central with Lee*.

Although things didn't work out quite the way she expected. The day before school started, Lee sat on her bed in the bungalow and gazed at her s till she said, 'Okay, what is it? Let me guess. Jacko's depressed again and he needs another visit ... You have to go home early because Tina's phoning from Sydney ... Your mum's turning on a special family dinner ... Have I got it yet?'

Lee shook his head. 'Actually,' he said, 'this is about us.'

Zan went cold all over. 'Us?' she said. 'Good news or bad news?'

'Neither, really,' Lee said. 'It's just that ... well, Annalise has been really great about you and me getting together. But she was my girlfriend for a year and you're her best friend and all her other friends know both of us, so ... I figured it might be good if we didn't act like we're an item while we're at Central. We can still keep on seeing each other outside school. I'm not trying to change that. I just feel as though we shouldn't be, like, too in your face about it, especially in front of Annalise.'

For some reason Zan wanted to slide onto the floor and shove her head between her knees and howl like a baby. She realised she'd thought Lee was about to give her the flick, which would've been unbearable. Not twice in a row. She could handle stressing about Barry but she couldn't handle any more stress on top of that, which meant she needed Lee more than she'd ever needed anyone.

'Need you,' she whispered, to see how he'd react, and Lee smiled.

'Mmm,' he said, pulling her on top of him. 'Don't worry, you've got me.'

And actually it turned out to be kind of fun pretending not to know Lee while they were at school. Like an undercover agent or whatever, with special codes and message drops and a secret sense that they were playing a big joke on everyone. Zan could tease Lee by catching his eye and giving him the look she gave him just before they kissed, then turning round and continuing to talk to Annalise or Siobhan or Rhianna.

That was another advantage of being Zan-on-her-own at Central, not half of Zan-and-Lee. She could use her school time getting to know Annalise's friends and making herself an indispensable part of the group. Zan didn't want to be a leader but she liked to hang with the leaders and at Central, Annalise's girl gang ruled, for sure.

There were six or seven of them, depending on the day, but Rhianna and Siobhan were the ones who mattered and Emma was the friendliest. So for the first couple of weeks Zan swapped clothes with Siobhan and helped

Emma with her Italian homework and listened while Rhianna told her every known fact about Jed Johnston and the rest of Silicon Fish. The girl gang were all Fish fans, some of them in a joky way, some of them totally serious.

Rhianna was serious about everything. She could tell you who had fancied who from primary school up until yesterday, which teachers gave the best marks, and why you shouldn't be seen dead wearing halter tops or coloured bras with the straps showing. Siobhan was the opposite: she made fun of everything, except Annalise, because she'd been Annalise's best friend since Zan left Central. (Zan worked particularly hard at making friends with Siobhan, to show she wasn't trying to cut her out.) And Emma was shy and nervous and dropdead gorgeous, with amber eyes and strawberry hair and a supermodel body that she didn't seem to notice, although the guys at Central noticed, all right.

Here's Zan at Monday lunchtime, lolling on the best bench in the yard, the one where you can see everything and be seen by everyone. The girl gang always scores that bench, not because they fight for it but because the other kids give it to them, like tribute. Zan's on Annalise's right side, Siobhan's on Annalise's left side and the rest of the gang are perching on the edge of the bench or leaning on the back of the bench or sitting on the asphalt in front of the bench.

Annalise is the queen of the castle, of course. The whole school can tell your credit rating by how close to her you're sitting.

'Did you tape the new Silicon Fish video clip on "party party" last night?' she asks, kicking off the next topic.

'I tried,' Rhianna says from her place at Annalise's feet. 'But our VCR's on the blink, so I left a message on Emma's answering machine.'

'Oh no,' Emma gasps, hanging over Annalise's shoulder. 'I'm sorry. I never got the message.'

'Not good enough,' Siobhan says with her ten-centimetre grin that turns being bossy into a joke. 'You'll have to hit the Fishbowl website and find someone who's selling copies of the tape.'

Emma gnaws one of the stubby nails on her butterfly hands. Zan stretches and smiles and looks round the yard, feeling sorry for lumpy scowling Solange Foley - and weedy little Word Munro with his nose stuck in a book - and Luke Kellaway who sits by himself and drums on his knees - and Tom Butcher, who's always hanging on the edge of a different group of guys.

Zan has spent her life competing with her big sister Barb, who likes to be different. (A lesbo for her best friend, a boyfriend with long hair and a dero overcoat.) Zan tried being different but she was no good at it, so now she likes being popular.

'No problem,' she says, just as Emma starts apologising again. 'I had insomnia last night, so I sat up and watched "party party" and taped the Fish

Shop Boys.'

Emma looks relieved, Rhianna looks pleased, Siobhan grins at the Fish joke. And Annalise draws a line down the back of Zan's hand and says, 'Poor Sue. Still having trouble sleeping?'

Now everyone looks sympathetic. They all know about Barry's stroke, because Zan told Siobhan and Siobhan told the rest of the gang. So when Ms Tonelli from the principal's office comes bustling over to say that Zan's wanted on the phone, the girls sigh and pat her and whisper, 'Don't worry, Zan, it'll be fine.'

Zan believes it. As she goes strolling past Solange Foley, she's convinced that nothing can go wrong, because she's in with the right people. She goes on believing that everything will be fine until she puts down the phone and stares out of the principal's window, replaying what Barb just said.

Barry's come out of the coma but there's a lot of pressure on his brain, so the doctors are bunging in something called a shunt. She has to go home straight after school, so she'll be there when Mum phones from England to give them the details.

It doesn't sound fine at all.

Out on the best bench in the yard, Annalise is saying something to the girl gang, while Siobhan grins and Rhianna scribbles a note in the back of her folder and Emma runs a butterfly hand through her strawberry hair. They seem very small, as if she's looking at them through the wrong end of a telescope. Zan shakes Ms Tonelli's hand off her elbow and walks out of the office, down the corridor, across to the lockers and into Lee's arms.

'Barry's having an operation,' she says. 'I'm scared he's going to die.'

'Not here, Zan,' Lee says, pushing her away. 'We agreed, remember.'

*

That wasn't the worst moment of the last four months, partly because Zan couldn't take it in properly at the time, partly because it got worse later on. She hid in the toilets and cried till the siren went, then sneaked out and wandered up and down the Lygon Street shops, trying on clothes that didn't suit her and eating a squishy Italian cake.

When she got home, Barb and Nan were in the lounge room, two steps away from the phone, looking guilty because neither of them had ever really liked Barry. Her mum rang right on time. She cried. Zan cried. Barb took over and jotted down words like 'complications' and 'hydrocephalus shunt' and 'prognosis favourable' on the phone pad. Then it was all over. Barb and Nan got stuck into the other squishy Italian cake that Barb had brought, looking relieved because Barry wasn't dead yet, and Zan sneaked out to the bungalow and went on waiting for Lee.

He never came. Instead, an hour after school was over, Siobhan knocked on the door. 'Oh right, the Fish tape,' Zan said. 'Sorry, I just had some more bad news about Barry, so I forgot.'

'Yeah, we thought the phone call must be something to do with your stepdad,' Siobhan said. 'Hard to tell, though, when you keep freaking out and disappearing. You have to do better than that, Zan. It's not fair on Annalise.'

Zan felt as if the floorboards were giving way, dropping her down into the centre of the earth. The centre of the earth was molten lava, wasn't it? That would explain why she was sweating all of a sudden.

'Huh?' she said. 'I don't get it. My stepdad has an operation and you reckon it's not fair on *Annalise*?'

Siobhan rolled her eyes. 'Don't twist things around,' she snapped. 'I wasn't talking about your stepdad and you know it. I'm talking about you and Ashley Ferris. Annalise's boyfriend, right?'

The floor turned solid, saving Zan at the last minute. 'Oh, that!' she said, laughing with relief. 'Come off it, Siobhan. Annalise already told me she didn't mind if we went out together.'

'Yeah, Annalise is pretty generous,' Siobhan agreed. 'You wouldn't catch me lending my boyfriend to some private school wuss who goes to pieces just because her stepdad gets sick. I keep telling Annalise you're a drama queen but she can't help feeling sorry for you, on account of having known you since you were ten.'

When Zan lifted her hands to her face, she felt tears on her cheeks. 'Sorry,' she gulped. 'Could you say that again more slowly, please? I don't understand.'

'Hold the tears,' Siobhan told her. 'They may work on Ashley and Annalise but I'm not impressed. I can't see why you need to keep up the Ms Innocent act but if you really want me to spell it all out, here goes. Everyone knows Annalise and Ash are, like, Romeo and Juliet of the twenty-first century. Everyone knows they break up all the time and they always get back together. Everyone knows you pushed in, while Annalise was mad at Ash, and then acted like you'd throw yourself off a bridge or something if Ashley ditched you. So when they made up, Annalise reckoned Ash ought to go on seeing you till you were ready to face the facts. Except that after today I figured you weren't ever going to get your shit together, so I decided it was time someone told you what was going on.'

She smoothed her skirt across her knee, over and over. When Zan looked closer, she could see that Siobhan's was hand shaking. So this was hard for her too. Siobhan wasn't just being a bitch. She really meant it.

'Okay,' she said. 'You've told me. Now what do you expect me to do?'

'That's your business,' Siobhan said. 'Just don't go running to Annalise. This wasn't her idea, okay? As a matter of fact, she doesn't even know I'm

here. Think about it, Zan. Maybe, if you try really hard, you can work out how to be a friend to her, same as she's always been a bloody good friend to you.'

Zan held her breath till she heard the last echo from Siobhan's footsteps bouncing off the side of Nan's house. Then she cried for three hours without stopping and spent most of the night staring at the ceiling, repeating, 'Everyone knows. Everyone knows.'

She thought about telling Nan she was sick and skipping school but then she remembered Siobhan calling her a wussy drama queen who kept freaking and disappearing, so she headed off to Central the next morning, determined to show Siobhan how wrong she was.

But the minute she walked through the gate, Annalise came racing over to say, 'Sue, what's the matter?', sounding so worried and friendly that Zan ended up sobbing on her shoulder, while Annalise smoothed her hair and Siobhan watched scornfully from the background. And after that, things kept drifting between bad and worse.

Zan tried to act normal but everything she said seemed to have some sort of double meaning. If she teased Annalise, she felt like a traitor. If she was nice to Annalise, she felt like a suck. If she joined in when the girl gang was discussing guys, it was like she was promising to give Lee up and find someone else. If she didn't join in, she was sure she looked as though she was dreaming about Lee. If she talked about Barry, she wondered whether the gang would think she was a drama queen. If she didn't talk about Barry, all the panic and worry kept fermenting inside her until she thought she might explode.

Secrets. They made a mess of everything. Zan wished she could just tell Annalise what Siobhan had told her but somehow she never seemed to see Annalise on her own these days. They were still friends, Zan was positive about that, but someone else was always there - the whole girl gang, when they were at Central; Siobhan or Rhianna or Emma, if Zan dropped round to Annalise's place after school or at the weekend.

Like bodyguards, almost. Like the others were protecting Annalise. Zan hadn't seen it that way before but she couldn't help seeing it that way now.

Since she couldn't talk to Annalise, she found herself talking to Rhianna instead. She didn't mean to do it but when she took the Silicon Fish tape round to Rhianna's place, the whole story came spilling out. Everything Siobhan had said and everything Zan had thought since then. How much she needed Lee. How she still couldn't believe Annalise loved him more than she did, not after Annalise had told her so definitely that she was over Lee.

Rhianna listened like a vacuum cleaner, sucking more and more details out of Zan's brain. She nodded a lot and asked questions every now and then, to make sure she'd got the facts right. She said she understood how Zan felt about Lee, because she felt the same about Jed Johnston. She told Zan

about her grandad, who'd had a stroke too, and Zan talked about Barry and cried and talked some more.

'Thanks,' she said, when Rhianna passed her a handful of tissues. 'For a while there, I thought I was going crazy. But you can see my side of things, even if Siobhan can't.'

Rhianna frowned and said, 'Well, actually, I always hated the way you kept flirting with Ashley in front of Annalise. It was pretty tacky, y'know. I'm not surprised Siobhan called you on it.'

That threw Zan. She was three blocks away from Rhianna's house before she worked out what she should've said. ('Hold on a minute. I thought Lee was *my* boyfriend, remember? He said we were just keeping it under wraps to be nice to Annalise.') The name was part of the problem, Zan decided. The fact was, she couldn't relate to this Ashley guy that the girl gang kept going on about. He seemed like a totally different person from the Lee she knew.

But then, Lee seemed pretty different these days, too.

And that was the worst thing of all. The minute she'd burst into tears on his shoulder, her beautiful kind Lee had disappeared. He hadn't come near her house. Hadn't phoned. Wouldn't even look at her if they passed each other in the corridors at school.

It was like this fairytale Zan had read when she was little, about an ordinary girl who married a handsome prince and started to live happily ever after. There was a catch, though. There's always a catch in fairytales. The girl wasn't supposed to look at the prince but one night she sneaked a lamp into their bedroom and, of course, the handsome prince vanished on the spot.

The girl in the story had gone searching for her prince, east of the sun and west of the moon. Zan just walked four blocks to Lee's place and said, 'Listen, we have to talk.'

'Why?' Lee asked, avoiding her eyes. 'You know it all. There's nothing to say.'

Zan felt as if she'd turned to stone. She stood on the Ferris' front doormat, until Lee took her into his room and told her all the things he didn't want to say and she didn't want to hear. Yes, he was back with Annalise. Yes, they'd kept it secret, because they were worried about how Zan would react. Yes, that was probably a mistake. Yes, he could see why Zan felt betrayed.

'But you're wrong,' he said, looking straight at her. 'I really like you, Zan. It's just -'

Zan lost it. First she lost the stone shell that had been protecting her. Then she lost control. She couldn't remember everything she'd said, which was lucky, but she couldn't forget the part where she fell off the end of Lee's bed and lay on the floor, wrapping her arms round Lee's ankles, sobbing, 'You can't do this. You can't, you can't, you can't.' That image kept coming back afterwards, small and clear, like she was watching herself from the ceiling,

observing the snot running down from her nose and the cracked screech of her voice and the disgusted look on Lee's face.

No way could she fall asleep with a movie like that playing inside her head. Around three in the morning, Zan scuttled across the shadowy backyard and crept into the kitchen to make toast and cocoa. The toast smell woke Nan, who said, 'Oh dear, fretting about Barry again', and gave Zan one of her sleeping pills. She was sure it wouldn't work but when she opened her eyes next morning, the falling-on-the-floor memory seemed more blurred and distant, separated from her by a solid block of dream time.

Losing it with Lee made her even more desperate to act normal. She went bouncing across to the girl gang's bench at lunchtime, running late because four hours of pill-sleep had slowed her down, which meant that she had to sit on the ground beside Emma, while Rhianna sat next to Annalise. Not a problem, though. Zan smiled at everyone till her cheeks ached, laughed at all Siobhan's Silicon Fish jokes and then tried a joke of her own.

'Hey, Rhianna, you've got a photo of Jed Johnston in your wallet! Something fishy about that, if you ask me. Time to get a life.'

Rhianna stood up and mumbled 'Scuse me' and walked away. Annalise glanced down at Emma, who leapt to her feet and went racing after Rhianna. Zan's mouth was still stretched into a smile but no one else was laughing so she let the muscles in her face relax, one by one. The place next to Annalise was empty now but something told Zan it wouldn't be smart to sit there, even though the asphalt was sticking to her legs and her exhausted body wanted to collapse against the back of the bench.

She thought: *This is so weird. First Lee vanished and now the girl gang's decided I'm invisible.*

Since she was too tired to work out what she'd said wrong, Zan just kept her mouth shut till the end of lunchtime. The girl gang went on pretending she was invisible for the rest of the day but Zan managed to corner Emma by the lockers after school.

'How's your Italian going?' she asked. 'Need any more help with your homework?'

'No,' Emma said.

Not even 'No, thanks'. Zan shivered. Emma was terminally polite, so this was serious.

'What've I done?' she blurted and Emma said, 'You were horrible to Rhianna. It took me ages to calm her down. She was *crying*, Zan.'

Zan rubbed her gritty eyes. 'But everyone cracks jokes about Silicon Fish,' she protested. 'Siobhan does it all the time.'

'Not like that,' Emma said. 'Not about Rhianna's crush on Jed Johnston. She knows it's crazy, being in love with a pop star. You didn't have to rub it in.'

It was the last straw. If Emma was ticking her off - shy, nervous Emma, who never stood up to anyone - then maybe Zan really was as hopeless as the girl gang seemed to think. Maybe she'd been trying to hurt Rhianna on purpose, because Rhianna had taken her place next to Annalise. Maybe she'd wanted Annalise to notice her flirting with Lee. Maybe she'd only fallen for Lee in the first place because she was jealous of Annalise.

How could she tell? All of a sudden, Zan felt like everybody else knew her better than she knew herself. She wasn't sure of anything any more.

Nan let her have another sleeping pill that night. 'The last one,' she said. 'You can get addicted to those things, you know.'

Zan didn't care. Sure, the sleeping pill knocked her out but then her brain woke her up four hours later and forced her to go through everything that had happened, from start to finish, to see if she could make it end some other way.

No such luck. Whichever way she looked at it, she was completely alone. Mum and Barry trapped in England. Her old friends from Jarawa College out of reach on the far side of town. Her new friends at Central hating her. Her prince lost, somewhere east of the sun and west of the moon. Nan was the only person on her side and Nan was seventy-one years old, so that wasn't much help. Six months ago, she'd had a perfect life. Now she had nothing.

Zan thought: *I never realised how easy it is to turn into a loser.*

She went sleepwalking from class to class next day, stumbling through a fog of misery. As she headed out into the yard at lunchtime, she tripped over Solo Foley's foot. 'Watch it,' Solo snarled and Zan said, 'Sorry, I'm sorry.' It sounded like her theme song. She wasn't surprised when Solo laughed.

'Ah, forget it,' she said. 'Now you're actually talking to me, I might as well ask about that stuff you were saying in English last week. What did you mean when you reckoned justice isn't possible unless you know all the facts?'

Zan squatted down beside her and started explaining her ideas about justice. (Mostly borrowed from Barb's friend Leith, who was doing Legal Studies as part of her uni course, but she didn't need to tell Solo that.) Solo was smarter than she looked. She kept asking difficult questions that Zan had to think about. By the time she'd finished answering them, the siren was hooting and the girl gang was leaving the best bench in the yard, jostling past them on their way to class.

Zan sighed. Obviously, they still thought she was invisible. She was glad she'd had a break from sitting at Annalise's feet and trying to act normal. Only one problem. It was going to be even harder to walk across to the bench tomorrow.

A gumleaf shaped like a scythe blade came swinging down towards her. The track had levelled out and widened, tunnelling through a forest of ghost-grey gums. Bark peeled away from the trunks, exposing silver scars or mushroom-coloured wounds, and the ground between the trees was padded with skeleton moss and dead brown leaves. When Zan sighed, her breath hung on the air in misty swirls.

She thought: *It didn't have to be like that. I could've argued with Siobhan. I could've phoned Annalise and asked her if it was true. I could've gone to see Lee sooner, before I started freaking out. I could've told Rhianna I didn't mean to upset her. I could've explained how I was feeling about Barry. I could've asked someone for help.*

Why didn't I do any of that?

The path split in half. There was a sign to the left, saying 'Bayside 5 km', and a sign to the right, saying 'Finnegan's Cave and Falls 200 m'. Zan veered to the right. Rhett Foley could do what he liked but she was going to see the cave.

The path shrank and clung to the side of the hill. Grey clouds pressed down like bad memories. A steep drop beside her and a rushing sound in her ears. The falls. As her feet clattered across the grey-green planks of another walkway, Zan sighed again and caught hold of the rail and continued on automatic pilot.

She thought: *It didn't have to be like that. If only Siobhan had given me a friendly warning, instead of dumping on me. If only Rhianna had listened properly. If only Emma had realised that I was suffering too. If only Annalise had sent her bodyguards away and given us the chance to talk. If only Lee had loved me.*

But he didn't.

Her heart shrank and stuck to her ribs. A strip of orange tape snagged her across the chest. Zan ducked under it and kept walking, faster, faster, off the walkway and onto a sandy track. Brown leaves against a last patch of blue sky, like Lee's autumn eyes. Lee, who didn't love her. Lee, who had never loved her.

The ground gave way under her feet.

*

Two hours earlier Rhett would've said that his sister was the sulkiest girl in Australia. He would've been wrong. If you made some comment to Solo, at least she snarled back but Zan didn't even bother to answer. He'd tried three times and then given up. Like he cared, anyway. As far as he was concerned, Zan O'Connell could get fucked. Yeah, right. Fuck her.

Rhett thought: *You wish.*

He stopped and lit a cigarette and admitted that Zan was pretty stunning. But so what? It was a bad omen, her and Mick sharing the same name. He didn't need another O'Connell in his life, that was for sure. The last one had nearly finished him off.

Rhett dragged smoke down to the bottom of his lungs, held it there for half a minute and then sighed it out. Sure, cigarettes could kill you but nicotine worked as an upper *and* a downer, which made it the perfect drug for people who went up and down all the time. He didn't know how he would've got through the last four months without it.

The bush was full of small noises - leaves pattering onto moss, invisible birds and animals scuffling in the branches or scuttling into their burrows. Rhett smiled and strolled on. Ahead of him, the path divided, this way to Bayside, that way to the falls. He could hear the Zan-girl's trainers thudding across a walkway, so he shrugged and followed, glancing sideways at another sign.

'DANGER,' it announced. 'This walkway is currently under repair due to subsidence in the path. Please turn back.'

So why were Zan's trainers still marching steadily forward?

Rhett ditched his cigarette and sped up, lengthening his stride, gasping for breath. His heart was thudding like Zan's feet. As he hit the walkway, he saw Zan duck under a strip of tape and keep on going. Was she crazy or what? Couldn't she see the piles of grey-green timber stacked beside the path? Hadn't she noticed that the walkway had been taken apart, so the council could fix the ground underneath?

He yelled 'Zan!' and 'Stop!' but Zan went lurching on, stiff as a zombie.

Mindless. Helpless. Like an accident about to happen.

Rhett wanted to sit down and curl into a ball, cover his eyes and pretend it had nothing to do with him. But he was the only one there, so he pushed himself even harder, jumping off the walkway and shouting, 'Stop, you stupid idiot!' Zan didn't bother to answer. She was too busy waving her arms to keep her balance, as her right foot slid slowly off the path.

Sandy soil rained down on the bushes below. Zan's foot dangled in empty air. She squealed and twisted sideways, crashing onto the path. A fault line opened. A clay triangle shuddered and separated and fell, taking Zan with it.

Rhett shouted 'Not again!' and threw himself at the edge.

The ground gave way underneath him.

*

It all happened so fast that Zan didn't have time to be frightened. She surfed the air for a few seconds and then her clay surfboard hit the slope and exploded. Zan landed on her arse with a force that propelled her forward. She

skidded and rolled and crashed into a spiky bush. Tack-sharp leaves ripped her hands as she clutched at the nearest branch. It broke and sent her sliding down a twisty rain-channel, narrower than her hips. Chunks of gravel, embedded in the sides of the channel, snagged her jeans and slowed her down, giving her time to look and think. She looked ahead and saw the channel forking round the base of a gum tree.

She thought: *Oops. Feet out, hands up.*

Three seconds later her heels rammed into the gum tree. A second after that her hands impacted on smooth bark. Shock waves spread through her body, jarring every disc in her spine. Zan froze and waited to see whether the tree would hold.

Once she was sure she hadn't uprooted it, she unlocked the muscles in her legs and slid a couple of centimetres further, wedging her thigh against the tree's base and wrapping her arms round the trunk. Her right hand prickled. She realised she was still holding a piece of spiky branch and threw it away. For the next thirty seconds she could hear it scraping and thumping, as it bounced down to the bottom of the gully.

Zan thought: *That could've been me.*

Two minutes' worth of fear caught up with her in a rush. She was gasping so hard that her breath rasped like sandpaper; shaking so hard that her head nodded; hanging onto the tree so hard that her muscles twanged. Adrenalin kickback. Zan retched and hiccupped and clung to the gum tree as though it was the only safe thing in a dangerous world, until her lungs stopped heaving and her heart stopped hammering and she was able to lift her head and look around.

Below her, the hill dropped away in long folds of scrubby grass and spiky bushes. (Not as steep as it had looked from the path. There were mounds and ridges and runnels where the rain had worn the ground away, which explained why she hadn't dropped straight down to the bottom of the gorge.) Above her, the path looked as though a giant had taken a bite out of it, scattering yellow cake crumbs down the slope.

Zan winced and wondered whether the council would make her pay to mend it. No, wait a minute, it was their fault for building a shonky walkway and a collapsing path.

No, wait another minute. Maybe it was *her* fault. She'd ducked under that orange tape, without even wondering what it was doing there, which meant she'd probably missed a sign or two as well.

Right, that settled it. This whole deal was Annalise's fault and Lee's fault and the girl gang's fault. If she hadn't been thinking about them, she would've been paying more attention to things like safety tape and warning signs. She'd be standing on the walkway right now, complaining to Rhett about how the council had blocked it off.

Finding someone to blame made her feel better. Zan loosened her grip on the trunk, stretched cautiously and decided that the situation wasn't as bad as it seemed. Okay, she was wedged against a gum tree halfway down a gully, which was kind of embarrassing. But she hadn't knocked herself out or broken a leg or her neck, so she could just sit here and wait while Rhett went to find someone with a rope who could haul her back onto the path.

Only one problem with that plan. Rhett should've been up there on the walkway, leaning over the rail and waving, but he wasn't.

Why not?

Another spasm of terror jerked Zan's head sideways. She scanned the slope and started to run through all the worst swear words she knew.

She thought: *Oh, great. So that's why Rhett Foley isn't on the walkway - because he's stuck in another bush, two metres lower down.*

*

Rhett had always been convinced he was totally non-violent but if he'd been able to get his hands on Zan right then, he would've strangled her. You try to save someone's life and they instantly start swearing at you. How fair was that?

'Shut up,' he yelled. 'Just shut up, okay? You're not making things any better, y'know. We have to do something.'

'Like what? Grow wings and fly up to the path?'

Rhett's hands flexed. He wanted a cigarette more than anything but the nicotine hit would have to wait. 'Not up,' he snapped. 'At least, not unless you're a world famous mountain climber in disguise. We'll have to keep on sliding downhill till we hit the bottom.'

The minute he said it, he realised it was a brilliant idea. Shock must be good for the brain. He'd never thought of himself as the orienteering type, more the sitting-around-in-cafes type, but one look uphill was enough to convince him that the only way out was down.

Zan didn't agree, of course. She sat there, hugging her tree, while she made him explain how they could slide slowly and carefully one section at a time, then listed all the things that could go wrong. Rhett switched on his Jeanette Protection Device and picked leaf spikes out of his palms, until Zan raised her voice.

'In other words, it's a stupid plan,' she announced. 'Except the only alternative's waiting for someone to rescue us - and *you* talked Jeanette into thinking you'd probably walk back to Bayside, which means they won't come looking for ages. Which means we could be stuck here all night. Which means we might as well start sliding.'

'Feeling better now you've rabbited on for ten minutes?' he asked. 'Maybe

next time you could just cut to the chase and say, “Wow, Rhett, great idea”.’

‘Yeah, right,’ Zan said. ‘You’re a genius. That’s why you’re sitting in a thorn bush, instead of being halfway to the car park, going for help.’

Rhett’s face scorched like sunburn. A few seconds later, he realised he was blushing, something he hadn’t done for ages. Bloody Zan O’Connell. She had a real talent for finding his sore spots. He’d felt proud of himself for trying to rescue her, even if it hadn’t worked. But she was right, it would’ve been much smarter to fetch Greg or the cops or whatever.

‘Are we going to argue till it gets dark?’ he said, a bit too loudly. ‘Or are we going to slide?’

He thrust his left foot out until he found a stone to wedge his heel against. So far, so good. Rhett took a deep breath, let go of the bush and wriggled sideways, lining up his left buttock and his left foot. Nothing happened. He’d been expecting to go slipping forward as soon as he lifted his foot off the stone but in the end he had to shove hard with both hands to get himself started. He bumped over the stone and slithered across a smooth patch, ran straight into a tree root and stalled.

So, okay, tobogganing down a hill on your backside wasn’t as dangerous as it looked. Rhett pushed off again, feeling marginally braver this time. He mapped the slope ahead of him and aimed for the nearest tree, steering himself away from wedges of stone and sudden drops.

It felt good. As a matter of fact, it felt bloody terrific. Rhett laughed out loud, riding a long ridge that carried him past the tree he’d set his sights on, down to a taller heftier gum tree that jutted out from the hillside, anchored by a shelf of roots. He landed in a nest of dry leaves, picked up a handful and tossed them into the air.

‘Yes!’ he said. ‘Yes, yes, yes!’

The gum leaves fell around him like heavy confetti. One of them caught in his hair and swung in front of his eyes. Rhett turned round, planning to shout something encouraging to Zan, but he couldn’t see her, so he blew the leaf away and tried again.

Felt a twinge of panic when he found the Zan-tree and realised it was Zanless. Heard a rattle of small stones, looked downhill and saw a red smudge flicking between the silver-grey gum trunks. It was Zan O’Connell, of course, slalomming down a long steep slope.

‘Typical,’ Rhett said. ‘Trust her to be a bigger jock than me.’

He hoisted himself out of his nest and followed, leaving the shelf of roots and skidding down the slope. Much faster than before. Almost too fast. A rush of speed that finetuned every nerve in his body and sharpened all his senses. Rhett felt as though he could’ve counted the dots of gravel scraping his bum, the bushes whizzing past, the molecules of air whirling around him. He checked his position, veered to the right and slammed into the next tree with a

jolt that realigned every bone in his body. A nanosecond later Zan landed on top of him.

‘Wow, Rhett,’ she gasped. ‘That was a great idea.’

They untangled themselves and leaned against the tree, panting like dogs in a heatwave. Rhett decided to forgive Zan for being a jock. After all, it would’ve been worse if she’d been a helpless damsel in distress. Rescuing damsels wasn’t exactly his thing.

Zan yawned and asked, ‘How much further?’

‘Two more slides,’ Rhett guessed.

‘Only two? Pity. This is cool fun.’

‘Uh-huh. We’d better head for different trees next time, but.’

‘Sure. Glad I wore my jeans today. How does your bum feel?’

‘Okay. I’ll be a write-off tomorrow, though.’

‘Tomorrow is another day.’

‘That’s what Solo says.’

‘Yeah, I pinched it from her.’

They swung their legs round to opposite sides of the trunk, gave each other the V-sign and kicked off. Not a race, Rhett reminded himself, but he couldn’t help keeping an eye on Zan as she went speeding from one spiky bush to another, cutting corners, yelling ‘Wheel’ like a kid at a fun fair.

Watching her, Rhett forgot to watch out for his next stopover. When he checked the ground, he found himself heading towards a razor-backed ridge, so high that he couldn’t see over it. That wasn’t a good sign. He swerved abruptly, coasted along one of the rain channels, spotted a suitable tree and braked with enough force to toss him out of the channel and slam him against the trunk.

When he looked down, the bushes that lined the gully were shimmering like a mirage. The stream that fed into the waterfall, presumably. Rhett sighed, remembering Jeanette serving sandwiches beside the black pool, only an hour ago. A boring nuisance at the time but now he’d give a week’s Austudy money to be back there, feeling bored.

He examined the hill and noted that it ended in a steep curve, leading towards even steeper rocks, which meant he’d need to be more careful. Then he spotted the Zan-girl skimming down the slope, forgot about being careful and launched himself with a shove.

The first rush tilted him sideways. His pack swung like a pendulum, tipping him even further off balance. Rhett flailed and kicked and snatched at tufts of dry grass that uprooted themselves and showered him with yellow dirt.

For the next few metres he travelled along on his back, spitting dust, until a rock snagged his pack and gave him a chance to fling his arms out. He pushed himself upright, spine straight and legs stretched out, like the lycra ladies in the workout videos that his mum sometimes dusted off, except that

he happened to be sliding down a diagonal slope at a speed that scorched his jeans.

Rhett thought: *This'd be funny if I was watching it, instead of doing it.*

As he glanced round to see whether Zan was watching him and laughing, his heels hit a boulder. Since his arse was still travelling at warp speed, his knees folded like a concertina. Then his backside rammed his heels and his legs splayed out in a V, kicking wildly at the air for a few panicky seconds, before their weight dragged the rest of his body forward.

Over the edge.

Out into the air.

Down

down

down.

Hard ground thumped the breath out of his lungs. A rock rose up and punched him in the ribs. Another rock slapped his wrist. Rhett lay flat on his back, feeling like the chalk outline of a corpse at a crime scene. The sky wheeled past, grey-wolf clouds chasing white-sheep clouds across a pale blue field. After a while Zan's face appeared in the middle of the field, decorated with a huge grin.

'Okay, you won,' she said. 'Was it worth it?'

'Sure,' Rhett said. 'I even had time for a nap.'

If he could talk, he was definitely alive. Besides, he hurt too much to be dead. Legs throbbing with gravel burn, skin tattooed with scratches, whip scars from passing branches, dust stinging his eyes, tiny thorns prickling inside his shirt and a dagger of pain in his left ankle. When he tried to sit up, Rhett realised his foot was jammed between two rocks. He rescued it and slumped back, groaning.

'No more naps. This is your early morning wake-up call,' Zan said. She pushed at her sleeve and added, 'Rats, must've left my watch in the bathroom. What's the time?'

Rhett hoisted his wrist off the rock and examined it. 'Quarter to five,' he told her.

'Shit. We better get moving. Back in a minute.'

Her face disappeared. By the time Rhett had struggled into a sitting position, the red parka was disappearing behind a fuzzy wall of bushes.

'Hey,' he called, panicking again. 'Where are you going?'

'Do you have to know everything?' Zan asked. 'I need a piss, okay?'

'Oh. Sorry. Fine. Go right ahead.'

Now that she'd mentioned it, Rhett realised that his bladder was aching along with the rest of him. He stood up, throbbing and stinging and prickling, and limped over to the mini-cliff that he'd just fallen down. He was still hosing the orange rock when Zan coughed behind him. A teacher's cough, as though

she was ticking him off for being a naughty boy.

Rhett thought: *All right, maybe I should've found a toilet bush, like you did. But my ankle hurts. And I'm not going to apologise again.*

He zipped his fly slowly and turned to find Zan marching off down the gully. 'Hold on,' he yelled. 'Why that way, instead of up to the cave?'

'Because it's quicker,' she said, without stopping or even bothering to look round. 'Why go backwards, when you can go forwards?'

'Why plough through the bush, when we could be walking on a path?' Rhett countered.

Zan wasn't impressed. 'Face it, your parents'll start throwing whammies at five o'clock sharp. That'll freak Nan and she's freaked about my mum already. You can climb up to the path, if you like, but me, I want to get back to the car park as quickly as possible. We can't get lost or anything. The stream'll lead us straight down to the Cobbleigh Falls, remember.'

She ducked under a low branch and pushed through a screen of leaves. Rhett limped faster, trying to keep up. He could've gone on arguing longer but he decided to save his breath for groaning.

'Not my parents,' he said. 'My dad and step-mum.'

'Whatever,' Zan said. 'Come *on*.'

For the first five minutes Rhett kept looking round at the gully. The stream wriggled along beside them, bouncing across smooth flat stones. Buttresses of orange rock propped up long steep slopes, roofed by a slab of sky. A secret place, warm and quiet and cosy, walled off from the rest of the world. Rhett liked the idea of seeing something that tourists couldn't see.

But by the time he'd scrambled over half a dozen boulders and slithered down half a dozen gravel screes, his foot felt so sore and swollen that he needed all his energy to haul it along. After that he concentrated on the square of ground straight ahead of him, whimpering every time he saw a stony drop, flinching whenever Zan shouldered through a cluster of bushes and let their branches snap back to flick him across the cheek.

A long time later he shifted his eyes to the next square of ground and found Zan's trainers in the middle of it, teetering on a rock ledge. When he glanced up, the sagging line of her shoulders told him what he was about to see.

Black rock, glossy with spray, dropping down into a black pool. The walls of the gully folding round the waterfall. Hugging the rock so tightly that there wasn't even room for a goat track between the hills and the falls.

'Told you so,' he said. 'No way can we get down there.'

'Thanks a lot,' Zan snapped. 'I really needed to hear that.' Then she turned and stared and said in a voice that he hadn't heard before, 'Rhett! What's the matter?'

'Twisted my ankle when I fell,' he muttered. 'Hurts a bit but I'll be fine.'

‘Guys,’ Zan said, like she was talking to Solo or someone. ‘They always have to be heroes.’

She tugged a head scarf out of her backpack, dipped it in the stream and peeled back his sock. Cold tightness wound around his ankle and took the pain away within seconds. It felt so good that Rhett wanted to burst into tears. He fumbled for a cigarette and lit it, watching the smoke eddy out across the falls and plunge down towards the black pool.

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘Should’ve thought of that before. But I wasn’t ever a boy scout.’

‘Me either,’ Zan said. ‘Will you be okay, climbing up to -? Nah, scrub that. Stupid question. We’ve got no alternative. We have to go back and find the path. What time is it now?’

‘Quarter to five,’ Rhett said.

As the words seeped through several layers of tiredness and into his brain, he realised there was something wrong with them. For some reason, he found himself thinking about schoolgirls in floaty muslin dresses who turned into zombies and went gliding up a rock face, while time stood still. A movie, that was it. An Australian movie he’d seen when he was little.

‘Oh, no,’ he yelped. ‘This is exactly like *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.’

At the same moment, Zan yelped, ‘*Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Omigod.’ They slapped their hands together and said ‘Snap!’. Then they edged closer and looked round, checking the hill for hypnotised schoolgirls, listening for spooky movie music.

‘It’s okay,’ Rhett said, remembering. ‘We haven’t walked into a time warp. I banged my watch on a rock, same time as I sprained my ankle, that’s all.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Zan said. ‘I knew that. I was just joking. Come on, Rhett. It must be almost half past five by now. We have to hurry.’

It was harder this time, because they were going uphill, instead of downhill. But it was easier too, because Zan kept turning to ask if he was all right and holding back the springy branches and slowing down whenever he dropped behind. Even so, Rhett’s ankle was bulging and throbbing by the time they got back to the place where they’d started. They glanced at each other, decided not to mention how late it was and went trudging on.

The sky settled over them like a heavy grey lid. Shadows silted down the hill, turning the cliffs on either side into grey prison walls. The stream escaped from its narrow channel and spilled out across the floor of the gully, washing away the earth and polishing the bedrock. When Rhett tried to climb the gravel slopes beside the stream, small stones skidded under the soles of his trainers and carried him backwards, as fast as he moved forwards.

He pumped his legs like a cartoon character, running to stay on the same spot. Felt his foot slip and twist, jabbing another spike of pain into his ankle. Grabbed Zan’s hand and let her haul him onto a grass island, where they

leaned together and rested for a few seconds, before starting again.

In the silence after their breathing slowed, they heard water gurgling and gushing. They glanced at each other, decided not to say, 'Hope this waterfall isn't as steep as the other one,' and went trudging on. Brown rocks speckled with pearly grains of stone made it easier for Rhett's shoes to hold and grip. He watched his feet lift and settle and push off, moving on automatic, pretending to ignore the pain.

After a while he realised they were halfway up a rock staircase, with water splashing from step to step. Spray patted his face like a cool hand, soothing the scratches on his cheeks.

'We're going to make it,' he said and Zan added, 'Cross fingers, touch wood.'

A few minutes later Rhett's right foot landed on a flat stone slab. He heaved his left foot up to join it and looked around. A rock circle under his feet. A broken circle of trees above him, looped by a ribbon of sandy path. And a semicircle of pure darkness, arching up from the rock towards the trees.

'That must be Finnegan's Cave,' he said.

*

Zan couldn't believe herself. Before she could stop it, her hand dived into the front pocket of her backpack and pulled out her camera. Now she was turning in circles with a camera for an eye, dividing the view into rectangles, trying to find a rectangle worth snapping. Trees: no. A rabbit track scribbled across the hillside: no. The darkness inside the cave: no. The yellow scar underneath the walkway, marking the spot where she'd fallen: no, no, no. Rhett grinning beside her: oh, why not?

Click.

'Tourist,' Rhett said, still grinning, and then he said, 'Finnegan's Cave. Why does that sound familiar?'

'Because of the poem,' Zan told him. 'My dad used to say it, when we were little, and tickle us to make us laugh.'

There was an old man named Michael Finnegan.

He grew whiskers on his chin.

The wind came out and blew them in again.

Poor old Michael Finnegan.

Begin again.

There was an old man -'

'Okay, that's enough. I get it.'

'- called Michael Finnegan.'

'I said, enough.'

'He grew whiskers on his chinnegan.'

'Quit it, Zan.'

'Make me. *The wind came out and blew them* - hey, stop tickling - *in again.*'

'Give up. Go on, say you give up.'

'You wish. *Poor old* - don't make me drop the camera. *Poor old Michael Finnegan.*'

'You look different when you're laughing like that.'

'Begin again. There -'

'Oh, right. So you want me to start tickling you again?'

'No way!'

Zan backed off, stopping just before her foot splashed into the stream. Rhett was as easy to tease as Barb. Older sisters and brothers took themselves so seriously - she should've remembered that sooner.

Although Barb never got that look on her face, mouth going soft at the corners, almost as if Rhett had been going to kiss her. A strange idea. Zan wasn't sure whether she did or didn't like it. So she swung the camera up for protection and focussed on Finnegan's Cave.

It wasn't much of a tourist attraction, really. Just a banana-shaped curve under an overhang of boulders that looked like giant lumps of toffee stuck together. Caves were supposed to be secret hollows in the earth but this one was more like a small stage for an outdoor theatre, a couple of metres deep. Still, she might as well get a shot of it, now she was here.

Zan steadied the camera and clicked. Then something tapped her cheek, hard but wet, and she lowered the camera just in time to see the next raindrop hit the tip of her nose. As she looked up at the sky, Rhett grabbed her hand.

'The cave,' he said. 'Quick. If we stay here, we'll be drowned.'

The clouds sagged and sloshed, like the balloon water bombs that the boys used to throw on the last day of school at Central. Rhett was pulling her into the cave when the first bomb smashed on the rocks, spraying out in a fan shape that crossed with the fan from the next water bomb.

It was better than the fountains in the French castles that Zan had seen on some TV documentary. She stood safe and dry in the shadows and watched rain like fluttering fans, rain like steel rods, rain like bouncing balls of mercury, rain like fireworks exploding, until the fans and rods and balls and fireworks merged and turned into a flat, thick, watery wall.

Zan thought: *Okay, show's over. I want to go home.*

All of a sudden she felt tired and sore. In a weird sort of way, she'd enjoyed sliding down the hill and exploring the gully but now that the excitement had worn off, her body was starting to complain about its cuts and

bruises and scrapes. Zan groaned and collapsed onto the cave floor, scowling at the wall of rain.

'Yow,' she said. 'The stone's cold. Get that sleeping bag out of your pack, so we can sit on it.'

Rhett spread the padded bag out like a rug, smoothing it across the stone floor. Obviously the type of guy who couldn't fall asleep if there was a single wrinkle in the sheets. It was one of those double sleeping bags. Zan started by imagining Greg and Jeanette snuggled up together and then realised she'd switched to imagining her and Rhett.

She thought: *Me snuggling with Solo Foley's big brother? I don't think so. Not even if I wasn't still in love with Lee.*

Remembering Lee made her bruises ache and her cuts sting. She stretched out, taking more than her fair share of the bag, and looked up at the roof of the cave. Honeycomb rock with lumps of dried mud clinging to the pale grey hollows. Birds' nests but no birds. Somehow that seemed really sad. Zan turned over and lay on her side, feeling sad and sore and lonely, until the shadows filling the cave started to spread into her brain.

As she balanced on the edge of sleep, she saw a picture in the darkness, small and bright as the rectangle inside a camera. Zan O'Connell marching along the walkway, noticing the orange tape but choosing to ignore it. Zan O'Connell flailing on the crumbling path. Zan O'Connell, who looked like she was deliberately throwing herself over the edge, not just slipping and falling.

Zan thought: *Weird. Why would I want to do that?*

*

Zan pushed her fist under her chin and let out a small contented grunt. Rhett glared at her. How the hell could she fall asleep like that? Some people had it easy. He couldn't sleep - wouldn't let himself sleep - ever since... well, since Mick.

It seemed like he was always waiting for the next bad thing to happen, even though he knew it wouldn't do him any good. After all, he hadn't been able to stop the last bad thing from happening. Probably wouldn't be able to stop the next one, either.

Still, that made it okay to lie down beside Zan. Since he knew he wouldn't go to sleep, he could rest for a bit, then wake her as soon as the rain slackened off. Downpours like this didn't usually last long. They'd still have time to climb up to the path while it was light and then they could grope their way along the path, even if it got dark before they reached the car park. Nothing to worry about, apart from getting mud marks on Jeanette's sleeping bag.

Outside, rain hammered the rock and topped up the stream, making it rush

and gurgle. Inside, the cave rippled with watery grey light. Rhett smiled at the swallows' nests glued to the roof and thought about swallows migrating off to the equator for the winter. He felt unexpectedly peaceful, the way he'd felt when he and Manny were driving up the coast and across to Darwin - long empty stretches of road and no one knew exactly where you were, so no one could corner you and make you do things. It was the same now. Trouble behind him, trouble ahead of him but just for the moment he was in a trouble-free zone.

The rain shut out the world and sang lullabies. Rhett closed his eyes and repeated his favourite rain poem, timing the lines to match the rhythm of the next squall.

*'Il pleure dans mon coeur
Comme il pleut sur la ville;
Quelle est cette langueur
Qui penetre mon coeur?*

*O bruit doux de la pluie
Par terre et sur les toits!
Pour un coeur qui s'ennuie,
O le chant de la pluie!*

How would you translate that? 'It's weeping in my heart like it's raining in town.' (But that missed the French pun on *pleure* meaning 'weep' and *pleut* meaning 'rain'.) 'What's this dreamy tiredness that's penetrating my heart?' Yuck. That sounded terrible. Rhett decided that he was definitely a writer, not a translator. Although, even if the guy had to say it in French, he'd got it right when he said, 'For a heart that's tired of itself - oh, the song of the rain!'

He thought: *That's me. That's exactly how I feel.*

The rain sounds lulled him and cradled him. Sad, he was always sad these days but this time it was a pleasant melancholy, something he could savour and enjoy, the way the poet had enjoyed matching all those melancholy French rhymes. A rain feeling. Funny, he hadn't felt any of the other feelings for hours, not since he'd fallen off the cliff. No plexiglass screen feeling, no claustro feeling, no going-down-in-a-lift feeling. He'd been too busy dragging one foot after another to have time for that.

And now he was taking a break in a trouble-free zone, with Zan snoring softly beside him and the rain washing his heart clean. Rhett smiled and snuggled his head into the crook of his arm. As he balanced on the edge of sleep, he caught a brief glimpse of a movie playing somewhere at the back of his brain. Rhett Foley flinging himself over the edge of the path, like he was throwing himself after Zan, instead of trying to catch her.

He thought: *Strange. Why would I want to do that?*

*

Rain hammers the rock. The stream rushes and gurgles. Darkness stains the sky and overflows the stone bowl, blotting out the path and the cave and the broken circle of eucalypts. The rain slows to a gentle drizzle and then stops. Trees drip. Small animals nose out of their hiding places and rustle the fallen leaves. Water surges down the falls, humming and chattering. The clouds shrink and separate, revealing pinprick stars.

Rhett dreams about opening doors.

Zan dreams about falling down a flight of stone steps. The last fall goes on forever. A scream echoes round her skull and shakes her awake.

*

When she opened her eyes, Zan was expecting to see the walls of the Seaview guest house. But instead she saw blackness and heard a wolf howling, so for the first few seconds she assumed she was still asleep and dreaming.

Then a voice said, 'Oh no. He's dead.'

Zan thought: *Barry!*

'He can't be,' she yelled. 'He can't be. He can't be.'

'He is,' the voice said. 'His skin's cold. Feel it.'

A hand found her wrist and thrust her palm at the darkness. Zan whimpered, expecting to feel Barry's dead face. Her fingers pawed the air, then jerked back so hard that they broke the hand's grip.

Apparently, she wasn't dreaming, after all. She was wide awake, lost in the hills, and nobody had even come looking for her. Plus she was holding hands with Solo Foley's brother, Rhett, who seemed to have turned into a werewolf or a maniac or something.

'Artefacts of *rigor mortis*,' the maniac said and Zan said, 'Huh?'

'The way your hand twitched,' Rhett said, sounding a bit embarrassed. 'It reminded me of this medical term, meaning the way bodies can move after they're dead.'

'Poser,' Zan said. 'I hate people who use words no one else can understand. Anyway, I'm not dead. Who is?'

A short silence and then Rhett said, 'Mick, my stepdad. Who did *you* think I meant?'

'Barry, my stepdad,' which was a pretty weird coincidence. Zan laughed, a rusty screw-loose sound, and said, 'Snap!'

'Snap!' Rhett said at exactly the same moment. 'Tell me about it, Zan.'

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Everything. Why you’re so freaked about your stepdad. Why you keep acting like it’s you versus everyone else in the world.’

‘Oh. All right.’

The funny thing was, she meant it. If a helicopter rescue squad had landed on the rock circle right then, Zan would’ve said, ‘Go away, we’re talking.’ Rhett wanted to hear the story. She wanted to tell it. Simple as that.

There was no hurry, either. She was happy to wait while Rhett fiddled with the zip on the sleeping bag, opening it out, so they could sit on one half and tuck the other half around them, like a cave inside a cave. Zan shifted sideways - not exactly leaning on Rhett, just pressing against him to soak up the warmth from his shoulder - and started to tell the Central Secondary College story for the hundred and third time.

Or the first time, if you were counting the times she’d said it out loud.

The darkness helped. Since she couldn’t see Rhett’s face, she didn’t have to wonder whether he was judging her, like Siobhan and Rhianna and Emma, or feeling sorry for her, like Annalise and Lee. So she just talked, on and on and on, about meeting Lee and Annalise telling them to go ahead and Barry’s stroke and the girl gang seeing the whole thing from a totally different angle, making her wonder whether she was as mean and mixed up as they thought she was.

Every time Zan decided she must be boring Rhett stupid, he asked some sort of practical question that she had to answer. The questions helped too. When she told Rhett how Siobhan had called her a drama queen, he said, ‘Hang on, wasn’t all that stuff about your stepdad a genuine drama?’ When she told him about Emma blaming her because Rhianna was crying, he said, ‘So would she have blamed Annalise or Lee, if *you’d* started to cry?’ When she told him about feeling completely alone, he said, ‘What about your father?’

‘Um,’ Zan said. ‘Never even thought of phoning him.’

‘Why not?’ Rhett asked.

‘Dunno. Haven’t seen him for ages. Two years, I think, and I didn’t see much of him before that. The minute him and Mum split, he took off for Sydney, married a trophy blonde and had two perfect kids. My sister and I used to go and stay for a week in the summer holidays but we always felt like we were in the way. And he didn’t seem to care when we started making excuses and copping out.’

‘Did you care?’

‘Not by then. But I cared at the beginning. I mean, Barb was Mum’s girl but I was Dad’s girl, so when Dad walked, I was, like, totally alone.’

‘Oh, right. That explains why your stepdad’s so important.’

‘... Yeah. Guess so.’

The last question took her up to the point where she'd ducked under the orange tape and walked over the edge of the path, last time she'd tried to tell the story. Zan shivered. Suddenly, telling her story to the darkness wasn't enough. She needed answers, just as much as she needed questions.

'So what do you reckon?' she asked and then wished she hadn't.

She thought: *What if Rhett reckons I'm a bad friend, like Siobhan said, or a flirt, like Rhianna said, or a horrible person, like Emma said? Don't know if I can handle that.*

But before she could take it back, Rhett said, 'I reckon those so-called friends of yours are bitches. You're better off without them.'

'Bitches?' Zan breathed, rolling the word round her mouth and tasting it. 'That's a bit unfair. They were just protecting Annalise, plus Emma was protecting Rhianna as well.'

'You think so? Frankly, your mate Annalise sounds like she can look after herself. If you ask me, they were sucking up to her, not protecting her.'

Zan started to laugh and then tried to stop herself. She wasn't supposed to be laughing at Annalise. She was supposed to be feeling bad about everything she'd done.

'But Lee,' she tried. 'Lee thought I was a mess too.'

'And you believe a guy who goes sneaking round, seeing another girl behind your back? Come off it, Zan. You're smarter than that.'

'Am I?'

'Yeah, sure.'

Zan found a chip of dead skin near her thumbnail. She tucked her thumb into her mouth and bit down, frowning at the night. The darkness wasn't as solid as before. Now her eyes were used to it, she could see several shades of black - metallic blue-black for the sky, the pitch black silhouettes of the treetops, charcoal grey for the rocks, and black lurex glints on the folds and pleats of the stream.

The warmth from Rhett's shoulder had spread right through her body by now, except for her toes, which felt like two rows of ice cubes. She wriggled them inside her shoes and hugged her knees to her chest.

'I'm not saying you're right,' she told Rhett. 'But if you *are* right, why did I let it get to me?'

'That's obvious, isn't it?' he said and Zan said, 'Not to me.'

'Oh, all right. If you insist.' He was silent for a few seconds and then he said, 'Most people can't handle death. They don't like talking about it. They don't even like thinking about it. So your so-called friends had two choices. They could admit that your stepdad was in a bad way, which meant admitting something like that could happen to their dads, as well, or they could decide you were a hopeless wimp, which meant it was your problem, not theirs. Like I said before, bitches.'

Zan's toes wriggled and rubbed. She felt as though Rhett had picked her story up and turned it around, so far that it was facing in the opposite direction. The same but utterly different. For the first time, everything made sense.

'Jesus,' she blurted. 'You *are* right. It's lucky I didn't -'

'Lucky you didn't top yourself?'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'Come on,' Rhett said, sounding pleased with himself for guessing. 'You can't stop there. Tell me the rest of the story.'

*

So, okay, her heart hurt every time she moved but she still had to decide where she was going to sit at lunchtime. If she sat with Solo Foley again, she might as well embroider LOSER on her school jumper. Zan felt like a loser, for sure, but she wasn't prepared to tell the whole world.

Next day she pushed the corners of her mouth into a smile and went striding across to the best bench in the yard, swinging her arms like the supermodels she'd been watching on TV. Annalise was in the middle, as usual. Siobhan was on her right, Rhianna next to Siobhan, with the rest of the girl gang clustered around them and an empty space on the left side of the bench - nothing there except Annalise's lunch box.

Zan considered the idea of shifting the lunch box and sitting down beside Annalise. But she wasn't feeling quite that brave, so she just said 'Hi, everyone' and went to perch on the back of the seat.

No one said 'Hi, Zan'. In fact, none of the girl gang even seemed to realise she was there. Zan felt so invisible that she started to wonder if she really existed. She was sliding two fingers up her sleeve, planning to pinch her arm and see whether it hurt, when Lee came strolling over. Annalise whisked the lunch box off the seat and he sat down, slinging an arm around her shoulders.

Heads turned. Eyes went sliding sideways. Apparently, Zan must've become visible again, because the whole girl gang was waiting to see how she'd react. Zan was wondering about that too. She felt as numb as if she'd had dentist's injections all over, which was good, because it gave her a chance to make it through the next forty minutes without giving the girl gang what they wanted.

But then Lee turned around and said, 'Hi, Zan.' And while Zan's brain was still telling her numb mouth to smile, her numb legs pushed her upright and carried her off across the yard.

When Rhianna had walked out, Annalise had sent Emma after her. When Zan walked out, she had to wait twenty-four hours to find out whether anyone had noticed. She begged Nan for another sleeping pill that night, practically

went down on her knees, but as far as Nan was concerned, that just proved she was getting dependent on the pills, which meant she'd better not have any more.

Friday night was torture. Zan told herself the Central story twenty times and it sounded worse each time she told it. So on Saturday morning she volunteered to do the shopping, put on her most adult clothes, dropped into the twenty-four hour clinic near the supermarket, told a few lies and came home with two bags of groceries and her own bottle of pills.

When she walked into the kitchen, Annalise was there, chatting with Nan.

'Look, you've got a visitor,' Nan said. 'I've been telling Annalise she should drop round more often. I miss that smiling face of hers, now you two see each other all the time at school.'

Zan thought: *Oh, Nan, how wrong can you get?* Then she focussed on Annalise's smiling face and said, 'Want to bring your coffee out to the bungalow?'

Annalise went straight to the leftover trophies on Grandad's workbench, just like she always had. For a moment, Zan almost believed that they were still friends. So she was smiling when Annalise swung around, balancing the littlest silver cup on her palm.

'That was so childish, Sue,' she said. 'If you want to prove you're over Ashley, you'll have to do better than that.'

'I wish you'd quit calling me "Sue",' Zan said before she could stop herself. 'And plus, I'm *not* over Lee.'

Her smile twitched and shrank. Annalise stood and watched until her mouth started to quiver.

'Not the freakout act again,' she said. 'Ash warned me about that one. When are you going to get real? I mean, I backed off when I thought Ash was keen on you. So you ought to back off, now you know he never stopped fancying me.'

'What about you?' Zan asked. 'Do you fancy Lee? Or were you just jealous?'

'Jealous?' Annalise said. 'Oh right, I suppose you think we should all be jealous of you, Miss Private School, slumming it at Central. Rhianna told me how you've been going round telling everyone you'd be better for Ash than me. I thought you were my friend, Sue. As a matter of fact, I came over to say we still want you in the group, even after you walked out on us yesterday. But hey, you obviously get on better with rejects like Solo Foley. At least she'll be grateful for the chance to hang with a private school princess, unlike us. Goodbye, Sue. Have a nice life, okay?'

The silver cup slammed onto the workbench and the door slammed two seconds later. Zan snatched up the cup and stared at the crack in its base, the shadowy dent in its side. Tears spilled down her cheeks. Tears for the

broken cup; tears for her grandfather, who seemed to be dying all over again; tears for Nan, who had to go on living without him; tears for Barry and her mum, because their story could end the same way.

Crying over her friendship with Annalise, which had maybe never even existed. Crying for herself, because she wasn't just a loser: she was lost. She couldn't go back to Central and face Rhianna, who'd listened and watched her cry and then twisted her words around, and Annalise, who hated her, and Lee, who'd told Annalise how Zan fell on the floor and howled.

But she had nowhere else to go.

That night, the sleeping pill didn't work. Zan stared at the darkness for three hours, telling the Central story for the twenty first and twenty second times. In the end she got up and tipped another pill out of the bottle. Then another and another and another, lining them in rows across the workbench. That wouldn't be enough, of course. They'd never give you enough, not in one bottle. It'd take two bottles, at least.

The backyard was dark with shadows and bright with light from the street. Nan was snoring when Zan tiptoed into her room. She tiptoed back to the bungalow and lined up Nan's pills underneath her pills. Round yellow blobs, like golden seeds. Zan tapped one with her fingernail to make it wobble and smiled at the thought of finally going to sleep.

She thought: *Forever and ever. Amen.*

Amen was a church word. Zan went to church with Nan on Sundays, even though she didn't exactly believe in all that God and heaven stuff. When you died, you were dead, that was all. Nan would get up tomorrow and come out to the bungalow, dressed in her church clothes. At first she'd think Zan was asleep, but then she'd realise Zan was dead. Like Grandad.

She thought: *Oh, hell. I can't do that to her.*

Time passed. Zan picked up one of the pills, moving as slowly as if it weighed a ton. She dropped it back into the bottle. Then another and another and another. Nan was still snoring as she settled the bottle carefully on the bedside table. Zan tiptoed into the bathroom, shook her own pills into the toilet and pushed the flush button - quickly, before she could change her mind and fish them out again. The golden seeds washed away into the sewers under the city. In a movie, there would've been background music, to show she was doing something important.

In Nan's bathroom at four in the morning, there was only the sound of the toilet flushing.

*

'Mum phoned next day, in the middle of Sunday tea,' Zan said. 'The shunt in Barry's brain had got infected. Mum can't handle international phone calls.'

Even though Barry's rich as, she still worries about how much it's costing. But this time she raved on and on about how in the middle of the night Barry opened his eyes and looked straight at her and went, "Sandy, I'm not giving up yet". So there he was, fighting for his life, and I'd nearly chucked my life away. It seemed like - you know how when little kids are playing on the seesaw, one of them'll jump off and let the other one go crashing down? I felt as if I'd almost done that to Barry. So after that, even though I was still pig miserable, I knew I had to stay alive.'

The cave made her words echo - not a full double echo, just a little shiver at the end of every sentence. Zan sat and listened to the shiver-sound of her last sentence: 'I knew I had to stay alive.'

She thought: *That was my secret. I never intended to tell anybody. Wouldn't have told Rhett, if he hadn't guessed. So how did he know?*

Rhett's shoulder nudged hers and she leaned against it. They were holding each other in place, wobbling a bit but keeping the balance, like a seesaw game. As she opened her mouth to ask, 'How did you know?', Rhett shifted slightly, changing the balance.

'I'm glad,' he said. 'Glad you're alive. Glad you didn't let the bastards win.'

Bastards? What bastards? Zan scrolled back through the past half hour, till she came to the part where Rhett had called the girl gang bitches and Lee a two-timer. She'd believed him then but she believed him even more now, because she'd had time to get used to the idea.

It was all right. There was another side to the Central story. There would always be another side - maybe lots of other sides. Like when she'd woken up in the dark and freaked, partly because of Rhett screaming, partly because it felt like everyone had abandoned them. But there'd be a reason why the adults hadn't come to rescue them. They'd find out the reason in the end.

Her stomach gurgled, loud as a trumpet. Zan nearly jumped to her feet but just in time she remembered that she and Rhett were still propping each other up. She rubbed against him like a friendly cat and said, 'Gotta get something out of my backpack.' Fumbled around till her fingers identified a plastic packet of tissues and said, 'Back in a minute, okay?'

'Where are you going?' Rhett asked. His voice sounded casual and calm but the echo in the cave squeaked 'going?' like a little kid having a panic attack.

'Outside,' Zan said. 'With some tissues. To find a bush. Can you work it out for yourself or do you want all the details?'

'Nah, that'll do. Sorry. I'm carrying on like Greg and Jeanette, making you report in every time you go to the toilet.'

'Don't kid yourself. You could never be like Greg and Jeanette, if you tried for a zillion years.'

'Thanks. I think.'

'Hey, it was meant to be a compliment.'

'Oh, wow. I'll frame it.'

'Go ahead. That'll keep you busy till I get back.'

As she edged out of the cave, the sky exploded. A fireworks display of stars. They must've been there all along but the cave rim blocked the sky, so she hadn't been able to see them.

Never mind, she could see them now, zapping out brilliant rays that travelled through light years of space and landed in the rock circle, still bright enough to draw squiggles across the stream and outline the bushes with silver frost. Zan followed the star marks over to a screen of leaves past the edge of the cave. She unzipped her jeans and patted her bloated stomach.

'Here goes,' she whispered to the stars. 'Time to dump all that old shit and start again.'

*

Rhett counted to a hundred, giving Zan time to find a bush, then crawled across to the opening of the cave. The stars hurt his eyes. He groped for his sunglasses, laughed at the idea and pulled out his cigarettes instead. Instantly his heart pumped faster, preparing for the nicotine hit. Funny, he hadn't thought about cigarettes while Zan was telling her story but suddenly every cell in his body felt like a hungry mouth, begging to be filled.

He tested the rock with his good foot and shuffled down to the stream, crossed it in one stride and ducked into a shadowy corner under the hill. A breeze blew out his first match, so he shielded the second match with his hand. Smoke plumped his lungs and seeped out into his bloodstream.

He thought: *That's better. Only ten cigs left. I'll need to ration them.*

Beside him, the stream kept chattering. Incessant whispers, soft chuckles and an occasional high-pitched gurgle, just like Zan's stomach. Zan. She'd moved to a different place in his mind, now he knew her story. She was a survivor. Tougher than she realised. Way tougher than him.

Of course, that wasn't hard. Everything scared him these days. Cars, lifts, heights, noises, people, darkness. You name it, Rhett Foley was afraid of it.

The next breath burnt his tongue. Apparently, he'd finished the cigarette already. Rhett spat out the taste of cork and flipped the butt into the stream. It was time to go back to the cave, except that for some reason he couldn't move. All his muscles had locked and his heartbeat was shaking his whole body. He tried to look around, failed and sighed with relief, because he didn't really want to turn and see Mick's ghost.

Back again? he said. *Why can't you leave me alone?*

Do you want me to go? Mick asked. *I could. But it's so lonely.*

No, it's all right. You might as well stay.

Good. Make me warm, Rhett.

I can't. Don't know how.

Fear trickled down his spine and chilled his heart. The back of his neck ached, as though a cold hand was gripping it. Draining the heat out of his body, barely enough warmth left to keep his blood flowing, let alone enough warmth to share with a ghost. Rhett realised he'd forgotten to breathe and heaved a long sigh down into the bottom of his lungs. He swayed on his feet, dizzy from the rush of oxygen, and felt synapses connect across his brain, sending an urgent telegram.

He thought: *Ghosts aren't real. You wouldn't believe this in the daytime.*

His neck muscles spasmed and spun his head round. A last surge of panic and then the fear eased off. No ghost in the shadows. No Mick, not any more. That should've made him feel better but it didn't. He'd sent the ghost away because he was afraid but there were worse things than fear. Pain, for example. Pain rippling along his nerves, cramping his heart, squeezing the breath out of his lungs and stranding him in the darkness, unable to move or speak. Shaking with helpless pity for a vanished ghost.

The stream chuckled and whispered, 'You look ridiculous.' Stars winked across banks of cloud, as though they were sharing the joke. Rhett's hand reached for the cigarette packet but as he got hold of it, his pocket flap twisted round his wrist. He tugged and swore but the more he tugged, the tighter he was handcuffed.

He thought: *Jesus, I'm hopeless. Might as well top myself.*

As he wrestled with his pocket, a voice called, 'There you are. I thought I'd lost you.' It was Zan on the other side of the stream, holding her hand out towards him. Rhett's hand released the cigarettes, slid out of his pocket and reached over to Zan. She grinned and heaved. He steadied himself and jumped. And half a second later he was back in the rock circle, leaving all the pain and fear behind him.

As easy as that.

*

It was like a ballet. Zan wouldn't have been surprised if Rhett had landed on one toe, ready to be twirled around and lifted high in the air. She could've done it, too. Right then, she felt as though she could achieve anything. She went dancing across the rock, avoiding bumps and hollows by instinct. So light, she felt. So light. Light as the gum-leaf drifting down from the trees, doing backflips on the air. Light as the stars flashing semaphore messages from the sky above the trees, telling her everything would be okay.

'Hey,' she said over her shoulder, 'thanks for listening.'

'Not a problem,' Rhett said, catching up. 'How are you feeling now?'

'Hungry,' Zan realised. 'Amazing. After four days of Seaview guest house cholesterol, I thought I'd never want to eat again. Have you got any food in your pack?'

They hurried back into the cave and tucked the sleeping bag round their shoulders. As soon as they warmed up, they tipped everything out of their packs. Rhett lit a match and waved it across the piles.

'Two of Jeanette's sandwiches and an apple in your stash,' he reported. 'Three energy bars in mine. What do you reckon, Zan? Should we eat it all now or save some for later?'

'That depends.'

'On what?'

'On whether we think we're stuck here for the night or -'

'Or whether we try to find our way up to the path. Maybe we should, except I wouldn't even know where to start. The walkway's a write-off, for sure.'

'Yeah, but the oldies - Nan's friends at the guest house - reckon there used to be a little rabbit-track path, before the council built the walkway. I think I saw it when we first got here, over on the far side of the stream.'

'Steep?'

'Mega.'

'And slippery, after the rain?'

'You betcha.'

'Then I reckon we ought to leave it. Okay, our folks are going to be mad at us for getting lost but they'll be even madder if one of us breaks a leg. Face it, Zan, our track record hasn't been too good so far. If we can stuff up on a walkway in broad daylight, we've got an even better chance of stuffing up on a rabbit track in the dark.'

Zan had started nodding at the point where Rhett said, 'Face it.' She was wondering why he'd bothered to go on arguing when it occurred to her that he couldn't see her. Couldn't feel her, either. This time, he'd left a deliberate space between them.

'Fair enough,' she said. 'Can we eat now?'

'For sure. Let's have the apple and the sandwiches for supper and save the energy bars for breakfast.'

He leaned forward and started to pat the rock with both hands, as if he was playing a bongo drum. When Zan asked politely whether he'd gone crazy, he explained that he was trying to save matches by finding the sandwiches in the dark. That sounded reasonable but next minute he was grabbing her foot and growling 'Sandwich!', clowning around and making her laugh.

So Rhett felt the same as she did. He *wanted* to stay. Well, maybe he didn't exactly want to be stranded in a dark, damp cave but he didn't mind getting away from everything for a while, any more than Zan did.

Supper turned into a party. For starters, they played a game called 'Pick Up The Sandwich Without Dropping Bits of Chicken All Over The Place'. When that was over, Rhett scabbled through his pack and found his Swiss Army knife and they played 'Cutting An Apple Into Two Exactly Equal Halves In The Dark'.

Lots of laughing and joking and a fair bit of touching - Rhett's fingers closing round her wrist as he steered her hand across to the sandwich; Zan's palm resting on Rhett's hand as he sliced the apple, to make sure he played fair. And after they'd finished eating, they snuggled back under the sleeping bag, leaning together, complaining about still being hungry and describing the best meals they'd ever eaten, till they begged each other to stop.

'By the way, you didn't tell me the end of the story,' Rhett said after a while. 'Like, how did you become friends with Solo, for example?'

It seemed pretty obvious to Zan. 'Well, I couldn't go back to the girl gang after what Annalise said. So I went on having lunch with your sister. Dunno whether you'd call us friends but we get on okay.'

That wasn't enough for Rhett. He kept asking more questions, wanting to know how she felt about Solo, how she felt when she looked across at the girl gang, how she felt about Barry and her mum still being in England. Before long, Zan started to feel miserable again. Rhett was trying to be nice but it wasn't working. She'd just got the Central Secondary College story out of her system. She didn't want to go back over it, not right now.

'Let's talk about something else,' she suggested but Rhett said, 'Nah, it's fine. I don't mind.'

Zan thought: *Ouch. It's like he hauled me out of a big hole full of self-pity and now he's pushing me back in. Maybe he wants me to be miserable, so he can haul me out of the hole again.*

It felt like a cruel thing to think when Rhett was sounding so kind and concerned and worried. But something kept tickling the edge of Zan's brain. Something Rhett had said? No, something she'd said to Rhett. She waited till the end of his next kind, concerned, worried question and then leaned harder on his shoulder.

'Listen,' she said, 'you never told me how you knew I'd thought of topping myself. Most people wouldn't've guessed ... but you did. Have you been there too?'

Rhett's arm jolted, like a frog on electrodes in a biology experiment. 'Not me,' he said. 'Someone else.'

Nothing kind or concerned about his voice now. In the space of a few seconds, he'd changed into a different person - scared, twitchy, borderline desperate. Zan wasn't sure whether she liked this new Rhett but then, she didn't have to get to know him. If she just shrugged and said, 'Oh, right' or 'That explains it,' she knew he'd relax and go straight back into his big brother

act.

It was her choice. Nobody was going to make her listen to Rhett's story, especially not Rhett. She could take the easy way out and help him to cover the whole thing up.

But she didn't. She said, 'Tell me about it.'

*

Once, long ago, when Rhett was playing hide-and-seek, he'd found the perfect hiding place under a stack of rugs in the hall cupboard. He could hear his mum and dad and Solo going round the house, calling his name, sounding more and more freaked, but he'd just gone on huddling under the rugs, grinning to himself. The darkness was safe and cosy. When Meredith worked out where he was and whisked the rugs away, the light hit him like a slap.

He thought: *What a rotten little kid I was. Haven't changed much, either. I like knowing Zan's secrets but I haven't told her any of mine.*

His throat felt tight and swollen, as if he was catching the flu. He had to cough three times and swallow a gob of mucus before he could say, 'All right. But it's a fairly gruesome story. Are you sure you want to hear it?'

'So?' Zan said. 'My story was totally girly and you managed to sit through that.'

Rhett laughed. Zan O'Connell was full of surprises. He'd been thinking, 'God, girls make everything so complicated,' but he hadn't realised she knew.

'Okay,' he said. 'Just tell me one thing first. Are you related to Mick O'Connell?'

Zan thought about it, while he held his breath. 'My dad's name's Michael but everyone calls him Mike,' she said. 'And he doesn't have any cousins with the same name as him. It's not exactly an unusual surname, though. There's about four columns of O'Connells in the phone book.'

'So it's a coincidence, that's all,' Rhett said.

Then he thought: *A coincidence - or a sign? Maybe I'm meant to tell Mick's story to another O'Connell.* He was still puzzling over that one, when an impatient finger jabbed into his ribs.

'Stop thinking,' Zan ordered. 'This isn't one of your writing classes. You don't have to describe everything perfectly. Just tell me, okay? We've got all night, y'know.'

Rhett sighed harder. Nobody had ever said that to him before. Sure, lots of people had asked about Mick but they always made it clear that there was a time limit - like, they wanted to know but they didn't want to know *too* much.

All night? The Zan-girl had said all night, as if she really meant it.

So he opened the door of his safe cosy hiding place and started to tell her everything.

*

'Like I said before, Mick's - Mick was my stepdad. Actually, he could've easily been my dad. He and Mum fell in love at first sight on their first day at uni when they were eighteen years old but they had a big fight straight after their final exams. Mick took off for a job he'd lined up in America, to show Mum, and Mum went to some party and met Dad and married him three weeks later, to show Mick.

'Seven years later Mick's a hotshot advertising whizz kid and Mum's teaching English at this school where Mick's firm's filming a margarine commercial. Zap! They see each other across a crowded school yard and fall in love all over again, at second sight. Mum sits me and Solo down and explains everything. (Me seven years old, Solo five.) Then it's goodbye, Greg, and hello, Mick. Solo never liked Mick, right from the start, but I did.

'I like - liked - like him a lot.'

Outside, the stream whispers and chuckles. Rhett's got used to the water noises over the last couple of hours but suddenly it's too much. Too noisy, too intrusive, too unbearable. He has to block it out, which means cutting straight to the hardest part of the story.

'On New Year's Eve I was going to a party at Stacy Carr's. You probably don't know Stace - I think she was two years ahead of you at Central. Anyway, I went round to my mate Manny's place first and bloody Con - his brother - spilt beer all over me, so I had to go home and change. I wasn't expecting anyone to be there. Mum and Mick'd been invited to a couple of parties each and Solo was off on a sleepover with some of her friends from Kingston Hall. So I was a bit surprised when I spotted this note on the table in the lounge room. A big piece of A4 paper but only a few words on it.

'The note said, "Sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry. Call the cops before you open the door. M.'

Okay, that's the hardest part, over and done with. He's managed to get through the five sorries, without losing it in front of Zan. What's more, the water noises have backed off. They're just a murmur in the distance, gentle and reassuring. Rhett's in control now. He doesn't even need a cigarette, because he's so calm that he can hardly feel his body. He frowns at the darkness and goes on trying to explain.

'A pretty weird thing to say, right? It shouldn't've made any sense. But it did. My mouth opened and this scream came out. Then, next thing I remember, I'm in Mick's study, which backs onto the kitchen. It's a seventies extension to the original house, with huge windows and three sideways rafters running along below the ceiling. Mick's hanging from one of the rafters and I'm standing on a kitchen chair, trying to hoist him up.

‘What I want to know is: how did I work it out so fast? I didn’t even have time to think. I just yelled and went straight in there. Even picked up a chair along the way. It’s like I guessed what’d happened. But if I guessed, why didn’t I do something to stop it?’

‘Anyway, as soon as I touched him, I could tell it was all over. His skin - it wasn’t icy or anything but it was dead. I got down from the chair and went to phone the cops. Then I made a mistake. I turned round and looked back.’

Rhett still can’t feel his body, so it’s a shock when his fingers heat up. He moves them experimentally and works out that Zan’s holding his hand. He doesn’t mind. Why should he? After all, he can’t feel it. He’s not there. He’s back in the New Year’s Eve lounge room, staring at Mick.

‘The thing is, if you hang yourself properly, your neck snaps. So it looked as though he’d cocked his head to one side, like he was about to make a joke or go, “Well, Rhett? What do you think of *this*?” Except that his face was ... his tongue and his eyes and the colour of ... Okay, you said I didn’t have to describe everything and I can’t. The point is, he didn’t look like Mick any more.

‘At any rate, I don’t think he did.’

‘Fact is, I can’t remember Mick now. I can only remember that thing.

‘I told you it was a mistake, looking back.’

*

‘It wasn’t your mistake,’ Zan said from a long way off. ‘It was Mick’s mistake.’

Rhett went travelling through time (only four months but it seemed like centuries) and arrived in Finnegan’s Cave on the hills near Bayside. He wasn’t quite back inside his body yet, more a case of hovering just below the rock ceiling, watching a shadowy Zan and Rhett.

‘Huh?’ he said to the Zan-shadow. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, he could’ve gone to a motel or something,’ she said. ‘He didn’t have to do it right there in the house. I mean, obviously you or your mum or Solo were going to -’

‘Nah, you’ve forgotten the note,’ Rhett interrupted. ‘Mick said to call the cops before opening the door, remember? It was my fault for barging straight in.’

‘You think everything’s your fault. How were you expected to guess what that weird note meant?’

‘Come on, the guy was about to kill himself. You couldn’t expect him to write logical notes at a time like that.’

‘I don’t. I’m just saying he made it hard for you. Well, it would’ve been hard, no matter what, but what he did made things even harder.’

Halfway through the last sentence Rhett dropped down from the ceiling and landed back in his body, with a jolt that shook his bones. ‘We’re fine,’ he

said through clenched teeth. 'Mum and Solo and me, we're all fine.'

'Yeah, sure,' Zan said. 'Greg reckons your mum's out of it. You fall off cliffs. And Solo's been having lunch with me for the last two months but she's never mentioned that her stepdad topped himself on New Year's Eve. If that counts as fine, I'm glad I'm a mess.'

All the muscles Rhett had clenched during the Mick story were relaxing and letting him know how they felt. He wondered why he suddenly wanted a cigarette and realised he was angry. Bloody Zan. How dare she say that he and Meredith and Solo weren't coping? They were alive, weren't they? What more did she want?

He glared at Zan and found himself reading the answer in the line of her shoulders. Zan had just found out that another of her friends had been keeping secrets but she was keeping her mouth shut. Holding back her own reactions. For his sake. Because she wanted to give him a chance to tell her everything, the way she'd told him.

Rhett thought: *Zan O'Connell, I love you.*

It was a small, bright thought, like a match flame in the darkness. Two seconds later, Zan's sigh blew it out.

'Sorry,' she breathed. 'I shouldn't've said all that stuff when I don't know the first thing about Mick. What was he like?'

Rhett started to pull down his invisible plexiglass screen and then realised he wanted to answer. 'Mick was funny,' he said. 'He thought about everything. He had a sideways kind of brain that could pick up on things nobody else noticed and turn them into another of his wacky theories. He used to shut himself in his study for hours but when he was around he was always the life of the party. He loved gossip, even about people he'd never met. Whenever we went out, someone'd come racing over, going, "G'day, Mick," and afterwards he'd say, "More people know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows." He wasn't real keen on kids, so he treated us like adults. I liked that and so did my friends Anna and Juss. Solo and my mate Manny hated it.'

While Rhett talked, Mick began to take shape in his mind, hands clasped behind his head, pushing his hair into an orange cockatoo crest, legs stretched out in front of him, so he could admire his new purple Doc Martens. Clever eyes with pale eyelashes and puffy pouches underneath, making him look like a cockatoo that'd seen a good joke it wasn't going to share it with the humans. Pale freckled hands that he hated and kept out of sight.

The real Mick, not dead Mick with his swollen tongue and bulging eyes. Somehow, Zan's questions seemed to have shown Rhett a way to dodge past that memory and find the memories waiting on the other side.

'Mick was a partner in an advertising agency,' he said, needing to tell Zan everything. 'You've probably seen heaps of his ads - the dolphin-friendly tuna ad, the rap-singing cashew nuts, the Style campaign. He was one of the first

people in Australia to make TV commercials interesting and funny, instead of just some boring stuff about the product. But he reckoned the latest trend in ads had gone too far - like those ads where you just see beautiful people being beautiful and they hardly show the product at all. Style Jeans knocked back the last commercial he scripted for them. Their publicity guy said it was old-fashioned. I know that, because the printout of his email was still on Mick's desk. In a way, it was like a second suicide note. Except that you wouldn't kill yourself over some advertising campaign. Or would you?'

Before Zan could answer, he went speeding on, listing all the possible reasons for Mick's suicide that he'd collected over the last few months. There was a biography of Ernest Hemingway on Mick's bedside table, with a sticker marking the place where Hemingway committed suicide - maybe that had influenced him. Mick never talked about his parents - maybe because they'd done something terrible to him when he was a kid. Mick was supposed to go to an ad agency party, before meeting Meredith at the union party - maybe he was convinced his partners were going to shaft him over the Style commercial, in which case he was wrong, because his partners were as shocked and freaked as everyone else.

Or maybe the Style knockback rocked him in a different way. Mick used to say, 'Advertising kills the soul. I ought to chuck it in and go back to being a poet.' Then he'd grin and say, 'Listen to me, will you? That must be the corniest idea I ever had. An even bigger cliché than Deera the Happy Dolphin.'

Maybe he'd killed himself because he thought he'd left his run too late. After all, if people didn't even like his ads any more, it'd be hard to believe that they'd like his poetry.

'Or maybe it was, y'know, *us*,' Rhett said, talking so fast that his words kept bumping into each other. 'Mick never wanted kids. He told Mum it was lucky she'd had kids already before they got together. So if he was losing his touch with the commercials and wanting to write poems instead, except there's no money in poetry, of course, and he was responsible for three other people, then m-maybe ...'

His voice stuttered and stopped. He couldn't say it. Just couldn't.

But Zan said it for him. 'Maybe he killed himself because of you and Solo and your mum? No way. It doesn't work like that.'

'How would you know?' Rhett snapped and then he remembered. 'Oh, hell. Sorry. I forgot. You know more about it than me, don't you? Tell me how it works.'

'It's not logical,' Zan said. 'I didn't write a list with "Reasons in Favour of Suicide" on one side and "Reasons Against Suicide" on the other side, then add up the number of reasons and see which side won. It's a feeling, that's all. It's about the way you feel.'

Her voice sounded crisp and definite, like experts on TV talking about earthquake patterns or genetically modified tomatoes or serial killers. Zan had always wondered how the experts managed to seem so sure of themselves but it was obvious now.

They *knew*, same as she knew where Rhett was getting it wrong. He'd been telling himself the Mick story over and over, just like she'd been telling herself the Central story to see if she could make it end some other way. Rhett was a smart guy, maybe smarter than anyone else she'd ever met, but he was making the same mistake as her.

'I don't get it,' he said. 'You've lost me, Zan. Go on. What makes people feel that way?'

Zan smiled at him, even though he couldn't see her. Rhett Foley was Solo's big brother; Rhett Foley was a uni student; Rhett Foley was Mr Cool. But right at that moment she was older and smarter than him and it felt good.

'Pain,' she said, like an expert. 'Basically, people kill themselves because being alive hurts too much.'

*

Pain shivered through Rhett like soundwaves after an explosion. Mick's pain. Meredith's pain. Solo's pain. The pain of witnessing their pain. The pain that had wrenched his heart when he turned back in the doorway and saw Mick's body shift and sway as the cool air from the lounge room stirred the warm air in the study, Mick's dead arm swinging slightly, like he was trying to wave goodbye.

Pain throbbing round his skull while he dialled the number of Meredith's party and waited for her to come to the phone, so he could say, 'Mum, Mick's dead,' and smash her whole world to bits. Pain ripping his mind in two, forcing him to slam down a protective plexiglass screen, when a cop came out of the study carrying a brand new rope.

The helpless pain of listening as Meredith told Solo. Two days of controlled pain while the three of them rang everyone in Mick's address book, pacing themselves, taking it in turns to fall apart. A dull ache in every muscle when he stood in the churchy room at the funeral parlour, watching Mick's parents get older by the minute, until he was sure they were going to crumble into dust and blow away. A fresh stab of pain when one of Mick's drinking mates sidled up to him at the wake and muttered, 'Tough it out, kid,' from the corner of his mouth, in a way that showed he knew what Rhett was going through, more than the others knew.

Pain.

Too much pain.

Rhett thought: *Mick couldn't bear it. But I can't bear it either and I'm still*

alive.

*

Zan had forgotten about the cave's echo effect. It picked up her crisp definite TV expert's comment and tossed it around until the edges blurred and frayed.

Pain. A few months ago she'd been hurting so badly that she'd fined up those rows of yellow pills, getting ready to put herself to sleep forever. She could hardly believe it now. It was like a telemovie or whatever - a flat, blurred picture of Zan O'Connell patting a pill with her fingertip and watching it wobble. But listening to Mick's story had made the movie real again.

What was the difference between her and Mick? How come she'd decided to keep going and he hadn't? Luck? (Suppose Rhett had come home half an hour earlier.) Love? (Suppose she'd been staying with Annalise, who hated her, instead of with Nan, who loved her?) Timing? (Suppose Mick's knockback hadn't come just before New Year Resolution time.) Strength? (Suppose she hadn't even had enough energy left to care whether Nan found her.)

Zan thought: *Or maybe Rhett's stepdad just hurt worse than I did. Oh God, I hope not. I was hurting bad enough.*

*

They sat side by side, staring at the darkness. Time passed. It was still passing when Rhett felt his bones rattle in their sockets. He turned and found Zan shaking his arm and grinning.

'Look!' she said. 'Come on, Rhett. You have to see this.'

He was out in the middle of the rock circle before he realised why he'd been able to see Zan's grin. The shadows had gone, blasted away by the blowtorch of an enormous moon, white and round, almost full, heaving itself up above the trees. So bright that the sky had changed from black to indigo and the stars had faded and his eyes were watering.

Rhett blinked and focussed on the copper halo round the moon until his eyes cleared. Then he faced the moon and let its silver light sink into his retina, filling his head, washing down through his body, lightening his heart.

'The thing is, pain feels so shitty that I've been trying not to feel it,' he told Zan. 'But that was stupid. If it hurts, it hurts. I can say whatever I like about Mick but what happened will still be sad. Nothing I can do about that.'

It had sounded better inside his moon-filled head than it sounded out loud. He was expecting Zan to go 'Duh' but instead she nodded, like they'd been chatting about pain for the last twenty minutes.

'Yeah, right,' she said. 'And what happened to me at Central was shitty

too. No way around that either.'

Rhett thought: *She understands. She knows it's a relief to stop pretending it doesn't hurt, to stop pretending that everything's fine, fine, just fine.*

So he turned to Zan and said - and at the same moment she said - 'But hey, shit happens.' They laughed and said 'Snap' and slapped palms.

The moon rocked, as though it was laughing along with them. Rhett blinked and saw the jolly moon-face he used to see when he was little. Like the round comedian face on the card Mick had given him for his eighteenth birthday, with a quote from W.C. Fields that went, 'It's a funny old world. A man's lucky to get out of it alive.'

'A funny old world,' Rhett agreed, framing the moon in a V-sign. 'Did you know they used to call homemade whisky moonshine? I think I might be a bit drunk.'

No answer this time. When he looked round, Zan was dancing. A funny little one-step, two-step, back and forth, and then a fancy step sideways, like the folk dances they made you learn in primary school, although Rhett got the feeling she was making it up as she went along. She was concentrating hard, a Pekingese-sized frown between her eyebrows, watching her feet most of the time but glancing up at the moon every now and then to check that she was getting it right.

They said women had a special thing going with the moon but Rhett had always thought that sounded like bullshit. He believed it now. Zan was moonstruck for sure, off in her own world. She probably wouldn't even notice if he stripped off all his clothes and went skinnydipping in the falls.

But he didn't. Instead, he jumped across the stream and went back to the shadowy corner under the hillside where he'd seen Mick's ghost.

The rock was coated with moondust, thick as icing on a Christmas cake. Moonlight outlined every detail of the shaggy moss lining the cliff, although the hollows between the moss clumps were as black as ever. There was no room for ghosts in the shadows, though. They were too small for that. Rhett planted his feet in the same spot as before and felt for his cigarettes.

The match dragged across the strip in a slow straight line. Nothing happened, so he swore and smashed the red tip against the box. It flared and flew off, catching on his knee, scorching a neat pinhole in his jeans. Scorching him. As he watched the tiny coal roll away and drop onto the rock, Rhett heard two voices commenting at the back of his brain.

The first voice said: *Damn. More bad luck. What'll I do now?*

The second voice said: *Might as well kill yourself.*

The burn on his knee throbbed. Rhett recognised the voices, even though he couldn't actually remember hearing them before. Old friends. They'd been there inside his head ever since Mick died.

He thought: *Oh, terrific. Now I'm hearing voices, as well as going down in*

imaginary lifts, hiding behind invisible plexiglass screens and talking to ghosts. How much weirder can one guy get?

And why the hell do I want to commit suicide, just because a match broke?

The patch of skin between his shoulder blades tingled. Suddenly, Rhett was convinced that the ghost was back again, breathing down his neck. He tried to turn and check but he couldn't make his head move, not with the moon shining a spotlight on the hills. Bad enough to sense Mick's ghost in the shadows. If he saw it by moonlight, he could die of fright. And he didn't want to die, so he had to do something.

Now.

Right now.

Up in the rock circle, Zan was still dancing. Down by the stream, Rhett rolled the cigarette across his palm, sighed and clenched his fist. Tucking the broken cigarette into the packet, he pulled his arm back and lobbed the packet over the falls. He couldn't hear the splash because the water sounds were cheering too loudly.

'That's a sacrifice, Mick,' he whispered. 'If I've been holding onto you, I'm letting go now, okay?'

He stood there for a while, watching the ropes of water plait and unravel. When he looked round, the shadow corner was empty, which was a relief, but the rock circle was empty too, as if he'd magicked Zan away at the same time as he'd magicked Mick. For a second or two, the going-down-in-a-lift feeling took over but then he decided that, as sorcerers went, he wasn't quite that powerful.

'Zan?' he yelled, finding his voice. 'Zan, where are you?'

'In the cave,' she called back. 'I'm freezing - and starving too. Can we eat the energy bars now?'

So everything was okay, after all.

*

Zan watched Rhett hesitate at the opening of the cave and giggled. From where he was standing, she probably looked like a monster caterpillar. Perhaps she should've asked his permission first but it seemed so stupid, using the sleeping bag as a rug, when it was a hundred times warmer now she'd zipped it back into a bag. And Rhett must've agreed, because he kicked his shoes off and slid in beside her.

'Food,' he said, growling. 'Where's the teddy bears' picnic?'

Zan rescued the energy bars from under her pack, which she'd turned into a pillow. Rhett did his surgeon act with the Swiss Army knife and they chewed slowly to make the bars last, taking sips from the water bottle that she'd refilled at the stream. There was plenty of room in the double sleeping bag but

all the same, Zan felt closer to Rhett than when they'd been sitting side by side, maybe because of the way she could feel the heat from their bodies warming the air between them.

She yawned so hard that her jaw cracked. 'Tired?' Rhett said. 'Might be a good idea to see if we can get some sleep.'

'In a minute,' Zan told him. 'There's one more thing I want to know first.'

'What?' he asked, yawning too.

'Yeah, what?' she echoed. 'I thought of it while I was dancing but it's gone now. Something about being glad we said all that stuff and got it out in the open. Oh right, that's it! I wanted to ask: what was the worst part for you?'

Rhett rolled onto his back and crossed his arms behind his head. 'There's this line that King Lear says in the Shakespeare play,' he began, so she punched him in the ribs. He twisted away, saying, 'Stop it, Zan. I'm not showing off. It helps if you can find people who've said this stuff already.'

'Oh, all right. Go on, poser. Tell me what Shakespeare said.'

'It's the scene where Lear finds out that his daughter's dead. He goes,

*"Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all?"*

'I kept saying that to myself, over and over, after Mick died. Only I wasn't thinking about the four-legged kind of dog - I was thinking about Dad. You know the saying, "Better a live dog than a dead lion"? Well, that's how I feel about Dad and Mick. I decided ages ago that Mick was my real dad, because he's - he *was* - everything I want to be. But he's dead now and boring old Greg's still alive. So that's the worst part, wishing Dad had died, not Mick.'

His voice sounded calm and clinical, like a doctor telling someone that the test results didn't look good, but Zan could feel him shivering. She moved closer, to raise their shared body heat by a few degrees.

'Is that all?' she said. 'If I could press a button and put my dad in Barry's place, I'd do it like a shot.'

'Would you put Greg in Barry's place?' Rhett asked and Zan couldn't answer. That was different. She hadn't seen her dad for years but she'd kind of liked talking to Greg beside the sign post to Cobbleigh Falls. Not so easy to imagine dumping him into a hospital bed, with machines checking to see whether he was dead yet. It wouldn't be fair.

'See?' Rhett said, sadly triumphant. 'You can't, can you? Fact is, Greg's a nice guy. Nicer than Mick. Nicer than me too, come to that. That's the problem, though. I'm more like Mick than I am like Greg. Maybe I always was or maybe I turned out like that because I've been copying Mick since I was seven. But either way ...'

Zan wanted to lean over and hug Rhett but she had a feeling he ought to

finish the sentence first. When he went on shaking, she decided to finish it for him.

'You reckon that if you're like Mick, you'll end up topping yourself like he did?' she guessed. 'Do you want to kill yourself?'

'No!' Rhett said. 'Never have. Don't intend to start now.'

'Well, then,' Zan said and waited. She had to wait for a long time, while Rhett thought it through.

'Yeah,' he said finally. 'Looks like there's one thing I can stop worrying about ... Okay, Zan O'Connell, what was the worst part for you?'

*

Actually, Rhett wasn't all that interested. Right then, he would've liked to lie back and stare at the moon marks on the cave roof and think about the things she'd made him say. (Like copying Mick, for example, which would explain why those voices told him to kill himself every time he had a problem, because that was how Mick had solved *his* problems.) But he figured Zan must've asked about him as a way of getting him to ask about her, so it seemed only fair to give her a chance to talk.

She didn't start talking straight away, though. She fidgeted, kicked his ankle, apologised and fidgeted a bit more. 'Anne Frank,' she said finally. 'She's my worst part.'

That got Rhett's attention. 'What?' he said, startled. 'I mean, why?'

'Because it was so much worse for her and *she* never thought of killing herself,' Zan said. 'She wanted to live and I wanted to die and that makes me feel like a complete and utter wuss. Like Anne ought to be alive and I ought to be dead.'

'That's stupid,' Rhett said, without stopping to think. 'For one thing, you can't arrange that sort of trade off. For another thing ... well, at least the Nazis weren't pretending to be Anne's friends at the same time as they trashed her. And even if she had to hide away in a couple of rooms, she had her parents and her sister and that guy Peter and her writing and - oh, I dunno, Zan. I just don't see the point of comparing yourself to her. It's like my mum's mother making her eat spinach, which she hated, and going, "The children starving in India would be grateful for that."' "

Zan gave a surprised snort of laughter. 'Anne's mother told her the same thing, while they were in the Secret Annexe,' she said. 'And Anne hated it too.'

She laughed again, snuffling slightly, as if she were about to burst into tears. Rhett wasn't sure he could handle tears just then, so he looked around for another question.

'What was the last thing Anne wrote in the diary?' he asked.

'Before the Nazis dragged her off to the death camp?' Zan snuffled. 'Can't

remember.'

'Let's look it up. I'll light a match and you can read it out.'

He held up the match and watched her thumb the pages. Bottom lip sucked in, to stop it quivering; diamond eyes faintly pink around the rims. For the second time that night he thought: *I love you, Zan O'Connell.*

Then she looked up and started to read.

'I get cross, then sad, and finally end up turning my heart inside out, the bad part on the outside and the good part on the inside, and keep trying to find a way to become what I'd like to be and what I could be if ... if only there were no other people in the world.'

It's Zan's voice but it's Anne's voice too, as clear as if she's there in the cave, telling them that she knows what it's like. Zan drops the book and stares at Rhett. Rhett yelps as the match burns his fingers and flicks it away. Zan clutches him. He clutches Zan. She's thinking about Lee and Annalise and the girl gang. He's thinking about Mick. They're both thinking about Anne and the people in her area who must've told the Nazis about the Secret Annexe.

If only there were no other people in the world.

Zan remembers the yellow pill, wobbling when she touched it. Rhett feels as though he's going down, down, down in an imaginary lift. But even as they both wish there were no other people in the world, they keep on clutching each other, breathing each other's breath, soaking up each other's warmth.

Zan unbuttons her shirt so she can feel Rhett's tears against her skin.

Rhett rests his head on her breasts, until the lift stops.

*

'Did you know that heaps of people go home from funerals and have sex, as a way of saying they're still alive?' Rhett asked in a muffled voice.

Zan grinned. 'Is that what we're doing?'

'Dunno. Are we?'

'Well, I hope you're not planning to fall asleep just yet,' she said, working on the buttons of his shirt.

His bruises throbbed when she brushed against them but it didn't seem to matter. Skin sliding across skin was the best cure for pain that had ever been invented. Rhett wanted more. They had to scuffle and kick and elbow each other to get the rest of their clothes off but that didn't matter either. This wasn't a performance, the way it had been when he'd slept with Nicole.

This was just him and Zan.

*

Zan decided that if anyone ever asked for a list of her hobbies, she was going to put kissing at the top of the list. Even with Lee, she'd always felt like there was something gross about sticking your tongue in another person's mouth but now she was desperate to get as far inside Rhett's skin as possible. It was strange, because she didn't think she'd been attracted to him before. As a matter of fact, she wasn't sure whether she was attracted to him now. She hadn't forgotten what an annoying, poetry-quoting, Big Brother poser he was.

But his mouth.

And the way his thumb stroked her nipples.

And his body pressed against her body, making him / her feel so real.

'Oh,' she gasped, remembering. 'I'm not on the pill or anything.'

'Doesn't matter,' Rhett said into her neck. 'There's other ways. Like this.'

Then she was flying to the moon. So much pleasure that it hurt. Zan saw white light, stared steadily into it for twenty seconds, blinked and collapsed back onto Rhett's chest.

*

Holding Zan while she slept. Breathing her girl-smell. Trying to memorise the way happiness felt, in case he needed the memory later on. Rhett didn't intend to go to sleep. He just closed his eyes for a second and when he opened them, his arms were empty and the cave was full of greasy grey light, the colour of washing-up water. Dawn. Time to rescue themselves, since no one else had bothered to do it.

Rhett thought: *Damn. Truth is, I'd rather go on being lost on the hills.*

But he hauled himself out of the sleeping bag all the same, found bits of his clothes and struggled into them. He was hopping on one foot, tugging at a sock, when Zan bustled in.

'Good, you're awake,' she said. 'We'd better get going before they catch us looking like something out of a porn video.'

She tucked her arm round his waist and steadied him while he jammed his foot into his trainer. Her cheeks were pink and waterfall drops glittered in her hair. Rhett hugged her hard and they kissed - only briefly, because Zan was as tense as a runner on the starting blocks and Rhett was comparing his ashtray mouth to her waterfall mouthwash. (Although that wouldn't be a problem for much longer, seeing that he appeared to have given up smoking in the middle of the night.)

He rolled up Jeanette's sleeping bag, stuffed it into his backpack and paused for a last look round Finnegan's Cave. A few minutes later Zan was steering him up the rabbit track and hauling him onto the path. She seemed to be a morning person, which was lucky because Rhett wasn't.

He followed her down the path, tripping on tree roots, squinting at thin grey light. Both of them walking faster and faster, gasping for breath, slowing down and then gradually speeding up again. Both of them, without needing to say it, sharing pictures of Nan sleepless, Greg pacing, Jeanette twittering frantically - all the things they hadn't let themselves think about during the night.

'Not long now,' Zan said as the path swerved to miss a boulder and opened a view down the gully, letting them look straight at the Cobbleigh Falls.

'Not long,' Rhett echoed, speeding up again. 'Oh, Jesus, I hope Solo didn't go and ring Mum.'

Another bend in the path gave them another view along the gully. There was a glimpse of sea this time - a cold grey shimmer that blazed silver as the sun heaved over the horizon. Clouds blushed, the sky softened from grey into blue and birds chattered in the trees. Rhett stopped and turned and found Zan stopping and turning his way.

They kissed for a long minute, bodies pressed close, then blinked and smiled and went scrambling up the next rise. When they paused at the top, Rhett saw three shadows climbing the hill towards them. Zan whimpered and surged forward, racing down the slope at breakneck speed.

'Mum,' she shouted. '*Mum!*'

*

She hurtled straight past Greg and Jeanette and flung herself at the shadow behind them. Her mum's arms locked onto her, tighter than Zan could ever remember. They stood completely still, while the dawn settled into place around them. Zan shut her eyes and breathed her mum's familiar smell, feeling small and safe, like a baby on a loving shoulder.

Sunlight tickled her eyelashes. When she opened her eyes, the world was brighter and warmer than before. The sun's rays probed the hairline crack between her mum's arm and Zan's shoulder, prying them apart. She stepped back and stared at her mum's smudged lipstick and tired worn face.

'Magic,' she decided. 'I missed you, Mum. How did you get here?'

'There was a last-minute cancellation on a plane to Australia,' her mum said. 'We wanted to surprise you.'

Zan thought: *We? Omigod. More magic. Apparently, it's all right. Barry's still alive.*

*

Rhett picked his way down the slope, moving more cautiously than Zan because his feet weren't doing what his brain told them. Two hours sleep, no

dinner and giving up smoking could have that effect on a guy. His eyes wouldn't focus properly either, so it was a bit of a shock when a powder blue blur came speeding up the path. Rhett swayed on his feet, clutching a tearful Jeanette, then lurched sideways as his dad thumped him on the back.

'We *told* the police you were here!' Jeanette wept. 'But they kept insisting you'd run away.'

'Not the cops' fault,' Greg said. 'Just an unfortunate coincidence. One of the Bayside coppers had noticed two kids hitching back to Melbourne - tall dark boy, girl in a red parka. And when they asked us if you'd been having any problems lately ... well, I had to tell them you'd been going through some hard times. Never mind, it's all turned out okay. You *are* okay, aren't you?'

Rhett nodded, which was enough to throw him off balance. As he grabbed a handful of Jeanette's tracksuit, he felt Greg's arm close round his shoulder. He shifted deliberately, disturbing his balance again, giving him an excuse to slump against his dad and his stepmum.

He thought: *Apparently, it's all right. I actually do love my dad, after all. Hell, I even love Jeanette.*

*

They jostle along the last stretch of the path, past the lizard grass and onto the walkway. Everyone's talking at once. Zan's mum is describing the flight home and the small signs that prove Barry's much better and the way she felt when she phoned the Seaview guest house and found that Zan was lost on the hills. Jeanette's making sure they know she didn't get a wink of sleep and replaying everything she said to the Bayside police when they refused to send out a rescue squad. Greg's pointing out that the cops were only doing their job and that a single autumn night out in the open never hurt anyone. Rhett's remembering the two kids he saw kissing in the car park - tall dark boy, girl in a red parka - and wondering what their story was. And Zan keeps repeating, 'Mum. You're really here. I can't believe it.'

As they clatter down the steps to the car park, Solo and Tate shriek, 'Rhett!' and come tearing towards him, leaving Mrs Hartwell beside Barry's Volvo. Zan hurries over to give her nan a reassuring hug. Rhett staggers and starts to fold at the knees. Solo grabs him. The sun comes floating up above the trees, dazzling them and blinding them. Everyone's still talking at once.

'Oh, Suzanne! What a relief to see you safe and sound.'

'Rhett, you poor thing! You must be starving! Come over to the car and I'll give you something to eat.'

'Coffee, that's what he needs. I brought some for you, Rhett.'

'Sorry, Nan. I really messed up your holiday, didn't I?'

'Dad, why does Rhett keep trying to fall over?'

‘Hop in the car, mate. We’ll take you to a doctor straight away.’

‘Barry’s waiting back at the guest house, Zan. He’s dying to see you.’

‘I’m fine, Dad. Honestly, I’m fine.’

*

The last thing Zan sees of Rhett is the top of his head, rising from the crowd beside Greg’s Toyota. Jeanette’s pushing chicken sandwiches at him. Solo’s offering a smoky thermos cup. Tate’s leaning against his leg. Greg’s pounding him on the back. Zan calls, ‘Rhett?’ but he doesn’t hear her.

So she lets Mum and Nan bundle her into the car.

*

As Rhett steadies himself against the car, he catches a flicker of red at the edge of his vision and hears someone call his name. But by the time he’s shifted Tate and dodged Solo’s cup of coffee and Jeanette’s sandwich, the Volvo is pulling out of the car park.

So the last thing Rhett sees of Zan is her hand, pressed against the window like a frozen wave.

TWO

ZAN

Solo dropped a postcard onto the bench, then sat down beside it. A classic Solo move - she liked to keep people guessing. That annoyed Zan, so she ignored the card and began to unpack her Nan-packed lunch box. Chicken sandwiches, which reminded her of Rhett, but then, most things reminded her of Rhett at present.

It was the same as when she'd been to see *Titanic* and images of icy waves and chandelier ballrooms and angel-faced Leonardo di Caprio kept appearing in her mind every now and then, as clear as though they were her own personal memories, not just memories of a movie. That night in Finnegan's Cave seemed like a movie too. The best movie ever, way outside normal life and yet somehow changing her ideas about everything.

About Solo Foley, for example.

'I've been trying to think of a polite way to ask this but I can't,' she said, ditching the sandwich. 'So I'll ask you anyway. We've been having lunch together for ages. How come you never told me what happened to Mick?'

Solo hunched her shoulders and let the rest of her body sag. 'You got that from Rhett, right?' she said. 'Bet he told you our stepdad was totally perfect, except for this little habit of killing himself.'

'Not exactly,' Zan said. 'Well, sort of. You don't think so?'

'Who cares what I think?'

'I do.'

'Yeah, sure.'

Zan bit her lip. It sounded like Solo knew she'd started having lunch with her because of the girl gang and then gone on because she was hoping for some news about Rhett. But that was weeks ago. Since then, she'd worked out that, if you actually listened to her, Solo had lots of interesting ideas.

Right now, Zan was sitting with her because she wanted to find out what Solo thought about the principal's born-again rap on reconciliation or Rhianna, the Silicon Fish Fan Club leader, falling for that tryhard Tom Butcher, who

couldn't have been less like Jed Johnston.

'Cut it out,' she said. 'If you don't want to talk about Mick, that's cool. Just don't put it back onto me, okay?'

Solo blinked. 'All right,' she said. 'If you must know, I switched from Kingston Hall to Central because I got tired of having to look sad and serious all the time. I was hoping nobody here would've heard about Mick. Fact is, I couldn't hack him when he was around and he bugs me even more now he's *not* around. All three of them bug me - Mick and Mum and Rhett. They were like this mutual admiration society.' She frowned and added, 'Were? Are? What verb do you use, when two of the people are alive and one of them's dead?'

'Dunno. Why do you reckon they're a mutual admiration society?' Zan asked to get her back on track.

'Because I lived with them for thirteen years,' Solo said. 'Mick and Rhett thought Mum was the most beautiful woman in the world. Rhett and Mum thought Mick was a poet disguised as an ad man. Mum and Mick thought Rhett was a boy genius. So I was the odd one out, on account of the fact that I couldn't get into that ideal family stuff. I'm more like Dad. I'd rather fuss about all the things that could go wrong, then try and make them go right.'

That was another of Solo's interesting ideas. Zan wouldn't have said Solo was at all like Greg but when she put it that way, she had a point. What's more, it was the first time Solo had mentioned Rhett since they'd been back at school. Zan had decided she wasn't going to ask any questions but she figured that she was allowed to drop half a hint.

'I guess it feels kind of strange, with only Rhett and your mum in the house,' she tried and Solo said, 'Ha! I had a feeling you didn't know. Here, read this. It's addressed to me but I reckon it's meant for you.'

She shoved the postcard further across the bench. Zan frowned at a shiny tropical sunset, complete with palm tree silhouettes, then turned the card over.

Hi from Darwin. I meant to say goodbye before I took off but I say things better on paper, anyhow. Had to get away, so I could think things through. Darwin's a great place for that. Everyone comes from somewhere else, so they don't have fixed ideas about each other. I'm assembling doors and windows for this builder guy that Manny and I met when we were here before and I'm living in a shared house with three other guys. When I feel like I need to talk to someone who knows me, I pretend I'm talking to you.

Love, Rhett

Zan read the card three times. Once to disentangle Rhett's tiny handwriting, twice so she could start picturing Rhett in Darwin and then one more time, while she wondered why the hell Solo thought Rhett was writing to

her. It seemed about as likely as getting a postcard from Leonardo di Caprio. Rhett was a movie-memory. The best memory ever but way outside normal life.

When she looked up, ready to hand the postcard back, Ward Munro was perched on the edge of the bench, next to Solo. Ward's nickname was 'Word', because he'd been answering eighty per cent of the science teacher's questions since Year 7, but he hardly ever said anything outside the classroom. He wasn't saying anything now and neither was Solo.

Zan thought: *Talk about hopeless. I'd better help them out.*

She flicked through her mental files and asked Word a question about genetic modification, pinched from one of the experts on TV. That got Word going on the scientific facts, which got Solo going on the scientists' ethics. Zan congratulated herself on being an ace conversation-starter. She left them to it and began to read Rhett's card for the fourth time.

She was trying to imagine klutzy Rhett making doors and windows, when the Central footy team went jogging past. One of them veered towards their bench - Aldo Garoni, as tall and muscley and gorgeous as Word was small and skinny and geeky.

'Ward, mate,' he said, punching Word on the arm. 'How's that big brother of yours getting on at uni?'

'As big a jock as ever,' Word said. 'Spends most of his time getting pissed with the other Engineering students. But I suppose I shouldn't be bad-mouthing jocks, seeing you're one of them.'

Aldo sat down beside him, shunting everyone along the bench. 'Nah, I'm the sensitive New Age type of jock,' he said. 'Go on, try me. Tell me what you were raving on about. I bet I can say something sensitive.'

'Genetic modification,' Word said, deliberately obscure, and Aldo said, 'Saw that on *The X-Files*, didn't I? A guerrilla group of alien tomatoes and cloned sheep, trying to take over the FBI.'

Word looked surprised. 'You won't believe this,' told Zan and Solo, 'but the guy's actually on the right track.'

'Told you so,' Aldo said smugly. 'Come on, talk science to me, babe.'

By the end of lunchtime Word was talking nearly as much as he talked in class, reeling off the addresses of the best science websites, telling them about his Internet science fiction lists. Aldo cracked jokes that were smarter than they sounded, Solo tossed in some of her interesting ideas and Zan came up with more questions whenever the others started running out of things to say.

The whole thing went so smoothly that Word even invited them over to his place after school, so they could see how the s.f. lists worked. When the siren hooted, Zan realised she hadn't glanced across at the girl gang all lunchtime, which was a first. Okay, she wasn't going to impress Annalise by hanging with

a jock and two losers but at least the guys had given her something else to think about.

She was waiting for the others outside Central, when hands tapped both her shoulders. Zan swivelled her head and saw her sister Barb on her left and Barb's friend Leith on her right. Barb was wearing a dress like one of Nan's lounge room curtains and looking stunning. Leith was wearing four layers of black and looking like Leith.

'What are *you* doing here?' Zan asked, instantly defensive.

'Calm down, can't you?' Barb said. 'I thought I'd take a detour on the way to Nan's place, so I could talk to you on your own. It strikes me as kind of weird, this whole business about you staying on with Nan and only going home for weekends. I got the impression you were hating it at Central - like, you couldn't wait to get away.'

'Funny, I didn't realise you'd even noticed I existed,' Zan said. 'Anyhow, you were wrong, as usual. I'd rather stay here than switch schools in the middle of the year.'

It wasn't the whole truth but it was all her sister was going to get. 'Fair enough,' Barb said. 'I just wanted to make sure you were okay but I'm obviously wasting my time. See you later - and remind me not to give a stuff in future.'

As she grabbed a handful of black scarf and hauled Leith over to her car, Solo appeared at Zan's elbow. 'Wish I looked like that,' she sighed.

'Really?' Zan said. 'You're usually more original. Everybody wants to look like Barb. She used to be the clone queen of Central.'

There she went, bitching about Barb again. After learning how to handle Big Brother Rhett, she'd been sure she could cope with Barb but apparently two seconds of big sisterly advice was enough to turn her straight back into Little Sister. The trouble was, Barb had hit a nerve, the way she always did.

Zan thought: *I don't know why it's so important to stay here at Central. I just want Barb - and everyone else - to lay off, while I give it a go.*

Then her thoughts scattered, because Solo was knocking on her forehead. 'Anybody home?' she asked. 'I said, I wasn't talking about your sister. I was talking about the other one.'

'Leith?' Zan said, startled. 'You want to look like Leith Dunbar? Actually, you look kind of like her already, except for ... hmm, what is it? Oh yeah, Leith and you are probably the same height and weight. But you walk like a fat person and she doesn't.'

'What do you mean?' Solo said, so Zan showed her, clomping back to the school gates, heels slamming down hard, soles thumping onto the concrete.

'Do not,' Solo said, thumping along behind her. 'Oh damn, you're right. I do. Okay, how do thin people walk?'

Zan showed her a movie star strut and a ballerina float, a supermodel

glide and an average person's walk. Solo went on thunking for a while and then suddenly got the knack. They practised up and down the footpath until Siobhan shouldered between them, with a couple of the girl gang in tow.

'You're blocking the gate,' she said, aiming a kick at Zan's schoolbag. 'What are you - primary school kids or something?'

'Nah, we're from the Ministry of Silly Walks,' Zan said in a Monty Python voice.

The girl gang, who'd been trained to appreciate Siobhan's jokes, giggled enthusiastically. Siobhan scowled at them, scowled at Zan and swept the others away.

'So Siobhan still hates you,' Solo said, gliding like a supermodel. 'Why bother? I would've thought she'd be over that, now she's Annalise's best mate again. Oh well, I guess she has to keep pretending you're one of the bad guys to justify trashing you. People are strange, aren't they?'

Zan stared. Another of Solo's interesting ideas - she'd have to think about it later. Right then it was more important to scan the schoolyard and make sure that Annalise and Lee weren't following along behind Siobhan. She wasn't ready to deal with the pair of them face to face, not just yet.

Luckily there weren't any tall blond guys or supermodel girls in sight - just Word and Aldo and Luke Kellaway, another member of the loner brigade, heading towards them. She started to smooth her jacket and found something in the pocket.

'Here's your postcard,' she said, stopping Solo in the middle of a ballerina float. 'By the way, what made you think it was for me?'

Solo glanced down at the card. "'I pretend I'm talking to you",' she quoted. 'My big brother Rhett never talked - *really* talked - to me in his entire life. And plus, did you happen to notice how he signed it? "Love, Rhett." Like the lawyers say, my case rests.'

Zan blushed.

*

Sometimes Luke Kellaway came to school with new bruises on his cheekbone or by his temple. He never mentioned them, so no one else mentioned them either, but Zan couldn't help making the connection with his throwaway comments about 'my dad, the drunk' and 'my dad, pissed as usual'. She always worked extra hard to include Luke on bruise days, asking questions he knew the answers to, sitting on his bruise-side and shielding him from the rest of the yard.

Zan was learning heaps about guys from hanging with Luke and Word and Aldo. It was like a crash course, making up for all those fatherless, brotherless years. Guys didn't want full-on sympathy but they liked being looked after, in a

sideways sort of way.

She thought: *Although Rhett's pretty full-on, for a guy. Didn't realise that at the time, because I was comparing him to my girlfriends. And to Lee, who turned out to be fake.*

While Luke and Aldo argued about the best way to fix Zan's bike chain, Solo flicked a postcard in her direction. Zan caught it like a frisbee and went on listening to the guys. After a while she glanced casually down at a photo labelled 'Kakadu National Park', which was somewhere near Darwin. Zan knew that, because she'd photocopied the Northern Territory page from the school library's big atlas and pinned it on her notice board in the bungalow. Okay, Rhett Foley might be just a movie-memory but it was nice to know where he was on the map, all the same.

She was about to flip the card over when Annalise came gliding across to their bench. ('The supermodel walk,' Solo hissed.) Zan's hands clenched, fingernails digging into the balls of her thumbs. She watched Annalise smile at Aldo and flick her eyes past Solo and Word and Luke, to show them they weren't worth noticing. Then her ex-best friend focussed on the empty air, approximately five centimetres to the left of Zan's ear.

'Hi, Sue,' she said. 'My mum wanted me to pass on this article from the *Women's Weekly*. It's about some doctor who specialises in helping people who've had strokes, so Mum thought your stepdad might be interested.'

Annalise's voice made it clear that she couldn't have been less interested. She shoved a few pages at Zan, pushed back her hair and gave Aldo an even more dazzling smile.

'Great game on Saturday, Garoni,' she said. 'I like your moves. How come you spend lunchtime with a bunch of geeks who don't even go and watch you play, when you could be, like, surrounded by adoring groupies?'

'I see the groupies at the weekend,' Aldo told her, totally deadpan. 'That means I can get a bit of culture during the week. Physics from Ward, music from Luke, general knowledge from Solo, and social skills from Zan. I figure it'll come in handy when I've got my own sports show on TV.'

Annalise hesitated, trying to work out whether she ought to laugh or take Aldo seriously. In the end she compromised, saying, 'Bet I *will* see you on telly some day.' She ran her eyes across Solo and Word and Luke again - even faster, like she was trying to erase them - and then stopped in the middle of turning away.

'See you, Zan,' she said and went gliding back to the best bench in the yard.

Zan's heart was racketing around inside her chest. She felt as though she'd just opened a gate saying 'Beware of the Dog,' expecting a rottweiler and finding a yappy poodle. The others looked pretty stunned as well, which was fair enough, seeing that Annalise had either flattered them or ignored

them. Word recovered first.

‘What was that about?’ he asked.

‘Annalise gets a buzz out of pinching Zan’s boyfriends,’ Solo explained. ‘Sibling rivalry, I guess. The two of them go back a long way. Anyhow, she got Lee Ferris under control at the start of the year and now she’s angling for Aldo, which shows how much she knows.’

Zan stared. Word looked blank. Aldo smiled at the sky. Luke whistled and said, ‘Catfight’ in a *Seinfeld* voice.

‘I’m not being catty,’ Solo protested. ‘It’s true. Isn’t it, Zan?’

She frowned and said, ‘Sibling rivalry? You mean Annalise feels the same about me as I feel about Barb? Maybe. She kept making bitchy remarks about me going to a private girls’ school, like it was some really big deal. As if. I’d rather be here with you guys.’

With a jolt of surprise, Zan realised she really meant it. She liked Word’s endless facts and crazes. She liked the way Luke talked in song lyrics and TV quotes. She liked Aldo’s off-the-wall sense of humour and the way Solo had a theory about everything. And she liked knowing that she had something to offer them, as well. All right, the others might be smarter than her but she was the one who’d turned a bunch of loners into a group.

Zan thought: *Life. That’s my talent. I’m good at life. Which is funny, seeing I nearly chucked my life down the toilet.*

Her heart muscle clenched. Part of her still wanted to forget about the yellow pills she’d flushed into the sewers. It would’ve been easy to go back to Jarawa Girls’ School and slot straight into the Zan she used to be. But another part of her wanted to remember everything she and Rhett talked about in Finnegan’s Cave, which was why she was here at Central. Testing herself. Facing Annalise ... and winning, in a way, because Annalise had finally called her Zan.

She smiled and tuned back into the conversation. ‘I don’t get it,’ Word was saying. ‘Why does Annalise think she can get Aldo to go out with her? Not a chance - unless she organised a double date with my big brother Hayden and his girlfriend.’

‘Not even then,’ Aldo said. ‘I’m not into straight guys and you’ve convinced me your brother’s straight as.’

‘Well, hypothetically, everyone’s born polymorphously perverse,’ Word said in his classroom voice. ‘Sigmund Freud reckons we only become gay or straight or bisexual as a result of socialization - but yeah, I gotta admit Hayden looks pretty straight to me.’

It sounded like the cue for one of the group’s weirder discussions. Zan waited, counting the seconds under her breath. Sure enough, on the count of five Aldo said, ‘Duh? Sigmund Fraud?’, Luke started singing, ‘Everybody loves somebody some time’, and Solo asked Word to define the difference between

bisexual and polymorphous perverse, which proved that at least one of them understood what he was talking about.

Zan had a feeling they'd be arguing about sex for the rest of lunchtime, so she opted out and flipped the postcard over. Her stomach lurched at the sight of Rhett's small, careful handwriting. She settled the card in her lap and started to read.

Hi again. Did you know that, back when suicide was a crime, people actually used to punish the corpse? Beating it with chains, throwing it out to be eaten by wild animals, burying it at the crossroads with a stake through its heart. They punished the family too, like they were accomplices in the crime, so naturally people tried to cover things up and pretend the suicides were just accidents. Okay, things have changed now but they haven't changed totally. We're still covering up. We're still pretending. Me included. (Well, why else do I keep running away?)

Love, Rhett

For the first time, Zan really believed Solo's theory that the postcards were meant for her. Rhett was saying what she'd just been thinking, only in a guy-way, instead of a girl-way. Guys loved facts but underneath all the facts, Rhett was on about remembering and forgetting, same as her.

It was like they were still talking together, even though he was at the top end of Australia and she was down at the bottom. Still reminding each other not to cover up. Not to pretend. Not to forget.

Zan nodded.

*

'Life gets you down,' Luke crooned, sounding exactly like Jed Johnston. 'Life sucks. Who needs it? Yeah, who needs it?'

He slouched against the wall, banging a drum solo on Zan's locker door. A blue blotch, streaked with red, spread outwards from the corner of his left eye. Luke tilted his head and shook his long hair back, deliberately defiant, bruise on display.

Okay, guys didn't usually go for full-on sympathy but this seemed different somehow. Zan hesitated, tried out sentences in her mind and decided to take the risk.

'I felt that way round the start of this year,' she said. 'Lucky I didn't do anything about it, 'cause I've changed my mind now.'

Luke's eyes turned white. Well, not exactly, but they opened so wide that more white than hazel was showing.

'Know what you mean,' he said. 'Like, you're right down in the pits and

then this song comes on the radio and suddenly you're ...' He searched for words and started singing, 'Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high,' sounding exactly like Judy Garland.

'Dead right,' Zan said. 'No, delete that. Alive, right?'

'Right,' Luke said with another drum roll. 'You're okay, Zan O'Connell. See you at lunchtime.'

He dropped an arm round Zan's shoulders in a quick, awkward hug and went strolling off. Zan collected her books, shut the locker door and jabbed her key at the lock. She'd missed three times before she noticed that her hand was shaking the key out of fine.

She thought: *Oh Jesus, I just told Luke I've thought about killing myself. Not the same as telling Rhett - like, I didn't say it in so many words. But freakier, in a way. After all, Rhett asked me to tell him. With Luke, I took a risk.*

As she jabbed at the lock again, a hand reached over and swiped the key. 'Here, let me do that for you,' said a voice that still gave her goosebumps. Zan swung round and looked straight into autumn eyes.

'Careful, Lee,' she said. 'Are you sure Annalise would approve?'

The blue sky in Lee's eyes clouded to grey. 'Annalise isn't likely to feel threatened,' he said. 'Anyone can tell you and Luke Kellaway are an item. Can't work out what you see in the guy - like, he'd be trailer trash, if his old man could afford a trailer. I was hoping you and I could get together again, now that Annalise has calmed down, but -'

'But you were wrong,' Zan said, reclaiming her key. 'Rhett Foley reckoned you were a two-timer. Looks like he was spot-on.'

'Rhett Foley?' Lee asked. 'Hmm, sounds as though you're doing a bit of two-timing yourself.'

Zan thought about explaining, realised she wouldn't know where to start and decided she wasn't obliged to explain things to Ashley Ferris anyway. Lee could've talked to her any time in the last six months but he'd probably assumed he had her on a string, till he saw her with Luke.

Well, he was wrong, wrong, wrong. For one thing, he couldn't recognise a brotherly hug when he saw one. For another thing, if you fell on the floor and grabbed someone's ankles and they kicked you away and nearly sent you over the edge, then basically there was no way back.

'Sorry,' she said. 'My mistake. I shouldn't've started talking to you. Goodbye, Lee.'

Then she turned and marched off down the corridor. Solo caught up with her on the stairs.

'Zan?' she said. 'Have you gone deaf or something? I was yelling my lungs out. Got another postcard yesterday. Do you want to read it?'

'Yeah, sure,' Zan said, not really listening, still thinking about Lee.

Next minute she was staring at Rhett's miniature handwriting, sorting the

tiny letters into words.

Hi again. Me and Nathan - one of the guys in my house - just had a rave about survivor guilt. Three of Nathan's grandparents died in Nazi concentration camps and he reckons it's hard to stop thinking, 'Why them, not me?' I re-read Anne Frank's diary and Primo Levi's If This Is A Man. Two of the most alive people ever - and yet one of them was killed because some of her neighbours doxed her in and the other one finally gave up trying to understand. So us survivors are doing something pretty tough. We have to keep on encouraging each other.

Bewdy, mate. Good one. Go for it, okay?

Love, Rhett

Zan grinned. That was Rhett, all right. Serious one minute and next minute laughing at himself, to make sure no one else laughed at him first.

'Interesting,' she said to Solo. 'Do *you* have this survivor guilt stuff?'

Solo thumped onto the landing, realised she was moving like a fat person and changed the next step into a bounce. 'Probably,' she said. 'I walked out of a school where I had lots of friends, into a school where I hardly knew anyone. Okay, I pretend I did it because I was tired of talking about Mick. But maybe I was just punishing myself.'

'Oh, thanks. What sort of punishment am I? The strap? Thumbscrews?'

'Nah, you're an unexpected bonus,' Solo said. 'I was planning to dag around miserably, being snubbed by the girl gang. I wasn't supposed to score any new friends.'

'So do you still feel like you ought to make yourself miserable because of Mick?'

'Not any more. Do you still wish you were in with the girl gang?'

'Yuck. No way.'

Words echoed round Zan's head - Rhett's voice saying, 'Us survivors need to keep encouraging each other'; Luke's voice singing, 'Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high.' If she hadn't talked to Rhett in Finnegan's Cave, she might have decided to pretend she'd never lined up those pills in rows on her grandfather's workbench. She might have run away to Jarawa or gone crawling to the girl gang, trying to belong. She might have even started seeing Lee behind Annalise's back.

Zan thought: *That would've been my loss. If I set myself a test, coming back to Central, I reckon I've passed it. I'm better off with Luke and Word and Solo and Aldo. A bunch of survivors encouraging each other.*

She sighed.

In November, Solo got another postcard from Rhett but this time she didn't pass it on. Zan only found out because she spotted a glossy frangipani flower poking out of Solo's school diary. When she tugged at the corner of the card, Solo smacked her hand.

'Yowl' Zan said. 'What was that for? You always let me read Rhett's cards before.'

'But before, I thought he was writing to you,' Solo said. 'Turns out he was actually writing to me all along.' She dumped some books on the ledge and dived back into her locker, adding, 'I don't understand people, y'know. They're a total mystery. Think I might study psychology at uni, to see if I can pick up a few more clues. Might even become a shrink or something. What do you reckon?'

'I reckon you'd be good at it,' Zan said, as she sidestepped over to the ledge. 'You know more about people than you think,' as she riffled through Solo's diary. 'But do you really want to spend your whole life helping people?' as she found the place where Solo had stashed Rhett's postcard and started nudging the card to the edge of the page.

'*Analysing* people,' Solo said. 'They'd have to help themselves. I'd just point out where they were getting confused.'

Zan was about to slip the card out of the diary and into her pocket, when Solo turned round, dropped two more books onto the pile and hitched the pile onto her hip. As she hurried off to her History class, the postcard floated to the floor behind her.

Zan thought: *Perfect. I didn't even need to steal it. When I tell Solo the card dropped out of her diary, I'll be telling the truth.*

She pounced on the card, opened her locker and hid behind its door to read Rhett's latest message. But she'd only got as far as 'Hi, Solo', when someone said, 'Um, hi, Zan.' She shoved the card into her pocket and spun round to find Emma behind her, butterfly hands fluttering nervously across her strawberry hair.

'Hi,' Zan said and then, because Emma looked like she was waiting for something, she decided to be generous and add, 'How's things?'

'Boring, as usual,' Emma said. 'Annalise and her lot never talk about anything except Silicon Fish and who's going with who. You're so lucky, Zan, hanging with Aldo and Luke and the others. Everyone reckons your mob's cool as.'

She went on waiting, as if she was hoping Zan would invite her to join them at lunchtime. Zan didn't feel quite that generous. She could still remember Emma going, 'You were horrible to Rhianna. She was *crying*, Zan.' But in a strange sort of way, she felt sorry for Emma, so she walked down to the Italian classroom with her, even though it meant she didn't get to read

Rhett's postcard before school started.

She couldn't read the card at lunchtime either, not with Solo sitting opposite, arguing with Word about why people liked computer games. Aldo told them he was definitely going to the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in Sydney next year and he didn't care if the TV cameras swung his way and his mother, father, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins all saw him there. Luke drummed on his knee and sang, 'Hey, babe, take a walk on the wild side.'

Zan leaned back, thinking about the Mardi Gras and computer games simultaneously, and saw Emma glancing sideways at her from the best bench in the yard.

She thought: *Omigod. She was serious. She'd really rather be with us than Annalise. What a joke.*

Then half a second later she forgot about the girl gang, because Word and Solo needed an umpire, Aldo needed advice on coming out to his family and Luke was grinning at her and singing Jed Johnston's first big hit, 'Dreamer Girl.'

So the postcard was still wedged in her pocket as she headed through the gates after school. Zan had been hoping she'd get a chance to read it while she waited for Barry, who'd driven down from the hills to get checked out by the stroke specialist in town. But Mr Hansen had kept her back after Further Maths, to discuss her latest assignment, and Emma had been hanging round the lockers again, which meant that by the time Zan hit the street, Barry's Volvo was already parked on the far side of the road.

Zan dodged cars and bicycles and slid into the passenger seat, leaning over to give her stepdad a kiss. 'G'day, Bazza,' she said. 'Did you pass all the doctor's tests?'

'With flying colours,' he said. 'Time to celebrate. How about we go down to Lygon Street, so I can watch you eat some of those cakes the doctor won't let me have any more?'

They stood arm in arm at the window, studying cakes with chocolate lattice work, tarts stuffed with glazed fruit, cannoli dusted with powdery sugar. When Barry pointed to one of the squishy cakes that used to be their favourite, Zan's heart bumped her ribs, as if it was trying to turn a somersault inside her chest.

The first bite of the cake was like tasting a memory - nine months ago, skiving off from school and eating squishy cake, while she waited for her mum to phone and tell them whether Barry was going to survive. Her eyes searched her stepdad's face, creased and yellow, mouth drawn down on one side - but alive. As he smiled at her, she forced herself to spoon up another mouthful of cake.

'Good?' he asked and Zan said, 'Yeah, it's good.'

It was the first time in months that they'd been on their own for more than

ten minutes, without Zan's mum looking in to make sure Barry was okay. Zan had been nervous in advance but they slipped back into their old patterns straight away: Zan telling Barry every detail of her school work, Barry giving advice about her maths assignment and telling her what a clever girl she was. Nothing too serious - her mum kept reminding her that Barry couldn't take much stress - but when the Volvo pulled up outside Nan's house, he switched off the engine and put his hand on Zan's arm, holding her in place.

'Just wanted to say I know you had a rough trot, back while I was sick,' he told her. 'I concentrated on my other kids, because - well, I've known them since they were babies, so I still think of them as small and helpless. But you must've felt helpless too. I'm sorry I didn't work that out sooner.'

'Thanks,' Zan said and hugged him so hard that they both sat back, breathless and startled. 'Give my love to Mum, okay? I'll see you at the weekend. Bye.'

A small chip of ice in her heart seemed to have melted and flowed straight into her tear ducts. Zan hurtled out of the car, before she started howling like a little kid and stressed her stepdad. Safe in the bungalow, she sat on the end of her bed and cried steadily for an hour, sniffing and gulping, blowing her nose and then realising she had to begin again, like Michael Finnegan.

She thought: *My other kids. Barry said, 'My other kids,' which means he thinks I'm one of his kids as well. He didn't abandon me. He just assumed I could cope, when actually I couldn't.*

But that's a compliment, if you look at it the right way round.

By the time Nan called her into the house for dinner, Zan had wept the last year into place. She was sitting in front of the TV, picking at a slice of roast chicken and watching the news, when she remembered that she still hadn't read Rhett's card. Not a problem this time. Nan was a news freak - she wouldn't turn her head away from the telly unless Zan was choking on a chicken bone. She took the card out of her pocket and scanned it quickly, to see why Solo had changed her mind.

Hi, Solo. Nothing much to tell you, except that I'll be home in a couple of weeks. But I wanted to write and say: can we go on talking in real life like we've been talking in letters? I've had a million important raves while I've been away but trust me, you're the only person in the world who knows how I feel about Zan O'Connell. Unless she knows too. Oh Jesus, I hope so. Put in a good word for me, if you get the chance, will you? And see you soon.

Love, Rhett

Zan smiled.

THREE

RHETT

Rhett found a weak spot in the neat hedge around the holiday house and wriggled through it, feeling like a criminal on the run. His dad hated people mucking up his hedge but Greg wouldn't be there - too early in the school holidays for that - and Rhett didn't have the energy to climb up the hill to the driveway and then walk back down to the house. Only twenty-four hours of hitchhiking and sleeping rough but he was totally stuffed. He couldn't remember why Kerouac and the Beat poets thought that sort of thing was so romantic but they were wrong, anyway. It sucked.

He shook torn leaves off his backpack and patted the hedge into place. The lawn bounced under his feet like a trampoline, rough sea grass but as neatly trimmed as the green lawn at his dad's house. Rhett thought about making a Greg-and-Jeanette Tidy Town joke but right at that moment, order and tidiness felt kind of comforting. He'd really been on top of things, up in the Top End, but the closer he got to home, the more useless he kept feeling.

His key slid smoothly into the lock but when he pushed the front door, it pushed back at him. He had to turn the key again before he could kick the door open, dump his pack and step inside. First stop: the bathroom, to pee and check his face in the mirror.

The cold sore looked even worse than it felt, lumpy and blistered and oozing, hanging from his lower lip like a cluster of overripe grapes. A smart idea, hiding out in the holiday house for a few days before he headed on home. He was supposed to be a hero, returning after a long quest, and cold sores didn't fit the hero image.

As he leaned closer to the mirror, Rhett noticed a bottle of aftershave balanced on the edge of the basin and some lipsticky tissues in the bin. Standard issue in most bathrooms but in a Greg-and-Jeanette bathroom, that counted as a mess. Rhett grinned at his reflection. So everyone screwed up

sometimes, even Greg and Jeanette. He'd screwed up big time in the last twenty-four hours but now he had a chance to pull himself together again. By the time he knocked on Zan O'Connell's door, he'd have the hero act down and perfect, no question about that.

He grinned harder, then winced as the cold sore stretched and tingled. What next? Food? There'd be biscuits or something in the kitchen but although he felt hollow, he didn't exactly feel hungry. A rest, then? Yeah, that was more like it. An hour on the balcony, to finish the book he'd been reading - *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf.

That and *Gone with the Wind* had been the only novels in the Bordertown op shop that weren't Mills and Boon romances or Stephen Kings - and *Gone with the Wind* was just a Mills and Boon romance in fancy dress, so Virginia Woolf had won, no contest. For the first fifty pages the book had driven Rhett mental - too many gushy descriptions of buying flowers and wandering round London - but suddenly something had clicked.

The drawing of Woolf on the cover, loops of hair and huge deepset eyes ... The author note on the front page, reminding him that in the middle of the Second World War she'd loaded her pockets with stones and walked into the river. Maybe that explained why the novel kept flipping back and forth between a society lady and a shell-shocked soldier. Maybe the characters were actually two sides of Virginia Woolf.

Rhett thought: *More exciting than a thriller, once you know what's going on. Gotta find out which side wins.*

He got the book out of his pack. As he climbed the stairs, from one split level to the next, he realised that the balcony door was open. Somebody was sitting on the rail, smoking a cigarette. Long cardigan and baggy cotton pants. Loops of hair and huge deepset eyes.

Virginia Woolf?

Rhett's brain went into overdrive, processing the facts at computer speed. Tissues in the bathroom, an unlocked front door and he'd come in via the hedge, so he hadn't checked the driveway for cars. Systems error. He didn't have the house to himself, after all. There were other people around.

His mother, for example.

Even after he'd recognised Meredith, Rhett still couldn't take the next step forward. He leaned in the doorway, recording every change the last seven months had made in her. Faint lines round her eyes and mouth, faint grey shadows in her long dark hair, and a defeated sag to her shoulders. Nothing too dramatic - if he'd been around, he probably wouldn't have even noticed. But he hadn't been around, had he?

He thought: *I should've stayed. She looks so sad. I shouldn't've gone away.*

The floorboards quivered under his feet, as if he was dropping down in a

lift. As he clutched the doorframe, banging his book against the latch, Meredith flinched and turned her head.

'Rhett?' she said, shading her eyes. 'Good heavens, it *is* you. I didn't know you were planning to meet us here.'

'I wasn't,' he said. 'I mean, it wasn't planned. My car packed up in Adelaide, so I sold it to the wreckers and started hitching.'

That didn't explain how he'd ended up on the coast road, instead of on the main highway, but luckily Meredith hardly ever left the city, which meant she wasn't big on geography. Although, come to think of it, she was out of the city now.

'What about you?' he asked. 'Last time I phoned, you weren't planning a holiday either.'

'Oh, for some reason Greg and Jeanette decided I needed a break. So sweet of them. They're always fussing over me. And it seemed easier to go along with them, much easier than arguing.'

Her hands were weaving patterns on the air, fuss-patterns and easy-patterns and argument-patterns. Rhett sighed with relief. His mum hadn't changed totally. She still talked with her hands, as well as her voice. But there was definitely something missing, something that mothers and sons normally did if they met up again after a long break.

Rhett ran his hand over twenty-four hours' stubble, stopping just before he bumped the cold sore. Oh right, of course. He'd held back from hugging his mum because he felt so grotty. And Meredith - well, she'd never been a huggy type of person, even with Mick. But a lot of things had changed while he'd been in the Top End, so he let go of the doorframe, reached the balcony in two strides and pulled his mum into a hug.

'Great to see you,' he told her. 'It's good to be back.'

If he kept saying that, maybe he'd start to feel it, although right then it was hard to feel anything except the tension stiffening Meredith's shoulders. Rhett squeezed hard, as if he could crack the tension and peel it away. But he wasn't strong enough. In the end he let go and stepped back, feeling less like a hero than ever. Meredith smiled up at him.

'Greg and Jeanette will be pleased too,' she said. 'Oh, look. Here they are.'

For a moment, Rhett was convinced that a mob was rioting up the stairs but actually it was only Solo and Tate, followed by Greg and Jeanette. Tate headed towards him so fast that he seemed to take off and fly into Rhett's arms. Jeanette squealed, 'Rhett! What a surprise! When did you get here?' Greg shifted from one foot to the other and looked unexpectedly shy. And Solo, his sulky kid sister, ran over and wrapped her arms round the bits of him that Tate wasn't hanging onto.

Rhett thought: *What brought that on? She's acting as though she likes me.* He kissed Jeanette over Tate's head. Said 'G'day' to Greg. Bounced Tate

and slid him down to the floor, saying, 'You're getting too heavy for me, mate.' That left Solo, still clinging to his arm, bobbing like a yoyo.

'You look different,' he told her. 'Have you lost weight or something?'

'Nup,' Solo said. 'Zan taught me how to stop walking like a fat person, that's all. And speaking of Zan -'

She released his arm and pointed down the stairs. A man came shuffling along the corridor, grey hair receding from a round, serious forehead, skin sagging loose on his bones. There was a woman at his side, with her hand tucked under his elbow like a nurse, and the girl behind them was - yep, no doubt about it - Zan O'Connell. Rhett's hand shot up to cover his cold sore.

He thought: *Oh, great. The gang's all here.*

*

Rhett hadn't expected Zan to fall into his arms like Tate and Solo, not after he'd taken off for seven months without even saying goodbye. He'd spent hours practising the speech that would prove he'd thought about her non-stop but he could hardly start making speeches in front of his entire family and half of hers.

Under the circumstances, it was probably a good sign that she'd nodded in his general direction and said, 'Hi, Rhett,' but he wanted more than that all the same. Some hope. Within seconds, Jeanette had organised an afternoon tea party, cakes and biscuits appearing from half a dozen tins, everyone sitting in a circle and smiling politely at each other.

Rhett wasn't even on the same side of the circle as Zan, although at least that meant he could watch her from the corner of one eye when she wasn't looking. He definitely didn't have the nerve to say, 'What the hell are you doing here?' but luckily Jeanette proceeded to tell the whole story, even though everyone except him knew it already.

It turned out that his dad and stepmum had got to know Zan's folks while they were trying to talk the Bayside police into searching for Zan and Rhett. They'd had a few dinners with Sandra and Barry and at the last dinner, they'd offered the holiday house to Zan's folks for a week, 'to let Barry breathe some fresh sea air,' Jeanette said. So there they were. And there was Zan, as stunning as ever, dark hair and diamond eyes ...

'Rhett?' Jeanette said. 'Oh dear, I don't think he heard you! *Rhett!* Your father wants to know what happened to your car.'

That gave them all something to talk about for the next twenty minutes. Greg was convinced that the Leyland could've been saved but Zan's stepfather agreed that once a car had a cracked chassis, the wreckers were the only option. Zan's mum turned out to have owned a Leyland years ago and she told a string of stories about its bad habits, completely straight-faced,

only laughing when her husband laughed. Jeanette asked breathless questions. Tate played with Rhett's shoelaces. Zan and Solo whispered together.

And Meredith leaned back in her chair with her Virginia Woolf eyes gazing at the distance, as if she was listening to another conversation that the rest of them couldn't hear.

A quarter of Rhett's brain kept on supplying answers to his dad's questions about the Leyland. Another quarter tried to read Zan's lips and the remaining half focussed on his mum. She'd changed, for sure, as much as Zan's stepdad must've been changed by his stroke.

You could still see the jolly fat bloke that Barry used to be, in the folds of skin that round his neck and hands, like a built-in scarf and gloves that were a size too large. You could still see leftover traces of beautiful tranquil Meredith, the pin-up girl from *Melbourne University Magazine* twenty years ago. But jolly Barry and beautiful Meredith were ghosts now, haunting the bodies where they used to live.

Rhett thought: *Not again. I've got ghosts on the brain. Think about something else. Foley.*

But he couldn't, because every time he looked at Meredith, he found himself remembering Mick. The bad memories, of course. The creak of the rope on the beam as he waited for the cops to arrive, meaning that Mick's body was still swaying in the draught from the door. The way the cops had looked at him when he said, 'I haven't rung anyone else yet,' because he couldn't've told Meredith, not while Mick was hanging there. He and Mick had always protected her - that's why Mick put the bit about calling the cops in his note.

It had been bad enough, watching his mum walk out of the study after she'd said goodbye to Mick, while two of her friends from the party whispered about how well she was coping, although Rhett knew she wasn't coping at all. Meredith had a secret place in her mind where she went if things got too hard. She'd stayed there for ages after Mick's death.

Rhett wasn't sure whether she'd come back yet.

He wasn't sure whether she ever would.

That idea sent him rocketing out of his thoughts and back into the lounge room, where Jeanette was - surprise, surprise - discussing the arrangements for driving back to the city.

'We really *can't* fit six people into the car!' she said. 'Tate's too big to sit on my lap and, besides, it's too dangerous. But we can't let you hitchhike home, Rhett! I wonder ... Solange, perhaps you'd like to stay on for a while?'

'Forget it,' Solo said. 'Rhett looks totally stuffed. Zan's family won't mind if he stays here overnight. He can come back on the bus tomorrow or whenever.'

Another round of wittering - Jeanette wittering about how they couldn't impose on Sandra and Barry, Sandra wittering back about being glad to have the chance to help. They sounded like finalists in the Bayside Politeness Award. Rhett would've found it funny if he hadn't been barracking for Sandra to win. He was wondering whether to stage a faint, to prove he was exhausted, when he realised that everybody was heading off to tidy the kitchen and pack Greg's car.

Apparently, Sandra *had* won, which was hardly surprising. After all, she was Zan O'Connell's mum. Rhett leapt up, planning to corner Zan, but his feet twisted and tipped him back into the chair.

'Shoelaces,' Solo said from behind him. 'It's Tate's latest trick. He ties them together.'

Rhett frowned down at the laces, then smiled up at his sister. 'Thanks,' he said and Solo said, 'Not a problem.'

'No, I meant thanks for -'

'Ssh!' she hissed. 'You've been away too long, big brother. You've forgotten what it's like around here. Do you really want all the oldies cooing over you and Zan? Good luck - and remember, you owe me one.'

'More than one,' Rhett said.

Solo sidestepped to stop Tate from packing a lump of seaweed into his overnight bag. She said, 'Thanks for the cards,' and went to dump the seaweed in the bin.

By the time Rhett had untied his laces, everyone else was putting cake in tins or carrying bags up and down the corridor. He rescued *Mrs Dalloway*, before someone could tidy her away, and went out onto the balcony, half-hoping that Zan would notice and join him, but either she was still mad at him or else she'd been pressganged into carrying bags.

Rhett perched on the rail for a while, flipping pages and glancing at the door, but then the book took over. For some reason, beautiful skittery Mrs Dalloway seemed to have turned into Meredith and Septimus, the shell-shocked soldier, had turned into Mick. He read on, faster and faster, watching Septimus try to talk to a posh doctor, watching Mrs Dalloway take a rest after lunch.

Watching Septimus panic, because the doctor wanted to put him in the bin, climb onto the window sill and throw himself out of the window, landing on the iron railings.

Rhett sat there, cold sore throbbing, reading that sentence over and over. There was still half a centimetre of the book left. He wanted to look at the ending, to find out what happened to Mrs Dalloway / Meredith, but at the same time he didn't want to know.

He thought: *Oh Jesus, this is a bad omen. Wish I'd bought Gone with the Wind instead.*

As he read the sentence one last time, the page warped and crinkled. Then a second drop of water landed on top of the first one, quivering wetly, instead of sinking into the paper. Rhett stared at it, wondering whether he was about to crack up in front of the worst possible audience.

But the water on the page wasn't tears. It was starting to rain.

*

It was still raining when Rhett went out to wave his family goodbye. Not the heavy rain that had trapped him and Zan in Finnegan's Cave but a pale powdery drift that settled on Solo's hair like glitter and dribbled down Tate's cheeks like tears before bedtime. Tate hugged Rhett's knees, Solo punched him on the arm and they dived into the back seat, still arguing about the seaweed. Rhett grinned and turned to face his parents, all three of them. Jeanette's hand was tucked under Meredith's elbow and Greg was standing behind them with a security guard frown.

'Well, Rhett,' he said. 'So you're back. Give us a ring, when you've got time. Oh, and by the way ...'

He slapped his pockets, found his wallet and pushed a note into Rhett's hand. Then he went hurrying around to the driver's side of the car, leaving Rhett with Meredith and Jeanette.

'That was nice!' Jeanette said. 'A surprise visit! We love surprises, don't we, Meredith? Now we'd better hop into the car, quick smart. We don't want to get damp at the start of a long journey.'

She hugged Rhett so hard that she knocked her plastic rainhood sideways. Rhett wiped rain from his face and got ready for a second try at a proper mother-and-son hug. This time, to his surprise, Meredith folded against him, clutching his collar like a drowner. When he bent to kiss her hair, she whispered, 'I hate saying goodbye,' then pulled away from him and threw herself into the car.

As the Toyota backed up the drive, Rhett found himself staring through the pale rain and seeing Mick, with a glass of whiskey lifted in a salute, as if he'd been waving the family goodbye as well.

'See you later,' he said to Rhett, the last words he'd ever said to anyone. 'Have a great time.'

It was only a memory, of course, but it seemed so real that he almost expected to hear gravel crunch underfoot as Mick disappeared. Rhett shivered and frowned at the empty patch of drive where his mother had been standing when she said, 'I hate saying goodbye.'

He thought: *So that's another thing Mick landed us with. Every time we say goodbye, we'll always wonder whether it's the last time.*

*

When he pushed the front door open, Zan came hurtling out of the second bedroom, pulling on her red parka. 'Don't take your coat off,' she said. 'We're going for a walk.'

'But, Zan, it's raining,' Sandra called from the stairs and Barry limped over to slip his arm round her waist.

'It's all right, Sandy,' he said. 'They won't melt.'

She laughed. 'No, I don't suppose they will. Off you go, then.'

Rhett smiled up at her, seeing Zan in her face and liking her for it, even though she'd almost wrecked his first chance to be alone with Zan. Almost, but not quite. A few seconds later they were out in the open air.

Fine rain tickled their skin as they climbed up the driveway to the road. Rhett tried to remember the speech he'd been rehearsing but his mind seemed to be completely blank. He was still wondering where to start and what to say, when he realised they were already holding hands.

He thought: *Of course. No need for speeches. Zan probably would've laughed at them, anyway.*

At the top of the drive they turned as smoothly as if they'd been practising for months, crossing the road and following the line of the cliff. Rain clouds chased each other across the sky and a gusty wind rocked the waves back and forth. Rhett tightened his grip on Zan's hand, feeling guilty because he should've been driving back to the city with Meredith, feeling glad because he was here with Zan. They stopped at exactly the same moment, on the exact spot where he used to stand and look out at the sea.

'Do you remember the first thing you ever said to me?' Zan asked, looking down at the beach. 'It was when I blobbed you with my ice cream. You said, "Shit happens."'

'And you said, "Yeah, I bet you make it happen",' Rhett told her.

'Did I? That was pretty mean. Besides, it's not true.'

'Yes, it is,' he said. 'I'm still making it happen.'

Zan turned towards him, diamond eyes cutting through his plexiglass screen. 'Yeah, I thought there was something wrong,' she said. 'Come on. Tell me everything.'

So Rhett told her about spotting the Bayside sign on the main highway and making a split-second decision to hitch down to the holiday house before he headed on home. Getting picked up by three guys who kept passing stubbies around and swerving all over the road. Starting to see images of burnt / bleeding / broken bodies, lifted from the Transport Accident Commission's ad campaign. Shouting at the driver to stop and when the guy slowed down, in order to shout back at him, fumbling with the door handle and throwing himself out of the car.

He'd landed on grass but he'd jarred every bone in his body. Three hours later, sitting on his pack and staring down an empty highway, he'd felt like the biggest fool of all time. By then, it was way too late to walk as far as Bayside, so he'd had to camp by the side of the road, waking every half hour to rub his bruises and see if it was morning yet.

Then Mick's ghost had turned up in the middle of the night, while Rhett was watching the stars and jumping every time a twig cracked. Not the memory-Mick he'd seen on the driveway but the cold shadow that had cornered him near Finnegan's Cave, trying to steal the warmth out of his body. It was the first time Rhett had seen the ghost since he'd tossed his cigarettes over the falls. He'd sent Mick away but next morning he'd found a blob on his lip, as though the ghost had left its mark on him.

'See?' he burst out. 'I'm losing it again. Normal people don't see ghosts. Normal people don't chuck themselves out of moving cars. Normal people aren't scared of anything and everything. But I am.'

'So? I'd be scared too if I had a ghost following me around,' Zan said. 'Plus drunk drivers are famous for having accidents, y'know. Okay, maybe you overreacted but who cares?'

'I care,' Rhett said. 'I thought I was over Mick. In Darwin I felt fine - like, I went to work, came home and chatted to the guys or watched telly. Didn't even think about Mick for days on end. But the minute I cross the border, I start freaking out. Why now?'

Zan frowned, like she was trying to work out whether he was serious. 'Well, it can't've been much fun, getting ready to see your mum again,' she pointed out. 'I mean, every time you two look at each other, it has to remind you of - Rhett? Are you okay?'

The sea and the sky were spinning round him in misty circles. Too many people and too many feelings, on too little sleep and too little to eat. Zan wriggled out of her parka and spread it across the wet grass, said, 'Sit' and sat down beside him. That felt better. Rhett took off his jacket and draped it over their heads, like a tent or a miniature cave.

'I knew Mum reminded me of Mick,' he said. 'But I hadn't realised it'd work the other way around. I'll have to factor that in, next time I see her. Oh hell, there's always something else to think about. It isn't fair!'

Zan giggled: the cheerful sound of a stream running over rocks. 'Sorry,' she said. 'You sounded exactly like Tate. You're right, though. It's not fair - but that's the way it is. Some kids think *their* parents won't die and *their* car won't crash and *their* favourite people won't kill themselves and *they'll* never end up in a concentration camp. But once you know shit happens, you can't help watching out for it.'

Rhett turned that idea around and looked at it from a couple of different angles. 'Makes sense,' he admitted. 'You're pretty smart, y'know.'

‘Yeah,’ Zan agreed. ‘That’s what I thought when you said the same thing to me, up at Finnegan’s Cave.’

The mist stretched and tore, like a soggy tissue. Rhett lifted his eyes to the hills and saw green paddocks shining through the rain. It was all right. No need to panic. According to Zan, he’d sorted this stuff out once before, which meant he’d probably be able to sort it out again. Tomorrow. Or the next day. Or maybe the day after that.

Zan’s thumb was stroking his palm. ‘It’s weird, isn’t it?’ she said dreamily. ‘Sometimes I look around at the kids at Central and go, “Jesus, you’re so ignorant.” Not Solo or my other mates, of course, but Annalise and Lee and the rest, who still think everything’s going to work out the way they want. I could’ve been like that, even after lining up those pills, if you hadn’t made me talk about it. But I’m different now.’

‘And that’s my fault?’ Rhett said, trying not to sound anxious. ‘It hasn’t turned you off me, has it?’

Zan groaned. ‘Stop worrying. I’m here, aren’t I?’ She snuggled closer and said, ‘Okay, tell me what’s the worst part for you, right now.’

Rhett thought: *I hate the way everything keeps coming back to Mick. I hate knowing more about the dark side than other people know. I hate thinking my mum mightn’t ever recover from Mick’s death. I hate wondering whether I’m permanently damaged as well. I hate the way I have to keep on learning the same thing over and over - like how, even if pain hurts, trying to block it hurts even more. I hate the fact that things will never be the way they were before Mick killed himself.*

But I can handle all of that, especially with Zan around. I’m not the only person in the world who’s trying to figure out why shit happens.

‘The cold sore,’ he told her. ‘That’s the worst part, because it means I can’t kiss you.’

‘Snap!’ Zan said. ‘That’s the worst part for me too. Never mind, you’ll recover.’

Rhett leaned forward and nuzzled her hair. Silky strands caught on the cold sore and he blew them away with a sigh. It was getting hot inside the coat-cave. When he peered out, the sea had turned silver, reflecting the shimmering sky. The mist absorbed the light and sorted it into colours - red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet. Zan pushed the coat off her shoulders and sat up straight.

‘A rainbow,’ she said, pleased. ‘Well, half of one, anyway.’

‘A sundog,’ Rhett told her. ‘That means a small or incomplete rainbow.’

As she turned towards him, Zan’s diamond eyes were dazzling. ‘Poser,’ she said and kissed him on the forehead. ‘Come on, it’s time to go home.’