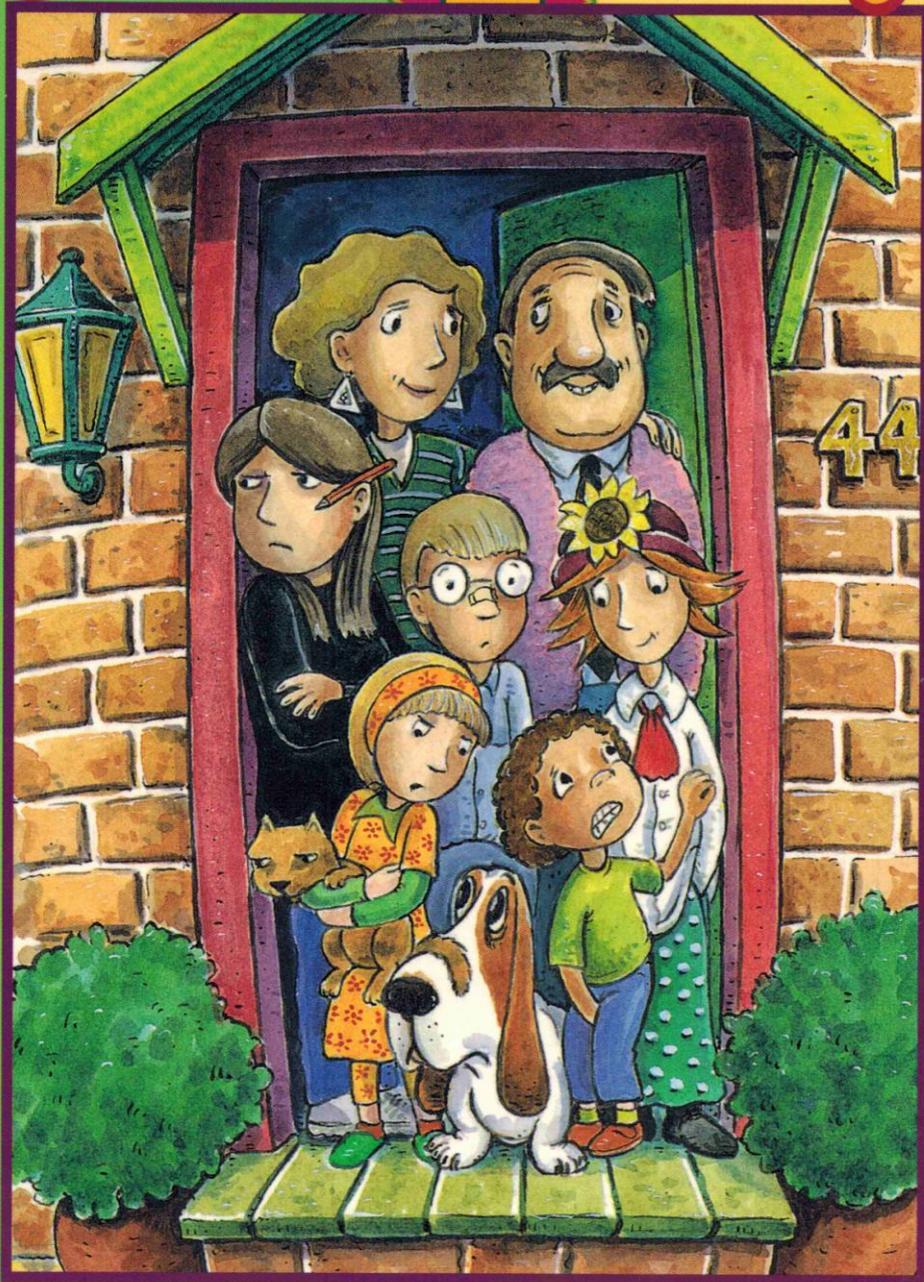


T O M B R A D L E Y



CROWDED HOUSE

The Brightside Bunch



FREE ebook - Book 1 of 6

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What the critics said about ‘The Brightside Bunch’ series

- “... good dollops of humour” (Waikato Times)
- “ ... Bradley weaves magic for a widening audience ... an easy-going, light-hearted manner and tone [but] they touch on a number of important themes, carefully woven into the storylines, adding depth and interest” (Greymouth Evening Star)
- “... an exciting series that tells kids how others might react to separation and remarriage” (Townsville Bulletin, Australia)

What this story is about

(First book in the series)

Simone Freeman and Todd Wozinsky, both 10, have their own thoughts on the wedding of their parents. No one said they have to be happy about it, and no one said it was going to be easy.

Simone and Todd can both see what a disaster this marriage could be for all of them. So stopping it sounds like the best solution.

But is it?

Chapter One

Simone's dad was about to do the dumbest thing he'd ever done and she was running out of ways to stop him.

'Simone, I can't find my bow tie,' yelled Michael Freeman.

'What's that under your nose?' she asked, bouncing into his bedroom.

Michael's hand shot up towards his face, then stopped. 'Very funny, Simone.'

'Cut off your moustache, Dad, dye it pink, and tie it around your neck. Who'd know the difference?'

And if everyone laughed themselves silly, her dad might finally call the whole thing off.

'We all know your taste in fashion,' he said. 'Simone, what have you done to your hair *this* time?'

Simone ran her hand over the tips of her orange spikes. 'Improved it.'

The coloured gel had set like concrete, tougher than the braces on her teeth. And the spikes were sharp. Any sharper and she'd lose a finger.

'That tie's got to be here somewhere,' said her father going back to his hunt.

Simone saw the tie poking out from under a pile of unsorted washing on his bed, but didn't say anything.

What a shambles. A 10 year old girl could live like this, but not a 40 year old father of three. Perhaps untidiness was inherited and he'd got it from her.

More likely he'd got it from mum. She wasn't very tidy either, or she hadn't been two years ago when she left home.

Mum! Simone's stomach did a flip. It wasn't fair, mum running off and leaving them like that. To find herself, she'd told them. But she wasn't even lost!

Sometimes Simone felt angry about it, sometimes just sad.

One thing for sure, if Simone's mum hadn't left home, her father wouldn't be free to do what he was going to do today.

Did mum know about dad getting married again? Would she come back if she did?

Simone kicked herself. She should have written and told her mother. Then she realised she didn't have an address.

Her mum had moved on from that last commune where she made all the pottery and no one knew where she was.

Zip wandered into the room.

Michael glared. 'If that mutt's eaten my tie...'

He'd be as sick as a dog, thought Simone, but it's not a bad idea. Another wedding-wrecker.

Simone and her big sister Holly had told their dad a thousand times he didn't need another

woman around the house. They'd managed, sort of, since mum left and the weekly housekeeper still did a good job.

Why upset everybody again? Little Logan's asthma had finally settled down, and her four year old brother had almost stopped wetting his bed.

When their father wouldn't budge about Paula, Simone and Holly offered him a deal. A pretty fair deal.

Let Paula move in and they'd make room for one more toothbrush in the bathroom. They'd even throw another packet of pasta into the supermarket trolley when Logan wasn't using it as a scooter.

In return, Paula could do things around the place like concrete the drive, or take Zip for a walk, which was harder than wheeling a barrow of concrete, especially if Zip ran out of puff and had to be carried home.

No, all things considered, Simone and Holly were prepared to be reasonable about Paula Wozinsky moving in.

So why did *she* have to go and spoil it by wanting to bring her kids?!

Thinking about Paula's kids gave Simone a pain in the gut worse than eating green apples.

Todd Wozinsky, with his four-eyed, serious face. Simone didn't want another 10 year old in the house. What fun could he be? He wouldn't even climb trees.

And his eight year old sister, Jaynee. The last thing they needed was another girl around the place. The little twit seemed to like animals more than people. A vegetarian. Wouldn't eat meat - not even a Big Mac!

Within a week, all seven of them would be in one house.

Simone's stomach churned again at the thought of it. They needed a much bigger house, but her dad said they couldn't afford to move, so that meant...

Stopping the wedding was still the best solution!

If Simone could only sneak the bow tie out from under the pile of washing and smother it in tomato sauce, Zip would slobber on it like he did to their slippers.

There was nothing like jumping out of bed on a cold winter's morning and slipping your feet into a couple of fluffy buckets of dog dribble.

'Relax, I've found the tie,' said her father, yanking it out by the elastic, sending shirts and underpants flying in all directions.

Next, he scrambled around the floor, trying to find two socks that matched. Difficult for someone with his sense of colour.

Michael stopped and looked up at Simone. 'We leave in 30 minutes. You'd better get dressed, too.'

'I *am* dressed.'

'Only to frighten the birds. Where did you get that stuff?'

'The City Mission,' said Simone.

'Again? The trousers *and* that ridiculous jacket?'

'They were having a sale.'

'Go and change into your new dress.'

'The frilly thing *Paula* wants me to wear?' asked Simone. 'I can't. It's dirty.'

'That dress is brand new. How can it be dirty?'

Easy, thought Simone. Let Zip sit on it while you feed him chocolate biscuits.

'I haven't got time to argue,' said her father. 'At least comb your hair.'

'With what?' she asked, fingering the spikes. 'A hammer and chisel?'

'What about wearing a hat?' he asked.

'The one that matches the trousers?'

'Please, Simone, don't embarrass me. Just this once.'

'Okay. I'll wear my black hat.'

'It's not a funeral,' he said.

Simone dashed out of the room and was back in a flash. 'Do you like it now?' she asked.

'What are those things you've stuck on it?'

'Paper flowers.'

Michael sighed. 'You look like a rainbow that's crash landed.'

'I like rainbows,' said a voice over Simone's shoulder.

'Hello, Mum,' said Michael.

'Gran!' yelled Simone, spinning full circle and throwing her arms around her grandmother's neck.

Or she would have, if their hats hadn't collided and bounced them apart.

'What is this?' asked Michael. 'A Worzel Gummidge scarecrow convention?'

'You look great, Gran,' said Simone.

Gran adjusted the brim of her big hat which kept flopping down to one side. 'I'm sick of looking like every other woman my age.'

'No danger of that, Mum,' said Michael.

Gran finally got the hat straight. 'Older and bolder is my new motto.'

'Couldn't you have left it until *after* the wedding?' asked Michael.

Gran ignored him. 'Sorry I was a bit late getting here.'

'Visiting Mrs Redmond?' asked Simone.

Gran nodded. 'Why don't you come with me next time, Simone? Thelma was asking after you.'

Simone hadn't seen her grandmother's friend since the old woman got sick. Simone kept

telling herself she had more important things to worry about, like stopping the wedding, but now she felt a bit guilty.

'How is she?' asked Michael.

'Getting more frail every time I see her,' said Gran. 'She needs a couple of walking sticks just to get around. How she manages those stairs, I'll never know.'

'She should be in a nursing home,' said Michael.

'Well, she won't go and live with Olive, that's for sure.'

Mrs Redmond and her daughter, Olive, had drifted apart over the years. Olive had married and moved away from Hatchwood. She now had her own business and her own life in another town, and hardly ever visited her elderly mother.

And Mrs Redmond wasn't about to move anywhere.

'But all alone in that big house...' said Michael.

Gran nodded. 'It's been in Thelma's family for generations. Olive's always pushing her to sell it, but Thelma's scared someone will buy it, then put a bulldozer through it.'

'Why would anyone want to knock it down?' asked Simone.

'Because it's old and very run-down,' said her father.

'Which is never going to happen to me,' said Gran. 'Let's talk about something more cheerful.'

Gran was moving in for the week to look after the Freeman kids during the honeymoon.

'How's everything here?' she asked.

'Under control,' said Michael.

'In this house?' said Gran. 'Impossible. Thank goodness Paula is such an organised woman.'

'I'm sure I'm doing the right thing, Mum,' he said. 'I think!'

'Don't start getting cold feet, Michael,' said Gran. 'You can make this marriage work. Anyway, it's too late to change your mind.'

Simone checked her watch. It wasn't too late at all.

Gran reached up and fiddled with the brim of her hat. As she did, Simone noticed a lock of hair sticking out.

'Gran, what have you done?'

Simone's grandmother sighed and pulled off her hat. 'I suppose I can't hide it forever.'

She must have used at least a can of hairspray to glue her hair in place. It reminded Simone of a bird's nest. A *blue* bird's nest.

'I'm so annoyed,' said Gran. 'Now I look like every other elderly member of the blue-rinse brigade. I really must remember to put my glasses on when I read a label. I prefer your orange hair, Simone.'

'I'll swap you,' said Simone. She knew someone who'd look stunning in blue!

As Gran jammed her hat back on her head, Michael squeezed into his dinner jacket.

'This suit used to fit me like a glove. Do you think it could have shrunk?'

Simone looked at Gran and they both grinned. The suit hadn't shrunk. Simone's father had expanded. Around the middle.

Michael snatched up a comb and dragged another strand over the little bald patch at the back of his head, then rearranged his thinning fringe.

Standing up straight, he sucked in his stomach. 'After the honeymoon, I'm going to join the gym with Paula.'

'Don't believe it,' Simone told her grandmother. 'Dad still sends Zip to the front gate to get the newspaper.'

On a good day, her father only had to wait a few minutes for the dog slobber to dry so he could turn the pages. On a bad day, he had to read the news off a block of paper-mache.

'Anyone seen Logan?' asked Michael.

'He's with Holly,' said Simone.

And all dressed up in the silly pageboy outfit Paula had made for him. On a stupidity scale of one to 10, Simone rated it a 99.

Even Logan's cute brown eyes and lashings of curly brown hair couldn't save him.

Gran said, 'Michael, just be thankful Paula didn't make you a matching suit.'

Simone had a flash of how silly her father would look if he was dressed like little Logan. A wedding-wrecker for sure. Especially with velvet trousers buckled under her dad's knobbly knees.

Gran frowned. 'Michael, why are you wearing odd socks?'

He hitched up his trouser legs. 'They're the same colour.'

'Only to you,' said Simone.

Michael dived into the pile of clothing on the floor and came up with two more socks. 'How about these?'

'They're both socks,' said Simone.

'They're fine,' said Gran.

'Simone,' said Michael, 'do me a big favour and make sure Logan goes to the toilet before we leave, will you? I don't want him to... you know.'

Simone knew. 'Especially not on the church carpet.'

Michael nodded. 'I don't want anyone letting our side down. Paula's children will be on their best behaviour.'

Simone swallowed another green apple.

'Jaynee will make a cute flower girl,' said Gran.

Simone snorted. 'The only way Jaynee Wozinsky would look cute is with a bag over her head.'

She felt a thump in the middle of her back and staggered forward as her sister Holly barged past and into the room.

'I know who needs the bag,' Holly roared, waving her arms around like she always did when she got excited. In one hand, she held a piece of paper, in the other a half-eaten donut.

'Hey, Simone,' she added, 'an orange tangerine has just gone splat on your head.'

'And a whole circus has just lost its home 'coz you're wearing their tent!'

'Simone, that's enough!' said Michael. 'You, too, Holly.'

Holly shovelled the rest of the donut into her mouth and glared at her younger sister. 'I promised Dad I wouldn't fight with you today, you little brat, but tomorrow...'

'Not tomorrow either,' said Gran. 'Not while I'm looking after you.'

'Good luck while I'm away, Mum,' said Michael. 'One word from me and these two do what they like.'

'You said we have to fight our own battles,' Simone reminded him.

Before Michael could reply, Holly held up the piece of paper. 'I've just finished your wedding speech, Dad.'

'I've already *got* my speech,' said Michael.

'But I'm the writer in this family,' Holly replied. 'Believe me, mine will be better. I'll read it to you.'

'Let me find some ear plugs,' said Simone.

'Holly,' said Michael, 'it's too late to change my speech. I've already memorised it, including the joke at the end.'

The others all groaned.

'Don't try and tell jokes, Dad,' said Simone. 'Please.'

'Listen you cynics,' said her father, 'they don't carry on like this at work.'

Michael Freeman was the accountant at Hatchwood Fisheries.

'In fact,' he added, 'they think my jokes are stunning.'

'Only to the fish,' said Simone.

'Logan!' Michael said, suddenly. 'Holly, you were supposed to be looking after him. If that boy's wandered away...'

There'll be no wedding! thought Simone.

'I'll check,' she cried and ran from the room.

Not that she wanted Logan to really get lost. Just misplaced for a few hours. But where? She could hardly give him money to go to the pictures. He was too young and The Lion King wasn't showing anywhere.

Maybe Logan getting lost wasn't such a good idea. But what else could he do to stop the wedding?

Simone looked through the kitchen window and saw Logan - and the answer - at the same time. He was about to crawl through a hole in the hedge. The sticky, prickly hedge that would turn a suit of armour into scrap metal and a velvet suit into rags.

Paula would burst out crying when she saw him, then everyone would start arguing and screaming and blaming everyone else. There'd probably be a massive brawl and Dad would call the whole thing off.

And in a month or two, when he'd forgotten about Paula, and was talking to Simone again, and all the wedding presents had been returned, and everything was back to normal, he'd throw his arms around her and say, 'Thanks, Simone, you were right. I don't need another woman around. And seven of us couldn't have lived in this house. You did the right thing. You saved me from a fate worse than death.'

And all I have to do, thought Simone, is let Logan crawl into the hedge!

As she watched, a little voice in her head asked, 'Can you *do* this? Do you *really* want to ruin your father's big day?'

But *he* was going to ruin their lives!

'Logan!' It was Gran, leaning over Simone's shoulder and banging on the kitchen window. 'Freeze!'

'Rats,' muttered Simone as she sprinted out the back door to retrieve her little brother.

Chapter Two

'Todd, have you seen your sister?' asked Paula Wozinsky.

Todd hadn't, but it didn't worry him. Jaynee was probably out doing her normal trick, roaming the neighbourhood, looking for stray animals to rescue.

He checked his watch. Wherever Jaynee was, she might be late getting back. Todd crossed his fingers behind his back and wished hard.

No flower girl, no wedding!

He heard a noise in the kitchen and uncrossed his fingers. 'I think Jaynee's feeding Carmen, Mum.'

Paula picked up her bouquet and turned full circle in front of the mirror. 'How do I look?'

Uncle Nick got in first. 'Stunning,' he said, limping slightly as he came into the room. 'In fact, dazzling. Michael will have to wear sunglasses when he kisses you.'

Yuck, Todd thought. How revolting. Being kissed by a man with a moustache.

But his mum did look great, even if *he* didn't like what was about to happen.

She'd made her whole wedding outfit, including the matching pink hat perched on top of her short, curly blonde hair.

'All that jogging and weight training did me some good,' she said.

'I'll be proud to walk you up the aisle,' said Nick with a big grin. 'And if the groom doesn't turn up, I'll marry you myself.'

Paula laughed. 'Aren't you a bit young for me, Nick?'

'I'm 29 and never been kissed.'

Paula laughed even louder. 'That's not what I've heard. Maybe the next wedding should be yours.'

Nick roared, but Todd didn't join in. This was no laughing matter, thought Todd. Why would his mother want another man around the house when she had him?

And what other man could compare with his dad? He looked across at the mantelpiece and the smiling photo of Rob Wozinsky. Scholar, musician, sportsman. Would *he* be smiling now if he knew what mum was about to do?

It was three years since the crash, but it still hurt to think about it. Why did his dad have to go and get himself killed?

Nick bent down and rubbed his left leg, just above the ankle.

'Playing up again?' asked Todd.

Nick was his dad's younger brother and had lost his foot in the same accident. It had finished his career as a jockey.

'I'll survive, Todd,' said Nick, rolling down his sock and tapping his wooden foot. 'Nothing a bit of sandpaper won't fix.'

Paula picked up her wedding list and made another tick. 'Almost ready,' she told them.

'Poor Michael,' said Nick, winking at Todd. 'The man who can't find anything meets the world's greatest organiser. What a match.'

Not in my book, thought Todd. More like the world's biggest *mis*-match.

'Jaynee!' yelled Paula. 'We're almost ready to leave for the church.'

'I'm giving Carmen extra milk,' came a voice from the kitchen. 'In case she runs out.'

'She won't run out,' yelled Todd. 'And we'll all be back here in a few hours.'

He glanced at his mother, then dropped his voice to a whisper, 'at least most of us will.'

But only for another week, thought Todd. Then they were moving in with the Freemans.

'You and Jaynee be good while I'm away,' said his mother, flicking Todd's blonde fringe out of his eyes.

'I'll keep them in line,' said Nick. 'Nothing like a boot up the bum with a wooden foot to get their attention.'

'Jaynee!' yelled Paula again.

Jaynee burst into the room. 'Mum, the Freemans don't like cats.'

'That's because Logan used to get asthma,' said Paula. 'They don't want it to come back.'

'But we *can* keep Carmen. You promised!'

'Jaynee, I've told you and Todd a hundred times, none of us will lose anything by this marriage. Quite the opposite. We'll all gain something.'

'Sure,' said Todd. 'Three more kids. Including the scarecrow.'

'I must admit,' said Paula, 'I wouldn't want Jaynee to dress like Simone...'

'Or look like the other ugly sister,' said Todd.

'Todd, that's not very nice,' said Paula. 'Holly can't help the way she's built.'

Jaynee frowned. 'They don't even look like sisters. Simone's so skinny.'

'Like her grandmother,' Paula explained. 'Those two are peas out of the same pod. Holly takes after her father.'

'She's just fat because she eats more than all of us put together,' said Todd.

'That's because she's unhappy,' said Paula. 'Growing up can be tough. It was for me.'

Jaynee started fiddling with her hair.

'Don't touch those curls,' said Paula. 'They're only just staying up as it is.'

'Why can't I wear a pony-tail?'

'Because you always wear a pony tail and this is a special day. Anyway, it wouldn't look right with your outfit.'

Jaynee started fiddling with the hem of her dress.

'What's the matter now?' asked her mother.

Jaynee held up a long pink thread. 'This came out.'

‘Only because you pulled it. Go into your room while I get the sewing kit. And don’t mess up your hair.’

‘What’s the big panic?’ Todd asked Nick as his mother and sister left the room.

‘We wouldn’t want Jaynee to unravel at the wedding,’ said Nick. ‘Only adults do that.’

‘Not the dress,’ said Todd. ‘This panic to get married. Mum’s only known him a few weeks.’

‘Six months is hardly a few weeks,’ said Nick.

Paula had met Michael when she got a teaching job at Green Hill High. He was on the school board which made the appointment.

‘Why couldn’t she have got married next year?’ said Todd, ‘or the year after? Or waited until Jaynee and I have grown up and left home?’

‘That’s not fair on your mum,’ said Nick.

‘Dad dying wasn’t fair on any of us!’ Todd replied, getting angry.

‘We can’t live in the past,’ said Nick, quietly. ‘Your mum’s got a right to be happy. And Michael seems a pretty decent sort of bloke.’

‘He’ll never replace Dad!’

‘If he’s smart,’ said Nick, ‘he won’t even try.’

‘And it isn’t fair that we have to move schools again and go and live in *their* stupid little house.’

‘Well, all seven of you certainly couldn’t live here,’ said Nick. ‘There’s not enough room to swing a cat.’

‘Uncle Nick!’ screamed Jaynee, coming back into the room. ‘I heard you. That’s a terrible thing to say!’

Nick laughed. ‘I didn’t mean *really* swing a cat. It’s just a saying.’

‘It’s still not funny.’

‘At least this flat is ours,’ said Todd, ‘even if it is rented. And we don’t have to share it with anyone.’

‘Nothing stays the same forever,’ said Nick. ‘Not even families.’

‘And the minister at the church won’t wait forever,’ said Paula, racing into the room, checking her watch. ‘Come on you lot, time to do the deed.’

Chapter Three

Simone, her father, and Logan stood in the foyer of St Marks church while Holly escorted Gran to her seat at the front.

'Now, have you got all that, Simone?'

With no bridesmaid or best man, the flower girl and pageboy had more to do.

'Got it, Dad,' said Simone. 'When Paula and Nick start heading down the aisle, I give Logan the cushion and he walks down behind them, next to Jaynee.'

'You've forgotten something.'

'Forgotten what?'

'The rings.'

'Dad, I haven't forgotten the rings.'

How could she? She'd thought of nothing else since she left the house. The rings could be her last chance to stop the wedding.

Rather than put them on the cushion for Logan to carry into the church, she could "accidentally" leave them in her pocket, or hide them in her hat, or under the carpet. She could even flush them down the toilet.

Toilet! She'd been so busy thinking about the rings, she'd forgotten to take Logan to the toilet before they left the house. She'd better do it now.

Before Simone could move, a car horn sounded in the street. Her father marched over to the front door, peeked out, then came hurrying back.

'It's them! They're on time. Who's ever heard of a bride being on time?'

Michael ran a hand over his hair, straightened his bow tie, then disappeared into the church to take up his position down the front.

Todd was first through the door into the foyer and, as he walked past Simone, she saw him looking her up and down. His mouth fell open with shock as he spotted the hat.

Probably thinks I'll upstage the bride, Simone decided.

A moment later, Nick walked in with Paula on his arm.

She glanced at Simone. 'All set?'

Simone was lost for words. It would take more than a few paper flowers to upstage Paula. She looked pretty good. As good as anyone *could* look in a pink dress. Definitely no need for a bag over *her* head.

Even Jaynee looked better than Simone expected.

The party assembled in the foyer with Nick and Paula in front and Jaynee and Logan behind. Simone handed her little brother the cushion, then felt in her pocket for the rings.

'Let's go,' said Nick, leading the way into the church as the organist launched into "Here Comes The Bride".

Simone still had her hand in her pocket. If she just left it there...

'Rats,' she said under her breath as she grabbed Logan's collar, dragged him back, plonked the rings down on the cushion, then shoved him down the aisle to catch up with the others.

As Simone raced to her seat, the minister's voice boomed out of the loud speakers.

'We are gathered here today...'

Simone knew the rest of the script, she'd seen a hundred weddings on TV. She looked around and recognised several familiar faces behind her from Hatchwood Fisheries.

She also recognised the smell of old fish. The factory operated seven days a week and some of the guests must have come straight from work.

The minister told them he wanted to read a special poem, and the organist launched into a tune Simone recognised from a TV commercial about toilet paper.

Toilet! She still hadn't taken Logan to the toilet.

Holly leaned over Gran and tapped Simone on the arm, raising her voice to be heard above the organ.

'This poem is garbage.'

'I thought *you* wrote it!' said Simone.

'Hush, you two,' said Gran, then leaned closer to Simone and whispered, 'did I ever tell you that Thelma Redmond got married in this very church?'

Gran's eyes were misty as she added, 'and I was her flower girl. Just like little Jaynee will be today.'

Simone glanced at Jaynee and noticed the flower girl starting to fidget. Several of her big blonde curls had started to unwind. She needs some of my gel, thought Simone. A bucket of the stuff.

Then Logan started to fidget and it wasn't his hair that was about to unwind.

'Weez, Daddy,' said the pageboy, quietly.

Simone shook her head. Not now, Logan, not now.

'Weez, Daddy, weez!' said Logan, getting louder.

This time everyone up the front heard it except the bride and groom who were hanging on to every word of the poem.

Next time, Logan would yell so loud even Zip would hear it, and Zip was back at the house!

This was an emergency, Simone decided, and her fault.

Jumping to her feet, she lunged down the aisle towards her brother. Logan got such a fright, his hands shot up in the air sending the rings and cushion flying.

Simone caught the rings like knuckle bones, shoved them in her pocket and stuffed the cushion under one arm. Clutching Logan's hand, she dragged him up the church aisle at full

speed, into the foyer and bundled him into the women's toilet.

'Hurry, Logan,' she said, taking up guard outside the cubicle.

'I'm hungry,' said Logan. 'And thirsty.'

'But at least you're dry. No drinks until the ceremony's over.'

Logan could recycle water faster than the town's fountain and Simone wasn't prepared to take the risk.

Then she heard the organ run out of steam, and the poem run out of verses, and the minister say to her father, 'Michael, where are the rings?'

The rings! Simone had them in her pocket. The cushion lay at her feet.

'Logan,' she yelled. 'Get out of there. You're needed.'

'I'm doing number twos,' he yelled back.

'Logan, we haven't got time for number twos!'

Simone heard her father's voice being picked up by the minister's microphone. 'But Logan was here a minute ago.'

Snatching up the cushion, she dashed out of the toilet through the foyer and into the church - and stopped!

Every eye was looking at her. There was no retreat.

Simone straightened her hat, arranged the rings on the cushion, then holding it out in front of her in her best Logan impersonation, walked slowly down the aisle.

As she got close, she saw a big vein in her father's neck start to pulse.

'Simone, I told you...'

'I've just taken him, Dad,' she replied, holding out the cushion, but keeping her distance.

'Logan said to give you these.'

'A fumble, but a good recovery, Simone,' said Gran, as they all filed out of the church.

Holly dragged a chocolate fish out of her pocket and took a bite.

'But it was funny,' she said. 'I've just got to write a short story about this. Did you see the look on Jaynee's face?'

'Your father was smiling at the end,' Gran told them. 'And laughter's good for cold feet.'

Simone took several deep breaths as the fresh air hit her. So did a few drops of rain, splatting on the paper flowers in her hat.

They hurried across the square, heading for the after-wedding venue, The Kiosk, a stone's throw from the town's famous fountain.

As they reached shelter, Gran suddenly stopped and grabbed Simone's arm.

'I know I'm supposed to stay here and keep an eye on you and Holly, but...'

'You're thinking about Mrs Redmond.'

Gran nodded and looked at her watch. 'Thelma looked so down this morning and wedding photos always take forever. If I slip away now, I could be back here before your father and Paula. Want to come with me?'

Simone thought about it. She no longer had the excuse of trying to stop the wedding. It was too late for that.

'Okay,' said Simone, noticing the other guests starting on the drinks and nibbles. 'Can I have a glass of wine first?'

'No, you can't,' said Gran. 'You're too young.'

As Simone followed Gran out the door, she noticed Holly off in a corner sipping something suspicious.

It was drizzling as Gran turned her brightly polished red Mini into Yardley Street and pulled up outside number 13. The big two-storied house looked more run-down than Simone remembered, but the tall trees still looked the same. A whole row of them, running down one side of the section.

As Gran pulled on the handbrake, Simone leapt out of the car and ran across the footpath to open the gate for her. For the first time, Simone noticed something carved into the wood. Writing of some sort, but she couldn't read it under the layers of paint.

Probably says "Beware of the Dog" she decided, but didn't see any dog. A hundred dogs could have hidden in the overgrown lawn and never been seen.

They walked up the cracked concrete path to the front door and, as Gran rang the bell, Simone studied the flaking paint around the door frame. The house certainly needed some tender loving care.

It was several minutes before the door slowly opened. Simone got such a shock, it took a few seconds to recognise the woman in front of her. A human skeleton, hanging from a walking frame.

'Hello, Doris,' Mrs Redmond said to Gran. 'Two visits in one day. You're spoiling me.'

Mrs Redmond didn't look spoilt, and when she smiled it made the skin on her face stretch tight like a very thin lamp shade. At least there was still a light shining underneath.

'And Simone,' said Mrs Redmond, turning up the light, 'how nice to see you again.'

For the second time that day, Simone felt guilty.

Gran pointed to the walking frame. 'Where did this come from?'

'The district nurse brought it for me,' said Mrs Redmond, 'just after you left. It's better than the sticks. Gives me more support. Do come in, both of you.'

She slowly backed the frame away from the doorway to let her visitors inside. 'Thank you both for dressing up to come and see me.'

Gran chuckled and stepped forward to give her friend a gentle hug. Thelma Redmond looked as though she would break in half if anyone squeezed too hard.

As Mrs Redmond led them at a snail's pace across the large entrance hall, Simone glanced up the long staircase leading to the floor above. Mrs Redmond would never get up there with her walking frame.

The old woman seemed to read her mind. 'The nurse has set up a folding bed for me downstairs,' she explained.

'And you still won't consider moving out?' asked Gran.

'No, Doris. No matter what Olive says. They'll have to carry me out of here. There's no other way.'

The lounge was off to the left of the hall. A tired looking chandelier hung from the cracked plaster ceiling and most of the old furniture looked as worn out as its owner.

Simone chose a chair without too much dust and sat down. As she did, Mrs Redmond started to cough, and the walking frame vibrated.

Simone got to her before Gran, but the old woman shook her head to wave them away.

'I'll be alright. Can I get either of you something to drink?'

'No, thanks,' said Gran. 'This is a very quick visit.'

Simone felt a lump in her throat. How could Mrs Redmond's daughter, Olive, leave her mother alone like this, even if she did live in another town?

If Gran was sick, Simone would never leave *her* all alone.

Simone made herself a promise. She'd come back to this house, and soon. In fact, she'd come and visit Mrs Redmond every chance she got.

Chapter Four

Simone and Gran arrived back at The Kiosk seconds before the bridal party, in time to join the others as they moved into the main reception area.

Nick Wozinsky took up position near the front to act as Master of Ceremonies. Simone sat a few tables away, with Gran on one side and Todd on the other - right between her and Holly.

More of Paula Wozinsky's brilliant organising, thought Simone. Or was she now Paula Freeman? Or Paula Wozinsky-Freeman? Or Paula Freeman-Wozinsky?

Simone shook her head. Paula could use any name she liked. She wasn't changing *her* name for anyone.

This time when the champagne came out for the speeches and toasts, Simone held out her glass, but Gran shook her head.

'When I was your age,' said Gran, 'I was happy with water.'

'Why?' said Simone. 'Didn't you have Coke?'

As the speeches droned on, Simone saw Holly, out of Gran's sight, filling a water glass with champagne.

Simone's father was the last to speak.

'Can't wait to hear this,' Holly said to Simone, leaning across Todd and breathing chocolate fish and champagne all over them.

Nick gave Michael a big introduction, only spoiled by the sound system which had started whistling and squealing.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, friends...' Michael began, but then the sound system gave a final hideous scream and died.

Michael tapped the microphone and his lips formed the words 'Testing, one, two, three,' but not a sound reached the audience.

'You'll have to speak up!' yelled his workmates from the back of the room.

Michael reached into his pocket and dragged out a long piece of paper.

'Oh, no,' said Gran. 'He's forgotten his speech. He's going to use his notes.'

The list of people to thank took longer to read than the minister's poem, and made even less sense. Then Simone's father launched into his joke.

'Here's one I told some of you at work the other day...'

Holly leaned over to Simone again. 'The speech I wrote was a million, no, a *trillion* times better.'

Up the front, their father was winding up for the big punch line, 'So the Irishman turned to the Englishman and said...'

Silence. Michael stared at the piece of paper in front of him, then turned it over and stared at the back.

'What *did* he say?' yelled Seamus O'Flaherty, an Irishman who sang under the name Carlos Argentina and who gutted fish for a living.

Michael's face went blank. 'He said... he said... I forgot to write it down!'

The crowd in The Kiosk erupted into laughter and Nick jumped up, signalling for quiet.

'Thanks, Michael. I'll tell you all the punch line if Michael ever remembers it. Now it's dance time, so everybody on the floor for Hatchwood's favourite band, Seamus O'Fla... I mean... Carlos Argentina and his South American Bandidos.'

The rest of the band also worked at the fisheries and they were no more South American than Seamus. Nor were they bandits, although some people said the way Seamus sang was criminal and he should be locked up for assault with a deadly weapon - his voice.

Everyone agreed he was kinder to the fish he gutted than the songs he sang. The rest of the band played at top volume to try and drown him out and keep him in time.

As the bride and groom led the others onto the dance floor and began to dance cheek to cheek, Paula suddenly lurched forward and grabbed her shins.

Simone smiled. Her new stepmother was learning that Carlos Argentina wasn't the only man in the room with no sense of rhythm.

Holly leaned across Todd again, still breathing lethal fumes, and yelled over the noise of the band. 'Why didn't Dad use *my* speech?'

'Hey, watch out,' said Todd, tipping back on his chair to avoid being the meat in a Freeman sandwich.

Simone was more interested in the expression on Holly's face. Glazed. Like a gutted fish.

'I can't hear you, Holly,' she yelled.

Holly lunged forward to get even closer to Simone's ear. Todd swayed further back on his chair, trying to escape, but he was trapped like a foot in a soggy slipper.

Holly's waving arm caught him right on the end of his nose, and Todd and his glasses went flying backwards.

As he hit the ground with a thump, Simone and Gran leapt to their feet. Todd sat up, looking more dazed than Holly and screwing up his eyes.

He's probably as blind as a bat without his glasses, thought Simone.

'Sorry,' mumbled Holly, getting up from the table in slow motion. 'I didn't mean to...'

Todd jumped to his feet as Simone found his glasses and handed them over. Both bits. Todd slipped the broken frame into his trouser pocket.

'Don't worry, Holly will pay for the repairs,' Gran told him. 'Look, it's been a big day for all of us. It's stopped raining so why don't you kids go outside and get some fresh air?'

'I'm not a kid,' Holly protested, standing up. 'I'm an... an... adult.'

Gran picked up Holly's glass and sniffed. 'You're a 14 year old girl and this is not water.'

'Please, Gran,' said Holly. 'Dad doesn't get married every day.'

'I hope not,' said Simone.

'Come on, Gran,' Holly begged, 'let me stay here and dance.'

'You?' asked Simone. 'Dance?'

Was there a man stupid enough to ask Holly to dance? Or a man brave enough to say "no" if she asked *him*?

Did Holly fancy someone? Simone wondered. She looked over to where her sister was staring. She did have her eye on someone. Todd's Uncle Nick.

'You can't dance with Nick,' said Simone.

'Why not?' said Holly, swaying slightly. 'He's cute.'

'He's also half your size. He'd have to do the Baby Elephant Walk.'

Holly took an unsteady lunge at Simone, but Gran stepped in between them. 'I'm your grandmother, not a referee. You two remember that.'

'I'm staying here,' said Holly, crossing her arms and her eyes at the same time.

Gran turned to Simone and Todd. 'Then you two take a walk.'

'I want to stay here as well,' said Simone.

'Me, too,' said Todd.

'Very well,' said Gran. 'Then Simone, you can partner Todd on the dance floor.'

'I've changed my mind,' said Simone. 'I need some fresh air.'

'Me, too,' said Todd.

'And don't come back until I call you,' said Gran, as they sprinted for the door.

Chapter Five

'It's your mother's fault,' said Simone as they burst out of The Kiosk and into the darkness. 'She made the mistake of putting us at the same table.'

'She made a bigger mistake marrying your father!'

Simone swung around to face him. '*He's* the one who made the mistake. He doesn't need *her!*'

'Well, she doesn't need *him!*'

'Then why did you let her do it?' asked Simone.

'How could I stop her?' asked Todd. 'You couldn't stop your stupid father.'

'If you're going to insult my Dad,' said Simone, 'you can walk by yourself,' and she ran off across the square.

Simone thought Todd *liked* the idea of the marriage and getting a new father. Maybe she was wrong.

At that moment, the lights around the fountain came on and Simone ran towards them. The fountain's water was pumped up the centre of the concrete stem, before splashing down into its pool.

Even through her coat, Simone could feel the cool night air. She'd freeze to death if she didn't do something to warm herself up.

Simone had an idea. Warm herself up *and* pay Todd back for what he'd said about her father.

She spotted Todd walking towards her, rubbing the end of his nose. Without his glasses, the fountain probably just looked like a blob of light. Todd was drawn like a moth to a flame.

As he got near, Simone called out, 'Wanna race?'

'Race where?'

'Around the edge of the fountain. You *can* see the fountain?'

'Of course I can.'

A thick concrete wall formed the outer rim, standing a metre off the ground.

A small sign, stuck to the wall, read: "No Bathing. Keep Off The Wall. Slippery When Wet."

It had only just stopped raining so the wall was still damp. Simone grinned. Todd may see the fountain, but he'd never see the sign.

She explained the rules. The rim was too narrow for two runners so it was a time trial, one at a time with each of them counting off the seconds for the other.

'I'll go first,' she said.

'Why?'

'To show you how it's done, stupid.'

That wasn't the real reason, but she wasn't about to admit it.

With a practised leap, Simone sprang up on the fountain wall and jammed her hat tightly on her head.

'One complete lap,' she said, leaning forward. 'Ready, steady...'

'Hang on,' said Todd. 'If I'm counting, I say when to go. Ready, steady...'

On "go", Simone was already in motion. She'd run this circuit many times. It was part of growing up in Hatchwood. Even Gran had played this game when she was young.

It's not my fault Todd's the new boy in town, thought Simone.

'... 10, 11, 12!' yelled Todd, as Simone's feet flashed past his nose.

Simone jumped down. 'See. Easy. Now you race and I'll count.'

Todd jumped up. 'Are you sure this is okay?'

'Can you see any signs saying it's not?'

'No...'

'Get ready, steady... go!'

Todd took off like a shot, catching Simone by surprise. This boy's as blind as a bat, she thought, but he runs like a rabbit. Just as well she went first.

Simone sped up the count.

'... 11, 12, 13!' she called as Todd flashed by. 'Unlucky 13. One second slower than me.'

Todd jumped down. 'You counted faster.'

'I did not.'

'I'm going to do it again,' he told her. 'And this time I'll do my own counting.'

The boy not only ran fast, he was smarter than he looked.

'Okay,' she said. 'Ready, steady... go!'

Todd was even faster the second time. Fast enough to beat Simone's time if she didn't do something. As he sprinted for the finish, she suddenly threw up her arms and screamed out his name.

It broke Todd's concentration and he stumbled. His shoe landed off balance and slithered on the damp rim. There was only one place to go.

Into the water.

'Todd!' Simone screamed again, louder this time, but it was too late.

You idiot, she thought. You were meant to slow down, not drown.

'Simone!'

Gran's voice carried across the square.

Todd's head appeared above the water.

If Gran had a whistle, she'd be blowing it. Like a football ref. Red card offence for sure. The same colour as the stuff pouring out of Todd's nose and down the front of his shirt.

'I let you out of my sight for a few minutes and look what happens,' said the old woman,

hurrying over.

'Todd!'

The second voice belonged to Nick who came hobbling over and pulled his nephew from the water.

I don't need to confess, thought Simone. Todd will drop me right in it. Why not? I dropped *him* in the fountain.

Todd stood, water and blood dripping through his fingers as he clutched his nose, but he didn't say a word.

'What a mess,' said Nick. 'Where are your glasses?'

Todd reached his other hand into his trouser pocket and pulled out the broken frame.

'What were they doing in your pocket?' asked Nick.

Gran explained how Holly had sent Todd flying out of his chair.

'Gee,' said Nick. 'You Freemans are a rough lot.' He turned to Todd. 'Let's find some ice for the nose and a blanket and then get you home before you freeze to death.'

As Nick led him away, Gran asked, 'What happened, Simone?'

Simone explained, then added, 'I wanted to beat him, Gran, but I didn't mean to hurt him.'

'You sound like me when I was a girl. Competitive. You're a chip off the old block.'

'That's what Dad always says.'

'Let's walk a bit,' said Gran.

'Why do things have to change?' said Simone. 'Why couldn't they have stayed the same?'

'Because life never stops, Simone. It keeps moving along. Look at Thelma.'

'Gran, did families split up when you were a girl?'

'Oh, yes,' she replied. 'Different reasons though. There weren't as many divorces, but more women died having babies.'

'Really?'

'People died from illnesses that doctors can now treat. And many families lost children before they even got to your age.'

Simone walked in silence, letting it sink in.

'And,' said Gran, 'a lot of our young men - brothers, fathers, sons - got killed, fighting in wars.'

Simone was silent for a few more seconds, then said, 'Like Granddad?'

Gran nodded, but kept walking.

'And Todd's father,' said Simone. 'He got killed, too, didn't he?'

'That's right. In a car accident.'

'It must be awful to lose someone.'

'You did, Simone.'

'But I didn't really lose Mum, Gran. She's just gone away for a while. She'll come back one day to visit us. Won't she?'

Gran threw an arm around Simone's shoulder. 'I hope so. For your sake.'

'But if she did come back,' said Simone, 'she couldn't even stay with us. Our house will be full of Wozinskys. Why do they have to move in with us?'

'What do you suggest?' asked Gran. 'That they pitch a tent on the back lawn?'

'But Paula's got her own flat. Why can't she stay there?'

'It doesn't work like that. She and your Dad want to be together.'

'Then we need a bigger house,' said Simone. 'A mega-bigger house.'

Gran pointed to a bench. 'Let's sit down for a minute. I made the mistake of dancing with your father. It's like climbing a mountain in bare feet. Not that I've ever climbed a mountain. Not yet, anyway.'

As she lowered herself gently, Gran dragged off her floppy hat and ran her hand across her stiff blue thatch.

'Don't worry, Simone, everything will be up in the air for a month or two, but things will settle down again. You'll see.'

'But they won't be the same, Gran. Nothing will ever be the same again.'

Chapter Six

'You don't want *another* cup of hot chocolate, do you?' Nick asked Todd. 'Have you got hollow legs?'

Todd pulled the blanket around his shoulders and moved closer to the heater. 'Make the next one in a bucket and give me a long straw.'

They'd been back at their flat for nearly an hour and Jaynee was fast asleep. Todd's teeth had only just stopped clattering like Carlos Argentina's castanets, and his nose still stung from Holly's blow.

'Want to tell me what really happened at the fountain?' asked Nick.

'I told you,' said Todd, trying to see through a pair of spare glasses he'd outgrown years ago. 'Nothing happened. I just slipped.'

Nick flopped down on the couch beside him, pulled off his left shoe and sock, and unstrapped his wooden foot.

'That feels better,' he said, rubbing the reddened stump. 'No wonder Long John Silver had a rotten temper. He had to lug a dirty great wooden *leg* around.'

He slipped off his other shoe. 'And Holly almost crushed my good foot on the dance floor. I've known horses with a better sense of rhythm.'

'Maybe she gets that off her father as well,' said Todd.

Nick laughed. 'Don't let your mother hear you say that.'

'Uncle Nick, why do we all have to live together?'

'Because when two people get married that's what they do,' said Nick. 'And they tend to take their kids along.'

'But there isn't enough room for all of us. Maybe Simone will go and live with her mother. She has got a mother, hasn't she?'

'Sort of,' said Nick. 'Simone's grandmother says they're not sure where the mother is. Families can be strange, sometimes.'

'The Freemans are *not* my family,' said Todd. 'Mum and Jaynee and you are my family. Why can't you stay here? Permanently.'

'Sorry, Todd, after your mum gets back from the honeymoon and I've helped you with the move, I'm outta here.'

Uncle Nick had lived on a sickness benefit since the accident, doing bits and pieces, mainly restoring and selling old motorcycles.

'Not much demand in Hatchwood for a disabled ex-jockey,' Nick explained. 'Especially one who left school too young with not enough education. But I'll survive. We all do.'

Todd glanced at his father's photo.

No, thought Todd. Not *everyone* survives.

Chapter Seven

'Let's think of this as our first real family conference,' said Michael Freeman, as the waiter at the pizza parlour showed them to a table.

'Which family?' said Simone.

'*This* family,' said Michael.

'There are two families here,' Holly pointed out.

'You know what I mean,' said her father. 'All seven of us.'

'I wish Gran had come,' said Simone.

'After a week with you lot, the poor woman's exhausted,' he explained. 'She said it was like being a full-time referee. But she'll drive over tomorrow and make morning tea for us.'

'Prune and bran cookies?' asked Simone.

'That's what she's threatened,' said Michael. 'Why can't she be like other grandmothers and stick to making regular scones?'

'Why isn't Uncle Nick here tonight?' Todd asked his mother.

'I think he's out on a hot date, Todd. Some woman he took a fancy to at the wedding.'

'But not the one who took a fancy to *him*,' said Simone.

Holly threw her a dirty look and buried her head in the menu.

Jaynee studied the menu as well. 'I refuse to eat anything with meat. I want a vegetarian pizza.'

'Good,' said Simone, 'then I won't have to share my pepperoni with you.'

Jaynee gave her a dirty look. 'I'd never eat an animal.'

'Come to think of it,' said Simone. 'I've never seen a pet pepperoni.'

'As you all know,' her father began, cutting in, 'tomorrow is the big move into our... I mean... the Freeman house.'

'I still prefer our flat,' said Todd.

'But it's not big enough,' said his mother.

Simone screwed up her face. 'Nor is *our* place. We need something bigger.'

'Much, much bigger,' said Todd.

Jaynee put down her menu. 'Why do we have to change schools *again*?'

'Because we're moving across town,' said Paula.

'We already moved school when we came to this stupid town,' said Todd.

'I'm thirsty,' said Logan.

Holly frowned. 'Let's order. I'm starving.'

'I thought you were on another diet,' said Simone.

'That was yesterday.'

'I'm hungry, too,' said Todd.

'I wanna go weez,' said Logan.

'Look, everyone,' said Michael, 'we're trying to have an intelligent conversation.'

'Weez, Daddy, weez,' said Logan, getting louder.

'Not now, son.'

'Now, Daddy, now!' cried Logan, starting to wriggle in his seat.

'Quick, Dad,' said Simone. 'Countdown's begun!'

Michael jumped up, grabbed the little boy's hand and dragged him across the pizza parlour towards the men's toilet.

'Family conferences are fun,' said Simone.

Paula looked at her. 'Simone, your father and I realise moving everyone into your house isn't ideal...'

'Then buy a bigger house,' said Simone.

'That's what I keep saying,' said Todd.

Paula shook her head. 'We're not ready for a bigger mortgage.'

'Talking of houses...', said Holly throwing down the menu and waving her arms around.

Todd touched the end of his nose and pulled back out of range.

The corners of Holly's mouth started to twitch as she asked, 'Where are we all supposed to sleep?'

To Simone, Holly's mouth twitch was like Logan's wriggle. A clue. Big sister was not in a good mood.

Before Paula could answer, Holly added, 'I'm getting too old to share with my dumb sister. I want my own room.'

'Swap with the dog,' said Simone.

'Listen Tin-teeth,' said Holly, flinging her right arm in Simone's direction.

Paula was in the way. She threw out her own hand for protection, catching Holly's fist before it could crush another Wozinsky nose.

Holly's arm froze. So did her voice. 'Let go of me!'

Paula released the fist. 'Holly, you almost hit me.'

'So?' said Holly.

'I think you should apologise.'

'Don't tell me what to do. You're not my mother!'

Paula kept her voice down. 'I was only suggesting...'

Holly cut her off. '*Dad* says us Freemans should fight our own battles.'

'But what if those battles involve other people?' asked Paula. 'Like at the wedding.'

'Mum!' said Todd, going red.

'Nick told me what happened,' Paula said to Holly.

'About having to dance with a baby elephant?' asked Simone.

Holly glared at her sister, but turned to face her new stepmother. 'We have our own way of doing things in *our* family. If you're coming to live with us, you'll have to get used to it.'

Before Paula could reply, Michael arrived back, towing Logan.

'What's going on?' he asked. 'Why all the grumpy faces?'

When no one answered, Paula said quietly, 'Let's look at the room plan I drew up.'

She pulled out a piece of paper and laid it on the table. 'At the moment, there are three bedrooms and four Freemans.'

'If Holly gets her own room, I want one, too,' said Simone.

'Get real,' said her father. 'We're *adding* people. It'll now be three divided by *seven*. What does that equal?'

'Trouble,' said Simone. 'Big trouble.'

'I'm still thirsty,' said Logan.

Michael signalled a passing waiter and ordered Cokes all round.

Paula said, 'Michael and I have been trying to figure out the best way to mix both families together.'

'Without mixing boys and girls, of course,' Michael added.

He paused as the Cokes arrived, then continued, 'Now, in our plan, Paula will move in with me, and...'

'Isn't that mixing boys and girls?' asked Simone, then turned to Paula. 'Have you seen how messy Dad's room is?'

Her father pointed to the sketch plan. 'Todd can move in with Logan.'

'I have my own bedroom at the flat,' said Todd. 'I don't want to share with anyone.'

'Especially not Logan,' said Holly. 'He wets his bed.'

Her father glared. 'Holly, that's not fair. Logan's almost grown out of it.'

Logan had slurped down his drink without taking a breath and was now trying to suck the ice through his straw, imitating a waste-disposal that was about to explode.

'It's the smallest bedroom,' Paula told Todd, 'but there's space for two beds. We've already measured it up.'

'But that would leave three girls crammed into the other room,' said Simone. 'That's even *worse* than before.'

Holly's bottom lip dropped and her straw slid out of her mouth. 'Simone whistles through her braces when she's asleep. What does Jaynee do?'

'I don't do anything,' Jaynee protested.

'Yes, you do,' said Todd. 'You sleep with Carmen.'

Holly's arms shot out in all directions and everyone ducked. 'I'm not having a cat sleeping

in my room.'

'I told you, Mum,' Jaynee squealed. 'The Freemans don't like cats.'

'We'll sort it out,' said her mother, keeping her voice down. 'What should we do, Michael?'

'I thought we'd already...'

'We'll buy bunks,' said Paula, answering her own question. 'That will give you girls more space. Yes?'

'Just what I was going to suggest,' said Michael.

'If you want my opinion,' said Holly, 'This whole move sucks.'

Logan made one, last, violent attempt to get the ice up the straw.

'See,' said Simone. 'Logan thinks it sucks, too.'

Paula sighed and looked at her new husband. 'Is this what our life's going to be like from now on?'

There was a moment's silence and Simone caught the unhappy faces around the table. Todd and Jaynee concentrated on their drinks. Logan started to wriggle.

Simone saw her father force a smile. 'It's early days, Paula. Things will improve. You'll see.'

'I hope so,' Paula replied. 'Let's order the pizzas then go and buy those bunks.'

'Good idea,' said Michael. 'They can be delivered with our new bed tomorrow while we're moving everything else around.'

'Weez, Daddy,' said Logan, pulling a face.

'Not again, son? You've just been.'

'And he's also just had a big drink,' said Simone. 'Counting down. Ten, nine, eight...'

Michael rose and grabbed Logan's hand. 'I swear if the fountain ever breaks down, I'll lend this child to the city council. They wouldn't know the difference.'

Simone grinned.

'And please,' said Michael. 'Could you *all* be smiling when I come back?'

Chapter Eight

All night Todd kept dozing off, then waking up. He wanted to enjoy his last night in his own room, but his sleep was disrupted by dreams about slow-motion car crashes, pizzas, crippled jockeys, bloody noses, and giant fountains.

When the alarm finally went off, Todd jumped as if he'd been shot. Flopping back onto his pillow, he heard Uncle Nick's voice telling him to get up and get moving.

Todd stumbled out into the kitchen to find his mother wrapping things in newspaper and packing them into cardboard cartons.

'Bit different to last weekend,' said Todd as he saw her outfit.

Paula looked down at her brightly coloured tracksuit and running shoes and grinned.

'Michael's hired a trailer and he'll be here at nine,' she told him. 'So will the second-hand dealer. We've got to be ready.'

She'd pre-sold most of the big items like the fridge-freezer and lounge suite. 'A new start,' she'd told Todd.

'Sure,' he'd replied. 'With the Freemans' furniture.'

Jaynee wandered in, rubbing her eyes. 'Carmen's hungry.'

'I don't believe it,' said Nick. 'I've ridden horses that ate less.'

'Well, she is,' Jaynee insisted. 'And someone's stolen her food bowl.'

Paula dug into one of the cartons and pulled it out.

'You kids better grab something to eat before all the food's packed,' said Nick, on his knees, defrosting the fridge's freezer section.

Todd scratched his head. 'How do I pack my bedroom?'

'In a very big box,' said Nick. 'Then tie it up with a pretty pink ribbon.'

Paula laughed. 'Throw all your clothes into suitcases, Todd, then bundle the bedclothes into a rubbish sack. I'll sort everything out when we get there.'

'Why can't I sleep in one of the new bunks?' asked Jaynee.

'Because Holly and Simone wanted them,' her mother explained, patiently. 'They got first choice. They're older.'

'They'll *always* be older than me. That's not fair.'

'And why didn't I get a new bed?' asked Todd.

'Because from now on,' said Paula, 'we have to watch our money. That's why we're not buying another house.'

'Accountants are supposed to be rich,' said Todd.

'No one's rich after a divorce,' said his mother.

'It's not fair,' said Todd. '*He* bought new beds for *his* kids.'

His mother corrected him. 'Not he, *we*. We bought the bunks for Holly and Simone. From

now on, every household expense comes out of our combined incomes.'

Jaynee walked past, carrying a bowl of milk.

'Jaynee,' Paula called after her, 'I've told you not to feed Carmen in the lounge.'

'Special treat, Mum,' Jaynee yelled back. 'Carmen's last day in this flat.'

'Why aren't *you* rich?' Todd asked his mother.

'Because I'm a school teacher,' she replied. 'We earn peanuts.'

'And we all know the old saying,' came Nick's voice from inside the freezer. 'Pay peanuts and you get monkeys.'

Paula smiled. 'For someone who didn't get home till 2am, you're very lively this morning, Nick Wozinsky.'

'Let's just say she was lighter on her feet than Holly,' said Nick. 'And more sober.'

He pulled his head out of the freezer and stood up. 'Come on, don't just stand around looking spunky, Mrs Freeman.'

Todd's stomach dropped. He'd forgotten about the name. 'Mum, do you have to...'

'No, Todd. I've decided I'll keep Paula Wozinsky as my professional name. But some people will call me Mrs Freeman,' she added, aiming a friendly blow at Nick's ear, 'which I am, and that's okay, too.'

'Mum!' yelled Jaynee from the lounge. 'Carmen's just been sick on the carpet.'

Paula sighed. 'Well, clean it up, Jaynee, then put Carmen in her cage. And Nick, count heads before we leave. I don't want to lose anyone on this trip.'

'Let me help you, Nick,' said Holly, as Todd and his uncle dragged Todd's bed off the trailer and carried it towards the house.

'It's okay,' said Nick.

'But I could help you carry your end.'

'No thanks, Holly.'

'What about one corner, Nick?'

'Not right now, Holly.'

'Nick, who were you out with last night?'

Before he could answer, Michael's voice rang out. 'Holly, come inside and help Simone assemble the bunks.'

'Why do I have to do all the hard work around here?' muttered Holly as she stomped off.

Gran popped her head out the kitchen window and smiled at the furniture movers. 'You'll be pleased to know I decided against the prune-and-bran cookies. I've baked a pumpkin-and-date loaf instead.'

Todd pulled a face as Gran's head vanished back inside.

'No worries,' said Nick. 'If it's awful, I'll smother it with lashings of butter.'

'You'll get fat,' said Todd.

'Not me,' said Nick. 'I'm like a racehorse. And you can't fatten a thoroughbred.'

Zip hurried by, pursued by Carmen, but it was more a jog than a sprint.

'I guess neither of them are thoroughbreds,' said Todd.

'Careful with that bed,' said Paula, walking by with a carton of crockery.

'It doesn't matter, Mum,' said Todd. 'It's only an *old* bed. Not like that one!'

He pointed to the street where two men were unloading a brand new queen-sized mattress and base.

'Don't give me that dirty look, Todd Wozinsky. Michael's double bed was left over from his first marriage. Sometimes it's nice to start fresh. Anyway, it's sort of a wedding present.'

'Morning tea,' yelled Gran. 'Come and get it!'

Chapter Nine

Todd soon found out there was something even worse than seven people sharing three bedrooms - it was seven people sharing one bathroom!

'Come on, Holly,' yelled Simone, pounding on the door. 'There's a queue out here halfway around the block.'

'Get lost,' came the muffled reply.

'I'm waiting, too,' said Todd.

'Tough,' Simone told him. 'Freemans first.'

'Says who?'

'It's our house,' said Simone.

Michael Freeman added to the chorus as he walked past.

'Get a move on, Holly, or we're all going to be late.'

The answer sounded something like "go suck eggs".

'Holly,' yelled Simone. 'Stop gazing at yourself. You'll shatter the mirror!'

The door flew open. 'Listen, scud-mouth, how would you like me to tighten your wires?'

Their father raced back and jumped between them. 'How did your grandmother control you for a whole week?'

'I just need some sleep,' said Holly. 'Logan kept me awake again last night. I could hear him through the wall. His asthma's getting worse.'

Todd tapped Michael Freeman on the shoulder. 'Can I please use the bathroom?'

'I was here first,' said Simone, appealing to her father. 'Tell four-eyes to wait his turn.'

'If I'm going to be the judge,' Michael replied, 'here's my ruling. Simone, you've got exactly two minutes. Then I need a quick shave or I'll be late for work, then you, Todd.'

'What happened to the bathroom roster?' asked Paula, walking past in her dressing gown. 'I had it all organised.'

'People around here can't read,' said Todd.

They were much better at arguing than reading. In the weeks they'd been living together, they'd argued about the bathroom, the kitchen. About breakfast, lunch and dinner. Going out or staying in. Which TV programme to watch.

Todd couldn't think of anything they *hadn't* argued about, and it was getting worse, not better.

Todd knew Simone was keeping up the pressure on her father to buy a bigger house, and he kept nagging his mother about the same thing.

He wondered how long it would take before someone cracked.

'Do you realise we've now survived nearly two whole months under the one roof?' asked

Michael Freeman, sounding more cheerful than he looked as he sat at the kitchen table with Todd and Jaynee.

In one hand, he held a piece of buttered toast. In the other, a rather stiff Saturday edition of the morning newspaper.

'And we'll keep surviving,' said Paula, arriving back from her run, dressed in yellow leotards and a head-band and wiping her face with a towel.

Todd thought she sounded more cheerful than she looked as well. They were all feeling stressed. The other night, Todd had found Jaynee sitting in the backyard beside Zip's kennel, telling the dog all her troubles.

And Zip wasn't even there!

'Mum,' said Todd, looking up from his bowl of cereal and glancing at the newspaper Michael held. 'There's a real estate section in the back. Why don't we...'

'You don't give up, do you?'

'Pardon?' said Michael.

'I'm talking to Todd,' said Paula. 'He's still nagging me about a bigger house.'

'The same way Simone's nagging me,' said Michael lowering his paper. 'Where *is* Simone?'

Todd shrugged. 'In the backyard last time I saw her. Chasing Zip.'

The door from the passage flew open and Holly burst in, wearing her dressing gown and waving her arms.

'Sleep is impossible in this madhouse!'

'We're being quiet,' said Paula.

'Not my dumb sister and that dumb dog. They sound as if they're having a water fight under my bedroom window.'

Holly pointed to where Carmen lay curled up next to the rubbish bin. 'And Logan's asthma is *still* keeping me awake at night. We've got to get rid of that animal.'

Jaynee opened her mouth to protest, but Michael got in first. 'Holly, don't start that again.'

Todd heard his mother give a loud sigh as she reached up and pulled off her sweatband.

'When we got married,' Paula said to Michael, 'I really hoped that one day we'd all...'

She was interrupted by a scratching sound at the back door. Paula leaned over to open it.

In walked a blue dog!

Jaynee squealed and jumped up from the table, knocking Logan's glass of water flying and into Todd's cereal bowl.

Zip stood there, looking embarrassed, his tail between his legs. Blue water dripped off his coat onto the kitchen vinyl.

Simone walked in behind him, in baggy t-shirt and oversized shorts, almost as blue as her

dog.

She shrugged. 'The colour looked good on Gran.'

Paula stood, stunned, as Zip shook a splash of blue onto her yellow leotards.

'Poor Zip!' said Jaynee, jumping down from the table and throwing her arms around the dog, getting dye all over her.

Carmen uncurled, spotted the strange coloured visitor and hissed. Zip slid out of Jaynee's grasp and shot off up the passage.

'Not in my room, you soggy mutt!' yelled Holly, giving chase.

'And not on our new bed!' yelled her father, sending his chair flying as well as a piece of toast and the newspaper.

'Don't hurt him,' yelled Jaynee chasing after the others.

'I'm thirsty,' said Logan, shoving his fist into Todd's cereal bowl to retrieve his water glass.

'Get your hand out of my breakfast,' said Todd, waving a spoon over Logan's knuckles.

'Dog grooming's hard work,' said Simone. 'I'd better have breakfast before I go and see Mrs Redmond.' She turned to Paula. 'What's cooking?'

Paula snapped out of her trance, reached down and snatched up the newspaper.

'I'll tell you what's cooking,' she muttered, flicking to the back section. 'A bigger house!'

Chapter Ten

Simone held the phone close to her ear and listened to it ringing, unanswered. On and on it rang. Where was Mrs Redmond? Her phone was only in the hall. Even on the walking frame she should have reached it by now.

Simone was calling ahead to tell Mrs Redmond she'd be a bit late.

It had taken longer than expected to shampoo Zip back to normal. Almost normal. The blue ears would just have to fade.

Simone had even managed to sponge most of the dye out of the carpet. As good as new, apart from the blue roses. And Paula could always donate her spotty leotards to the City Mission.

Mrs Redmond's phone kept ringing. Maybe she was in the bathroom. But what if something was wrong? Simone couldn't ring Gran to pop around and check because Gran was out of town for the day. And her father and Paula had gone house hunting.

If Mrs Redmond needed help, who else could she call on?

Todd walked by. 'What are you looking so worried about?' he asked her.

Simone put down the phone. Should she tell him? Part of her didn't want to. Mrs Redmond was *her* friend, not his. The Wozinskys had butted into enough of her territory.

Mrs Redmond was private.

But if she'd had a fall...

'You're only coming this once,' she told Todd as they cycled towards Mrs Redmond's house.

'How much further?' he asked.

'Not much.'

Simone had visited Mrs Redmond two or three times a week since the wedding. With visits from Simone and Gran, Mrs Redmond now had more company than she'd had in years.

Simone didn't have to do much. Just sit on the dust-covered couch and listen to the old woman talk about the past. About Gran being the flower girl at her wedding. About how Mrs Redmond's mother had been born in the old house, and Mrs Redmond's own daughter, Olive.

Mrs Redmond also told Simone about nursing her husband before he died in their bedroom upstairs. Olive was still young then. The little girl had hated the house from that day on, and when she finally left home, Olive vowed she'd never live in it again.

Simone always felt a bit guilty when she had to leave. Yesterday, Mrs Redmond had seemed more fragile than ever, more lost in her memories, and even less steady on her walking frame.

'Mrs Redmond! Mrs Redmond!'

Simone knocked a second time and then a third. The old woman always took ages to

answer the door, but never this long.

'Todd,' she said, checking the door handle. 'I was right. Something's happened. We've got to get inside.'

'How?'

She looked up. 'That window. It's not completely closed.'

'How are we going to get up there?' asked Todd. 'Do a Spiderman up the wall?'

They wouldn't have to. The biggest tree had two huge branches that stuck out like giant arms. One of them almost reached the window.

'You want me to climb up there?' asked Todd, looking a bit green.

'Don't worry,' she told him, 'climbing trees is my thing.'

'I don't think... ' Todd began, but Simone wasn't listening. She leapt into the tree, hauling herself up branch by branch. Within seconds, she was on her stomach crawling towards the window.

'It won't work,' Todd called from below, but Simone ignored him. He was a boy. What did he know?

Only another metre or two to crawl. Then it happened.

The branch started to sag and Simone suddenly found herself pointing towards the ground.

'I tried to tell you,' yelled Todd. 'I could see it wouldn't take your weight.'

Muttering under her breath, Simone retreated and dropped out of the tree.

'Have *you* got a better idea?' she asked.

'Let's check the back,' said Todd and took off.

As he did, Simone realised she'd never even been around the back of the house.

She arrived to find Todd squinting through the keyhole.

'I can see the key,' he told her, grabbing an old cardboard box and ripping off a piece.

'What are you going to do with that? Build a paper ladder?'

'Watch,' he said, sliding the cardboard under the door. 'If I poke something in the lock and push the key out, it should fall onto the cardboard. Then I can slide it out, like a tray.'

'How long will that take?'

'Depends.'

Simone wasn't prepared to stand around and wait. She gazed hard and found what she was looking for. Another second-storey window that didn't look completely shut - and a heavy creeper growing up the wall of the house.

But would it take her weight? She gave it a tug. It was stuck fast to the paint.

'Forget the key,' she called and leapt at the creeper, climbing up, hand over hand, like a jungle-gym.

She'd be inside in a flash.

'Almost there,' yelled Todd, still working on the key.

'Me, too,' she yelled back. Part way up the wall she realised something. The creeper was stuck to the paint much better than the paint was stuck to the house!

Simone felt her stomach flip as the paint and creeper peeled away from the wall, sending her flying. She twisted as she fell, trying to land gently, but still took most of the weight on one foot which buckled under her.

Todd reached her as she struggled to her feet, the pain shooting up her leg.

'I'm in,' he said. 'You okay?'

'Don't just stand there gawking. Let's find Mrs Redmond.'

Todd led the way with Simone hobbling behind, the pain in her leg getting worse by the second.

'Oh, oh,' said Simone as she saw the walking frame lying on its side at the bottom of the stairs - but no Mrs Redmond.

'She must have gone upstairs,' he said.

'She *never* goes upstairs.'

'Only one way to find out,' said Todd, and raced up the staircase.

'Hey,' Simone called after him. 'Wait for me,' and she took off after him, hopping up one step at a time on her good foot.

Todd stopped at the top of the landing and waited for her. The landing was empty.

'Mrs Redmond!' Simone yelled, her concern overriding the pain. 'Todd, try the rooms on that side.'

Simone hopped across the landing to start on the others.

'Todd! Come quick!'

Mrs Redmond lay on the floor inside the biggest bedroom, barely breathing.

'Such a silly thing to do,' said the old lady, in a ragged whisper. Simone slumped down on the floor beside her and put her ear close to Mrs Redmond's mouth to hear the words.

'I'll call the ambulance,' said Todd, dashing out the bedroom door.

'It's okay,' Simone said to Mrs Redmond. 'We'll get you to the hospital.'

Simone sat there, holding her friend's frail hand, watching the old woman's bony chest rise and fall. There was now only a very faint light burning behind the paper thin skin.

'I wanted to come up here one last time,' said Mrs Redmond, reaching out her hand to touch the edge of the tattered bedspread.

The voice faded, then came back. 'Simone, I want to lie on my own bed again.'

'Mrs Redmond, I don't think...'

'Please.'

'Todd!' Simone yelled, 'get back up here. I need some help.'

Within minutes, Simone heard the siren. Two paramedics lifted Mrs Redmond off her bed onto a stretcher before carrying her downstairs and loading her gently into the back of the ambulance.

Then they came back for Simone.

As they carried her out the front gate, Simone turned her head. Despite the pain from her damaged ankle, she again noticed the writing carved into the wood.

From this angle, she suddenly realised what it said, but before she could tell Todd, she passed out.

Chapter Eleven

'This itch is driving me mad,' said Simone as she sat on the bottom bunk in her room, poking a knitting needle down her plaster.

'Be thankful you only broke a little bone in your foot,' said her father, 'and not your head.'

'You and Todd did a good job,' said Paula.

Todd shrugged. 'It was a team effort.'

'But it still won't save Mrs Redmond,' said Simone, losing interest in the itch.

'Nothing will at this stage,' said Michael, 'but at least in hospital she can get the care she needs. Gran's with her now.'

'You did okay, Fang-face,' said Holly coming into the bedroom. 'But don't quote me on that. And you can keep the lower bunk for a while. I'm not having you sleeping above me with that thing on your leg.'

'Why don't we all sign it?' asked Jaynee.

'Good idea,' said Holly, grabbing a felt tipped pen. 'Can I write something rude?'

Holly signed the plaster, then the others took turns. Even Logan added his mark - a smiley face. Todd was the last.

'This thing's so big we should give it a name,' he said.

'The Simone Smash?' Michael suggested.

'The Freeman Fracture,' said Holly, roaring with laughter.

Simone shook her head. 'We'll name it after Mrs Redmond's house.'

'Her house has got a *name*?' asked Todd.

Simone nodded. 'Carved into the gate under a zillion layers of paint.'

She took the pen from Todd and wrote across the plaster in big letters...

"The BRIGHTSIDE Break!"

The End