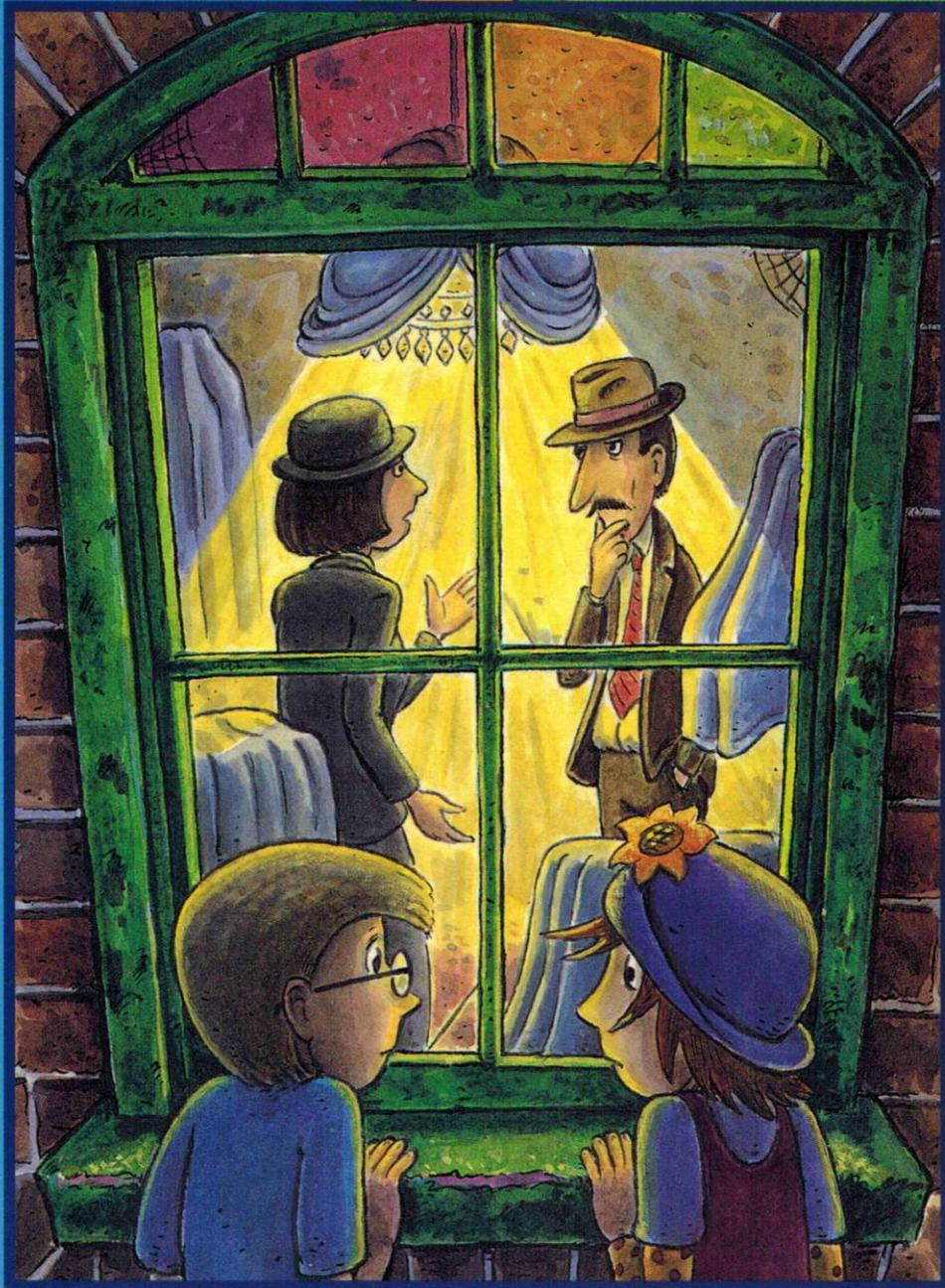


T O M B R A D L E Y



**DOUBLE**  
**Dilemma**  
The Brightside Bunch



**FREE ebook - Book 2 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**

(Second book in the series)

For Simone Freeman and Todd Wozinsky, both 10, sharing bedrooms and bathrooms in a small house after their parents got married is causing big problems.

With so many children in the new family now fighting for their own space, they need a different house. A much *bigger* house, and no matter what it takes, it’s up to Simone and Todd to work together to try and make it happen.

## Chapter One

'Clear the beach!' yelled Simone Freeman, holding her hands in front of her eyes like binoculars. 'Clear the beach!'

'What is it?' asked her grandmother, tipping back the brim of her oversized sun hat.

'It's hideous, Gran,' said Simone. 'A great white shark, headed this way. Look out!'

Fourteen year old Holly Freeman jogged up the last few metres of sand and flopped down on a beach towel.

'My sister, the clown,' she said, grabbing a second towel to dry her hair. 'Pity you're not always funny.'

'Cut that out, you two,' said their father, Michael, trying to sleep, but being attacked by a sand fly. 'I didn't come to the beach to listen to you two scrap. I can do that at home.'

Gran Freeman turned down the brim of her hat and swivelled the beach umbrella. 'Apart from the noise, this is one of my favourite places. Hatchwood may not be the biggest city in the world, but it's got a great beach.'

'Which is full of thieves,' said Holly. 'Who's stolen my sun block?'

Simone picked up a bottle lying in the sand.

'Give that here,' said Holly.

Simone held it out of range. 'Say, please.'

Holly lunged, snatched the bottle, and started lathering her body. 'Simone, why don't you take your braces for a dip in the ocean? Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll rust shut.'

'Girls, will you stop that,' said their father, still fighting off the same sand fly and a horde of hungry friends. 'Someone hand me the insect repellent before I get eaten alive.'

That would be more than a three course meal, thought Simone, grabbing a second bottle lying in the sand and handing it to her father.

'Thanks,' he said, pouring it over his body. Then he stopped. 'Yuck. This stuff smells like the local rubbish dump. What is it?'

He checked the label. 'Ray-Away?'

Holly, who'd just stretched out on her towel, sprang up. 'That's my sun block. Then what am I wearing?'

'A lifetime guarantee from all insects and pests,' said Simone.

'I hope that includes you!'

Michael Freeman sank back on his towel. 'It could be worse,' he said to no one in particular. 'I could have had a dozen daughters, instead of only two.'

Simone shook her head. One sister was enough for her. And one little brother. In fact, their family had been just the right size until *they* came along and messed things up.

*They* were the Wozinskys. Her father's new wife, Paula, and her two kids. Todd and his

eight year old sister, Jaynee.

‘Why don’t you kids go for a swim?’ Gran Freeman suggested.

Todd Wozinsky looked up from where he lay stretched out on his stomach and brushed the blonde fringe out of his eyes. ‘I’m enjoying my book.’

Simone snorted. No wonder Todd needed glasses. Reading ruined your eyes. Everyone knew that. But he’d had a book glued to his hand, day and night, since discovering a new science fiction series about aliens invading another planet.

Just like the Wozinskys had invaded the Freemans’ house. Well, at least no one else could invade them. There was no more room.

Simone and Holly had tried to tell their father that seven people in one house wouldn’t work. Especially a small house. But their father hadn’t listened. He’d got married anyway.

‘Why don’t you go for a swim, too, Jaynee?’ Paula Wozinsky asked her daughter.

‘Not yet, Mum,’ said Jaynee, flicking sand off her pony tail.

The eight year old concentrated on the hole she and four year old Logan Freeman were digging. Logan had taken to Jaynee like a stray puppy to a new owner.

‘We might find a crab,’ said Jaynee. ‘He could be our next pet.’

Simone smacked her lips. ‘He could be our next *meal*.’

Jaynee flared. ‘You... meat-eater!’

‘I bags the legs. I love crab’s legs.’

‘Mu-um,’ said Jaynee. ‘Simone’s being mean.’

‘Come on, everyone,’ said Paula Wozinsky in her best classroom voice, pulling her head out of the pile of Green Hill High English essays. ‘It’s too nice a day to fight.’

What’s the weather got to do with it, Simone wondered.

‘How about a family truce?’ Paula suggested. ‘For the next hour no one argues, fights or screams.’

Get real, thought Simone. That might work back on Planet Wozinsky, but not here. Unless Paula had a stun gun in her beach bag to enforce it.

Michael Freeman had drifted off to sleep, snoring loudly. He suddenly grabbed the edge of the towel he shared with Paula and rolled over.

‘He’s like this with the blankets at night,’ Paula told the others as she tugged back some of the towel. ‘Maybe I should have let the rest of you come to the beach on your own and marked these papers at home.’

‘Why don’t you read us Holly’s essay?’ asked Simone. ‘Give us a laugh.’

‘Big joke,’ said Holly. ‘You know I’m not in *her* English class.’

Holly had almost died of embarrassment when their father started dating the new English teacher at school. *Marrying* the teacher had made it worse.

As Paula adjusted her bikini top, Simone noticed again how her stepmother's skimpy costume showed off a fit body she'd earned in the gym pushing weights.

On the other hand, her father's costume showed off a body he'd earned at the local fish factory, pushing a pen.

She and Holly had been fathered by a great white whale. Moby Mike.

'Dad,' asked Simone, 'where on earth did you get those tatty swim trunks?'

When her father only grunted, Paula said, 'He must have hidden them. That's the only way they could have escaped the rag bag.'

Simone glanced down at her own swimming costume. The one Holly said looked like it had been used for straining jam.

Maybe Simone had been a bit heavy with the dye, but what was wrong with a tint or two, or three, or four, or...?

The rest of the kids on the beach had been staring at the costume since she arrived. Was it the frills? Or the sleeves? Or the long legs?

Hadn't any of them *seen* an original before? A one-off? The only one like it in the City Mission bargain bin?

'I wish you'd found me one as well,' said Gran, as Simone stood up. 'I wore outfits like that when I was your age.'

'You still do, Mum,' said Michael in a sleepy voice without opening his eyes. 'Remember the wedding?'

'Gran looked great at the wedding,' said Simone.

'Different,' said Michael.

'As I keep telling you,' said Gran. 'I refuse to behave like every other woman my age.'

Simone grinned. 'You just refuse to behave.'

Gran winked at her. 'I'm getting worse with age. Older and bolder.'

'I don't want to hear this,' said Michael.

Simone looked at her grandmother. They both had the same skinny build. 'If you want a swim, Gran, you can borrow my suit.'

Michael Freeman chuckled. 'How many other grandmothers and granddaughters swap clothes?'

'Simone's got flair,' said Gran.

'That's only hair gel,' said Holly.

'You're a bad influence on your grandmother,' Michael told Simone, unseating Paula completely this time and wrapping the towel right around him as he rolled over again.

Now he looks like an uncooked sausage in a slice of bread, thought Simone. I hope no one here's got a barbecue or there could be a nasty accident.

'You can have this plaster, too, if you like Gran,' said Simone, waving around her leg. Simone had broken it rescuing Gran's friend, Thelma Redmond, after the old woman collapsed in her home.

The house was called Brightside and Simone had named the plaster cast "The BRIGHTSIDE Break" in big letters across the top.

Simone waved her plastered leg again. 'They cut this thing off tomorrow.'

'Can they do your head at the same time?' asked Holly.

While Simone's leg had healed up well, Mrs Redmond was still in hospital and would never come out.

Gran visited her every day and Simone visited every chance she could. Todd had come a couple of times, but he didn't like hospitals. He said they made him think of death and dying and that made him think of his father.

Simone didn't mind Todd staying away. The Wozinskys didn't have to shove their noses in everywhere. Especially not between Simone and her friend. And Mrs Redmond had become a very sick friend.

'How much longer is this house hunting going to take?' asked Holly, lathering more sun block over her face.

The four Freemans and three Wozinskys had tried to survive in the Freemans' house, but it had been a disaster.

'I'm sick of sharing a room,' said Holly, using her nose to point to Simone and Jaynee. 'Especially with these... kids.'

Todd folded down the corner of a page and shut his book. 'We've still got to sell the place we're in.'

'We will,' said Paula. 'We've just got to get organised.'

Holly snorted. 'Right up your alley.'

'If we're lucky,' said Paula, without reacting, 'we'll sell our house and move into a new one without a hitch.'

'There'll be a hitch,' said Holly putting on her sunglasses before stretching out on a towel. 'Life these days is full of hitches. Hitches and Wozinskys.'

Paula shook her head slowly from side to side, but before she could say anything, Michael sat up, spraying sand in all directions.

'How am I supposed to sleep with all this chatter?'

'You've managed so far, sweetheart,' said Paula, reaching over him and dragging a notebook out of her beach bag.

Michael flopped down again, but Paula nudged him. 'Sit up, Michael, I'm calling a family conference.'

'Leave me out of this,' said Gran. 'I'm not taking sides.'

'You might have a few ideas, though,' said Paula.

'I do have a few ideas,' said Gran. 'Like staying in my own flat, driving my own car, and remaining independent.'

'Why do we have to have a family conference right now?' asked Holly. 'This is supposed to be a day off.'

'It won't take long,' said Paula, packing away her school papers. 'Just a quick review of where we're at.'

How about you lot going back to Planet Wozinsky, thought Simone. That seemed fair. Last in, first out.

Then she saw her father smile at his new wife and felt a bit guilty. He did seem happier than he'd been for years. The happiest Simone had seen him since before their mother walked out.

But why did people who got married again have to drag their kids along with them? No one ever asked the kids if they wanted to go. And if they did ask, the adults never listened to the answers.

Michael Freeman pulled on a t-shirt. 'I still have nightmares about the mortgage we'll need for this new dream home.'

'Me, too,' said Paula.

He wiped some sand out of his moustache. 'Let's be thankful we both have secure jobs.'

Paula pushed her sunglasses up into her short curly blonde hair. 'And there's no more talk of a takeover at work? New owners for the business?'

'Nothing I'm taking too seriously,' he replied. 'Anyway, whoever owns Hatchwood Fisheries will still need a good accountant.'

'Then let's go over our wish-list,' said Paula, clicking her pen.

'Is that note book big enough?' asked Holly.

Paula smiled. 'First question. Have we been looking for the impossible?'

'Like Holly with her diets?' asked Simone.

Holly ignored her. 'We still need our own bedrooms. That's a must.'

'It's okay, Dad,' said Simone. 'You can keep sharing with Paula.'

Todd said, 'I still want to be able to kick a football around.'

'Me, too,' said Simone. 'Inside.'

Jayne stopped digging. 'Lots of space for all our animals.'

'What do you mean, all our animals?' asked Paula. 'We've only got Zip and Carmen. Or have you found another stray?'

'Just find our dinner,' Simone told Jaynee. 'I've craving a crab-burger.'

Jaynee picked up a fistful of sand and drew back her arm, but her mother's glare stopped her.

'No one does anything until we've finished this,' said Paula. 'Logan, what do you want?'

'A drink,' said the pre-schooler, glancing up at her from under his mop of brown curly hair, before going back to his digging.

Simone handed her brother a carton of apple juice. 'How about your own portable loo?'

Michael smiled. 'There'll never be a water shortage with that boy around. What about you, Simone?'

'I still want trees to climb,' she said. 'Big ones. Like Godzilla.'

Holly sprang up and grabbed Simone's arm. 'Who are you calling Godzilla?'

'I wouldn't call you Godzilla,' said Simone, shaking off the hand.

Holly sank back onto the towel.

'More like King Kong!' said Simone rolling out of range.

'I refuse to fight with a child,' said Holly. 'Especially one who talks to trees.'

'I practise on you,' said Simone. 'You're as thick as a plank.'

Michael groaned. 'The joys of a blended family.'

'The joys of any family with kids,' Gran reminded him.

'I know the tree Simone's talking about,' said Todd. 'At Mrs Redmond's place. It's got these huge branches that stick out like arms.'

Logan started to wriggle. Simone recognized the sign. The apple juice had reached Logan's control box and turned the signal green.

'Counting down, Dad,' said Simone.

'Oh, no,' said her father. 'The toilet block's at the other end of the beach. He'll never make it.'

'I'll take him for a swim, then,' said Simone, grabbing Logan's hand. 'The ocean's big enough.'

'That's gross,' said Jaynee.

'I could leave him here,' said Simone, 'but he might fill that hole you're digging. And I prefer *salt-water* crabs.'

## Chapter Two

Simone ran into the bedroom she shared with Holly and Jaynee and tossed her school backpack up on the top bunk. It landed beside the teddy bear Mrs Redmond had given her.

A few weeks before she went into hospital, the old woman had offered Simone all the toys her grown-up daughter, Olive, had abandoned years ago.

Simone had politely said no, but Mrs Redmond insisted she take the teddy. Simone still felt bad about it. Everyone knew teddy bears always belonged to their first owner.

She headed for the kitchen where Todd studied the real estate section of the Hatchwood Herald while demolishing a bag of potato crisps.

'It's the wrong end of town,' said Simone, leaning over his shoulder and grabbing a handful of crisps, 'but look at the size of that place.'

She pointed at a picture of a large house with an enormous section. Apart from the location, it had everything, including a swimming pool.

Jaynee wandered in and headed for the cupboard. 'Any more crisps?'

'Too late,' said Todd. 'This is the last pack.'

'Then what am I supposed to eat?'

'You'd hate these anyway,' said Simone.

'Says who?'

'They're *crab* flavoured.'

'Big joke,' said Jaynee.

'Zip likes them,' said Todd.

The Freemans' dog hung around their feet, snuffling up any crumbs that fell.

Jaynee poked her tongue out at Simone. 'I hope the crumbs get stuck in your braces.'

'So do I,' said Simone. 'Give me something to snack on later.'

She took a crisp out of the bag and held it above Zip's head. 'Up, boy. Show these Wozinskys what a clever dog you are.'

Zip lifted his head and his body quivered, a fountain of dribble pouring over his bottom lip, over his feet, and forming a frothy puddle on the vinyl floor.

'You'll have to wash your paws later,' said Simone. 'Up, you dumb dog.'

Each time she offered it, the crisp got lower, but Zip's legs stayed stuck to the floor.

'What's holding him down?' asked Todd. 'Slobber Glue?'

'Come on, Zip,' Simone hissed. Not that he'd ever begged for anything in his life.

Zip just looked up at her with his gooey eyes and dribbled a bit more. As he did, Simone lowered the crisp and dropped it into his mouth.

'That's not begging,' said Jaynee in disgust.

'He's a Freeman,' said Simone. 'He's too smart to beg.'

Simone wiped her slobbery hands on her trousers and then reached for the crisps.

Todd pulled the bag away. 'Wash your hands first.'

'Okay,' said Simone, reaching down so Zip could lick her fingers.

At that moment, Paula swept in, towing Logan behind, having picked him up from kindergarten.

'Mu-um,' said Jaynee, 'Simone's being gross again.'

'Stop telling tales,' said Paula.

Simone spotted her chance. With Todd distracted by his mother's arrival, she snatched the bag off him and plunged a frothy hand inside.

'I'm starving,' said Paula, heading for the fridge. 'What's on the menu?'

'Crisps,' said Simone, holding out the bag.

'No, Mum,' said Todd.

'Are they fresh?' Paula asked Simone.

'Just opened.'

'Say no, Mum,' said Todd.

'I don't feel like crisps,' said Paula, 'but Logan might like some.'

'Crisps!' said Logan, his face lighting up. 'Me, please?'

Simone screwed up the bag and threw it in the kitchen tidy. 'You wouldn't like them, Logan. They're starting to go soggy.'

Logan began to wail. Paula picked him up and the crying stopped. The four year old always seemed happy around his new stepmother. He was much too young to remember his own mother.

'We're still getting real estate agents through,' said Paula, making Logan a sandwich. 'I hope you've all kept your bedrooms tidy.'

'Tell that to Dad,' said Simone.

'Now *this* is what I really feel like,' said Paula as she poured the ingredients for a health-shake into the blender. 'How's the leg, Simone?'

It felt as good as new. To prove it, Simone booted an imaginary football into an imaginary goal.

Paula paused in her shake making. 'Why on earth did your grandmother want the old plaster cast?'

'She glued it back together and painted it,' Simone explained. 'Makes a neat umbrella stand.'

'I've never met a grandmother like her,' said Paula.

'No one has,' said Simone. 'She's a Freeman original.'

'Logan and I are going outside to play,' said Jaynee, taking the youngest Freeman by

the hand and leading him off.

'Don't go far,' Paula called after them. 'We're going house hunting again when Michael comes home.'

Simone reckoned they'd already seen every big house for sale in North Hatchwood.

'We need some luck,' said Todd.

'Forget luck,' said Simone. 'We need to be quick.'

They'd missed out on a couple of good houses because her father had dithered.

'He won't make that mistake again,' said Paula.

As Paula poured the shake, Holly burst in. Pulling off her Green Hill High jumper, she flung her backpack into the corner, just missing Zip.

'I've got some great news,' said Holly, waving her arms around in all directions. 'Really great news.'

'You're going to run away from home,' said Simone.

The human windmill made a rude gesture to Simone which Paula didn't see.

'If anyone's interested,' said Holly, 'I got an A on my latest essay.'

'I'm interested, Holly,' said Paula. 'That's great.' Mrs Naidu keeps telling me how well you're doing.'

'I deserve a reward,' said Holly, opening the fridge and extracting the remains of last night's apple pie.

'Why don't you...?' Paula began.

Holly stopped. 'You have a problem with me finishing the pie?'

Simone knew how her sister hated comments about her binge-and-diet eating patterns. Especially from Paula.

'It's your decision,' said Paula. 'I just thought you might like to share my shake instead. It's very healthy.'

'Then you drink it,' said Holly, taking a large mouthful of pie.

Simone turned to Jaynee and whispered, 'You want gross? *That's* gross!'

'Ameeta Naidu's a good teacher,' Paula told Holly, 'but if you were in my English class, we could work on...'

'I like Mrs Naidu,' Holly said, swallowing hard. 'Vasanti and all my friends are in her class. Don't you try and move me!'

Just then, the phone rang. It was Michael.

'Good news,' Paula told them after a few seconds, holding her hand over the mouthpiece.

'What is it?' asked Todd.

'Shush,' said Paula, concentrating on what her husband had to say.

When she finally dropped the phone, she let out a whoop. 'We've sold it. We've sold our house!'

Except it's not your house, thought Simone. It's the Freeman house. The only house Simone had ever lived in. Where she'd been born, and Holly, and Logan. The same house where their mother used to live - something that seemed like a hundred years ago.

'We've got two weeks to get out of here,' Paula explained.

'But where are we going?' Todd asked his mother. 'We haven't got a house to go to.'

'The Great Organiser strikes again,' Holly muttered, finishing the last of the pie and heading back to the fridge.

'I've kept the best news till last,' said Paula.

Holly left the fridge door closed and swung back to listen.

'Michael's found our dream home,' said Paula.

The agent had just shown it to him. Not far from where they already lived. Brand new and a bit expensive, but affordable - just - as long as they all pulled in their belts.

Simone grinned to herself. She could picture her father trying to pull in *his* belt.

'And you're sure we'll get this house?' asked Simone.

'We've already got it,' said Paula. 'Your father's just signed the papers.'

'You mean we're stuck with it?' asked Holly. 'Even if we hate it?'

'Your father had to make a snap decision,' said Paula. 'Another family was chasing it, too, and they're still keen. They'll get it if our deal falls over.'

'But there's no danger of that,' said Todd. 'Is there?'

'We'd better all cross our fingers and toes,' said Holly.

'And Zip,' said Simone to their dog curled up in the corner. 'I'll give you a bowl of crisps if you cross your paws.'

### Chapter Three

'I recognise this area,' said Todd as his mother drove them towards the new house. He was sure of it. He could see himself riding his bike along this street. Where had he been heading?

He'd remember, eventually.

Holly sat in the front passenger seat. That left Todd crushed into the back with Simone, Jaynee and Logan.

'I don't know this area at all,' said Paula. 'But the house is somewhere around here.'

'What's the address again?' asked Simone.

'Number 11 Hardy Street. At least that's what it sounded like on the phone. Your father was so excited.'

'There's no Hardy street around here,' said Simone. 'I know this area like the back of my hand.'

'Your father said it wasn't far from Northmall,' said Paula, trying to look at street signs as she drove.

'As long as it's still close to school,' said Holly in the front, doing her windmill impersonation. 'I'm not changing schools and that's final.'

'Jaynee and I had to change schools,' said Todd from the back. 'Twice. When we moved to Hatchwood and then when we had to move into your place.'

'We didn't ask you to move in,' said Holly.

'At least this will end one battle,' said Paula. 'The new house won't be anyone's old family home. It'll be our home. The Wozinsky-Freeman home.'

'Says who?' asked Holly. 'What's wrong with Freeman-Wozinsky?'

'I don't really care what it's called,' said Paula, 'as long as it's a place where no one argues and everyone smiles.'

'You mean like Disneyland,' said Todd.

Paula laughed. 'Well, we can at least try.'

'You also need a bigger car,' he told his mother as Jaynee and Simone dug each other in the ribs squeezing him tighter against the door.

'We can't buy a bigger house *and* a bigger car,' said Paula.

'Maybe Hatchwood Fisheries will upgrade Dad's car to something bigger,' said Simone. 'Like a truck.'

Paula pulled over to the side of the road and checked her road map. 'There's definitely no Hardy Street. What else could it be?'

'I've got it,' said Simone, jumping up and down, increasing the squeeze in the back seat.

'Mu-um,' said Jaynee, 'Simone's shoving me.'

'Jaynee, stop moaning,' said Paula. 'Simone, what have you got?'

'Big elbows,' said Jaynee.

'It's not Hardy Street,' Simone told Paula. 'It's Yardley Street.'

Todd suddenly realised why the area looked so familiar. 'Where Mrs Redmond lives?'

'That's right,' said Simone. 'Just around the corner.'

As Paula turned into Yardley Street, they spotted Michael's company car parked further down the street.

'There's Mrs Redmond's house,' said Simone, bouncing up and down on the seat.

'Brightside!'

'Stop yelling in my ear,' said Holly.

'What house?' asked Logan, trying to peer over the other bodies to see out the side window.

Simone pointed. 'There. And that's Godzilla. See, the big tree. And around the back of the house is the creeper I pulled down off the house when I broke my leg.'

'Can we send you back for seconds?' asked Holly.

Paula slowed down as she drove past number 13. 'It looks kind of spooky.'

'It's not spooky,' said Todd. To him, the house only looked sad.

'But this is what we've come for,' said Paula, stopping the car next door to Brightside.

'Number 11.'

'We'll have Mrs Redmond for a neighbour...' Todd began, then stopped. Mrs Redmond would never come back to her old house.

Perhaps he should visit her more often, but he hated hospitals, and Simone didn't seem to want him there.

They stood outside number 11, waiting for the real estate agent to arrive.

'Peace, privacy, and my own room,' said Holly. 'I can feel my creative juices flowing.'

Simone handed her a tissue. 'Wipe your chin.'

The house sat on the town's northern boundary, framed by bush covered foothills and mountain ranges.

'I could jog around those hills,' said Paula, taking her husband's hand and giving it a squeeze.

'And I could sit in the lounge and watch you,' said Michael.

Between the house and the hills lay a hundred metres of open paddocks.

'I could kick a football forever,' said Todd.

'I could build the world's biggest zoo,' said Jaynee.

'And I could climb myself silly,' said Simone, pointing to Godzilla and the other ancient trees running along the shared boundary.

'The new owners might not like it,' said Todd.

'But we're the new owners.'

'I mean next door.'

Mrs Redmond's daughter, Olive, hated Brightside because her father had died there. Todd could understand. Brightside would definitely be sold when Mrs Redmond died.

A third car pulled up outside. 'Sorry I'm late,' said Mr Ellery, jumping out, and striding over to greet them. 'I see you've already noticed funny old number 13 next door.'

'It's not funny,' said Simone.

Mr Ellery gave her a strange look then continued, 'Don't worry, it won't drag down the neighbourhood for much longer. I'm sure whoever buys it will put a bulldozer through it and build something decent.'

'It's not fair,' Simone whispered to Todd. 'Mrs Redmond loves that house.'

'It must have looked magnificent in its day,' said Paula.

'The original country mansion when everything around here was still farmland,' said the agent. 'But it's not a patch on the house you've just bought. Number 11 Yardley Street. It's got Freeman written all over it.'

'I hope not!' said Paula.

'Did I say something wrong?' asked the agent.

'We're the Freemans and the Wozinskys,' Paula explained. 'A blended family.'

But not forever, thought Todd. When his mother had more money, she could buy number 11 on her own, and the Freemans could move out.

A look inside the house confirmed it for Todd. If anyone went, it would have to be the Freemans. There was no way he would ever move out. Number 11 was *better* than their wish list.

'Look at the size of this kitchen,' said Paula. 'Brand spanking new. Every mod-con you could ask for.'

Logan started wriggling and tugging at his father's sleeve. 'Please, Daddy, weez, Daddy. Now!'

'No problem, Mr Freeman,' said the agent. 'There's an ensuite off the master bedroom, and two other bathrooms with separate toilets.'

'Look at the size of that lawn out the back,' Todd said to Simone.

'This is too good to be true,' said Holly.

'I hope not,' said Todd.

'I can't believe our good luck, Todd,' said Paula, as 20 minutes later they walked back up the drive.

'That's what Holly keeps saying.'

Before he left, Mr Ellery reminded them that the other buyer would step in if they couldn't raise the money.

'No worries,' said Michael. 'Everything's sweet with the bank. Getting the money is a formality.'

As the agent drove off, Todd spotted a late model silver Mercedes pull up across the road. An Indian woman in a sari got out of the front passenger's seat.

'That's Ameeta Naidu,' Paula told Michael. 'What's she doing here?'

A girl of Holly's age in sweatshirt and jeans and an older teenage boy in a tracksuit scrambled out of the back.

'That's Vasanti,' Holly explained to the others. 'She's in my class at school. And her brother, Raj.'

Their father, Keval, stepped out last in a three piece business suit.

'Love his tie,' said Simone. 'It makes my swimsuit look dull.'

'What are you doing here?' Holly asked her classmate as the Naidus joined them.

'Looking at our new house,' said Vasanti, flicking her long hair out of her face.

'*Your* house?' asked Todd, wondering why people with such a fancy car would want to buy Brightside.

Mrs Naidu, pointed. 'There. Number 11.'

None of the Naidus seemed to notice the stunned Freeman-Wozinsky silence.

'It'll be perfect,' said Raj. 'Close to Green Hill High for Mum, me and Vasanti, and handy to Northmall for Dad.'

'Unfortunately,' his father explained, 'someone has beaten us to it. Hopefully, that deal will fall through, in a big crashing heap.'

Todd jumped in. '*We're* the new owners of number 11.'

'Oh, dear, so sorry,' said Mr Naidu. 'I did not mean...'

'We understand,' said Paula.

'You could still be our neighbours,' said Holly, pointing next door.

Keval Naidu shook his head. 'Goodness me, no. Thirteen is unlucky.'

Vasanti laughed. 'What Dad's saying is we're not that desperate.'

Todd stood his ground. 'Well, you'll have to find something else. Number 11 is ours!'

## Chapter Four

Right after dinner that night, Simone got a phone call. Paula answered it and the look on her face told Simone it wasn't good news.

It was Gran, calling to say Mrs Redmond had died that afternoon.

'I should have been there, Gran,' said Simone, feeling her stomach tighten. 'Not out house hunting.'

'Don't feel guilty,' said Gran. 'Thelma went peacefully. I was sitting with her. So was Olive.'

Mrs Redmond hadn't seen much of her daughter over the years, not even since she'd got sick. That's why Simone and Gran had stepped in.

Of course, Mrs Redmond didn't need anyone now.

'Simone, the funeral's on Thursday,' said Gran. 'Would you like to come with me?'

Simone paused. A funeral? She'd never been to a funeral. No one close to her had ever died before.

But Gran might like some company. And Simone hadn't said a proper goodbye to her friend. She had to do that.

'I'll come, Gran.'

'Thanks, Simone. I hope enough people find out about it.'

'Won't there be something in the Herald?'

'Would you believe it?' asked Gran. 'The paper's on strike from midnight.'

Simone thought about who she could invite to the funeral. Her father hardly knew the Redmonds. Nor did Holly or Logan.

'Todd might want to come,' said Gran. 'Thelma only met him a couple of times, but she really liked him.'

That's because she didn't have to live with him, thought Simone.

'I'll ask him,' she told her grandmother.

'Now, let's talk about something more cheerful,' said Gran. 'Tell me about your new house.'

Simone told her everything she could remember.

'That's amazing,' said Gran. 'And right next door to Brightside. Thelma would have enjoyed having you as neighbours.'

Before she hung up, Simone asked, 'Gran, what do you wear to a funeral?'

'Let's wear something bright,' said Gran. 'There'll be enough gloom there without adding to it. You remember how Thelma loved the outfits we wore to your father's wedding? Let's wear those.'

'Done,' said Simone. Even though it would mean a quick trip down to the City Mission to

buy back the hat she'd traded in on the new dressing gown.

At least she still had the decorations to go with it.

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Simone took Gran's arm as they walked across the square towards St Marks church.

'Doesn't seem that long ago since the wedding,' said Gran. 'Did you know Thelma got married here?'

Simone had heard the story a hundred times, but she let Gran tell her again about being Mrs Redmond's flower girl. Simone had seen some of the old wedding pictures. Everyone in them looked so happy, so alive.

Now, most of them were dead. But not Gran. Simone squeezed her grandmother's arm a bit tighter.

'There's Olive now,' said Gran as Mrs Redmond's only child pulled up outside St Marks wearing a charcoal grey coat and hat which matched the colour of her new Toyota.

Simone saw Olive lift a phone to her ear and hold a brief conversation before getting out of the car and walking into the church.

'I don't like her,' said Simone.

She'd met Olive a couple of times at the hospital and taken an instant dislike to her.

'She acts tough,' said Gran, 'but who knows how she really feels?'

'What happened to her husband?' asked Simone.

'They're divorced,' said Gran. 'These days her business is her whole life. I wouldn't want to trade places with her.'

'Even if you did, Gran, I'd still stick with you.'

Gran chuckled. 'Every home needs a Simone.'

'That's not what Holly says. Or Todd.'

'You did ask Todd if he wanted to come?'

'I asked, Gran, but he said no. He went to his father's funeral and he never wants to go to another one.'

'Who does?' said Gran. 'But funerals are a part of life, like births and marriages. There's always another one around the corner.'

They walked into the foyer of St Marks and Simone felt a shiver go up her back. A couple of months ago she'd stood in this same foyer, dressed in the same clothes, clutching two wedding rings.

Her father and Paula's ceremony had started a new life.

Today's ceremony ended a life, and Simone felt a lump in her throat as she walked with Gran down the aisle. It felt so different inside as well. The church was almost empty.

As the organ played, Simone glanced at the tiny coffin down the front near the altar.

Had Mrs Redmond really been that small? The coffin hardly looked big enough for a doll. Or a teddy bear.

The organ stopped and the minister stepped up to the lectern. 'We're gathered here today to say goodbye, and pay tribute to Thelma Redmond...'

Where were all the people saying goodbye Simone wondered? All the people her grandmother had rung because of the newspaper strike? Didn't they care?

Or had they stayed away because funerals weren't like weddings. No big party afterwards with speeches and champagne and dancing.

Simone sneaked a look at Olive Redmond. She had a handkerchief in her hand, but her eyes were dry.

Then Gran started to sob quietly. Simone reached out a hand to comfort her. One day she might have to come to Gran's funeral, and that made her own eyes moist.

The service was soon over and some people Simone didn't know carried out Mrs Redmond's coffin and loaded it into the back of a long black hearse.

Olive Redmond's handkerchief had disappeared back into her pocket, but Gran only stopped wiping her eyes long enough to shake hands with the minister at the door.

As he shook Simone's hand, the minister gave her a sad smile. 'A bit different to the last time you visited. One wedding I'll never forget. Especially what you did.'

Simone tried to smile back, but the smile froze halfway.

'What happens now?' she asked Gran as they stepped out into the fresh air in time to see the hearse drive off.

'We follow it to the cemetery.'

Simone stopped. Cemetery? She hadn't thought about that part of it. She'd cycled past the Hatchwood cemetery plenty of times, but never actually stopped there.

Cemeteries were spooky places. Places to be avoided. Full of dead people.

This was turning out to be a bigger day than she'd realised. Simone wondered briefly about her father and his appointment at the bank. The thought seemed unfair to Mrs Redmond and Simone chased it away.

She walked across to her grandmother's red mini and climbed in. Simone had survived her first funeral service. Now the time had come for her first visit to a real grave.

Simone had seen plenty of graveside scenes on television, but they looked different in real life.

'That hole's big enough for 10 coffins,' she said to Gran as they walked towards it.

Around the edge of the grave, the funeral director had assembled a rectangle frame of metal pipes, with several thick nylon straps stretched across it. It reminded Simone of a camping stretcher.

As Simone watched, the coffin was wheeled from the back of the hearse and laid on the straps, suspended above the pit.

The minister said some more blessings and Simone wondered if they'd help Mrs Redmond more than the blessings he'd already given back at the church.

Simone heard a small motor start up. Like a fridge.

'Where's that noise coming from?' she whispered.

Gran pointed. The straps holding the coffin slackened off and, as Simone watched, the coffin slowly sank into the grave.

She wanted to ask Gran what happened next, but she didn't trust her voice to say the words without cracking.

Gran leaned close to her. 'This is where we say our final goodbyes.'

The minister stepped back to allow Olive Redmond to sprinkle a handful of dirt on top of the coffin before hurrying away.

Then the rest of the mourners filed past the open grave. Some of them said a few quiet words. Others sprinkled flowers on top of the coffin.

Finally, only Gran and Simone were left. Gran pulled an envelope from her purse. Inside was a dead flower.

'Part of the posey I carried at Thelma's wedding,' Gran explained, looking down. 'Goodbye, old friend.'

The dried flower floated down like a falling leaf and came to rest, gently, on the wooden box.

Suddenly, Simone wanted to leave something, too. A farewell present to her special friend. But what?

She felt a spot of rain hit her face. With a lump in her throat, Simone said, 'Goodbye, Mrs Redmond.'

Then, one by one, she plucked the brightly coloured paper flowers off her hat and dropped them into the grave.

## Chapter Five

As Gran's red mini drove off from outside the Freeman house and disappeared around the corner, Simone took a deep breath. The air always smelled cleaner after it rained.

Simone hoped she wouldn't have to go to another funeral for a very long time. Not an excuse she'd ever want to use again for a day off school.

She'd invited Gran in for a cup of tea, but her grandmother had refused. Gran said she wanted to get home and change into some dry clothes, but Simone understood the real reason. Gran wanted to be alone.

Impossible in our house, thought Simone, as she checked her watch. Everyone should be home by now. Paula's car stood in the driveway, but not her father's. Why wasn't he home yet? On a big day like today?

He'd told them he planned to leave work early to pick up the letter from the bank finalising the deal on 11 Yardley Street.

The Naidus were out of luck.

Things could only be better if the Freemans moved into the new house on their own. Maybe, one day...

As Simone headed up the drive, a car pulled up behind her. A taxi. Her father got out. He never rode in taxis. That would explain his lateness getting home. His car must have broken down.

Simone turned and ran back to meet him, but he didn't look up. He just kept walking, his head down.

'Dad, what's wrong?' asked Simone as she reached him. He looked like an unmade bed and his suit felt damp. Had *he* been standing out in the rain as well?

His head dropped even further. 'You'd better come inside, Simone.'

Without another word, he walked past her and into the house.

What's going on Simone wondered as she followed him inside.

Everyone mobbed Michael Freeman as he walked through the front door.

'Please tell us we got the loan,' said Holly, waving her arms around. 'Tell us we got it.'

'Yes, we got the loan...,' he began, but cheering drowned out the rest.

Paula hugged Todd and Jaynee. Holly smiled. Logan wrapped his arms around his father's leg.

Simone stood back and watched. In their excitement, the others hadn't noticed something. Her father looked sick. Like a ghost.

Michael held up his hand. 'Let me finish. We did get the loan. But... that's not the only big news. I've lost my job.'

'Oh, no,' said Paula, instantly turning the same colour as her husband.

'Let's go into the lounge,' said Michael. 'Emergency family conference.'

Simone studied her father as he talked. He looked ready to burst into tears. If he squeezed Paula's hand any harder, he'd snap it off.

The takeover rumour was true after all, he explained. And he'd been right about one thing. The new owners did need a good accountant.

'Apparently, I wasn't good enough,' he told them.

The new boss had met him at the factory door when he arrived at work, taken the keys to his company car, and handed him a redundancy cheque and enough cash for a taxi home.

'And it happened this morning?' asked Paula. 'Where have you been all day?'

'Walking around the square,' Michael replied. 'Then when it started to rain, I wondered whether I should go the next step and jump in the fountain and drown myself. I decided it wasn't deep enough.'

'But I don't understand, Dad,' said Simone. 'We got the loan. We can still buy Yardley Street.'

Michael held up the letter, ripped it into shreds and let the pieces flutter to the carpet.

Simone scrambled to pick them up. Her dad had gone crazy. She couldn't let him throw away their loan. A bit of sticky tape would fix it.

'Don't bother, Simone,' he told her. 'The offer's not worth the paper it's written on. I'm unemployed. That means we can't afford the repayments.'

'But Mum's still got her job,' said Todd.

'Just as well,' said Michael. 'Someone's going to have to pay the bills.'

'You'll find another job, Dad,' said Holly.

Her father shook his head. 'I'm 40 years old. In business today, that's ancient. Over the hill.'

'Rubbish,' said Paula. 'I'm not over the hill, and you're only two years older than I am.'

Michael attempted a smile. 'Right now I feel about 150.'

'Didn't you get any redundancy money?' asked Holly.

'It wouldn't buy Zip a new kennel.'

'Well, what about the money from selling *this* house?' asked Simone.

'Most of it's going to pay off *this* mortgage,' he explained.

'But I thought you owned this house,' said Holly.

'Your mother and I did, once,' her father explained, 'but when we got divorced, she took half of everything.'

'Except us kids,' said Simone, quietly.

'Why is life so... complicated?' asked Todd.

Michael shook his head. 'It just is.'

'So where to now?' asked Paula, grabbing Michael's other hand as well. 'This house is already sold. We've got to be out by the end of next week.'

'I've been doing some sums,' Michael explained. 'With a bit of juggling, we can still afford another house...'

'I hope so,' said Holly.

'About the same size as this one,' he added.

Simone's stomach did a flip-flop. By the looks on the faces around the room, hers wasn't the only stomach playing bounce.

'Let's stay calm,' said Paula. 'This isn't the end of the world.'

Maybe not, thought Simone. Not like the end of the world for Mrs Redmond.

But it sure felt like it.

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Ten minutes later, Michael Freeman put down the phone from talking to Mr Ellery. The real estate agent had promised to draw up a list of cheaper properties for them to look at.

Unfortunately, there was no guarantee they'd find one in North Hatchwood.

'Oh, no,' said Todd. 'Not another move. Not another school.'

'I told you,' said Holly. 'I won't leave Green Hill High. I won't.'

'It's not that bad,' said Michael. 'It's only a... sideways move.'

'Rubbish,' said Holly. 'We're going backwards.'

Paula jumped in. 'That's not true, Holly.'

'Don't tell me what's true and what isn't!'

'We have to stick together,' said Paula.

'And live in another shoe box?' asked Holly.

'Your father and I will come up with a solution,' said Paula, looking across at Michael who'd flopped down on the couch.

'That's right,' he said, 'when the numbness wears off and the blood starts pumping to my brain again.'

'Feeling sorry for ourselves is not going to help,' said Paula. 'I need to let off some steam. I'm going to the gym. Anyone want to come with me?'

'Better than sitting around here,' said Todd.

'Jaynee? What about you?'

The youngest Wozinsky lay on the carpet beside the couch holding Zip in a headlock. He'd slobbered all down her jersey, but she didn't seem to notice.

'If we do have to move,' said Jaynee, 'we're not getting rid of Zip.'

'Of course not,' said Simone. 'Zip's a Freeman. He stays.'

'And don't think you're getting rid of Carmen,' said Jaynee, dragging the cat across to make a trio with Zip. Carmen spat at Zip, wriggled free, and scooted out of the room.

'I'm warning you,' said Jaynee. 'If Carmen goes, I go.'

'Don't tempt us,' said Simone.

Paula looked at Holly. 'Want to come to the gym with us?'

'No way,' said Holly. 'I'm staying here to write a poem about what's happened. I'll call it, The Death of a Dream.'

'Very inspiring,' said Michael. 'Go and write it in your room.'

'I haven't got a room. Remember?'

He shook his head and turned to Simone. 'What are you going to do?'

'I might stay home, too,' said Simone, thinking of Mrs Redmond, 'and write my own poem.'

'You can't write poems,' said Holly. 'You're illiterate.'

'It doesn't stop you.'

'Well then keep out of my way,' said Holly.

'It's my house as much as yours!' said Simone.

'Not for much longer!'

'Enough!' said their father. 'I didn't know poetry was a contact sport. Simone, you go to the gym with Paula and Todd.'

Simone saw how serious he was by the way his moustache twitched.

'Okay,' she said, turning to Todd. 'We can have a weightlifting contest.'

Paula groaned. 'Maybe this isn't such a good idea.'

'I'd still rather stay home and write my poem,' said Simone.

Her father pointed to the door. 'Simone, out!'

## Chapter Six

Todd could hear his mother's voice across the crowded gym.

'Put those weights down!'

He'd already put his down. Simone was the one about to pick up a dumbbell.

And she had plenty to choose from. Body-Blasta, one of Keval Naidu's Northmall businesses, boasted the newest and most high-tech gym equipment in Hatchwood.

Simone picked up a weight slightly heavier than the one Todd had used. 'Bet I can lift this one up and down, *two* hundred times.'

Todd saw his mum heading in their direction, but didn't tell Simone.

'Nine, 10,' was as far as Simone got before Paula snatched the weight out of her hand.

'You two are distracting everyone,' she said as sweat dripped from her headband and down onto her leotards. 'Especially me! Wait here.'

Paula disappeared out the back and returned quickly with a five dollar note. She handed it to Todd.

'You and Simone go and buy something at the food bar downstairs. And don't wander away. It'll be dark soon.'

'Your mum's really stressed out,' Simone told Todd a few minutes later as she sipped a chocolate thick shake.

'Worst I've seen her since my Dad died,' said Todd, biting into a cookie.

'And *my* Dad's so depressed,' said Simone, then paused. 'Do you think it will last? This marriage.'

'It might not,' said Todd, 'especially if things get any worse.'

'Would you care?'

'Would you?' he asked.

'I asked you first.'

'I liked things the way they were,' said Todd. 'Before they got married.'

'Me, too,' said Simone. 'I wish we could turn back the clock.'

Todd stared at her in surprise. 'That's my wish, too.'

Simone sucked up the dregs of her shake and tossed the container in the rubbish bin.

'Yardley Street's just around the corner,' she said. 'Let's take a last look.'

'But Mum said to stay here.'

'Don't worry,' said Simone. 'We'll be back before she knows we're gone.'

The light was starting to fade as they walked up the street. Number 11 Yardley Street looked better than ever.

'A neat dream down the gurgler,' Todd said to Simone.

No reply. She'd vanished.

'Simone,' he called into the growing darkness. 'Simone, where are you?'

'Over here.'

She'd pushed through the line of trees and into the front garden of number 13.

'Saying goodbye to Brightside,' she told him. 'It feels different with Mrs Redmond gone.'

Todd could also feel something different. Not very nice. 'Yuck.'

He put his hand up and dragged down the spider's web wrapped around his glasses. By the time he looked back up, Simone had disappeared around the back of the house.

Todd almost lost her in the gloom, but he knew the way. He'd been around the back before. But the property was even more overgrown than he remembered and the grass and hedges needed a major trim.

Simone stood by the back door next to a pile of shrivelled creeper that had grown up the side of the house until she'd pulled it down.

'Did I really fall from way up there?' she asked, looking up at the dark wall looming above her.

'You're lucky you didn't break your neck,' said Todd.

'It's the last ride I want to take in an ambulance. All I could hear was the siren, and....'

Todd put out his hand. 'What's that?'

'You know what a siren is.'

'I thought I heard a car pull up.'

The next sound was closer. The banging of a gate.

'Someone's round the front of the house,' said Todd.

Voices drifted in their direction, carried on the still night air.

'Burglars,' Simone said, dropping to a whisper.

They heard footsteps on the wooden front porch, then a key being turned in a lock.

'Burglars don't have keys,' he told her.

Several downstairs windows lit up. Someone had turned on the house lights.

'Let's go round the front and see,' said Todd. 'But keep quiet.'

'What do you think I'm gonna do?' she whispered back. 'Jump out and yell, boo!'

Todd led the way through the long grass until they crouched beneath the lounge window.

He raised his head slowly and peeked in the window. The furniture in the lounge lay hidden under white sheets. It looked like a convention of comic-book ghosts.

Todd spotted a man and a woman standing in the entrance hall with their backs to him. One of them was Mr Ellery, the real estate agent.

'Who's the woman?' asked Todd.

Simone recognised the charcoal coat and hat. 'Mrs Redmond's daughter, Olive. You

met her at the hospital.'

'She looks different. Older.'

'This'll be about selling the house,' said Simone in disgust. 'The way she feels about Brightside, she'd drive the bulldozer herself.'

'Shush,' said Todd. 'Listen.'

'Why did you wait so long?' Mr Ellery asked Olive Redmond. 'Why didn't you put the house on the market when your mother first went into hospital?'

'She wouldn't sign the papers,' Olive replied.

'This is such a rush.'

'For both of us,' she told him. 'I need the money for a business deal I'm working on.'

'When do you need it by?'

'Early next week,' said Olive. 'I'll take the best offer I get by seven o'clock Sunday night.'

'But it's Thursday already,' said Mr Ellery. 'And the Herald strike could last another week. We can't advertise.'

'Then put up a sign outside,' said Olive, snapping out the words. 'This is a good bit of land. People will fall over themselves to make an offer.'

Mr Ellery waved his arms at the sheets. 'What about the furniture?'

'Include it in the price.'

'There's nothing you want to keep?' asked the agent.

'Everything here reminds me of my childhood,' said Olive. 'I hated this house.'

'Doesn't Brightside have *any* happy memories?'

'None that I can remember,' said Olive.

Todd didn't hear any more because Mr Ellery and Olive Redmond turned and walked back into the hall.

In the next few minutes, the lights went out and Todd heard the visitors' footsteps retreat up the path.

There was a bang as the gate shut. Then more banging.

Finally, the car started up and drove away.

Todd beat Simone to the ancient gate and threw it open.

The flickering streetlight gave enough light to see the object nailed to the gate. A "For Sale" sign.

'Holly got the title wrong,' said Simone. 'Her poem should be, Death of *two* dreams. Ours, and Mrs Redmond's.'

'I wonder who'll buy it?' asked Todd.

'Someone who won't appreciate it.'

'Maybe Mr Naidu wants it,' said Todd.

'Why?' said Simone. 'So they can knock it down and build a tennis court?'

'It's too good to be knocked down,' said Todd. 'We could use a house like this.'

Simone stared at him. 'Then why don't we buy it?'

Todd stared back. 'What with? Monopoly money?'

'We've got real money for a cheaper house,' said Simone. 'And Brightside's got to be heaps cheaper than number 11.'

'At least it would be big enough,' said Todd, then froze.

Buying Brightside could make things better again for the new family. His mum and Simone's dad might stay together. Then things would never go back to the way they were!

'What's wrong?' Simone asked him.

He told her.

'But what if we don't tell them about Brightside?' she asked. 'And Dad and Paula stay together anyway? We could end up in another poky little house.'

'Yeah,' said Todd. 'Maybe seven of us crammed into only *two* bedrooms.'

'Worse than that.'

'What could be worse than that?'

'No bathroom,' said Simone.

'Not even one?'

She shook her head. 'The shower would be an old oil drum strung up in a tree with holes in the bottom.'

'What about the loo?'

'A hole at the bottom of the garden. Logan would dig a trench running up and down.'

'People don't live like that in Hatchwood,' said Todd.

'And we don't want to be the first.'

'Urgent family conference,' said Todd. 'You vote for your family, I'll vote for mine.'

Question. Do we tell Mum and your dad about Brightside?'

Simone shot up both hands. So did Todd.

'I think that means yes,' said Todd.

## Chapter Seven

Simone watched as her father put down the phone.

'We'll meet Mr Ellery at Brightside in 20 minutes.'

Paula turned to Todd and Simone. 'Sorry I yelled at you two when you got back to the gym. It was getting dark and I was worried.'

They'd gathered for the second family conference in a few hours. This time most of them managed to smile. But not Holly.

'What sort of time is this to go house hunting?' she asked. 'I've still got a pile of homework to do.'

'If we don't buy Brightside,' said Simone, 'you'll be doing your homework under the stars.'

'Okay,' said Holly, 'but I bags first choice of bedrooms.'

'Does everyone have to come?' asked Michael.

'This affects all of us,' said Paula, 'so we should all be there.'

'What about Gran?' asked Simone. 'Does she get a vote?'

'No,' said Michael. 'She wouldn't want one.'

'But we'll need her mini,' said Simone.

'I forgot,' said Michael. 'Seven people and only Paula's car.'

'We've coped with worse,' said Paula. 'We can make two trips. I'll shuttle everybody across.'

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'I thought the sign on the gate would work,' said Mr Ellery, 'but not this fast.'

'We were in the neighbourhood,' said Simone.

'That was lucky.'

'It's our lucky day,' said Simone. 'Starting now.'

'Well, I hope you do better with this house,' said Mr Ellery, as he pocketed the offer-to-buy Michael and Paula had just signed. 'What'll you build here?'

'We're not going to build anything,' said Todd. 'We're going to live in this house.'

The agent shook his head. 'Rather you than me.'

'That's what we had in mind,' said Simone.

'And you want all this stuff?' asked Mr Ellery, waving his arm around, pointing at the white sheets.

'Everything,' said Michael.

'What we don't recycle, we'll give to the City Mission,' said Simone.

'So you can buy it again,' said her father.

On the floor above, Holly and Jaynee chased Logan in and out of the bedrooms with a

great crashing of doors.

'These old houses were built to last,' said Michael.

'I hope so,' said Paula. 'Otherwise our mob will turn this one into firewood.'

The agent pulled out a bunch of keys. 'Before they do, maybe you can round them up.'

Out on the footpath, the agent pointed to Paula's car. 'How did you all fit in that?'

'Holly rides in the boot,' said Simone.

Mr Ellery blinked, then turned back to Michael and Paula.

'I know how much you want this house,' he told them, 'especially after what happened with next door. But please don't get your hopes up too high. I'm expecting a lot of offers before Sunday and Olive Redmond will take the best one.'

Simone felt her stomach sink. They could still lose out.

'We understand,' said Paula. 'We'll just have to cross our fingers a bit harder.'

But finger crossing doesn't work, thought Simone. Or toe crossing, or paw crossing. They'd done that when they bought number 11 and they'd still lost it. This time they might have to do something more drastic. But what?

'I'll call you at seven o'clock on Sunday night,' said the agent, getting into his car. 'To tell you the truth, I'm looking forward to getting home and putting my feet up. It's been a long day.'

'Not as long as ours,' said Simone.

## Chapter Eight

Simone looked at her clock. After midnight. No chance of sleep in the upper bunk with Holly tossing and turning and crashing around. Worse than being on the top deck of an ocean liner in a storm.

Through the wall, Simone could hear Logan's asthmatic breathing. Todd probably wasn't getting much sleep either.

They had to get Brightside. Everyone would go crazy if they didn't. Which meant doing something to make sure it happened.

Simone slipped off the top bunk, pulled on her dressing gown, and headed for the kitchen. As she dragged a bottle of milk from the fridge and poured herself a glass, Todd padded in behind her and slumped down at the table.

'Want one of these?' she asked.

'The milk or the dressing gown?'

'This is a one off,' she said, fingering the gown.

'Sure,' said Todd. 'Off a distant planet. You'd be an easy target for alien death-rays.'

Simone lowered her voice. 'Quiet, or you'll wake the whole house.'

'They're lucky. Try sleeping next to a hissing steam train.'

'You try sleeping above an out-of-control roller coaster.'

Todd nodded. 'We need Mrs Redmond's house.'

'If we don't get it,' said Simone, 'we'll all go nuts!'

Todd nodded. 'And start shopping at the City Mission.'

Simone took a sip of her milk. 'If ours was the only offer on Brightside, we wouldn't have a problem.'

'That'll only happen if no one else sees the sign.'

Simone took another sip. 'What if the "For Sale" sign fell off the gate?'

'It can't fall off. It's nailed on.'

'I'm allowed to dream, aren't I? What if the sign not only fell off, but *disappeared*?'

Todd's eyes widened behind his glasses.

'I know where Dad keeps his hammer,' said Simone.

'And you want me to go with you?'

'I'd do it myself,' said Simone, 'but it might need four hands.'

'But Mum will...'

'Do you want to share a bedroom with Logan *and* Holly?'

Todd paused. 'A crowbar might be better. When?'

'Now.'

'But it's pitch black out there.'

Simone snorted. 'We can't pinch the sign in daylight. Someone would see us.'

'Mum will really blow her top if she finds out.'

'So will Dad,' said Simone. 'We won't tell them.'

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Simone felt like they were the only people on the planet as she and Todd cycled towards Brightside. Almost every house was in darkness. Only Northmall shopping centre shone brightly, lit up by a row of security lights around the walls.

'It looks like something from an old science fiction movie I saw,' said Todd. 'Where the aliens kidnapped everyone on earth... in alphabetical order. The F's went on the first day.'

'The remake was better,' said Simone.

'I've never seen any remake.'

'It was great,' said Simone. 'The aliens were dyslexic. They started with the W's.'

Yardley Street felt as dark as any street they'd cycled down. Darker, because the streetlight outside number 13 had finally blown, leaving the front gate in shadow.

'This really is our lucky day,' said Simone as they parked their bikes.

'We're due for one,' said Todd, placing the crowbar behind the sign and giving it a tug. It didn't move.

'I knew it would take two of us,' said Simone.

She threw her weight behind the bar, but it still wouldn't move. Up the street, a dog barked a couple of times, then stopped.

'Again,' said Simone. 'Ready, steady... heave!'

Nothing, except more noise than they wanted to make.

The dog barked again. This time it took longer to stop.

'What did Mr Ellery stick this sign on with?' asked Simone. 'Zip slobber?'

'Pull,' said Todd.

This time some of the nails actually moved a bit with a high pitched squeal.

The dog started up again and this time didn't stop.

'Quick,' said Simone. 'We're going to get caught if we hang around here much longer.'

A few houses along, a light came on and a man's voice said, 'Shut up, Rover.'

The dog kept barking.

'What is it?' asked a woman's voice.

'Something's spooking Rover,' the man replied. 'I'll get a torch and have a look.'

Simone and Todd threw themselves at the crowbar and heaved with all their strength. Slowly, the sign pulled away from the gate with more screeching and squealing.

Finally, with a last heave, it came away with a rush, sending them sprawling on the footpath.

Simone bounced to her feet.

'Come on, Rover,' she heard the man call. 'Show me what you're barking at.'

Todd snatched up the crowbar as Simone grabbed the sign. Within seconds, they were cycling up Yardley Street at full pedal.

As she turned the corner out of the street, Simone looked back and saw the beam of a torch outside number 13. Even though she wasn't counting on luck anymore, she still cycled with crossed fingers and toes.

Nothing could go wrong now they had the sign. By Sunday night, Brightside would be theirs.

She gripped the sign slung over her handlebars and pedalled faster.

## Chapter Nine

'What time is it?' Todd asked his mother, only half watching the Sunday night wildlife special on television.

Why was the evening dragging along so slowly? Would it ever be seven o'clock?

'Five to seven,' said Paula. 'Exactly one minute later than the last time you asked. What's wrong with your own watch?'

'I think it's running slow.'

'That zebra's not running slow,' said Simone, pointing at the screen. The black and white striped creature was running the race of its life. Unfortunately for the zebra, the lion chasing it was also setting a personal-best time.

'Go, zebra, go,' yelled Jaynee. 'You can do it.'

'This is more than a simple chase,' said Holly.

'Is it?' asked Simone.

'Of course,' said Holly. 'This is a more primitive version of our own drama.'

'Writers are weird,' said Simone.

'Can't you see it?' asked Holly. 'The zebra represents us chasing the house, but the lion is another buyer with a bigger bid.'

'He's got bigger teeth as well,' said Simone.

Paula nodded. 'That's an interesting idea, Holly.'

'It's my writer's eye,' said Holly.

'I thought that was your nose,' said Simone.

'Quiet, you two,' said their father. 'I'm cheering for the zebra.'

'Into the home straight,' said Simone, launching into a sports commentator's voice, 'and it's the zebra in the lead. But the lion's catching up. It's neck and neck. Stride for stride. It's the zebra, no the lion. The zebra, no the lion. The zebra...'

She stopped. 'There's been a foul. The lion has tripped the zebra. Sin bin for sure. Maybe a sending off. The zebra seems to be unconscious. The lion's trying to revive him with mouth-to-mouth ... No, he's not. He's eating him!'

'Yuck,' said Jaynee. 'That's disgusting.'

'I guess there are no vegetarian lions,' said Simone.

'This could be a bad omen,' said Holly.

'Why can't you write happy stories?' Todd asked Holly. 'With happy endings.'

'Only fairy tales have happy endings.'

Paula hit the off button on the TV remote. 'Nothing wrong with fairy tales. Like the beautiful princess who kisses the ugly frog...'

'I know that one,' said Jaynee.

‘Doesn’t the princess marry the frog?’ asked Simone, ‘and bring her kids with her, and they all live in a castle with one bathroom?’

Paula laughed, but Michael looked grim.

‘I like castles,’ said Logan.

‘You like the moats,’ said Simone. ‘Lots of water.’

Paula looked at Michael. ‘Cheer up. Expect the best and you’ll often get it.’

‘I hope we do,’ he replied. ‘Get the castle... I mean house.’

‘It’s seven o’clock!’ said Todd.

At that moment, the phone rang. And rang again. Then a third time.

‘Answer it someone!’ yelled Michael.

‘You said *you* wanted to answer it,’ said Paula.

‘He’s scared it’s the lion,’ said Simone, getting there first.

She listened for a few seconds, then covered the mouthpiece with her hand.

‘It *is* a lion,’ she hissed at them, then took her hand away. ‘No, Gran, they just wondered who it was.’

Around the room, everyone let out their breath at the same moment.

‘No, Gran,’ said Simone. ‘No news yet. We’re still waiting. Sure. We’d love to try your new recipe. Really? All in the same cake?’

‘Tell your grandmother we’ll ring her back,’ said Michael.

‘Gotta go,’ said Simone, but as she replaced the receiver the phone rang again.

‘It’s got to be the agent this time,’ said Michael, jumping up. ‘I’ll take it.’

He snatched the receiver and listened for a few seconds, then started to smile. ‘This sounds too good to be true.’

‘Yes, yes, yes!’ said Paula, bouncing up and down on the couch, clapping her hands. ‘We got it.’

Michael’s smile faded and he held up his hand for silence. ‘What do you mean? Are you saying there’s a catch? Well, what would you call it?’

‘I knew it,’ Holly whispered to Simone. ‘Catches are related to hitches. The omens are getting worse by the minute.’

Her father was now as angry as Simone had seen him since the wedding day when she’d almost ruined the ceremony.

‘And if you dare ring back,’ he told the person on the other end of the phone, ‘I’ll... I’ll...’ and he slammed down the phone.

‘What on earth did Mr Ellery say to you?’ asked Paula.

‘Mr Ellery?’

‘Wasn’t that him?’

'No, some bloke telling me I'd won a tropical island holiday.'

'Can we go with you?' asked Simone.

'No one's going. To get the holiday, I had to buy a car.'

The phone rang again, and Michael snatched it up. 'Listen, you can take your car, and... Oh, hello, Mr Ellery, we've been waiting for your call.'

Simone glanced at Todd. The winning post was in sight.

'Our bid was the highest,' said Michael Freeman. 'That's wonderful, that's...'

Before the cheering could build, his face fell. 'I see. Very well, we'll see you in a few minutes.'

'Bad news,' he told them as he put down the phone. 'Mrs Redmond's daughter doesn't want to accept our bid.'

'But that was the deal,' said Simone. 'She can't change her mind now.'

'She can and she will,' said Michael. 'Unless she gets an answer to her question.'

'What question?' asked Paula.

'Why no one else made an offer!'

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'Mum will kill me this time, for sure,' said Todd as they cycled through the dark.

'It's all my fault,' said Simone. 'Taking the sign was my dumb idea.'

As well as balancing the sign, Simone had her schoolbag slung over her shoulders. She had two things to put right, and this was as good a time as any.

'We're both in this mess,' said Todd. 'Up to our necks.'

'Over our heads,' said Simone. 'But if we can get the sign back on the gate before Olive Redmond discovers it's missing...'

'We'll still lose Brightside,' said Todd.

'But maybe stay out of jail.'

'Unless we're caught doing it,' said Todd.

'Stop trying to cheer me up!'

They'd slipped out of the house before Mr Ellery arrived. Simone didn't have a clue what excuse they could use for disappearing, but they'd worry about that later.

It was dark as they pulled up next to Brightside's front gate. At least the streetlight hadn't been fixed. They might get away with it.

While Todd had his back turned, parking his bike, Simone slipped something out of her backpack and wedged it in Brightside's letterbox.

'You hold the sign,' said Todd walking back, waving the hammer.

'Not with your four eyes,' she replied, handing him the sign and snatching the hammer. 'You hold and I'll nail.'

As she raised the hammer, Simone heard a growling sound.

'Shut up, Todd. We've got to keep the noise down.'

'That's not me,' he told her, his voice dropping to a whisper. 'I think it's a...

The growl got louder. A man's voice said, 'That's them, alright!'

Simone and Todd spun around together. A man holding a dog on a leash stood in the shadows.

'No doubt about it,' he said to the person with him. 'These were the kids who got Rover barking the other night, then rode off before I could catch them.'

'Thanks for your help,' said Olive Redmond, stepping out of the darkness.

'I hope they aren't moving in,' said the man as he tugged Rover's collar and headed back up the street. 'Delinquents like that could drag down the whole neighbourhood.'

Simone still held the hammer and Todd still held the sign.

'Want us to nail it back?' Simone asked Olive. 'It's the least we can do.'

'You must really want this house,' said Olive. 'Why?'

Simone started to tell her, and everything tumbled out. About the new family, the need for a bigger house, meeting Mrs Redmond, becoming her friend. The sadness, and the laughter.

'She had a great chuckle,' said Simone.

'We didn't laugh much,' said Olive, anger in her voice. 'Not after my father died.'

'I know how you feel,' said Todd.

Olive frowned. 'How could you?'

'Because *my* Dad died three years ago!'

'I'm sorry,' said Olive. 'I didn't realise...'

'We didn't laugh for a long time,' said Todd.

'But they do now,' said Simone. 'Living with us Freemans is a laugh-a-minute, isn't it, Todd? Especially in our little house.'

'We could fill Brightside,' said Todd.

'Better than putting a bulldozer through it,' said Simone.

'Maybe,' said Olive, 'but it's worth a lot more than you offered.'

'That's all we've got,' said Simone. 'All we can afford.'

'I'm sorry,' said Olive Redmond. 'Brightside's going back on the market tomorrow.'

'What are you going to do with us?' asked Todd.

'Call the police?' asked Simone.

Olive paused. 'You kids helped my mother when she had her fall. I'll return the favour. Go home and forget about the sign and I'll do the same.'

Simone picked up her bike and looked at Brightside for the last time.

'Sorry, Mrs Redmond,' she muttered under her breath. 'We tried.'

## Chapter Ten

'Olive Redmond might not throw you in jail,' said Simone's father, 'but I'm still thinking about it. And I haven't asked Mr Ellery what he'd like to do with you.'

Simone bowed her head. She deserved this and she knew it.

'I'm disappointed, Todd,' said Paula. 'I've raised you and Jaynee to tell the truth.'

'I *a/ways* tell the truth,' said Jaynee, helping Logan with a puzzle.

'This is the truth,' Todd told his mother. 'I'm sorry, okay? We were just trying to get us a bigger house.'

'And save Brightside,' added Simone.

There was a knock at the door.

'Probably the police,' said Holly. 'You'll soon be straining prison porridge through those braces, little sister.'

'Stop that, Holly, and answer the door,' said her father.

'One down,' Holly called back over her shoulder as she left the room. 'If I can persuade the police to take Jaynee as well, I'll finally have my own room. There's no other way I'm going to get one.'

'Mu-um,' said Jaynee.

'Hush, Jaynee,' said her mother.

A few seconds later Holly came back - with a visitor.

Olive Redmond introduced herself to Michael and Paula.

'I'm sorry about your mum,' said Michael. 'She and my mother were really good friends.'

Olive nodded, but didn't reply.

Simone glanced at Todd and caught his eye. What was going on? Then Simone saw the package in Olive's hand.

'Someone left this at the house,' said Olive, holding it up. 'My name's on the front, but they didn't leave their name.'

Simone took a deep breath. With the trouble she was in, a bit more wouldn't matter.

'It was me,' she told Olive.

'What's all this about?' asked her father, glaring at her.

'I'm not sure,' said Olive, pulling off the wrapping paper to reveal a teddy bear with one eye.

Simone shrugged. 'Your mum gave it to me. She wanted me to have it, but I knew I couldn't keep it.'

'Why not?'

'A teddy bear always belongs to its first owner.'

Olive paused. 'Do you still want to buy Brightside?'

In the stunned silence that followed, Simone heard her heart pounding in her chest.

'We didn't have enough money before,' she told Olive. 'And we still haven't got it.'

Michael came out of his daze. 'Simone's right, we can't afford another cent.'

'What you've already offered *might* be enough,' said Olive. 'But only if you can get the money in a hurry.'

Michael almost jumped. 'How about... tomorrow night?'

'Make it midday.'

'Midday it is,' said Paula. 'After what we've been through, it'll be a breeze.'

As they walked to the door Todd asked Olive, 'Why did you change your mind?'

'Todd,' said Paula, 'don't be noseey.'

'It's alright,' said Olive. 'I need the money to swing a big business deal. If I don't move quickly, I could miss out.'

'I feel bad about this,' said Michael. 'The way Simone and Todd tried to stop you selling the house to someone else.'

'Don't worry about it,' said Olive, holding up the teddy. 'Seeing this again brought back a few memories. Good memories I'd forgotten about. They're worth more than a few extra dollars.'

The others went back inside, but Simone and Todd stayed on the front steps and watched their visitor depart.

When Olive reached her car, she turned and called back. 'I think Mum would be pleased the way things have turned out.'

As she drove off, Simone thought she heard another sound. 'What's that?' she asked Todd.

'A Toyota.'

'No, listen!'

'I can't hear anything,' said Todd.

Nor could Simone. Not anymore. But she had heard *something*. Was it in the air or only in her head? It didn't matter. No one had a chuckle like old Mrs Redmond.

'Let's go back inside,' said Todd. 'And plan the move to Brightside.'

'Sure,' said Simone. 'But us Freemans get first choice of bedrooms. You Wozinskys take what's left.'

'Says who?'

'Says me!'

Michael popped his head out the front door. 'Simone, keep your voice down. You'll wake up the neighbourhood.'

'You, too, Todd,' said Paula from inside.

'But Dad...' Simone began.

As Michael shepherded them inside, he said, 'At least there'll be one big advantage moving to Brightside.'

'What's that?' asked Todd.

'No excuse for you kids to keep bickering and fighting.'

Simone grinned. 'Wanna bet?'

The End