

T O M B R A D L E Y



FATHER DAZE

The Brightside Bunch



FREE ebook - Book 5 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

(Fifth book in the series)

The Wozinsky-Freeman family is having a bad week. Four year old Logan has mumps. And there's a sheep-killing dog on the loose, possibly the dog hiding in their shed.

And how will the newly blended family handle Father's Day? Simone wants to give her father breakfast in bed. Todd just wants to visit his dead father's grave.

It's time for everyone to work together to find some solutions.

Chapter One

Simone Freeman burst out the gates of Claxton Road Primary School, the clang of the last bell ringing in her ears as she sprinted up the road.

'Wait for me,' yelled Todd Wozinsky, racing after her.

Simone stopped and waited impatiently for him to catch up.

'I can't hang about all day,' she told him. 'I want to get home and check on Logan.'

Her little brother had looked miserable that morning at breakfast. The longest face Simone had seen since their dog got Holly's slipper stuck in his teeth.

That had led to a frantic chase all over the house with Holly screaming and Zip trying to shake loose his extra tongue with thunderous growls and buckets of slobber.

It was a toss-up who looked the silliest.

Now, as the mid-afternoon sun beat down, heating the pavement, Simone tapped one multi-coloured sneaker toe up and down impatiently.

'I suppose we have to wait for the little moaner as well,' she said.

She meant Todd's eight year old sister, Jaynee.

'Jaynee likes walking home with us,' he said.

'I'll give your sister till the count of 10,' said Simone, 'then I'm out of here. One, two... nine, 10!'

'Wait,' said Todd as he turned back to the school gates. 'She's probably stayed back to help the teacher.'

'Yuck,' said Simone in disgust. 'There's only one thing worse than a moaner and that's a teacher's pet. I'm not waiting any longer. See ya!'

With the squeal of sneaker soles, Simone took off up the road, past school friends, waving, but not stopping to talk.

She ran fast enough to make her puff, but the breeze racing across her closely cropped head kept her cool. As she ran, she reminded herself of the important event coming up.

Father's Day was less than a week away. Only a few days left to sort out a present and plan how to celebrate. Of course Holly would want to do things *her* way.

I wonder if I'll be like Holly when I'm 14? Simone wondered. She crossed her fingers and hoped not.

Mind you, crossing her fingers and wishing didn't always work. It hadn't stopped her father marrying Todd and Jaynee's mother, Paula. But it *had* worked when the new blended family needed a bigger house.

Now Brightside would see its first Father's Day. Simone had no idea how the Wozinskys would spend the day. How *could* they celebrate? Todd and Jaynee's father was dead.

Simone kept running towards Yardley Street, smelling the Hatchwood smells she'd

grown up with. The town's trees. Newly mown grass. The salty tang of the nearby ocean.

And something else. The pong of burning rubber and hot paint!

Simone stopped and glanced down. Her sneakers! They'd been white and boring when she bought them from the City Mission, but she'd solved that with a bucket of dye and a paintbrush.

She'd struggled hard to get them looking like this. By the smell of it, the sneakers were fighting back.

As Simone started running again, she kept glancing down, hoping the soles wouldn't come off.

Heading into Yardley Street, Simone spotted a car parked outside her house. Who could that be? Not Paula. As a high school teacher, Paula didn't get home till later.

Couldn't be her father. He didn't have a car. That had gone when he lost his job at Hatchwood Fisheries.

Simone sprinted for the front gate, flashed past the Naidu's house and screeched to a rubber-wrenching halt outside number 13.

Her sneakers weren't the only things buried under layers of peeling paint. So was the name of their new-but-old house, Brightside, carved into their front gate.

Simone flung the gate open, dashed up the cracked concrete path, up the front steps, into the hall, then took the inside stairs two at a time.

From the top landing, she heard two voices coming from Logan's room but only recognised one of them. She pushed the door open and walked in.

Her four year old brother sat propped up in bed, a thermometer sticking out of his mouth and a strained look in his big brown eyes. His little face looked like a balloon about to burst.

'Simone, this is Dr Kennedy,' said her father.

'Hello, Simone,' said the doctor as he pulled a stethoscope from his bag and lifted Logan's pyjama top.

This is like watching Holly trying to catch Zip, thought Simone as the doctor struggled to listen to her brother's heartbeat while Logan wriggled around in the bed.

'Logan, sit still,' said his father. 'And don't you dare touch that thermometer.'

'Weeve, Daddy,' said the little boy in a muffled voice.

Sounds like he's chewing a sheet as well as that thermometer, thought Simone.

'Almost finished, Logan,' said the doctor, as the stethoscope bounced around the tiny chest.

'Weeve, Daddy, weeve!' said Logan again, sounding as if he's stuffed the duvet into his mouth as well.

Simone's father turned to her. 'What does "Weeve" mean?'

'Dad, it's what Logan says when his mouth's as full as his bladder.'

'He needs to go weez,' said Michael Freeman, shouldering the doctor aside. Grabbing Logan's hand he propelled him towards the door. 'The human fountain strikes again.'

'Is he that bad?' asked a surprised Dr Kennedy.

Simone nodded. 'Logan's last doctor wore a wet suit.'

Five minutes later, with Logan tucked back safely in bed, Simone walked down the stairs with her dad and the doctor.

'Mumps, all right,' said Dr Kennedy. 'With a temperature to match.'

'He's not the only one burning up,' said Michael Freeman, looking down at Simone's sneakers. 'They smell like old tyres.'

Simone noticed one sneaker sole starting to come away from the uppers. 'Nothing a retread won't fix.'

Simone turned to the doctor. 'How long will Logan look like a bullfrog?'

'Most kids with mumps look like that for a while,' he explained.

Simone frowned. 'Logan looks like our big sister.'

'Your sister's got the mumps?' asked Dr Kennedy.

'No, Holly's just got a frog face.'

'Simone, stop that,' said her father.

The doctor laughed. 'I understand. I have two daughters of my own.'

'Do they fight all the time?' asked Michael.

'Day and night,' said Dr Kennedy. 'Enough to make your blood curdle.'

'That makes me feel a lot better,' said Simone's father stroking his moustache. 'I think.'

'How long will Logan have to stay in bed?' asked Simone.

'He'll be feeling sick for a few days,' the doctor replied. 'Don't you remember, Simone?' her father asked. 'You've had the mumps.'

'But, Dad, that was ages ago.'

'You and Holly got them at the same time,' said her father. 'The house was very peaceful for a few days.'

'I think I remember,' said Simone. 'Mum fed us buckets of jelly and ice cream.' She turned to the doctor. 'My mum doesn't live here anymore.'

In fact, I don't know *where* she lives these days, thought Simone. No one does.

The doctor looked at Simone's father. 'I assume you've had the mumps.'

'Probably,' said Michael. 'Doesn't every kid growing up?'

'That's the best time to get them,' said the doctor. 'It can be very painful for adult males. Who else lives in the house?'

'Half of Hatchwood,' said Simone.

'They do not,' said her father.

'It feels like it sometimes.'

'There are eight of us,' Michael told the doctor. 'Four Freemans and four Wozinskys.'

'Four too many,' said Simone under her breath. 'Guess which four.'

As the doctor reached the front door, he turned to Simone's father. 'Try to keep Logan away from everyone who hasn't had mumps.'

'And there's nothing else we can do for him?' asked Simone.

'Rest, the occasional aspirin... and plenty of fluids,' Dr Kennedy added with a grin.

Means we'd better keep a bucket by Logan's bed, thought Simone. Unless we rigged up something with the garden hose.

As the doctor left, Simone's father headed back to his downstairs office where he ran his new accounting business.

Simone walked across the hall into the kitchen and hunted through the fridge for a snack. All that running had made her stomach rumble.

She found some leftover mince pie and, as she transferred a slice to a plate, glanced up at the clock on the wall.

A few moments of peace and quiet. Hard to find at Brightside. Todd and Jaynee wouldn't be home for another few minutes. Holly would catch a lift home from high school later with Paula.

As Simone bit into the chilled pastry, she felt a wet nose press against the bare leg showing below her rolled up trousers.

'G'day, Zip, you great lunk. Another frantic day of sleeping and slipper-slobbering?'

The Freeman's dog dropped his head and sniffed her sneakers.

'Get off,' said Simone, leaning down and pushing his nose away. 'Chew these and your teeth will dissolve. They're so toxic, a good sniff could turn you into a mutant monster.'

Carmen, the Wozinskys cat, waddled into the kitchen and looked around.

'Talking of mutant monsters...' said Simone.

Carmen stared at Zip through half-shut eyes.

'Don't let that fat feline scare you,' Simone told Zip as he cowered under her chair. 'We'll get rid of her when we throw out the rest of the invaders.'

Simone heard voices coming up the path to the back door. Goodbye peace and quiet.

'Talking of invaders...' she said.

Eight year old Jaynee Wozinsky bounced into the kitchen, her long blonde pony-tail waving behind her. She ignored Simone and headed straight for Carmen.

'Hello, lovely pussy,' said Jaynee, dropping to her knees and throwing her arms around Carmen's neck. 'Have you missed me?'

'Don't answer that, Carmen,' said Simone. 'It could be used in evidence against you.'

Jaynee poked out her tongue at Simone before turning her attention to Zip.

'Run, Zip,' said Simone. 'One kiss from those lips and your ears will drop off.'

Jaynee grabbed Zip and planted a wet one on his nose before jumping to her feet.

'Where's Digby?' she asked Simone.

Simone pretended to check her pockets. 'Fluffbucket was here a minute ago.'

'My kitten's name is *Digby*,' said Jaynee in disgust. 'I hope I have more brains than you when I'm 10.'

'I hope I'm not around to see it,' said Simone.

Jaynee turned away and headed for the fridge. 'What's to eat?'

'Bread and water,' said Simone.

'What's that you've got?' asked Jaynee.

'Leftover pie,' said Simone, holding it out towards her. 'Want some?'

Jaynee scowled. 'Is that what I think it is?'

'I can't read your mind,' said Simone.

'I'm right,' said Jaynee. 'Yuck, you *meat*-eater!'

'But it tastes scrummy,' said Simone, jumping up from the table as Jaynee backpedalled. 'Have a bite.'

Jaynee squealed, ducked under Simone's outstretched arm and sprinted for the kitchen door where she almost collided with her big brother.

'To-od, Simone's being gross.'

'She always dresses like that,' said Todd, throwing down his school backpack.

With one eye on Jaynee, Simone asked, 'Todd, want a piece of dead-cow pie?'

Keeping her brother as a barrier between her and Simone, Jaynee grabbed a biscuit from the pantry and sprinted from the room.

'You wait until Mum gets home, Simone,' she called back over her shoulder. 'You'll be in big trouble.'

'Trouble's my middle name,' Simone called back, helping herself to a glass of milk.

'I'm going to find something to watch on TV before your mother gets home,' she told Todd, digging the morning paper out of the recycle bin in the corner.

She tossed the paper on the table and with one hand flicked through, looking for the entertainment page. The whole paper overflowed with ads for Father's Day gift ideas. That reminded her. She must talk with Holly as soon as big sister got home.

'That guy with the funny suit is on,' said Simone, looking up from the TV section.

'Superman?' said Todd.

'Who else would wear their underpants outside their tights?' asked Simone.

'You would.'

'True,' said Simone. 'But only after I'd given them the sneaker treatment. That's a thought. I wonder if...'

She stopped as Todd turn away, snatched off his glasses, and start polishing them. Any harder, thought Simone, and the frames will melt.

'You go and watch whatever you want to,' he told her, still with his back turned.

Why did his voice sound strange? Simone shrugged. They might both be 10, but they were from different planets.

With Zip tagging along behind, Simone headed for the family room at the front of the house. She thought about the gift suggestions she'd seen in the paper. What could she and Holly buy their dad for Father's Day?

Being as broke as they were, not much!

Chapter Two

As Simone disappeared out of the kitchen, Todd slumped down in a chair. Slowly he slid his glasses back onto his nose and flicked his blonde fringe out of his eyes.

The paper sat open where Simone had left it.

“BUY YOUR FATHER THIS” one newspaper advertisement screamed in big letters. “GIVE YOUR DAD ONE OF THESE” said another. A third said, “MAKE HIS DAY SPECIAL WITH...”

Todd’s stomach hurt so much he almost groaned. His dad was dead!

Jumping up, Todd scrunched the newspaper into a ball and hurled it across the kitchen, just missing Carmen who jumped out of the way and took off as fast as her overstuffed legs could carry her.

‘Todd Wozinsky!’ said his mother striding into the kitchen. ‘This kitchen is not a basketball court. Pick up that paper and put it back in the recycle bin.’

Todd started to argue, but something in his mother’s voice told him not to. Then he realised why she sounded so tense as Holly Freeman burst into the kitchen waving her arms around.

‘I can’t wait until I’m old enough to leave this dumb place,’ Holly roared, heading for the fridge.

‘All I said, Holly...’ Paula began.

‘I know what you said,’ Holly snapped. ‘You’re not my mother so stop trying to boss me around!’

With a face like stone, Holly snatched the remnants of the mince pie, a big bottle of Coke, and a new packet of chocolate biscuits before heading for her bedroom across the hall.

‘Holly,’ said Paula, ‘if you eat all that you’ll...’

Bang! went Holly’s door.

‘That girl,’ said Todd’s mother, making a wringing motion with her hands. ‘I know you and Jaynee will be teenagers one day, Todd, but promise me you won’t behave like that.’

At any other time, Todd might have cracked a joke, but not now. He wasn’t in the mood for laughs. It must have showed on his face.

‘Spit it out, Todd,’ said his mother, dropping into the chair beside him. ‘What’s on your mind?’

‘Nothing,’ said Todd, wanting to tell her, but not sure how.

‘You must have had a day like mine,’ said his mum. ‘I should go for a run, but I’m too pooped.’

For his mother to admit that, she must be exhausted. Todd knew his problems would

just add to her worries, but this concerned her as well. Even if some people called her Mrs Freeman, she was still a Wozinsky. Like his dad.

Before Todd could open his mouth to explain, his mother started up again.

'You wouldn't believe the pile of English papers I've got to mark before Monday. I'm going to have to work every night. And, as for this weekend...'

'It's Father's Day!' said Todd.

His mother looked at him for several seconds before she replied. 'Todd, while I make us a drink, why don't you go and find Jaynee? She should be in on this.'

A few minutes later, Todd sat at the kitchen table nestling a steaming brew in his hands while Jaynee sat beside him stroking her kitten.

'Nice, pussy,' she told the little bundle of fur. 'My little Digby. Don't you answer when that stupid girl calls you Fluffbucket.'

'Stop babbling,' said Todd, getting angry with his sister. 'This is more important than your silly animals.'

'Mu-um...'

'This *is* more important, Jaynee.'

'But, Mu-um...'

'Sunday is Father's Day,' said her mother, quietly.

Jaynee stopped stroking the kitten. 'Oh, I forgot.'

'How could you forget?' Todd snapped.

'I didn't mean I *really* forgot,' said Jaynee.

'I know what you mean,' said her mother. 'We all get busy with other things.'

'Why did we have to lose our dad?' asked Todd.

'I can't answer that,' his mother replied. 'But you're luckier than some children.'

'Stepfathers don't count!' said Todd.

His mother sighed. 'I was just going to say... Oh, never mind. Just remember, Father's Day can be a tough time of year for a lot of families.'

'Not for the Freemans,' said Todd. 'They've still got their father.'

His mum raised her eyebrows. 'How do you think they'll feel on *Mother's Day*?'

'The Freemans didn't really lose their mother,' said Jaynee, stoking Digby again. 'She ran away!'

'And they might see her again one day,' added Todd. 'Being somewhere else is not the same as being dead!'

Three years ago, after the car accident that killed Todd's dad, the Wozinskys happy world had fallen apart. But Todd and his mum and Jaynee had struggled on, building a new life. It had been okay, too, until his mum got married again.

Todd knew one thing. His real dad would always be his one-and-only father. No matter *how* many times his mother remarried. Nothing would change that.

And nothing would stop Todd from doing something special this Father's Day.

'Mum, this Sunday, can we go and visit Dad's grave?'

Jaynee buried her head in Digby's coat. 'I don't want to go. I'm staying home.'

Todd started to get angry again, then stopped. His mum always said Jaynee hadn't coped with her father's death as well as Todd had.

'Jaynee, visiting your father's grave is a nice way of remembering him,' said her mother.

'I still don't want to go,' said Jaynee.

Todd remembered the last time they'd visited the cemetery. Jaynee had turned into a crying, quivering mess when they packed up to go home.

Their mother put down her coffee cup. 'It's okay, Jaynee, don't get upset.' She turned to Todd. 'Can we leave it for another weekend?'

'Why?'

'I've got all those English papers to mark.'

'So?'

'Todd, I haven't got time this weekend. You know Leafton Bay's the best part of a day's drive there and back.'

'So?'

'Todd, you're not listening to me!'

And you're not listening to me, thought Todd. 'I want to visit Dad's grave and I want to do it on Father's Day.'

His mother frowned. 'Well, I'm sorry, I don't think it's possible.'

Todd frowned back. Now he'd made up his mind, there was no stopping him. He'd go on his own if he had to. Maybe catch a bus.

'Sorry to butt in, but I'd kill for a coffee,' said Todd's Uncle Nick from the doorway. 'Unless I'm breaking up a family gathering.'

'You're family,' said Paula. 'Come in.'

Nick Wozinsky limped slightly as he walked to the bench to re-boil the jug. The ex-jockey had lost his foot, as well as his older brother, in the fatal accident.

'Todd wants us to drive up and visit his Dad's grave on Sunday,' Paula told him.

'That's a great idea,' said Nick.

Thank goodness, thought Todd. Someone else who likes the idea.

'Then you'll come with us, Uncle Nick?' asked Todd.

'Any other time,' said Nick, getting milk out of the fridge.

'What does that mean?' asked Todd.

'I can't this weekend,' said his uncle. 'I'm up to my eyeballs at the moment.'

What is this? thought Todd. Even Dad's brother is too busy to visit him.

'Things are really crazy at the moment,' Nick explained. 'No rest for the wicked.'

'Work or play?' asked Paula.

'You know me,' said Nick, who worked as a night security guard up at Northmall. 'I'm all work and no play.'

'Not from what I hear,' said Paula. 'Nick, you should settle down and get married.'

'But I've only just moved in.'

Paula laughed. 'We're not trying to get rid of you, but you are pushing 30.'

'Don't worry,' said Nick. 'I'm pushing back.'

Todd scowled into his cup. How could they goof around at a time like this?

Nick must have spotted his serious face.

'Hey, Todd,' said his uncle, 'all joking aside, I really am flat out at work.'

Paula stood up. 'Todd, let's see how things are nearer the weekend. Okay?'

'I'm still not going,' said Jaynee. 'Mu-um, can I go outside and play now?'

'After you've done your chores, young lady. You and Todd start while I go and check on Logan.'

Nick frowned. 'Poor little bloke. He looks like Humpty Dumpty before the fall.'

'Todd looked like that when he had the mumps,' said Paula.

'Mu-um,' said Jaynee, as she followed her mother out of the kitchen. 'When I had the mumps, I didn't look like Humpty Dumpty, did I?'

'No dear,' said her mother. 'You looked more like Kermit the Frog.'

As mother and daughter disappeared, Nick poured himself another coffee.

'Don't get mad with your Mum, Todd. I know she'd like to take you on Sunday, but she's under a lot of pressure. She has to juggle a lot of hats. Wife, mother, stepmother, teacher...'

Todd nodded but didn't say anything. He'd already decided to cycle down to the bus station and pick up a timetable for Leafton Bay.

No way he'd spend Father's Day stuck at Brightside.

Chapter Three

Simone paused outside her sister's room. Holly's outburst at Paula had interrupted her TV viewing. Shaken more plaster off the ceiling as well, thought Simone.

Would Paula and Holly ever be friends? Or even friendlier enemies? That was like asking if Logan would ever stop wetting his bed. The answer to both questions was "not today".

In the meantime, Simone had to stay onside with Holly. At least until they'd had a talk about Father's Day. For once Simone decided to knock before barging in.

'Go away,' Holly mumbled from the other side of the door, obviously munching something chewier than carrot sticks.

Did that mean a postponement of Holly's latest "wonder diet"? The one she'd started that morning.

Simone knocked again.

'I'll eat what I want to eat. And when I want to eat it!' said Holly.

Not just a postponement of the diet by the sound of it. A cancellation.

'Holly, it's me,' said Simone.

'Oh,' said Holly. 'I thought it was... *her*.'

Simone heard the sound of a key in the lock. Just as well she hadn't tried barging in or she'd now be nursing a broken shoulder.

'Stay out if you're good looking,' said Holly, throwing open the door. 'Come in if you're ugly.'

'Too late,' said Simone. 'You've beaten me to it.'

Holly flopped back on her bed and plucked a chocolate biscuit from an almost empty packet. 'What do you want, brace-face?'

'How about a new sister?' said Simone. 'One who's polite and friendly.'

Holly turned up her nose. 'If you know where to buy them, get me one as well. See if they'll take a stepmother as a trade.'

Simone grinned. 'After we buy a present for Dad. It's already Tuesday and it's Father's Day on Sunday.'

'I know that, dummy. The TV and papers are full of it.'

'Full of ads for things we can't afford,' said Simone.

'We used to have money,' said Holly. 'Before *they* came along.'

'Even if money's tight,' said Simone, 'Dad still deserves something.'

'He deserves the best,' said Holly.

'He reckons he's got the best,' said Simone. 'Marrying Paula.'

'Yuck,' said Holly. 'That just proves that love is blind.'

'Or in Dad's case, shortsighted,' said Simone, which made Holly laugh. 'How's your bank account?'

'As always, I'm broker than broke,' said Holly, pulling out her wallet.

'Look out for the moths,' said Simone as Holly flicked it open.

Holly threw a few dollars on the bed.

'Is that all you've got?' asked Simone.

'I'm not made of money,' said Holly. 'Who do you think I am? Scrooge McDuck?'

'No. You've got a bigger beak.'

Holly made a fist and Simone stepped back.

'Truce,' said Simone. 'Let's put our money together and buy a combined present.'

'Only if I get to pick it,' said Holly.

'Why?'

'Because, Simone, you've got the worst taste of any person on this whole planet. Look at what you're wearing.'

Simone glanced in the mirror. 'What's wrong with it?'

'You look like an explosion in a scarecrow factory. One you didn't survive.'

'Either we both pick the present or you buy your own,' said Simone.

Holly frowned. 'Okay... if I have to. When?'

'How about tomorrow? After school?'

Holly nodded. 'But it's got to be good *and* cheap. Northmall's too expensive.'

'Forget Northmall,' said Simone. 'I know just the place.'

Chapter Four

After dinner, Todd lay on his bed, flicking through an old science fiction comic. He didn't bother to look up when he heard a knock on the door.

'Go away,' he said.

The door opened and Jaynee walked in.

'What do you want?' Todd asked her.

Jaynee kept her voice low. 'First, tell me you're not angry with me.'

'I'm not angry with you,' said Todd.

'Yes, you are. Just because I don't want to go and visit Dad's grave.'

'Jaynee, you never even talk about Dad.'

'I do so!'

'Not to me or Mum,' said Todd.

'I still talk about him,' said Jaynee.

Todd shrugged. Who could read the mind of an eight year old?

Jaynee brightened. 'I've come to cheer you up.'

Todd couldn't help smiling back. Why didn't Simone see his sister in her nice moods?

'I've found something,' Jaynee told him.

'What sort of something?'

Jaynee shrugged. 'Come and see.'

'I'll bet it's another kitten,' said Todd. 'Carmen hasn't forgiven you for finding Digby.'

'She has, too. And it's not another kitten.'

'A rabbit, then,' said Todd. 'You've found a baby rabbit in the paddocks over the back. Don't tell Simone. She'll start stirring you up about making a rabbit pie.'

'It's much, much bigger than a rabbit.'

'A horse?'

Jaynee shook her head. 'You'll never guess.'

'Okay,' said Todd. 'Show me.'

He got up and followed Jaynee down the stairs and out the back door, heading for the shed.

'I hope the zoo hasn't lost a tiger,' said Todd. 'Or a lion. Or a...'

'Hush,' said Jaynee, opening the shed door a crack. She squeezed through, then waved for him to follow.

'I'm not that skinny,' said Todd.

Jaynee opened the door a fraction more and Todd stepped into the almost empty shed. Almost, except for the dirty and bedraggled collie cowering in the corner.

'Meet Lassie,' said Jaynee.

'Lassie?' asked Todd, noticing the dog didn't have a collar. 'How do you know his name? Did he introduce himself?'

'She's *not* a he, she's a *she*, and all collies are called Lassie. Don't you watch TV?'

'Well, she's frightened,' said Todd.

'Not of me,' said Jaynee, walking over and gently throwing her arms around the collie's neck.

'She's filthy,' said Todd. 'Where did you find her?'

'Wandering in the back paddock,' said Jaynee, stroking the little star-shaped patch of hair between the dog's eyes. 'She was exhausted, but she'll soon feel better after a bath and some food and lots of cuddles.'

'Jaynee,' said Todd. 'Are you sure she didn't have a collar?'

'Promise,' she replied.

'Well, she can't be a stray,' said Todd. 'She looks too valuable not to belong to someone.'

'She does belong to someone,' said Jaynee. 'Me. Finders keepers.'

'And losers weepers,' said Todd. 'We'd better see what Mum says.'

'Do we have to tell her?'

'You can't hide a dog,' said Todd.

'Why not?'

'Because dogs bark.'

'Mu-um, you're not listening,' said Jaynee, as her mother crawled around the lounge floor arranging neat stacks of English papers against the wall beside the couch.

'I am listening, Jaynee,' she replied, looking at the piles of paper. 'This is the easy bit. Now all I've got to do is mark them.'

'But can I keep her, Mum?' said Jaynee. 'Can I keep Lassie?'

Her mother looked up. 'Let me talk it over with Michael.'

Todd's heart sank. This was a Wozinsky decision. Why did his mum let the Freemans call the shots?

'Did someone mention my name?' asked Michael walking in.

'I did,' said his new wife, jumping up.

'I'm just on my way to take a drink up to Logan. He's still got a fever and he's sweating a lot. Doesn't seem to affect his bladder, though.'

'Before you do that,' said Paula, 'Jaynee's got something to tell you.'

Jayne explained for a second time about finding Lassie.

'Well...' said Michael, then stopped. 'I suppose we could look after Lassie until she's

strong again.'

'But I want to keep her forever,' said Jaynee, turning to her mother. 'Mu-um, Lassie's really cute. And she's got this little star-shaped patch of hair between her eyes. And...'

'Jaynee, let's see what happens,' said her mother. 'Maybe Lassie's real owner will advertise for her.'

'We'll keep an eye on the Herald Lost and Found column,' said Michael, walking out of the room. Paula picked up the first pile of papers and flopped down on the couch with a pen.

'I'm going to give Lassie some milk,' said Jaynee, 'and I'm going to keep her. I am.'

'Jaynee...'

said her mother without lifting her head as Jaynee ran out of the room.

'Mum,' said Todd, 'have you thought any more about Sunday?'

'Todd,' she replied, still looking down, her pen flying, 'I told you I'll see how things go in the next couple of days. And the more interruptions I get, the less chance I have of finishing.'

Todd turned away and marched out of the room without looking back.

Maybe I'll take Lassie with me on Sunday, he thought. At least Lassie wouldn't have an excuse not to come.

And she'd be better company than a lot of the people at Brightside.

Chapter Five

'Where is everybody?' asked Uncle Nick the next night after dinner as he stuck his nose into the family room where Todd sat watching television.

'Jaynee's feeding Lassie,' said Todd.

'All done,' said Jaynee, skipping into the room.

'How is the wonder dog?' asked Nick.

'Those Freemans don't think she's wonderful,' said Jaynee.

Holly, especially, had moaned about another mouth to feed when the new family was already so broke. But Todd knew Lassie would only be there until her real owner turned up, something Jaynee wouldn't talk about.

The way his sister kept the collie locked away, Todd doubted the neighbours even knew about the second dog at Brightside.

'Where's the rest of the mob?' asked Nick.

'I think Holly's doing homework,' said Todd. 'So is Simone.'

'What about your Mum and Michael?' asked Nick.

'Up at school,' said Jaynee.

'I forgot,' said Nick. 'The big parent-teacher meeting at Claxton Road.'

Todd held up crossed fingers. 'Hope my teachers say nice things.'

'My teachers *always* says nice things about me,' said Jaynee.

'That old Wozinsky charm,' said Nick with a grin. 'If we could bottle it, we'd make a fortune. Anyway, I'm off to work. See ya in the morning.'

Todd heard the front door slam and next minute his uncle's new motorcycle roared off into the dark.

On the television, a sitcom family had struck a problem. They'd bought a present for their father, but wanted to hide it until the big day. The audience found it funny, and so did Jaynee, but Todd found it depressing.

Over the sound of the canned laughter, Todd heard a banging.

'Someone get that!' yelled Holly from her room across the hall. 'I'm trying to concentrate.'

Todd jumped up. By the time he argued with Holly, the caller would have gone. Maybe Uncle Nick had forgotten something? But his uncle had a key.

Todd threw the door open and took a step backwards. A policeman, in uniform, stood on the front steps.

A policeman Todd recognised.

'Hello, Sergeant Quinn.'

'Hello...Todd, isn't it?'

Todd nodded. The night Logan Freeman disappeared, Sergeant Quinn had coordinated the search.

'How *is* our little vanishing act?' asked the sergeant.

'Got the mumps,' replied Todd, still puzzled as to why the policeman was there. 'Do you want to come in?'

'No, thank you. I've never had the mumps and I don't want to get them now. Your Mum or Dad in?'

Todd flinched. 'Mum's up at school. So is my *stepfather*.'

'Sorry, I keep forgetting who belongs to who in this family. Tell them I came by, will you? We've had complaints from the farmer who rents the paddocks behind you. Some of his sheep were killed the other night.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Todd noticed Jaynee standing in the family room doorway, listening.

'I've been knocking on doors up and down Yardley Street,' the policeman continued, 'to see if anyone's seen any strange dogs in the neighbourhood.'

Todd hoped his face didn't give him away and that Jaynee would stay out of sight.

'Stray dogs?' asked Todd.

'Yes,' said the policeman. 'We figure a stray killed those sheep. Happens from time to time.'

Todd knew what his sister would be thinking. He had to ask the question.

'What will you do with the dog?'

'Shoot it,' said the sergeant.

'Why do you have to do that?'

'Todd, once dogs get a taste for killing sheep, they never lose it. There's only one way to cure them.'

'I'll tell Mum when she gets home,' said Todd.

'Thanks,' said the sergeant. 'And say hi to Logan.'

'Who was that?' yelled Holly from her bedroom as Todd closed the front door.

'No one,' said Todd.

'Lot of chatter for no one,' Holly yelled back.

Jaynee glared at her brother. 'I know what you're thinking.'

'No, you don't.'

'Yes, I do. You think Lassie's the sheep killer.'

'Look, Jaynee, she's the only stray we've seen around here. I really should have told Sergeant Quinn.'

'Lassie's not a killer,' said Jaynee, folding her arms and glaring at him.

'Come back into the family room and keep your voice down,' said Todd.

On TV, the sitcom family had successfully kept their gift hidden. Now, as the big day dawned, the sitcom father unwrapped it to squeals of delight and hugs all round.

Todd hit the remote and changed channels.

'Lassie wouldn't hurt a fly,' said Jaynee, picking up Digby and cuddling him as she spoke.

'Try telling that to Sergeant Quinn,' said Todd, flicking from channel to channel, trying to find something to take his mind off the thought of a dead collie.

'Or better still, Jaynee, tell it to those dead sheep!'

Chapter Six

'Come on, Holly, pedal faster,' said Simone, glancing behind to make sure big sister was still there.

'I'm peddling as fast as I can,' said Holly, squinting into the sun and puffing loudly.

'Whose dumb idea was this?'

'It was your idea to steal Jaynee's bike.'

'I didn't steal it. I borrowed it.'

'Well, you should have borrowed a bigger size.'

Or 10 sizes bigger, thought Simone. On a bike built for an eight year old, Holly looked like a pumpkin on a pimple.

'I still think you should have asked Jaynee,' said Simone.

'I couldn't find the little moaner,' said Holly, her face glowing. 'Relax. She won't even notice it's gone.'

Wanna bet? thought Simone. Jaynee will notice, all right. And that would mean fireworks when they got home. Especially if Holly wrecked the bike in the meantime.

'Stop wobbling,' said Simone, slowing down to ride beside her sister.

'Listen, brat...'

'I'm talking about the bike,' said Simone, 'not your chin. You're all over the road.'

'I was riding a two-wheeler while you still had training wheels,' said Holly. 'Anyway, in all of recorded history, no one ever forgot how to ride a bike.'

'Congratulations on a new world record,' said Simone.

'If we don't find something...' said Holly.

'We'll go back to plan T,' said Simone.

'Don't you mean plan B?'

'No, plan T,' said Simone. 'That's the one where instead of a present, you write Dad a Father's Day poem.'

'So what's the T stand for?' asked Holly.

'Terrible,' said Simone.

Holly took one hand off the handlebars and made a fist, but Simone swerved away, picked up the pace and zoomed ahead.

'Last one there is a super-stupid-idiot,' Simone yelled back as she pulled further away.

The look on Holly's face told Simone not to slow down. Not if she wanted to get there in one piece.

'This place is a rubbish tip,' said Holly as they parked their bikes and walked into the City Mission, an old warehouse converted into a fundraising shop by Hatchwood's combined

churches.

'It's just like your bedroom,' said Simone.

'More like the inside of your head,' said Holly. 'Pure junk.'

'Gran says one person's junk is another person's treasure.'

'That's because Gran shops here as well,' said Holly. 'What a family. It's so embarrassing.'

'Haven't you heard of recycling?'

'Don't talk to me about any sort of cycling,' said Holly. 'My legs are starting to cramp up. How am I going to get home?'

'Tow truck,' said Simone.

Holly pulled a face and flopped down on an overstuffed couch next to a huge writing desk.

'I need one like that,' said Holly. 'My desk at home's getting too small.'

'You've got to stop outgrowing everything,' said Simone.

'Let's find a present and get out of here,' said Holly. 'Someone from school might see me.'

'Hello, Holly. Hello, Simone.'

Simone spun around. Behind her stood someone they both knew very well. Mrs Naidu. Not only their next-door neighbour, but Holly's high school English teacher.

'Hello,' said Holly in a very small voice, her cheeks turning scarlet.

'Love the outfit,' Mrs Naidu told Simone.

Simone smiled. Holly might not appreciate her fashion sense, but their neighbour did.

'Love that, too,' said Simone, pointing to the brightly coloured garment Mrs Naidu wore wrapped around her.

'This old sari?' asked Mrs Naidu. 'I've had it for years.'

'Don't get rid of it without talking to me,' said Simone.

'What are you doing here?' Holly asked her teacher.

Simone was curious, too. The Naidus were the richest people in Yardley Street, if not all of Hatchwood. Surely they didn't need to shop for bargains.

'I'm minding the store for a few hours,' Mrs Naidu explained.

'You *work* here?' asked Holly.

'My first afternoon as a volunteer,' said Mrs Naidu. 'I wanted to put something back into the community. What about you two? Have you come to buy or to browse?'

'To buy,' said Simone.

'To browse,' said Holly jumping up from the couch and grabbing Simone's arm. 'My sister's such a kidder.'

'I'm not kidding,' said Simone, trying to free her arm.

'We wouldn't shop here, Simone, would we?' Holly muttered through clenched teeth.

'Where do you think I bought this outfit?' asked Simone, shaking off the arm.

Holly slumped down again on the couch and buried her head in her hands. 'I am now totally embarrassed. I'm going to die. I swear I'm going to die.'

'Don't be so dramatic, Holly,' said Mrs Naidu, gently. 'Remember what I keep telling you in English class. If you want to write great fiction, you must see the story in every situation.'

'There's no story here,' said Holly, lifting her head and looking around.

'Open your eyes,' said the English teacher. 'In a shop like this, every object tells a story.'

'Tell them to speak up,' said Simone, cupping her hand behind her ear. 'I can't hear a thing.'

'That's because *you're* not a writer,' said Holly, cheering up as she jumped to her feet and walked around. 'You're right, Mrs Naidu. This shop is inspirational.'

'Holly's already been inspired to write one story today,' said Simone.

'What story?' asked Holly, suspiciously.

Simone grinned. 'About a bicycle thief.'

'Simone...' hissed Holly.

'Yeah,' Simone told Mrs Naidu. 'It's about a real ugly thief who keeps falling off her bike.'

'She's not ugly, and she's not a thief,' said Holly, with a fixed smile. 'She only takes the bike to escape from the police after strangling her idiotic sister in self-defence.'

'Sounds a bit violent, Holly,' said Mrs Naidu. 'Why can't they all live happily ever after?'

'You wouldn't ask that, Mrs Naidu, if *you* had to live with the idiotic sister.'

'I think I see,' said their neighbour, winking at Simone. 'Holly, let me read the story when it's finished. In the meantime, why don't you both look around?'

'We need a cheap present for Dad,' said Simone as Holly wandered off.

Simone felt she could tell Mrs Naidu the truth. The Naidus knew how broke the new blended family was. They'd even helped the Freemans and Wozinskys run their backyard fair to raise money for Brightside's new roof.

'My husband loves Father's Day,' said Mrs Naidu. 'The kids always bring him breakfast in bed.'

'That's what we usually do for our Dad,' said Simone. 'But this year it's a bit complicated.'

'Of course,' said Mrs Naidu. 'Todd and Jaynee.'

Simone started her search for a present. It couldn't be expensive or large. Nothing they couldn't carry home on a bike.

That meant no furniture, no luggage, and no lamp stands. Which left... clothing.

Simone's favourite corner of the store.

Better not get her dad anything with buttons or zips, Simone decided. Not the way his middle-aged spread kept spreading.

Since he'd been working from home, her father had stopped wearing a suit so a tie would be a waste of money. Then Simone spotted something much more interesting.

Mrs Naidu was right. The stuff in the City Mission store did talk, because the more she stared, the more the thing in front of her shouted, 'Buy me! Buy me!'

'You can't buy that!' said Holly as Simone reached out to grab it. 'We're looking for a present for Dad, not you.'

'This is for Dad.'

'Can you imagine him wearing... that?'

'Why not?'

Simone had never seen him wearing one before, but he definitely needed to update his wardrobe and this could be a good start.

His first scarf.

Well-made, she decided, checking it for any holes. No signs of damage or wear. It still had its original label sewn to one end. Almost as good as new.

Except for the colour.

'Yellow,' said Holly, in disgust.

'It used to be white,' said Simone, pointing to a lighter patch behind the label. 'It's gone a bit funny with age.'

'That'll make Dad feel *really* good,' said Holly.

'This calls for Plan D,' said Simone.

'D for Dumb?' asked Holly.

'No,' said Simone. 'D for Dye.'

'I saw what you did to those sneakers,' said Holly. 'I'd better start writing my Father's Day poem.'

'You'd better start preparing your stepmother excuse,' said Simone. 'For taking Jaynee's bike.'

'Me apologise to a Wozinsky?' asked Holly. 'Forget it!'

As Simone turned into Yardley Street with Holly trailing a hundred metres behind, she heard a high pitched scream. A siren. Screaming for its mother.

'Mu-um!' yelled Jaynee Wozinsky standing on the footpath outside Brightside. 'Mu-um! they're back. Mu-um...'

Simone pulled up as Paula ran out of the house.

'Jaynee, stop yelling,' she told her daughter as Holly pulled up behind Simone.

Paula stood quietly, watching Holly as she sat on the seat of Jaynee's undersized bike, holding it upright by planting both feet on the ground with her knees bent.

'I'm sure Holly has a good explanation,' Paula told Jaynee.

Simone saw the pain on Holly's face. Anger at Paula? Or cramp?

'Well?' asked Paula after a few seconds when Holly didn't reply and instead bent down to rub her calves.

'Mu-um...' Jaynee began.

'Stop it, Jaynee,' said her mother, 'or you can go back in the house.'

'That's not fair,' said Jaynee, dropping her bottom lip as she pointed at Holly. 'She took my bike without asking.'

'We couldn't *find* you to ask you,' said Holly. 'And what's the big deal? I didn't break your dumb bike.'

Paula frowned. 'In this house we don't take other people's things without asking.'

Holly scowled. 'When we had our own house, we used to do what we liked. Dad didn't mind.'

'I'm sure he'd mind this,' said Paula.

'I'll go and ask him,' said Holly, jumping clear of the bike and letting it clatter onto its side as she hobbled towards the house.

'Holly!' said Paula, firmly.

Holly didn't stop, but instead hit Brightside's front door like a bulldozer and stormed inside.

From the pavement, Simone could hear her sister's foghorn voice complaining, 'Dad, that *woman* you married is trying to boss me around again...'

'We had to do some urgent present hunting for Father's Day,' Simone told Paula.

'Mu-um, don't let them off,' said Jaynee, turning to Simone. 'At least say how sorry you are.'

'Okay,' said Simone. 'How sorry you are!'

'Mu-um...'

'Okay, I'm sorry, too,' said Simone.

Paula nodded. 'I'm sure Holly will be sorry as well, Jaynee, when she's had a talk with her father and calmed down a bit.'

Don't hold your breath, thought Simone. Only Holly's diets fizzle out quickly. Not her tantrums.

'And did you find a present?' Paula asked Simone as they walked towards the front door.

‘Sort of,’ said Simone. ‘When I’ve finished with it, Dad won’t believe his eyes.’

Late that night, Simone slipped out of Brightside’s back door and headed across the back lawn towards the shed. She’d have done this earlier, but the other job had taken priority. Hopefully, the glue on the sneakers would hold.

Now, ready for the second job of the night, she carried the scarf, a bucket of water and several bottles of dye.

Holly wouldn’t be helping. She’d been grounded for a week when she refused to apologise for the business with the bike. After dinner, she’d stormed off to her bedroom with a tub of icecream and locked herself in.

I’m better off doing this on my own, anyway, Simone decided. Holly would want to do it the way she did most things. Brute force and a heavy hand.

Simone could have used Holly’s heavy hand re-soling the sneakers. Her arms still ached from cutting up the old truck tyre.

She wondered how long it would take Paula to discover the missing carving knife. Or how much a new blade would cost.

Dyeing things was more fun than cutting them up, Simone decided. She’d been experimenting with dye since her mother left home, back when Simone first cut off her long hair. So far she’d successfully dyed clothes and hats and shoes and...

Zip had been her biggest failure. Blue dogs didn’t look right. And it had made an awful mess of the kitchen.

Deep in creative thought, Simone put down the bucket and reached for the handle on the shed door, giving it a twist as she flung it open.

She jumped back as a dark shape hurtled past her. Lassie! She’d forgotten about Jaynee’s visitor.

Simone opened her mouth to yell, but before she could, Lassie had raced to the back fence, dropped to her stomach, wriggled under the bottom wire and disappeared into the blackness of the back paddocks.

Simone scratched the stubble on her head. Should she go back to the house and tell the others? If she did, there’d be a fuss, and she’d had enough fussing for one day.

She shook her head and decided to say nothing. Everyone, except Jaynee, knew Lassie was only visiting. She had to leave sometime. Simone stepped into the empty shed and switched on the light.

Earlier in the year, Claxton Road Primary had done a musical about Joseph, the boy from the Bible with the coat-of-many-colours.

Stand by, Joe, thought Simone. Here comes the matching scarf!

Chapter Seven

'Todd! Todd!'

'Go away,' said Todd, early the next morning as his sister barged into his room without knocking.

'This is an emergency,' she told him, marching over to his window and dragging back the curtains to show the first rays of sunshine.

'Can't it wait?' he asked her, having only just nodded off after a restless night's sleep.

'No, it can't. You've got to come with me. Now!'

As Jaynee scampered out of the room and headed down the stairs, Todd yawned and grabbed his dressing gown. He double checked his slippers before stepping into them.

Zip had decided that Wozinsky slippers tasted as good as the Freeman variety and Todd didn't fancy starting the day with an unplanned foot bath.

Todd shuffled out onto the top landing and looked around. The other bedroom doors were closed. So they should be at this ridiculous hour.

'Hurry,' hissed Jaynee, waving to him from the bottom of the stairs before taking off for the back door.

Something must have happened to Lassie, thought Todd.

Was the collie sick? Or worse. Pregnant. Had she had pups?

A litter of Lassie puppies would really cause problems. Zip already waddled around with a long face, and Carmen wouldn't go near the shed.

But Digby might like it. He could stop being the smallest in the family.

Jaynee shoved the shed door open wide and beckoned Todd inside.

Empty. No pups, thought Todd. Good. But no Lassie either.

'Who did this?' asked Jaynee.

'How would I know?' asked Todd.

'It had to be one of *them*,' said Jaynee.

'Well, you can't blame Logan,' said Todd. 'He's too sick. And Holly wouldn't do it.'

'She stole my bike!'

'And she's been punished for it,' said Todd.

'This is her revenge,' said Jaynee.

'I don't think so,' said Todd. 'Holly can be mean, but not this mean.'

'Whose side are you on?' asked Jaynee.

'Your side,' said Todd.

'Then if the others didn't do it, Simone must have let Lassie out,' said Jaynee. 'She's the meanest of the lot.'

'She just kids you a bit,' said Todd. 'There's a difference.'

'Stop defending her.'

'I'm not,' said Todd. 'I'm just sure she wouldn't do a thing like this.'

'Let's ask her,' said Jaynee. 'And if she did, I'll...'

Todd suddenly felt very protective towards his little sister. 'Don't worry Jaynee,' he told her. 'If Simone did this, I'll do it for you.'

'It was an accident,' said Simone from inside her bedroom as Jaynee pounded on the door. 'I forgot Rin Tin Tin was in the shed!'

'Her name's Lassie and it's your fault!' screamed Jaynee. 'It's your fault, it's your fault!'

'I told you I didn't...' yelled Simone, then stopped. 'Oh, yuck!'

Todd jumped back as Simone threw open the door, pulling on her dressing gown, and wiping one foot on the back of her pyjama pants.

'You're not the only people with a problem dog,' Simone told them. 'Zip found my slippers.'

'What's all the fuss?' said a weary looking Michael Freeman, walking out of the main bedroom in his pyjamas.

'That's what I want to know,' yelled Holly from downstairs.

Another figure, a yellow and blue flash, darted up the stairs and joined Todd and the others on the top landing.

'I could hear you all shouting from the other end of the street,' said Paula, dragging off her sweat band.

'Paula, it's the middle of the night,' said Michael, stifling a yawn.

'There aren't enough hours in my day,' she reminded him.

'Mu-um....' said Jaynee.

'I'm guessing that Lassie is missing, right?' said her mother.

They all nodded.

'She slipped out last night when I went out to the shed,' Simone explained.

'What were you doing out in the shed at night?' asked her father.

Todd noticed Simone stop and think about the answer.

'Um... it's a secret, Dad. You'll find out when the time comes.'

Todd's stomach flipped. This sounded like the scene from the sitcom the other night. The night the policeman dropped by. A visit Todd hadn't mentioned to his mother.

He took a deep breath. 'We had a visitor the other night. Sergeant Quinn.'

'To-odd!' said Jaynee. 'You can't!'

'Lassie's gone now,' said Todd. 'What harm can it do?'

'Sounds like family conference time,' said Paula.

'And I should have told you earlier,' Todd confessed a few minutes later in the lounge as he finished explaining about the police visit.

Paula sipped a cup of coffee. 'Yes, Todd, you should have told us a lot earlier.'

'This is so unfair,' said Jaynee. 'Lassie's not a killer. And I should know. I'm the only one around here who understands animals.'

'Then why aren't you and Holly good friends?' asked Simone.

'Listen, brat,' said Holly, wrapped up in a faded and well worn dressing gown. 'When I wake up properly, I'll thump you for that.'

'No one's thumping anyone,' said her father, turning to Jaynee. 'And no one's going to blame Lassie for killing sheep without more evidence.'

'How do we get that?' asked Todd.

'We wait and see if this killer dog's still in the area,' said his mother. 'If it attacks again, someone's bound to see it.'

'And that'll prove it isn't Lassie,' said Jaynee.

'Let's cross our fingers,' said Michael. 'Hopefully, Lassie's gone home.'

'Just like in the movie,' said Holly.

'A horror movie,' said Simone. 'Especially when they catch the guilty dog.'

Chapter Eight

That Friday afternoon as Simone walked home from school with Todd and Jaynee, she replayed the week in her head. And what a week it had been so far.

Logan's mumps were finally on the mend. He'd probably be well enough to help her and Holly with their dad's breakfast in bed on Sunday. And the scarf looked stunning. If her dad didn't want it, she'd wear it herself.

Or offer it to Mrs Naidu. That's if Indian people wore scarves with a sari.

Lassie still roamed free, but no more Hatchwood sheep had been turned into chops. That seemed to prove Lassie wasn't a killer, something Jaynee reminded the others of every chance she got.

'I told you so, I told you so,' said Jaynee, starting up her favourite chant as she skipped alongside Simone and Todd.

Simone turned to Todd. 'Have we got any big springs at home?'

'What for?'

'Your little sister. She's like a cuckoo clock.'

'I told you so!' said Jaynee skipping ahead of Simone and Todd. 'I told you so, I told you so!'

'It's past the hour,' said Simone. 'You're running slow.'

'She shouldn't be the way you keep winding her up,' said Todd.

As Jaynee fell back to join them, they turned into Yardley Street. A police car raced by and the driver gave them a wave.

'That's Sergeant Quinn,' said Todd. 'What's he doing back here?'

The police car pulled up outside Brightside, to be joined quickly by other cars and vans. In seconds, a dozen men assembled on the footpath. Simone recognised some of them as the volunteers who'd turned out to search for Logan the night he'd disappeared.

Except this time, they all carried guns!

'To-od, stop them,' yelled Jaynee.

'What with? My lunch box?'

'Come on,' yelled Simone, breaking into a sprint.

'Hi, kids,' said Sergeant Quinn. 'We're just going to cut through your property to get to the paddocks out the back. It's okay.' He glanced at Todd. 'I rang your Dad and checked.'

'He's not *their* Dad,' said Simone. 'He's my Dad.'

'Sorry,' said Sergeant Quinn. 'I still get confused.'

'Are you...' Jaynee began, 'are you...'

'Going after the sheep killer,' said Sergeant Quinn. 'Yes. He struck again.'

'When?' asked Simone, hoping the sergeant would tell her some time during Lassie's

imprisonment in Brightside's shed - before she let him escape.

'Last night,' said Sergeant Quinn. 'More sheep torn to bits.'

Simone's heart sank. Lassie was loose and sheep were dying. Too much of a coincidence.

'Has anyone actually seen the dog?' asked Todd, moving closer to his little sister and resting his hand on her shoulder.

'One sighting,' said the policeman. 'We can't be sure, but it sounds like a collie.'

'Is there a little star-shaped patch...' Todd began, but Jaynee shrugged off his hand, burst into tears and raced for the house.

'Do you kids know more about this than you're letting on?' asked Sergeant Quinn.

Todd studied his shoes. 'There has been a stray dog around here.'

'A collie?' asked the sergeant.

'A TV-Lassie clone,' said Simone, hoping the sergeant wouldn't start asking difficult questions, like - had anyone been hiding the dog?

Instead, the sergeant asked, 'Where is this collie now?'

'It sort of... disappeared,' said Simone. 'A couple of nights ago.'

Sergeant Quinn frowned. 'We'll finish this conversation some other time.'

He waved his hand and the armed men fell into line.

'Spread out when we get to the paddocks,' he told them. 'If the dog's gone bush, we'll go in after it. And shoot to kill!'

Simone raced into the house with Todd close behind. They dropped their backpacks and went looking for Jaynee. She sat on the floor in the family room, sobbing quietly and hugging Zip.

Simone felt sorry for her. Sorry enough not to stir her with jokes about dog's dinners or sheepskins.

'I'm going to follow them,' said Todd, beckoning Simone out into the hall.

Simone shook her head. 'They've got guns.'

'But they're not pointing them at me,' said Todd. 'I'll just tag along behind.'

'Why?'

'To make sure it really is Lassie. I've got to find out. For Jaynee.'

Simone shook her head. She'd never had an older brother or sister to protect her. Usually, it was Holly she had to be protected from.

'I'll come with you,' she said.

That way she could be sure as well. After all, she'd let Lassie escape. If the collie finished up as target practice, she'd feel almost as bad as Jaynee.

Simone thought about asking her father's permission, but decided against it. He'd

probably say no. Better to do it first and ask later. That hadn't worked with Jaynee's bike, but no time now for a better plan.

'If you're coming, let's go,' said Todd.

Simone sprinted down the passage after him. At the back door, she stepped into a pair of gumboots, jogged across the lawn, and slipped through the wire strands of the fence.

The hunters were already halfway to the bush foothills and their voices carried back to her across the paddocks.

'He's probably hiding in the trees,' she heard Sergeant Quinn tell the men on either side of him.

Although it wasn't cold, Simone shivered.

'What's wrong?' asked Todd.

'Just thinking about the last time we were out here.'

'I remember,' said Todd. 'Searching for Logan. But that turned out okay.'

'No one wanted to shoot Logan,' said Simone. 'But the dog's history.'

In one way, Simone hoped Lassie would escape. But if Lassie escaped the hunters' guns, more sheep would die.

'Why is life so complicated?' Todd asked her, as if reading her mind.

Not everything's complicated, Simone thought. Only some things. Like blended families on Father's Day which was now only two days away.

Maybe she *should* share her father with the Wozinskys. Just a bit, and just for that one day. Plenty of him to go around. If they were cannibals, Simone's dad could provide a three course meal.

'What are you lot doing on Sunday?' asked Simone, looking at the ground, trying to find a way to make the offer without feeling silly.

'I've got plans,' he mumbled.

Simone sighed at being let off the hook. Looking up, she realised the hunters had disappeared.

'They must be in the bush,' said Todd, breaking into a jog.

Bang! A gunshot echoed around the hills.

'It's him, all right,' yelled Sergeant Quinn from inside the bush. 'Don't let him get away!'

Another gunshot.

Lassie's about to go home all right, thought Simone. Home to doggie heaven.

Another shot echoed around the hills, then several more, followed by a man's shout.

'Got him!'

Other voices joined in, congratulating the successful marksman.

'Shooters one, dog nil,' said Simone, acting tough, as she willed her eyes to stay dry.

'Come on, Todd, let's go back.'

'Not yet.'

Just then, Sergeant Quinn and several of the hunters walked out of the bush with their rifles over their shoulders.

'What are you kids doing here?' he wanted to know.

'Was it a collie?' asked Todd.

Sergeant Quinn nodded. 'It's tragic to see such a lovely animal go bad. Someone, somewhere, has just lost a pet.'

And Todd looks as though he's about to lose his lunch, thought Simone, tugging at his sleeve.

Todd shook off her hand and stood his ground. 'What about...'

'A couple of the men are slinging the dog over a pole to carry it out. The Herald wants a picture. It shows we're doing our job.'

Now Todd turned green. Simone didn't feel so hot herself.

'I don't think either of you should hang around to see it,' said Sergeant Quinn. 'It's not a pretty sight.'

As Simone and Todd trudged back towards the house, Todd's colour changed from green back to pink. Almost.

'Better keep Jaynee away from the windows,' said Simone.

'She'll go crazy when she finds out,' said Todd. 'I can't wait until this week's over.'

Chapter Nine

Todd lay in bed and watched through a small gap in his curtain as the Saturday morning sun came up. Today couldn't be half as bad as yesterday, could it?

When she went to bed, Jaynee still looked as sad as a doll with both arms missing. It hurt Todd to watch her. That pain had spilled over into his dreams.

In his sleep, he'd been one of the hunters with a huge gun. So enormous he could hardly pick it up. He'd been the first to spot the killer dog, but when he got close he realised it wasn't Lassie, just silly old Zip chewing a slipper.

Shoot, shoot, Sergeant Quinn ordered. Todd had tried to drag his finger off the trigger, but couldn't, and the gun went off with a tremendous flash, waking him up.

Thinking about it again made Todd shiver, so he jumped out of bed, grabbed a sweatshirt and jeans and headed downstairs.

He heard a key in the front door and Uncle Nick walked in from his overnight security shift at the mall.

'You look as tired as I feel,' said Nick.

'Bad night's sleep,' said Todd.

'Any sleep will do me,' said Nick. 'Good or bad. I've just got time for a bath and a couple of hours shut-eye, then it's back to work. They need me to do some overtime. Father's Day is crazy up at the mall.'

He handed Todd a newspaper before he headed up the stairs. 'Guess what's on the front page?'

Todd didn't have to guess. A big picture of two hunters, walking out of the bush with a dead dog slung between two poles. The caption said, "KILLER COLLIE COLLARED".

'Let me see that,' said Jaynee standing behind him.

'Don't, Jaynee,' Todd warned, turning around, clutching the paper to his chest. 'It won't do any good.'

'It's not true, it's not true,' she said, trying to wrestle the paper from him.

The front door flew open and their mother trotted in, slipping off her track suit jacket as she took the paper from Todd and studied the gruesome picture.

'Why did this have to happen?' said Jaynee.

'I don't know, Jaynee,' said her mother, giving her a hug. 'I wish I did. What a week.'

'It's not over yet,' said Todd. 'What about tomorrow? Visiting Dad's grave? You said you'd try to find time.'

'And I have tried,' said his mother, flicking to the back of the paper, 'but I've still got two full days of marking left and only this weekend to finish it.'

Todd started to protest then stopped. He still had plan "B for Bus" ready to go. It would

be a long ride, and Todd had never travelled so far on his own, but he wouldn't take no for an answer.

'What rotten timing,' said his mum, holding up the paper. 'Look, Lassie's owner's got an ad in today's lost and found.'

A Mrs Dixon from Leafton Bay had placed a notice for her missing collie. It was Lassie, without a doubt, right down to the little star-shaped patch between the eyes.

Todd sneaked another look at the front page, but the way the dog's head hung down he couldn't see the eyes, only the throat.

'Poor woman,' said Paula. 'She'll have seen the picture by now. Jaynee, why don't you ring her?'

'No-oo,' said Jaynee, slumped on the bottom step.

'But you could tell Mrs Dixon about how you found Lassie, and how you were kind to her. I'm sure she'd like to know...'

'Mu-um, I can't!'

'Well, someone should ring her,' said her mother, picking up the phone.

Todd heard a scratching at the front door. We must have locked slobber-gobber outside, he thought, flinging the door open expecting to see Zip.

A dark shape pushed past him.

'Lassie!' yelled Todd and Jaynee at the same time.

Their mother dropped the phone as Jaynee squealed and threw her arms around the collie's neck.

'Lassie's come home, Lassie's come home,' said Jaynee, over and over again.

'At least this proves she's not a sheep killer,' said Todd.

'I told you so,' said Jaynee. 'Mu-um, this time I can keep her, can't I?'

Why not, thought Todd. After all the pain Jaynee had been through, she deserved a reward. Then he remembered.

'Jaynee,' said Todd, quietly. 'Lassie's got a home. Up at Leafton Bay.'

'I'm not saying goodbye again!' said Jaynee.

'Darling, you have to,' said her mother, stroking Jaynee's hair. 'I'd better call Mrs Dixon with the good news.'

'It's not good news for me,' said Jaynee burying her head in Lassie's coat as she started to sob.

'Todd, why does everything happen at once?' his mother asked as she started to dial.

Todd glanced into the lounge, spotting several piles of English papers on the floor still waiting to be marked.

He shook his head. There was no way his mother would have time for their Father's Day

trip. Not unless Todd could find someone to help her with the marking.

Then he remembered!

He leapt to his feet, sprinted past Jaynee and Lassie and down the front steps.

'Todd, where are you off to?' his mother called after him.

Todd didn't stop to explain. Instead he kept running, through the trees that separated Brightside from number 11.

Chapter Ten

Their first Father's Day in Brightside, thought Simone, turning on the back element of the ancient stove. Dad loved bacon and eggs. Not the healthiest meal on the planet, but this was one day of the year he deserved to be really spoiled.

'Why couldn't we have made it a Father's Day lunch?' asked Holly, still not completely awake, shoving bread in the toaster. 'That way I could have had a sleep in.'

'Stop moaning,' said Simone. 'You sound like Jaynee.'

Holly laughed, then stopped. 'You know we're lucky, Simone.'

'Lucky?'

'Yeah,' said Holly. 'We get to take our Dad breakfast in bed.'

Simone nodded. It was smart of Todd to ask Mrs Naidu to help his mother with the marking. That way Todd would get his trip to the cemetery.

'But why won't Jaynee go with them?' asked Holly.

Simone dropped several strips of bacon into the pan.

'Todd reckons she goes to pieces when she has to say goodbye.'

'Is that what yesterday's performance was all about?' asked Holly.

When Lassie's owner, Mrs Dixon, arrived from Leafton Bay to collect her dog, Jaynee had raced out of the room and locked herself in her bedroom. She still hadn't come out.

'Probably starving by now,' said Holly, nibbling a bread crust. 'She missed out on dinner.'

'And Dad will miss out on his breakfast if you don't hurry with that toast.'

'Listen, brat, butt out.'

'Are you producing toast or coal?' asked Simone, as smoke started to rise from the toaster.

Holly hit the pop-up switch and two pieces of black bread leapt into view.

'I suppose I could scrape it,' said Holly.

'Butter it thick enough and he won't notice,' said Simone. While Holly did that, Simone dropped the eggs into the pan while double checking the Father's Day menu in her head.

Eggs and crispy bacon. Even crispier toast. Coffee, a slightly damp Sunday paper she'd rescued from Zip, and the big present.

Decision time. Should they give him the scarf before or after the food?

And when should he be allowed to hear Holly's poem? Before breakfast might put him off his food, and after might make him sick.

Simone glanced up at the kitchen clock. They'd leave Logan sleeping until the last minute. A four year old in the kitchen at a time like this would be like Holly on a bike. An unguided missile.

Simone flipped over the eggs as her stepmother walked into the kitchen.

'Hello, girls,' said Paula.

'Hi,' said Simone, noticing how tired Paula looked. 'Is Dad awake?'

'I slipped out of bed and left him sleeping,' said Paula.

'Would you like a coffee?' asked Holly.

Simone almost fell over, especially when Holly smiled as well.

'Yes, please, Holly,' said Paula, looking as surprised as Simone felt. 'I have a favour to ask. As Todd and I will be away most of the day, I wondered if you and Simone could... you know...?'

'Keep an eye on Jaynee?' asked Holly, smiling again. 'Sure, we'll look after her, won't we Simone?'

Simone opened her mouth in surprise and when nothing came out simply nodded. Big sister had just set a world record for niceness to the Wozinskys.

Longer than a diet but shorter than a tantrum.

Todd wandered into the kitchen and Holly poured him a cup of coffee as well. Simone shovelled the fried food onto a plate and placed it on a tray with everything else.

Stuffing her dad's brightly wrapped present under one arm, Simone picked up the tray and headed for the door with Holly close behind, poem in hand.

On the top floor, they woke up Logan who no longer had a swollen face.

'I'd forgotten what you really looked like,' Simone told him with a grin, putting down the tray and running a hand through his hair to tidy his curly brown mop.

She thrust the present into his hand. 'When I give you the nod, hand this to Dad.'

Logan examined the wrapping and gave her a funny look? 'Santa paper?'

'We're into recycling in this house,' said Simone. 'Anyway, it's the thought that counts.'

'Follow me,' said Holly, as she led the way into their father's darkened room.

With a swish, she flung back the drapes and they all shouted together, 'Happy Father's Day!'

In return, they heard a groan from under the duvet.

'I know the feeling,' said Holly. 'While you're still waking up, let me read you my special poem.'

I hope he stills wants his breakfast, thought Simone, trying hard not to listen as Holly reached the end of the third verse. That's when their father's face finally appeared from under the covers.

At least it looks like his face, thought Simone. After he's chewed his mattress and forgotten to spit it out.

'Oh, no!' she yelled. 'Dad's got the mumps!'

Her father struggled out of bed and stumbled over to the dressing table mirror. Slowly he gazed at himself, opening and closing his mouth silently, like a goldfish who'd spotted a cat.

'Get back into bed, Dad,' said Holly, fluffing up his pillows. 'I'll read you the rest of the poem later.'

Simone put down the tray and nudged Logan. 'He'll be too sore to eat anything. Just give Dad the present. That might cheer him up.'

'Happy Father's Day, Daddy,' said Logan.

'Thin-kyew,' said his father, trying to say "thank you" without moving his jaw.

'A Father's Day to remember,' said Holly.

'For everyone,' said Simone, thinking again of Todd and Jaynee.

Michael tore the Santa paper off his present and held it up. His eyes smiled while the rest of his swollen face struggled to catch up. 'It's... it's...'

'Perfect for someone with a sore neck,' said Simone, taking the multi-coloured scarf from his hand and wrapping it around his shoulders.

'But if you don't mind, Dad,' Simone added, 'we'll leave all the Father's Day kissy-kissy stuff till later. Like next week.'

Chapter Eleven

Todd jumped up from the kitchen table as Simone burst into the kitchen with the tray full of uneaten food.

'Mumps,' she said, which was enough to send Paula running from the room.

Todd glared at Simone. 'It's not fair. Why did you have to go and spoil our Father's Day?'

'Don't blame me,' said Simone. 'Blame the mumps.'

'Well, I'm still going to Leafton Bay whether Mum takes me or not.' He looked at his watch.

'You'll have to hurry,' said Simone. 'It's the only bus today.'

He looked up. How did she know about his plans?

She shrugged. 'I saw the timetable lying around. It wasn't hard to figure out.'

'Todd!' yelled his mother from the top of the stairs.

Todd pushed past Simone and into the hallway.

'Are we going to visit Dad or not?' Todd asked his mum as he glared up the staircase.

'Todd, I think we should wait until the doctor gets here and takes a look at Michael, don't you?'

'No, I don't,' said Todd, backing towards the front door. 'Why does *my* Dad have to take second place?'

'Todd, be reasonable!'

'Why should I?' he yelled. 'No one else is being reasonable.'

Todd spun on his heels, threw open the front door, raced down the steps, up the path and out the gate.

He kept glancing at his watch as he ran. It would have been quicker on his bike, but it was too late now to turn back. He tapped the bulge of his wallet in his jeans pocket. Enough money for a return bus trip. He'd checked that when he got the timetable.

Up ahead he could see the top floors of Northmall towering over the surrounding houses. Only a couple of blocks left to run.

Still touch and go to get there, but it was this bus or nothing and he couldn't let his dad down. Not for anything. Todd piled on the pace, lengthening his stride, his lungs pumping. Not much further.

Then Todd heard it. The bus - early! Only by a minute or two, but he didn't have a second to spare. Todd prayed and ran and prayed and ran, all the time gulping in big breaths, hoping they'd supercharge his legs.

He burst around the last corner and there stood the big, striped cross-country bus. The bus to Leafton Bay.

Slowly pulling away from the kerb!

'Wait!' yelled Todd, finding extra strength, pushing his legs faster, but the bus only belched smoke in reply as the tyres bit into the road.

'No!' Todd screamed, but his cry was drowned out by the sound of changing gears. The bus picked up speed and disappeared from sight.

Todd's sprint slowed to a jog and then to a walk as he stumbled over to the mall and slumped down on a wooden seat in front of a shop with a big "Father's Day Sale" sign in the window.

Not another soul in sight. The mall wouldn't open for at least an hour. Good!

Todd took off his glasses and buried his head in his hands, pushing against his eyeballs, trying to dam the tears. The most awful day he could remember since his dad died.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there when he heard a car horn beeping. He kept his eyes closed and hoped whoever it was would go away.

Then he felt a tap on his shoulder. He opened his eyes as his mother sat down on the seat beside him.

'I'm glad you missed the bus,' she told him. 'I didn't fancy having to chase you.'

'How did you know where to find me?'

'Simone told me,' said his mother.

Todd scowled. 'You said you were going to stay with... *him*.'

'No, Todd, I said I wanted to wait and hear what the doctor said, but Simone and Holly both insisted they could cope without me.'

'Why are they being so nice?' asked Todd, wiping away the last salty tear and replacing his glasses.

'I think it's a Father's Day truce,' said his mother.

Todd got to his feet. 'I wish Jaynee would come with us.'

His mother shook her head. 'So do I, Todd, but she's still locked in her bedroom. Losing Lassie - twice - has been too much for her.'

Todd had a flash of Lassie's owner, Mrs Dixon. When the woman had arrived to collect her dog, she'd been so excited and grateful. Not even tired, even though she'd driven all the way from...

'It might work,' said Todd, suddenly.

'What might work?'

'I'll tell you, Mum, on the way back to Brightside.'

'Why are we going home?'

'To get Jaynee!'

'Go away!' said Jaynee, through her closed door as Todd rattled the handle.

'Jaynee, it's me.'

'I don't care who it is, you're not coming in and I'm not coming out.'

'Poor Lassie,' said Todd, raising his voice.

There was a moment of silence behind the door before Jaynee said, 'What about Lassie?'

'Open the door and I'll tell you,' said Todd.

Todd heard the key turn in Jaynee's bedroom lock and the door swung open.

'Well?' said Jaynee, one hand poised to slam the door shut again.

'We're going visiting,' said Todd. 'Want to come?'

'I told you...'

'I know,' said Todd. 'But I've just realised something. I talk about Dad to Mum and Uncle Nick, but you talk about him to your animals.'

Jaynee blushed. 'So?'

'That's okay, Jaynee. Mum says we all need someone to talk to.'

'What were you saying about Lassie?' she asked.

'Did you tell Lassie about Dad?'

'Of course I did,' said Jaynee.

'About visiting the cemetery, and how you hate it?'

'Yes,' said Jaynee, frowning. 'Why?'

'Because the cemetery's in Leafton Bay.'

Jaynee looked puzzled, then the penny dropped. 'That's where Lassie lives!'

'We're going there now,' said Todd. 'If you came with us, you could visit Lassie as well.'

'But, Todd, I was rude to Mrs Dixon yesterday.'

'She understands,' said Todd.

'How do you know?'

'She told me,' said Todd, 'when I rang her a few minutes ago.'

Jaynee eyes opened wide, then narrowed to a slit. 'When we leave, I'll have to say goodbye to Daddy *and* Lassie.'

'Try a little goodbye,' Todd suggested. 'To both of them.'

'What's a *little* goodbye?'

'The sort of goodbye you say when you know you're coming back.'

Jaynee brightened. 'Todd, do you think Mrs Dixon would let me take Lassie to the cemetery?'

'Probably,' said Todd.

He'd already got the okay from the collie's owner, but he wanted his sister to ask

Mrs Dixon herself when they got there. The more Jaynee felt it was her idea...

'I could introduce Lassie to Daddy,' said Jaynee.

'Great,' said Todd, as Jaynee pushed past him and sprinted down the stairs.

'Mum,' yelled Jaynee, 'wait for me!'

'She's okay when she's not moaning,' said a voice behind him on the landing.

Todd swung around and saw Simone standing there.

'I mean okay for a Wozinsky,' Simone added with a grin.

'How's your Dad?' asked Todd.

'Still waiting for the doctor. Holly's reading him the rest of her Father's Day poem. It's longer than a TV mini-series.'

'Sisters can be a pain sometimes,' said Todd, 'but I'd miss Jaynee if she wasn't around.'

'I suppose I'd miss Holly, too,' said Simone.

'Simone!' yelled Holly from their father's bedroom. 'Get back in here and listen to the rest of this!'

'No doubt about it,' said Simone. 'I'd miss her all right. Like a hole in the head!'

Simone's laughter followed Todd down the stairs as he headed for the front door and the car waiting out front with his mum and sister.

Happy Father's Day, Dad, he thought.

Wherever you are!

The End