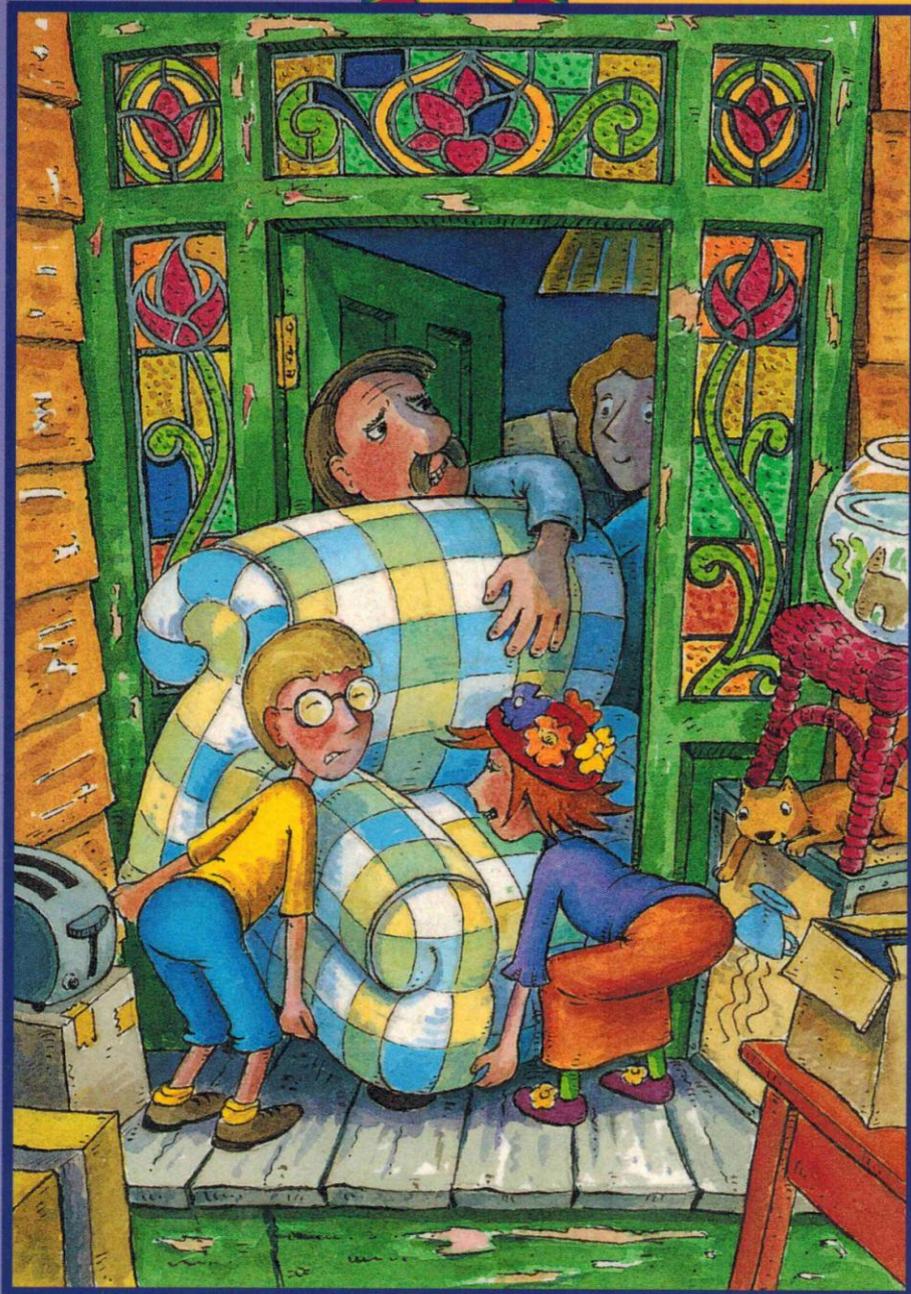


TOM BRADLEY

TRADING

# SPACES

The Brightside Bunch



FREE ebook - Book 3 of 6

## Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Copyright details & more FREE ebooks .....                      | 3  |
| What the critics said about 'The Brightside Bunch' series ..... | 4  |
| What this story is about.....                                   | 4  |
| Chapter One .....   | 5  |
| Chapter Two .....   | 11 |
| Chapter Three.....  | 14 |
| Chapter Four.....   | 17 |
| Chapter Five .....  | 20 |
| Chapter Six.....  | 23 |
| Chapter Seven.....  | 26 |
| Chapter Eight.....  | 29 |
| Chapter Nine.....   | 34 |
| Chapter Ten.....  | 37 |
| Chapter Eleven .....  | 40 |
| Chapter Twelve.....   | 43 |

## Copyright details & more FREE ebooks

First published in 1995 by HarperCollins New Zealand

Text © Tom Bradley 1995

Cover artwork © Stephen Axelsen 1995

This edition © Tom Bradley 2019

ISBN 978-0-9951226-2-8

Thanks to HarperCollins New Zealand for their permission to reproduce the original print-edition cover and to Stephen Axelsen for the use of his artwork.

This ebook edition of 'Trading Spaces' is FREE for educational purposes, or personal reading pleasure, but must not be sold, hired, edited, reprinted or modified in any way.

You can download more of Tom's FREE ebooks at [www.bradley.nz](http://www.bradley.nz)

Note to teachers: for classroom use, you're welcome to download a single copy and share the file with your students.

### **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**

(Third book in the series)

The move is finally on for Simone Freeman and Todd Wozinsky, both 10, and the rest of their blended family.

Their new home, Brightside, has plenty of room for everyone. But it also has peeling paint and worn carpet. And when it starts to rain, they suddenly realise the roof leaks.

But things are about to get worse and moving day ends with a family emergency.

## Chapter One

'Simone,' yelled Todd Wozinsky, banging on the wall between their bedrooms. 'Have you seen my soccer ball?'

'Yes,' Simone Freeman yelled back as she dangled upside down from her top bunk. Why did people always ask dumb questions when she was trying to relax?

'Well,' yelled Todd. 'Where is it?'

'I didn't say I knew where the ball was,' said Simone. 'Just that I'd seen it. It's that round brown leather thing.'

Nothing like the rock poster on her wall. Seen the wrong way up, it looked weird. How did the drummer keep his kit on the ceiling? Why didn't those giant speakers crash down and through the floor?

Todd suddenly appeared in her doorway. 'Can't you *ever* be serious?'

'That's your job,' said Simone.

She began swinging herself backwards and forwards, gathering speed, ready to flip back up onto the bunk.

'You look like a monkey when you do that,' said Todd.

'You're confusing me with Holly,' said Simone.

'You two don't look like sisters.'

'That's 'cos she's a gorilla.'

'This whole place is a zoo,' said Todd.

'Only since you Wozinskys barged in,' said Simone, flipping herself upright. 'And talking of zoos, here comes one of the keepers.'

'What are you two arguing about?' asked Todd's mother, Paula, poking her head in the doorway.

'The price of bananas,' said Simone.

'You two haven't got time to fight.'

'We've always got time for that,' said Simone.

'Not today,' said Paula. 'How about a truce until after the big move?'

The house move was getting closer by the day, Simone realised. On Saturday, the new blended family would finally take over their new-but-ancient home, Brightside. No more sharing bedrooms with her stropky 14 year old sister, Holly. Or Todd's eight year old sister, Jaynee.

'Mu-um,' said Jaynee, joining them, clutching an outsized bundle of fur. 'Carmen's looking a bit sick.'

'Then stop strangling her,' said Simone.

'She likes cuddles,' said Jaynee. 'Your dog likes them, too.'

'Zip also likes potato crisps,' said Simone, 'but not 10 times a day.'

On cue, the Freeman's dog waddled in.

'If his stomach gets any bigger,' said Simone, 'his paws won't touch the ground.'

'He's going to have fun with the stairs at Brightside,' said Todd, polishing his glasses.

'Zip should go on one of Holly's diets,' said Simone. 'Which one is it at the moment?

Prunes and jelly beans?'

'Holly's big boned,' said Paula. 'She'll never be skinny like you, Simone.'

Nor you, thought Simone. For an oldie of 38, Simone's new stepmother was in good shape. Great shape compared to Simone's father.

'Holly should become a vegetarian,' said Jaynee. 'Like me.'

'She wouldn't want to be like you,' said Simone.

'Why not?'

'Go and look in the mirror.'

'I was talking about Holly to Mrs Naidu this morning,' said Paula.

Ameeta Naidu taught English with Paula at Green Hill High and would soon be their new neighbour as well.

'Ameeta said Holly's making good progress,' Paula continued. 'Says she's a pleasure to have around.'

'Then there must be *two* Holly Freemans,' said Simone. 'And we've got the not-so-nice one.'

Paula grinned. 'It may have something to do with Holly being elected president of the school's Young Writers Club.'

'A club would be more use than a pencil the way *she* writes,' said Simone.

'Enough of that,' said Paula. 'You three get going.'

As Jaynee lowered Carmen to the floor, the big ball of fur unwound, hissed at Zip, and the two overweight animals took off up the passage.

'Gran can run faster than either of them,' said Simone.

Paula steered them towards the front door. 'I'll detour past school to pick up Holly after her meeting and meet you at Brightside. Michael will be pleased to see reinforcements. There's still a mountain of work to do.'

\*\*\*

'On your marks, get set...'

said Simone as they assembled on the footpath with their bikes.

She pushed down on the pedal with one foot and rolled her machine forward.

'Hey,' said Todd. 'That's cheating. This isn't a fountain race.'

Simone grinned to herself as she remembered how Todd had tumbled into Hatchwood's

fountain the day her dad and Paula got married.

'And don't go too fast,' said Jaynee. 'Mum said you're not allowed to lose me.'

Why not, thought Simone. Then there'd only be *two* Wozinskys to get rid of.

She rolled her bike forward another metre.

'Now you're in front of the line,' said Todd.

'What do you want?' asked Simone. 'A starter's pistol and a flag?'

'Races should be fair,' said Todd. 'Someone has to say go.'

'Okay,' said Simone, 'Go!' and she took off up the road.

When she looked back, Jaynee hadn't moved, but Todd had. He was pretty fast for a 10 year old boy.

But she was *super* quick for a 10 year old girl and she'd never let him beat her. At anything.

And he wouldn't even compete in the one type of contest she really loved. Tree climbing. Todd just looked at trees and turned as green as a leaf. Simone was still trying to figure that one out.

She almost fell off her bike as Todd pulled level.

'I'm gonna win this one,' he yelled.

'Never,' she shouted back, drawing away again as she pumped her pedals full steam. Any more steam and her head would blow off. Someone would find it lying in the gutter and think a car had skittled a hedgehog with braces.

That's what Simone's father said she looked like since she'd cut her hair again. It would have been even shorter if his electric shaver hadn't given up. No one told her green hair gel would clog up the motor. Next time she borrowed his shaver, she'd use a different colour.

Todd drew level again and they swung into Yardley Street neck and neck.

'Todd!' she yelled, trying to distract him, but he took no notice. He was getting used to her tricks.

Simone put her head down for one last burst.

I'm going to win, I'm going to win, she told herself as they flashed past number 11.

'I won,' yelled Todd, screaming to a halt outside number 13.

'No, you didn't,' Simone yelled back. 'Dead heat.'

Jaynee arrived several minutes behind, her blonde ponytail streaming out behind her.

'That wasn't funny,' she told them.

'I got a laugh,' said Simone.

'Well, I almost got lost.'

'*Almost* doesn't count,' said Simone. 'Want to try again?'

'No,' said Jaynee. 'I want to explore the house some more. Find a place for Carmen and

Zip to sleep.'

'Not together,' Simone said. 'You already tried that and Zip's still got the scars.'

At least Zip had plenty of places to hide around the new property. He could run away over the paddocks at the back. Straight up into the bush-covered hills, or if he kept going, up into the mountain range behind.

Not likely, she decided. Not without someone to carry him home.

'This'll be a neat spot to live,' said Todd.

'Great location,' said Simone. 'Pity about the house.'

The two storied ex-farmhouse with the name "Brightside" carved into the front gate would be home soon to three Freemans and four Wozinskys.

'This place used to belong to The Addams Family,' said Todd. 'That's what the kids at school reckon.'

'They'd be too proud to live here,' said Simone.

'The kids at school?'

'No,' said Simone. 'The Addams Family.'

Todd peered through the line of trees at the brand new house next door. 'That would have been better.'

Simone nodded. Number 11 had almost been theirs. They'd signed the deal to buy it, but then Simone's dad lost his job. The loss of one income meant they couldn't pay off the big mortgage. That forced them to find something cheaper.

'Hey,' said Simone. 'It still beats living in a tent. And what's number 11 got that Brightside hasn't?'

'How long have you got?'

'Just 'cos number 11 is brand new, ' said Simone, 'and the paint hasn't peeled off, and the driveway hasn't cracked, and...'

She paused. 'I see what you mean.'

If Brightside was a car, thought Simone, someone would have towed it to the wreckers long ago.

The real estate agent kept telling them it was solid enough. Nothing, he told them laughing, that couldn't be fixed with a bit of tender loving care and a million dollars!

Big joke. The Freeman-Wozinskys didn't even have a spare *ten* dollars. Every cent they had was wrapped up in Brightside.

Simone pushed open the gate and they wheeled their bikes towards the front door.

'Watch the cracks in the path,' Simone told Jaynee. 'If you fall down one of those, you'll end up in China.'

She looked up at the roof which seemed to stop where the sky began. Higher than most

of the trees that lined the boundary with number 11, but not as high as the tallest tree, Godzilla!

She'd named it Godzilla because it looked exactly like the movie monster with two giant arms sticking out waiting to grab someone. Hopefully someone named Wozinsky.

'Want a quick climb before we start work?' she asked Todd, knowing the answer she'd get.

He shook his head. 'Not today.'

What was it with this boy and trees?

'When?' she asked.

'Never.'

'It's only a tree,' she said. 'You're just chicken.'

Although Todd was brave enough to share a bedroom with Simone's four year old brother, Logan, who not only had asthma, but sometimes wet his bed.

Todd shrugged, but Simone noticed his face changing colour. 'Climbing trees doesn't interest me, okay?'

'Suit yourself,' said Simone, 'but I'm going up.'

In seconds, she sat halfway up Godzilla, gazing down on Todd who looked like a toy soldier.

Then she did what she'd been practising on the bunks. Hooked her legs around a branch and swung back and over, like a catcher in a trapeze act, hanging head down.

'I'm hungry,' she called down to Todd. 'Got any food on you?'

'Like what?' he called back. 'Bananas?' He checked his pockets. 'Only half a chocolate biscuit. Yuck, it's melting.'

'I'm not that hungry,' she told him. As he tossed the biscuit away, she turned her attention to the topsy-turvy world in front of her.

Nothing looked the same upside down. Even Holly. Simone loved swinging from her top bunk and watching her sister's wrong-way-up frown become a smile.

Of course, upside down smiles turned into scowls, but despite what Mrs Naidu said, Holly didn't smile much.

At least not when Todd's mother was around.

But if the Freeman kids had to have a stepmother - only until their dad came to his senses - then Paula was okay.

At least she wasn't the fire-breathing-dragon stepmother Simone had read about in fairy tales.

'Simone!'

Her father wasn't a dragon either, but he could produce a dragon's roar.

'Simone, come down from that tree. Now!'

## Chapter Two

Simone hung there, upside down. 'Dad, please, just a few minutes more.'

'Now, Simone. There are still a million things to do.'

Up till a few days before, Michael Freeman had been a collar-and-tie wearing accountant for a local company. Since he'd been made redundant, he'd slipped into sweatshirts and jeans.

Slipped with some difficulty, thought Simone, going by his current outfit.

The jeans had been loose fitting when she'd given them to him at Christmas. He kept promising to join a gym, but never got around to it. The latest excuse was that work around Brightside would get him fit.

Simone reckoned to do that, he'd have to swing a paintbrush until both arms dropped off.

'Do you like my new sweatshirt?' he asked Simone as he ushered the three of them into the house.

Simone only grunted. Why tell the truth and hurt his feelings? She looked at the sweatshirt again. Could this be the same father who always kidded Simone about her taste in clothes?

At least the City Mission sold stuff she could wear out in public without looking completely ridiculous.

'Paula gave it to me,' he explained. 'To go with my new duties.'

Simone bit her tongue. She could live with the colour, but the words HOUSE TRAINED across the front made her dad look like a sack of kitty litter.

'Just don't wear it to a job interview,' said Simone.

'What interview?' he replied. 'Who'd employ an over-the-hill old man?'

'The same people who'd hire you.'

He smiled. 'Thanks for the thought... I think.'

Simone knew her dad was only 40 and that wasn't ancient. Not really. Her *Gran* was ancient.

'So,' said her dad, 'what took you so long getting here?'

'Jaynee was on a go-slow,' said Simone.

'I was not!' said Jaynee. 'They wouldn't wait for me.'

'I don't want to hear this,' said Michael. 'There's too much to do before we move in on Saturday. I get depressed just thinking about it.'

Take the sweatshirt off then, thought Simone. You'll feel a lot better.

'The next job,' said her father, wiping a cobweb off his moustache, 'is to move out some of this old furniture.'

Stuff that had once belonged to Mrs Redmond, Simone's friend, who'd lived at Brightside all her life. After the funeral, the old woman's daughter had sold the house with everything in it.

Simone went up to the biggest sofa and gave it a shove. 'This thing weighs a tonne. We'll need a truck to move it. Or Holly.'

'That sofa stays,' said her father. 'We're keeping some of the other stuff as well. We'll need it. Our furniture will only fill half this place.'

'We should have kept *our* furniture,' said Todd. 'It was much better than any of this.'

Here we go again, thought Simone. More grizzles about what the Wozinskys gave up to move in with us.

'Daddy, Daddy!' came a voice from above. Logan Freeman's big brown eyes peered down at them, framed by a mop of curly brown hair.

'If you need to go,' said his father, 'use the one down the end of the hall.'

Hooray, thought Simone. One big plus of moving to Brightside. It had *two* bathrooms. Seven of them trying to exist in the Freeman's old house had been chaos. A disaster. Non-stop fighting, yelling, screaming, punching.

And that was only her and Holly!

'Woo, woo, woo!' yelled Logan, waving his arms and running around the top floor, in and out of rooms, banging doors.

'Logan, stop that noise,' yelled his father.

'Getting under your feet?' asked Simone.

'It's worse than having Zip around,' said her father. 'Why is kindergarten only in the mornings?'

'Logan will be dynamite on Saturday,' said Simone.

'He will be if he keeps running outside on his own.'

'We could tie him up,' said Simone.

'I've got a better idea,' her father said. 'On Saturday, *you* look after Logan.'

'But, Dad...'

'And keep him out from under everyone's feet. He nearly tripped me while I was vacuuming the stairs.'

Vacuuming? Simone's father had been using a vacuum cleaner? She was impressed. Normally, her dad was useless with domestic things. He'd hired a housekeeper when Simone's mother left home and went walkabout.

Michael Freeman obviously deserved his HOUSE TRAINED sweatshirt. And Paula deserved a sweatshirt of her own with PATIENT PAULA written across it.

The first person in history, thought Simone, to teach dad which end of the vacuum

cleaner sucks and which end blows.

'But what have you been vacuuming?' Simone asked him. 'This carpet's nothing but holes.'

'It is not,' he said. 'Just a bit threadbare in places.'

'We had much better carpet in our old flat,' said Todd.

'We've got good carpet at our house, too,' said Simone.

Except for the bit in the lounge where Zip tried to bury a bone. To be fair, most of the damage was done when he came back later and tried to dig it up.

'Let's face it,' Michael told them, 'Brightside is a bit rundown, but at least you'll each have your own bedroom.'

'Yes!' said Simone.

'I already *had* my own bedroom in our flat,' said Todd.

'Then everyone should be happy,' said Michael. 'And don't fret about the carpet. We'll replace it when we have some spare money.'

Simone shook her head. Spare money would be as rare as a smile from Holly. And it would be like that for as far into the future as she could imagine. At least a couple of months.

'What do you want us to do?' Todd asked his stepfather.

'Take your pick,' said Michael, pointing to a pile of cloths and mops and brooms and buckets.

'I've got an idea, Dad,' said Simone. 'While you and Todd and Jaynee clean inside, I'll clean outside.'

'Clean *what* outside?'

'Godzilla's branches.'

He held out a bucket and brush. 'I've got a better idea. You clean the toilets. Both of them.'

### Chapter Three

It's certainly the biggest house I've ever been in, thought Todd. And this fireplace is as big as a soccer goal.

He knelt on the stone surround, shovelling damp and musty ashes into a bucket.

'Poo,' said Jaynee, standing beside him and holding her nose. 'That stinks.'

'Anyone who takes a cat to bed can't be that fussy,' he said. 'Look, Jaynee, don't just stand there watching me. Do something useful.'

Next time Todd looked around, Jaynee had disappeared. He filled the bucket nearly to the brim and stood up.

'Jaynee!'

'Out here.'

He followed the voice and walked across the entrance hall into what had once been the front porch.

'Zip and Carmen could sleep in here,' said Jaynee.

'No way. Mum's gonna turn this into a TV Room.'

'Zip and Carmen like TV.'

Todd frowned. 'They're not getting a vote as well.'

Since the two families had combined, the only thing worse than scrapping over one bathroom had been scrapping over one TV.

'Why do I have to miss the wild life documentaries?' asked Jaynee. 'Simone's always hogging the set.'

Especially for stunt shows where people jumped off 20 storey buildings onto a pile of cardboard boxes.

Holly had different tastes. She went crazy if she couldn't watch the newest mini-series. She said that because they were based on mega-selling books, it was important study for her own writing career.

'I'd just like to be able to watch more soccer,' said Todd.

Logan wasn't fussy. He'd watch anything as long as they were cartoons.

Todd's mother and stepfather never seemed to have time to watch anything. Just as well. Otherwise they'd have to line up and wait their turn.

'Maybe we can get our bedrooms wired for TV,' said Jaynee.

'Good idea,' said Todd. 'The wire could help hold up the walls.'

'Todd,' yelled Michael from upstairs. 'How's that fireplace going?'

'Jaynee's on another go slow!' he called back.

'I'll tell Mum on you,' said Jaynee.

'And I'll tell her on you, if you don't go and empty that bucket.'

Todd led the way back into the lounge and scooped a last shovelful of ash on top.

'It's too heavy now,' said Jaynee.

'Stop moaning. Take it down and empty it behind the shed.'

As Jaynee left, muttering under her breath, Todd looked more closely at the room.

My whole soccer team could play in here, he decided. And still have room for a few hundred spectators.

He sighed as he looked around. The ancient glass chandelier above his head was like the rest of the house and had seen better days. It hung from the fanciest carved plaster ceiling he'd ever seen.

A ceiling only slightly less cracked than the front path, and with slightly less peeling paint than the rest of the house.

Todd wandered back through the hallway into what had once been an office. Maybe his mother would take it over and use it as a place to mark school work.

She'd have something planned for it. Nothing surer. Paula was the new family's resident organiser. It drove the Freemans crazy, especially Holly.

Next door to the office stood the old formal dining room. As Todd wandered in, a mouse scuttled across the floor and into a small hole in the skirting boards.

We should give this room to Jaynee, he decided. She can adopt the mouse. Of course, Carmen might object. No, he decided, their cat was too lazy to care.

Why was Jaynee taking forever to get back from emptying the ashes? Had she slipped back into the house while he wasn't looking?

'Jaynee!' he yelled up the stairs.

'She's not here,' called Simone. 'But when she comes back, send her up to help me. You should see this toilet. Yuck.'

At the top of the stairs, Todd saw Simone's father attacking the walls with a broom to get rid of the cobwebs and the heaps of spiders that lived in the house.

But why go to so much trouble? Todd wondered. He could just flash his silly HOUSE TRAINED sweatshirt at them and any spider would run a mile.

'Todd,' came a hiss from the direction of the back door, and a beckoning finger. 'Quick.'

'Jaynee, why are you whispering?' he asked as he walked towards her.

'Shush,' she said, putting her fingers to her lips and grabbing his arm with her other hand. 'Come with me.'

'But we haven't finished...'

'This is more important.'

She led him across the overgrown back lawn to the shed as rundown as the house, but as large as a double garage.

Not that they needed parking space for two cars. Simone's father had lost his company car when he lost his job.

'What's the big secret?' asked Todd.

Jaynee dragged the door of the shed open and beckoned him in. The interior was already full of stuff they'd moved out of the house and the small windows made it very gloomy.

Jaynee bent down, scooped something up, and held it out for him to see.

A kitten!

'Where did you find that?' asked Todd.

'Round the back when I dumped the ashes,' she replied. 'I've made him a bed on this chair, but he's starving. He needs some food.'

'And I know where to get some,' said Todd, dashing out the door. In a few seconds he returned.

'I knew I'd been carrying it around for some reason,' he told his sister, holding out the melted chocolate biscuit for the kitten to lick and nibble.

Jaynee held the kitten tightly.

'Pity you can't keep it,' said Todd.

Her eyes flashed in the gloom. 'Says who?'

'Logan's asthma.'

'Why does everyone keep blaming Carmen?'

'Because Logan's asthma only started up again after we moved in,' Todd explained. 'The Freemans reckon Logan's allergic to cats.'

'But this is just a wee baby kitten.'

'Which will grow into a big cat,' said Todd. 'Anyway, Zip's got enough problems.'

'I can't leave him,' Jaynee protested. 'He'll die of starvation.'

Todd rummaged in his pocket. 'I've run out of food. Look, we'll find the kitten another home.'

'Whose side are you on?' she asked, cuddling the kitten so tightly it started to cough.

Todd suddenly felt guilty. Simone and Holly fought worse than Carmen and Zip, but at least they knew which team they were on. The Freeman team.

It's important for us Wozinskys to stick together, too, thought Todd. The way we stuck together after dad got killed.

'Okay, we'll keep the kitten,' Todd told his sister. 'Lock it in the shed until we move in on Saturday, but we'll need to find it some more food. And milk.'

## Chapter Four

Todd heard the explosion as he and Jaynee reached the back steps.

'You can't make me!'

He arrived in the kitchen at the same time as Simone and her father to find Holly Freeman marching around the room waving her arms.

'Look, Holly,' said Paula Wozinsky, her voice low, 'I'm not trying to make you *do* anything. I just assumed you'd be here. The way I had it planned...'

'Stop trying to organise my life,' screamed Holly.

Michael Freeman stepped in between them. 'What's going on?'

Paula shook her head. 'Don't ask me. Ask Holly. She's got the problem.'

'I'm not the one with the problem. It's you.'

'Whoa,' said her father. 'Stop right there.'

'Something's come up,' Holly explained. 'I can't be here on Saturday to help with the move.'

'Out of the question,' said her father. 'We've got to be out of our place by mid-morning. It's all hands to the pump.'

'Vasanti's father is hiring *real* removal people,' said Holly.

The Naidus were also moving on Saturday. Into number 11 next door.

'You know how tight our money is,' said Paula, quietly.

Holly glared at her. 'Even tighter since *you* lot came.'

'Holly,' said her father, 'I won't tell you again.'

'But Dad, it's an all day picnic for the Young Writer's Club.' Holly turned to glare at Paula. 'You're supposed to be a teacher. You should know how important this is.'

'I do,' said Paula, 'but so is this move.'

Holly turned back to her father. 'How come Vasanti's Dad doesn't treat her like a slave?'

'Because, unlike us,' said Michael, 'Keval Naidu doesn't need his daughter's unpaid labour.'

Holly scowled. 'Don't expect me to stay around this dumb place if you're going to start playing the heavy father.'

'You have another option?' he asked, quietly.

'I could go and live with Mum!'

'If you can find her,' muttered Simone.

In the awkward silence Paula said, 'We picked up some nibbles from the hot bread shop and some fresh milk. Someone put the jug on.'

'I'll do it,' said Todd, taking the food and milk from his mother and winking at Jaynee.

'Good boy,' said Michael. 'I'm famished.'

Paula pulled a sheet of paper from her briefcase. 'When that's ready, we should have a family conference and finalise who sleeps where.'

Five minutes later, Todd sank his teeth into a sticky bun topped with thick icing. He noticed Jaynee breaking off hunks of hers and wrapping them in a tissue before shoving them in her pocket. Kitten rations.

As Todd expected, his mother had drawn up a plan of the new house. The seven of them sat around in a circle in the lounge, while Paula pointed to various rooms, and Logan picked at the holes in the carpet.

'If everyone agrees,' said Paula, 'this will stay the lounge.'

'Does anyone want my opinion?' asked Holly, stuffing the rest of her bun into her mouth.

'When your mouth's empty,' said her father.

'Like your head,' said Simone to Holly.

Paula pretended not to hear them. 'The kitchen's huge, certainly big enough to cook and eat in.'

'Which means we don't need a separate dining room,' said Michael. 'That leaves two spare rooms downstairs, plus the five bedrooms.'

'It would make sense if we live downstairs and all sleep upstairs,' said Paula.

'There aren't enough bedrooms up there for everyone,' said Holly, 'and I'm not sharing. Never again.'

She grabbed a second sticky bun and shoved it in her mouth.

'I only bought one for each of us,' said Paula, gently.

'Then this will make up for the food I miss out on at the Young Writers Club picnic, won't it!'

'It's okay,' said Michael. 'That can be my bun Holly's eating. I'm going on a diet.'

'Since when?' asked Paula.

'Since I ran out of puff chasing spiders.'

Holly rammed the rest of the bun in her mouth and swallowed. 'Now, if everyone will listen. I want to sleep downstairs.'

'Don't be difficult,' said her father.

'No, it makes sense,' said Simone. 'If Holly eats any more buns, she won't be able to *get* up the stairs.'

'I want to be away from everyone else,' said Holly.

'But we'll be living downstairs,' Paula reminded her.

'Not at night,' said Holly. 'When you lot go to bed, I'll have the whole bottom floor to myself.'

Not quite to yourself, thought Todd, as he watched Holly point to the old dining room.

The mouse he'd spotted could keep her company.

## Chapter Five

Simone balanced one end of the partly dismantled top bunk while Holly held the other and Jaynee scrambled around under their feet, trying to find Carmen.

'Gran picked a good weekend to go out of town,' said Simone.

'If she'd been around, she could have taken *my* place,' said Holly.

Simone spotted Logan. Good. She had to remember to keep an eye on him.

Jaynee finally found Carmen under a pile of sheets and snatched her up.

'Leave that dumb cat alone.'

'He's not dumb,' said Jaynee.

'He can't catch mice,' said Simone, 'and that makes him dumb.'

Simone saw Holly shiver. Big sister didn't like mice. They gave her the creeps.

'Drop the cat and give us a hand with this heavy stuff,' Holly told Jaynee.

'Carmen *is* the heavy stuff,' said Simone.

Jaynee glared at Holly. 'Carmen will get trampled on if I leave her here.'

Simone grinned. Holly tangling with Carmen would be like a sumo wrestling match.

She decided not to say it, otherwise she might get one end of the bunk in her mouth and money was too tight to rewire her teeth. This was no time for a fight.

The fight could wait until they'd got the bunk out the door and onto the trailer.

'You hate Carmen, don't you?' Jaynee asked Holly, hugging the oversize cat to her chest.

'I just don't like Wozinskys,' said Holly. 'And that ugly moggy's given my little brother asthma again.'

'Says who?'

'Says me. I told Dad to get rid of her, but then your precious mother stuck her nose in and stopped him. Maybe Dad should get rid of *her*, instead.'

'Mu-um!' yelled Jaynee, clutching Carmen and fleeing the room, 'Holly's being mean, again.'

Simone almost lost her grip on the bunk as Holly gave her end a sharp tug.

'Take it easy,' said Simone. 'I'm on your side.'

'Since when?'

'Most of the time.'

'I didn't ask those kids to come and live with us,' said Holly. 'And as for their dumb mother...'

'Paula's not that bad,' said Simone. 'It could be worse. Dad could have married an old witch.'

'Who said he didn't?' asked Holly.

'Paula's not that old,' said Simone, and they both laughed.

'I really hate it when that *woman* tries to organise my life,' said Holly. 'I'm 14 and I've got a mind of my own.'

'And the speed of a turtle,' said her father, walking in on the end of the conversation. 'Hurry up, will you? This is the last load.'

And then, thought Simone, it will be time to lock the front door and say goodbye to the house I grew up in. The house I've lived in for 10 years. The only home I've ever known. Where I'd still live if the Wozinskys hadn't squeezed us out.

'Why should I be the only slave?' Holly asked her father, dropping the end of the bed. 'Get Todd in here to help us.'

'Todd's organising the tarpaulin for the trailer,' he replied. 'We could do with some rain, but not while we're unloading.'

'I hope Brightside doesn't leak,' said Simone.

'Dry as a bone,' he replied.

'*Everything's* dry at the moment,' Simone reminded him.

Hatchwood had just been through its worst dry spell in years.

'No worries,' said her father, 'I asked the real estate agent to take another look around and he assures me Brightside is pretty solid for its age.'

'That's what I keep saying about you,' said Paula, chuckling as she passed by the room, 'but I'll get you to the gym yet.'

Simone felt a niggling doubt. 'But, Dad, did the agent check the roof? Old houses...'

'Stop worrying about the roof,' said her father, 'and start pumping those arm muscles. We've got a new home to move into.'

\*\*\*

As their father backed the trailer down Brightside's drive, Holly nudged Simone and pointed through the trees to where a fleet of removal trucks and a silver Mercedes sat in the drive next door.

'Look,' said Holly. 'What did I tell you? Vasanti's family have got an army of people helping them move in.'

Simone looked up at her big tree. 'If Godzilla was human, he'd be stronger than *two* armies.'

'A tree that comes to life,' said Holly, her eyes brightening. 'I could turn that idea into a story.'

'Just don't turn it into a poem,' said Simone.

She rated Holly's poems as several floors below the pits.

'Look out, Dad,' cried Holly, running off and leaving Simone, as a wheel of the trailer

smacked into a piece of broken paving, diverting the whole load onto the overgrown front lawn.

In jungle movies they lose whole expeditions in grass shorter than this, thought Simone. If dad and the trailer aren't back in a week, I'd better report it.

She could see Logan standing on the front steps of the house, watching. As long as the four year old didn't wander off, she was sure he'd be okay.

Then she spotted another pair of eyes watching the trailer. Eyes belonging to a small, furry creature, peeking out from behind a bush.

Simone felt someone standing beside her.

'Cute, isn't he?' asked Jaynee. 'I locked him in the shed, but he got out.'

'You *know* that little bucket of fluff?'

'He's mine,' said Jaynee. 'I found him.'

'Well, get rid of him,' said Simone. 'And quick. Dad will go off his rocker if he finds another cat around the house.'

'I suppose that means you're going to tell him about Digby.'

'Digby?' asked Simone. 'That little midget is called Digby?'

'Better than Godzilla.'

Yes, thought Simone, but I don't take Godzilla to bed at night.

'Simone!' her father called, reappearing from the long grass. 'Don't stand there all day. Give us a hand to unload. Those rain clouds are getting thicker by the minute.'

## Chapter Six

It was late afternoon when Simone poked her head in Holly's new bedroom and asked, 'Have you seen Logan anywhere?'

One minute he'd been there, and the next he'd gone. Simone assumed he'd latched on to one of the others, but looking after her little brother was her job, so she thought she'd better check. Just in case.

'I haven't seen him,' said Holly. 'And Logan's the least of my worries.'

Holly spoke from on top of her bed, her feet tucked under her, a rolled up newspaper in one hand.

'Still waiting for the return of Mighty Mouse?' asked Simone.

'It's not funny,' said Holly. 'You know I hate mice. Are you sure you didn't know anything about this?'

'Not until you started screaming,' said Simone.

'I don't believe you.'

'Would I lie to you?' asked Simone.

'If you could get away with it,' said Holly. 'I want to know why the mouse had to choose my room.'

Simone grinned. 'Maybe he smelled a rat.'

She ducked as the newspaper whacked into the doorjamb, then sprinted upstairs to the master bedroom where Paula had dumped piles of fancy linen onto an expensive new queen size bed.

Paula would know where Logan was. She liked Logan. And he liked her.

'Give me a hand with these sheets, will you, Simone? I thought I was fit, but this move has been a killer. I'm exhausted.'

I wouldn't mind a bed like this one day, thought Simone, grabbing one edge of the bottom sheet and tucking it in. Her father had bought it for his new bride as a gift - when he still had a job.

'This linen's nice,' said Simone, running her hands over the duvet cover. Then she remembered why she'd come upstairs. 'I'm looking for Logan.'

'Not here,' said Paula. 'He's probably avoiding me.'

'Why?'

'I almost broke my neck tripping over him on the stairs. I got such a fright I yelled at him. His face dropped and he took off like a shot.'

'If Gran had been in town, we could have taken him over there for the day,' said Simone, fluffing up a pillow before leaving. 'I'll be pleased when this is over.'

'So will I,' said Paula.

So Logan wasn't with Paula either. She tracked down her father and Todd. No luck. Then it struck her. Logan would be with Jaynee and she could see Jaynee through a window, carrying bits and pieces out to the shed.

Logan wouldn't be far away.

Paula called her back upstairs to help with something so Simone didn't think again about her little brother until much later.

It was getting dark when she ran into Jaynee near the back door feeding Carmen and Zip.

'Where's Fluffbucket?' asked Simone.

'His name is Digby,' said Jaynee. 'And he's disappeared.'

'Probably playing with Logan.'

'Wherever *he* is,' said Jaynee.

Simone felt a little niggle run up and down her spine. 'Hasn't Logan been with you for the last hour or so?'

'No.'

The niggle got bigger. Logan wasn't with anyone.

'Simone, I told you to keep an eye on him,' said her father as the family assembled in the lounge.

'I got distracted,' said Simone.

'My fault,' said Paula. 'I asked Simone to help me.'

'He can't be far away,' said Holly.

'He could be anywhere,' said Simone, remembering the long grass. 'You could hide an army of pre-schoolers around this place.'

'Then we'd better spread out and look for him,' said her father.

'Inside first,' said Paula. 'Then let's assemble at the front gate and work towards the back of the section.'

A quick search confirmed their fears.

'No trace of him,' said Michael, sounding really worried, as they reassembled in the lounge.

Outside, the last of the daylight was fading fast and without being asked, Todd raced through the house turning on lights.

'I shouldn't have yelled at him,' Paula said to Simone.

'You yelled at him?' asked Holly. 'You *yelled* at my little brother?'

'He tripped me. Gave me such a fright.'

'You had no right to yell at him,' Holly insisted. 'You're not his mother.'

'Holly, not now,' said her father.

Holly pointed at Paula. 'But it's *her* fault he's gone missing!'

'Logan's not exactly missing,' said Michael. 'Just... misplaced.'

Simone cut in. 'I'll bet he's wandered over to the Naidus.'

'Of course,' said Paula, sounding relieved. 'All that activity next door would attract him. He's probably getting under their feet.'

'Want me to go and get him?' asked Simone.

Her father shook his head. 'You've already lost him once today.'

'I'll ring the Naidus,' said Paula.

'Can't you even be bothered walking next door?' asked Holly, crossing her arms. 'You'd do it if you lost one of *your* kids.'

'Holly, knock it off,' said her father. 'Forget the phone. I'll go myself.'

'I'll come with you,' said Paula, 'or I'll never hear the end of it.'

'And I'm coming, too,' said Holly. 'Vasanti should be back. She can tell me about the wonderful Young Writers Club picnic I missed. For this!'

## Chapter Seven

'What a day,' Todd said to Simone as Michael, Paula, and Holly headed off through the dark to number 11.

'I'm pleased we found him,' said Simone.

'That's if Logan *is* next door.'

Simone shrugged. 'Where else could he be?'

Jaynee wandered outside and Simone vanished into the kitchen for a drink. Todd looked around for something else to do. He'd tidied his bedroom enough to see his bed. The rest could wait till tomorrow.

The fireplace still glistened from his work the other day. The way the temperature kept dropping, it could be a good night to test-drive it.

'Todd! Todd!' yelled Jaynee, racing into the lounge and grabbing his sleeve. 'Come quick!'

She dragged him outside and over to the tree Simone had christened Godzilla.

'Up there,' she pointed. 'I've found Digby. He's stuck up in those branches.'

The only light on the tree came from the upper windows of both houses, giving a ghostly floodlight effect, full of shadows.

'I can't see a thing,' he said, taking off his glasses and giving them a rub. 'Are you sure it's a cat? It's not meowing.'

'Digby's too frightened to make a sound.'

'Carmen's always climbing trees,' he said, replacing his glasses and flicking the curly wire ends around his ears. 'Cats come down where they're ready.'

'Not Digby,' said Jaynee. 'He's just a little kitten. He'll stay up there and die. I know he will.'

'Then climb up and get him,' said Todd.

'I'm not going up there in the dark,' said Jaynee.

Todd went numb. 'You want *me* to go?'

'Who else?' asked Jaynee. 'Unless you want me to ask Simone?'

'Ask me what?' Simone stood beside them, looking up.

'Digby's stuck,' said Jaynee. 'Someone will have to rescue him. It's much too high for me.'

And a hundred times too high for me, thought Todd, feeling Simone's eyes burning into him.

'Well?' Simone asked him. 'Do I go and get Fluffbucket? Or do *you*?'

Todd felt the blood rush to his cheeks. 'I'm... I'm...'

'Scared,' she said.

'I am not.'

'Yes, you are. Which means I'll have to climb this great big tree and rescue *your* little sister's poor wee kitten.'

'No!' Todd replied before he could stop himself. 'It's my job.'

He could measure the size of Simone's victory grin by the flash of reflected light from the wire braces on her teeth.

Todd gazed up the tall trunk and shivered. 'I still can't see anything. How far up is that silly cat?'

'About halfway,' Jaynee replied. 'But hurry, Todd, hurry!'

Halfway's not too bad, thought Todd, trying to feel brave. Anybody could climb *half* a tree. Even a pre-schooler like Logan. Maybe Todd should ask Logan to do it when he got back from next door.

No. Dumb idea. This was a job for a Freeman. All he had to remember was to keep his mind on the job at hand. Don't get distracted, he told himself. Concentrate on the tree.

And don't look down!

He grabbed the lowest branch and hoisted himself off the ground. So far so good. Then another branch and a bit higher.

His whole body trembled, but apart from that he felt okay. Up and up he went. It worked. Concentrating on the tree, and not looking...

'Todd!' yelled Simone.

For a second, he forgot his good intentions and looked down. His body suddenly felt as if it had been dumped in a deep freeze.

'No problem,' Simone called up. 'Just wanted to see how you were getting on.'

She'd tricked him! The way she'd tricked him at the fountain, but this time he felt as though she was holding his head under the water!

It made no difference that he wasn't very far off the ground. It was still too high for him. He wrapped both arms around the nearest branch with such force he thought it would snap off.

Simone must have sensed his panic. 'Todd? You okay?'

'Todd,' yelled Jaynee, when he didn't reply. 'Keep going. You've got to rescue Digby.'

'I think your brother's the one who needs rescuing,' said Simone, scrambling up the trunk. 'Stay there, Todd, I'll get the cat.'

In a few seconds, Simone scrambled past him and up into the branches above. In a flash she returned, holding something in her hand.

'Digby's disguise,' she said, holding out what she'd rescued. 'An empty bird's nest.'

Todd felt sick. Digby wasn't even in the tree!

Todd didn't move. He couldn't. He was glued to the branch.

'You can't stay here all night,' said Simone, perching opposite him.

'Well, I can't move either,' he said, fighting to get the words past his teeth.

'I figured you were scared of heights, but not *this* scared.'

'Now you know!'

'Try hanging upside down,' she suggested. 'Everything looks better that way.'

Todd felt his stomach tighten into a steel knot. 'Upside down? You're crazy.'

'You're right,' she told him. 'That's only for advanced tree climbers.' She leapt down to a lower branch and reached up to touch his foot.

'You're not that far off the ground,' she reminded him. 'I'll guide your feet down. Just keep looking at the tree.'

'I can't do it.'

'If you're going to stay up here forever, I'll ask that bird if you can rent his nest.'

'Okay,' he hissed. 'Okay!'

One frightening branch at a time, Todd descended. With every step, he swore to himself he'd never climb a tree again as long as he lived. Not for a kitten, not for a dozen kittens, not for all the kittens in the world...

'Simone! Come down this instant,' said her father, standing at the foot of the tree.

'But, Dad...'

'No excuses. Now!'

'You, too, Todd,' said his mother, her voice tense.

'How much further to the bottom?' Todd whispered to Simone.

'One small step for a girl,' she whispered back, 'a giant leap for you.'

'Todd!' said his mother. 'This is no time for silly games. Logan's not at the Naidus.'

'Where is he?' asked Todd, now on the lowest branch.

'That's what we want to know,' said Holly. 'He's vanished!'

## Chapter Eight

'The police are calling out their night search team,' Michael explained as they gathered in the lounge. 'If Logan was older and the weather was warmer, they'd wait until morning, but with a four year old and this cold snap...'

Simone noticed her father's face had gone deathly white.

'There must be something we can do,' she told him.

'We can knock on a few doors while we wait for the police,' said Paula.

Simone felt sick. Her brother was out there somewhere. 'Why don't we check the paddocks out the back?'

'Good idea,' said her father.

They split up into two teams.

'We need torches,' said Simone.

'There's one in my car,' said Paula.

'And there's one in mine...' Michael began, then stopped. 'There was when I still had a car.'

'I'll go and ask the Naidus,' said Simone, running out of the room.

'I'll come with you,' said Todd, sprinting off after her.

As they knocked at number 11, Simone could hear loud music coming from inside. Probably the Naidus two teenagers.

'We should have moved in *here* today,' said Todd.

Yes, thought Simone. But Logan might still have got lost.

Holly wanted to blame Paula for what had happened, but Simone knew that wasn't fair. It was Simone's fault. She'd lost Logan. Lost her own little brother. Nothing could change that.

'Hello, Simone,' said Mrs Naidu, opening the front door and letting out a blast of loud music.

'Vasanti and Raj having a party?' asked Todd.

'No,' said Mrs Naidu, putting her hands up to her ears. 'They've gone out. It's their father making the racket.'

'Please,' said Simone, raising her voice to make herself heard. 'Have you got a spare torch we could borrow?'

'I saw Keval with some today. Old stock from the toy shop.' Mrs Naidu pointed. 'Follow the noise.'

'Sorry to hear about little Logan wandering off,' said Keval Naidu, 'but don't worry, I'm sure he won't have gone far.'

He turned down his state-of-the-art stereo system. It had bigger speakers than the rock

band on Simone's poster.

Simone explained what they needed.

'You've come to the right place,' said Keval.

As he dashed out of the room, Ameeta Naidu turned to Simone and said, 'He hates to throw anything away. I swear he has more fun owning a toy shop than owning a gym.'

Simone saw Todd gazing around. Big, like Brightside, but new. No cracked plaster or peeling paint or carpets full of holes.

'We still have a lot to do,' said Ameeta, watching Todd. 'Please excuse the mess.'

Simone couldn't see a mess. The team of professional house movers had left number 11 looking immaculate. Not a packing case or a piece of wrapping paper anywhere.

Keval Naidu hurried back with a cardboard box with the name of his toy shop, KidsHeaven, printed on the side. He took out a torch and handed it to Simone.

'These are old stock,' he explained.

Very old, Simone realised. Shaped like a TV superhero she'd loved when she was Logan's age. Nothing looked as pathetic as yesterday's superhero.

Except a plastic superhero with two batteries shoved up him and eyes that glowed in the dark!

'I suppose toy shop owners don't have ordinary torches,' said Todd as Keval fitted batteries.

Simone took one torch and fiddled with the buttons. A separate one for the plastic eyes. And each torch came complete with its own glowing built-in watch and a compass.

'Thanks, Mr Naidu,' said Simone, grabbing a couple. 'We'll bring them back.'

He handed her the box. 'Please. Take them all. There are extra batteries in there as well.'

'If you need any more help, don't hesitate to call,' said Mrs Naidu, showing them to the door.

As Paula, Holly, and Jaynee set off to door-knock in their street, Simone, her father, and Todd grabbed superhero torches, threw on warm clothing and headed for the back paddocks.

'This shouldn't take long,' said Michael. 'Spread out, but keep close enough to see the other torches. Yell if you spot anything.'

'What happens when we reach the bush?' asked Simone.

'We turn back,' he replied. 'If we go in there, we'll get lost as well. That won't help Logan.'

'I'll go to the right,' said Todd.

'Are you scared of the dark?' Simone asked Todd, quietly.

‘Only when my feet are off the ground,’ said Todd. ‘Are you?’

‘Me?’ asked Simone, feeling more scared than she’d ever felt in her whole life. Not scared of the dark so much as scared of what they might find. But she couldn’t tell Todd that.

‘I’m not scared of anything,’ she said, hoping she sounded confident.

‘I’ll take the left flank,’ said Michael. ‘Simone, you stay in the middle.’

Simone waited as her father and Todd took up position on either side of her. Within a few metres, they were swallowed up by the darkness, only visible by their torch beams.

‘Logan!’ she heard her father calling as the torch on her left began to move forward.

‘Logan!’ called Todd as he joined in.

‘Logan!’ called Simone, trying not to let her voice shake as much as the torch in her hand. At least no one would know it shook if she kept moving it backwards and forwards like a spotlight.

‘Be careful, you two,’ yelled Michael. ‘Don’t break a leg. This ground’s full of rabbit holes.’

‘Don’t tell Jaynee,’ Todd called back. ‘She’ll want to adopt them.’

Even with houses behind her, and her father and Todd on either side, Simone felt very alone. At night, these paddocks were spooky.

Up ahead, the moon outlined the mountains towering over the hills. Did anything live up there? Big, furry creatures like those Abominable Snowmen she’d read about? Did they have Abominable Snow-families? Breed Abominable Snow-kids?

She looked down in time to avoid stepping in a rabbit burrow, and decided to concentrate on the ground.

It took only a few minutes of searching to reach the edge of the bush.

‘This is as far as we go,’ her father called across to Simone and Todd.

But we can’t stop now, thought Simone. What if Logan’s just inside the line of trees, shivering and cold? Hearing us call, seeing the torches, but hurt and not able to call out?

Or trapped by some real live bush monster, too terrified to yell. She couldn’t just turn around and leave him there. Not without checking.

Simone took a deep breath and stepped into the trees.

A thick wall of leaves and branches wrapped around her like a cocoon. Simone’s heart started beating faster. Just a few steps, she told herself, holding the torch out in front of her to cut through the blackness.

‘Logan!’ she called softly. Nothing.

This was spookier than the paddocks. She walked a few more paces and called again, louder this time. Still nothing.

But her little brother could be lying, injured, behind the next tree. A few more paces.

'Logan!' Nothing there, either. Simone knew it was hopeless, but at least she'd tried. Time to go back.

She'd walked into the bush in a straight line. All she had to do was turn a complete circle, and head back the way she'd come.

As she spun around, Simone tripped and fell, but still managed to hang on to the torch. Jumping to her feet, she realised she'd lost her bearings.

Simone didn't know *which* direction she'd come from. The cocoon of trees and branches around her looked thicker than ever.

Don't panic, she told herself. Yell loud enough and dad will come and get you. But then he might get lost as well. She'd got herself into this mess. She had to get herself out.

She turned around and around, shining her torch into the blackness, trying to find a way through the trees. With every turn, the beam got weaker.

Great, she thought, getting angry. The batteries are probably old as well. Stupid torch with its pathetic plastic eyes and dumb watch and...

Compass!

She could use the built-in compass to find her way back. There was barely enough charge left in the batteries for back-lighting, but by squinting she could read North, South, East and West.

Which would have been great if she knew which direction to head in. She should have checked that *before* she stepped into the bush.

Her torch flickered, then died.

Don't panic, she told herself, still trembling in the darkest dark she'd ever seen.

Yelling for help was now the only option.

Simone opened her mouth, but the cry for help choked in her throat as she heard a sound close by.

What was it? A creature of the night out for a walk? Looking for food? Simone could become a midnight snack.

Then she saw them. Two glowing eyes.

'It's only me,' said Todd, stepping forward and turning on the main beam.

'You did that on purpose!' she said, angry, but pleased to see him.

'I was saving my batteries,' said Todd. 'Did I scare you?'

'Scare me?' hoping her voice shook less than her knees. 'I told you, I'm not scared of anything.'

'But you're lost,' said Todd.

'I am not! It's this stupid torch.'

'I brought some spare batteries,' said Todd, digging them out of a pocket and handing

them over. 'Didn't you?'

'What do you think?' she muttered.

A few seconds later, her plastic superhero shone again.

'Which way out?' she asked.

'You said you weren't lost?'

'For the last time,' said Simone, 'I'm not lost!'

'Then I'll follow you,' said Todd.

'I recognise this tree,' she told him flashing her torch. 'We go this way.'

'Okay,' he said checking his own compass. 'Got any food on you?'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Climbing mountains is hard work.'

'I'm not climbing any dumb mountain!'

'You will if you go that way,' he told her, heading off in the opposite direction.

Simone hesitated. She hated to be proved wrong. Especially by a boy. She took a few steps in the other direction, then stopped. Up ahead she heard a scuffling sound. A real forest animal this time.

Not battery powered.

Simone spun around and lunged after Todd's disappearing torch beam.

'Wait for me,' she called.

As they emerged from the bush, Simone's father came running over.

'I told you two not to get lost!'

'We weren't lost,' said Simone. 'Not for a second.'

'But *Logan* still is,' said her father. 'The police should be here soon. Let's get back to the house.'

## Chapter Nine

'No sign of Logan in the paddocks,' said Simone, as the six of them gathered in the lounge and swapped notes.

'You should have taken Zip along to help you,' said Jaynee.

'You'd have had to come, too,' said Simone. 'To carry him home.'

'Poor wee Logan,' said Paula. 'I feel awful.'

'So you should,' Holly muttered.

'You don't feel as bad as me,' said Simone.

'You and Paula stop blaming yourselves,' said her father. 'Who knows what got into his head?'

'And none of the neighbours have seen him?' Todd asked his mother.

Paula shook her head.

Todd shivered. 'This room is colder than the bush.'

'I can't remember when it's been so cold at this time of year,' said Michael.

'Imagine what it's like for Logan,' said Simone.

Thump.

Everyone jumped at the same time. The noise came from above their heads.

Thump, thump, thump.

On and on, faster and faster until it sounded like a machine gun being fired.

'Rain,' said Todd.

'Either that,' said Simone, 'or the sky's falling in.'

'My little brother's out in this,' said Holly.

'He's my brother, too,' said Simone.

'He's related to all of us,' said Paula.

Buckets of rain now belted down on Brightside's tin roof.

'Logan will find some shelter,' said Jaynee. 'Maybe under a tree.'

Paula jumped to her feet. 'Why don't I make everyone a hot drink? I've got to do something until the police arrive.'

'I'll help you,' said Michael.

As they headed for the kitchen, the others sat in silence, listening to the rain getting heavier.

The machine gun had been joined by the heavy artillery.

Thunder!

And lightning!

Holly suddenly said, 'We'd better hope Logan's *not* under a tree.'

'Why not?' asked Simone. 'He'd be out of the rain.'

Simone saw the look of horror on her sister's face.

'Don't be so thick, Simone,' said Holly, jumping up. 'Trees *attract* lightning. That's how people get killed!'

Holly sprinted from the room and Simone took off after her. Holly cracking up was the last thing they needed.

Holly lay across her bed, sobbing.

'He's not coming back,' said Holly. 'We'll never see him again.'

'Don't say that,' said Simone, trying to sound convinced. 'Logan's not dead. He's a Freeman. He'll survive.'

Holly rolled over. 'In this weather? The lightning's getting worse. And that rain's getting heavier.'

Simone looked up in the direction of the noise and blinked. On the ceiling, right above her was a big, fast spreading water stain.

'We're sinking,' yelled Simone, running back to the lounge. 'Launch the lifeboats!'

'Quickly, everyone,' said Paula, taking control, 'grab some buckets and pans. Check the bedrooms first. Then report back here.'

A few minutes later, they held an emergency family conference in the kitchen.

'It's worse upstairs,' Michael told Paula, his face grim. 'Two leaks in the main bedroom. The smallest is seeping down through our floor and into Holly's room. I've put a bucket under it.'

'And the other one?' asked Paula.

'The other one - the big leak - is right above our new bed. The whole thing's a soggy mess.'

'All my beautiful new linen,' said Paula.

'Yuck,' said Simone. 'Instant waterbed.'

Todd reported that his room on the opposite corner had also sprung a leak, and another trickle of water ran down the inside back wall at the top of the stairs.

'Our *old* house didn't leak,' Holly hissed at Todd as she left the room.

'Nor did our flat,' said Todd.

'What about Digby?' Jaynee whispered to Simone. 'He's out there somewhere in this storm.'

Just then a car pulled up outside.

'The police are here,' said Simone.

'Let's light a fire,' said Paula. 'It's going to be a long night.'

Simone beat her father to the front door and threw it open for a man dressed in oilskins.

'I'm Sergeant Quinn.'

As he spoke, more cars pulled up in the street outside, spilling out others dressed in the same way.

'I'll be the search controller,' he explained. 'We'd like to use a room in the house as a base, if that's alright.'

'Come through,' said Michael waving him inside.

The sergeant looked down at the water dripping from his coat and forming a puddle at his feet.

'Don't worry,' said Michael. 'A bit more water won't do any harm.'

The sergeant explained how the search would work.

'We'll send two specialist teams into the hills straight away. They're trained in night searches. You stay here at the house. The bush at night is no place for amateurs.'

Simone saw Todd looking at her.

The sergeant continued, 'We'll keep in touch by portable radio. Other police will door-knock around the area and talk to the neighbours. If we haven't found the little fellow by first light, we'll call in our regular volunteers and widen the search.'

Simone walked to the window and stared out.

She wanted to ask the sergeant what the chances were of finding Logan, but the words wouldn't come out.

Because, regardless of what she'd told Holly, Simone was scared the policeman might tell her they weren't really looking for a little boy - just a little body.

## Chapter Ten

All night Todd tossed and turned on his mattress in the lounge as the rain hammered Brightside's tin roof. Sleep was impossible because every half hour he had to trudge up the stairs and empty the bucket in his bedroom.

Once he stumbled and slopped water on the carpet, then trod in the puddle trying to mop it up in the dark.

Everyone had bedded down in the lounge, the warmest place in the house, and the driest. A faint glow from the fire's embers gave competition to the lightning outside.

The police had taken over the family room near the front door as their search base. From across the hall, Todd could hear the crackle of hand-held radios.

In the lounge, Todd could also hear whispered conversations start up and stop again every few minutes. Sometimes his mother comforted Michael and told him everything would be okay. Sometimes Michael comforted Paula.

He also heard Simone say quietly, 'Stop worrying, Jaynee. Digby will be fine.'

Holly's sleepy voice cut in, 'Who's Digby?'

'Godzilla's friend,' said Simone.

'I've seen those old movies,' said Holly. 'Godzilla doesn't have a friend.'

'Nor will you if you don't shut up,' said Simone. 'Go back to sleep.'

Simone acted tough, but Todd knew she'd be hurting inside. If something awful had happened to Logan, Simone would never forgive herself. Nor would his mother.

The death of Todd's father had drawn the three surviving Wozinskys closer together. What would Logan's death do to the new blended family?

He had flashes of his father's funeral. Logan would only need a very small coffin.

The thought made his skin crawl and he forced himself to think of something else. He glanced at his watch. Time to empty the bucket again.

The rain had eased. So had the lightning. It would be daylight soon. Hopefully, by then, the storm would have passed. They needed all the luck they could get.

When he came back downstairs, Todd found Simone sitting on the bottom step.

'The smoke from the fire's hurting my eyes,' she told him.

'Mine, too,' he said, sitting down beside her.

Another figure wandered out of the lounge.

'That floor's too uncomfortable,' said Holly. 'I'm for a snack. How about you lot?'

The three of them walked into the kitchen. While they waited, a policewoman filled several mugs with instant coffee and boiling water. As she walked out, she flashed a brief smile.

The three of them sat around the kitchen table and cracked a large bottle of Coke.

'I'll bet Logan's thirsty,' said Holly.

Simone nodded. 'Remember when we went to that pizza place just after the honeymoon, and dad had to rush him to the toilet every few minutes.'

She paused. 'Logan was such a... *is* such a neat little guy.'

'We'll find him,' said Todd, wishing he could sound more confident. 'There'll be more pizzas for Logan.'

'More of everything,' said Simone. 'I hope. I just wanna hear his little voice again saying, "Weez, Daddy, weez".'

Todd could see the tears forming in the corner of Simone's eyes.

They were interrupted by movement out the front of the house. They ran back into the lounge and gazed through the front windows.

The storm had finally passed and in the misty morning light, Todd could see cars and vans pulling up, one after the other, spilling out men and women dressed for the outdoors.

Todd checked his watch. Time to start the real search.

Within minutes, there were close to a hundred people gathered outside the house.

The sergeant called a handful of squad leaders inside for a briefing and assigned search areas.

While he did that, the Naidus arrived from next door to help.

'We'll find him,' Raj Naidu said to Simone.

Todd heard Vasanti whisper to Holly. 'You didn't miss a thing yesterday. What a useless picnic.'

'But if I'd been there and not here,' she heard Holly whisper back, 'Logan might not have gone missing.'

Todd saw Holly point at his mother.

'It's all *her* fault.'

Before they set out, Sergeant Quinn called everyone together for last minute instructions.

'He's only a little boy,' said the sergeant, 'so he could be anywhere. Look under every log, under every bush, down every hole. Use your radios and keep in touch with base.'

Just then, a truck pulled up and double-parked outside Brightside.

'For you first-time searchers, that's our mobile canteen,' he explained. 'Now we just need somewhere to set it up.'

'Park it in my driveway,' said Keval Naidu. 'I'll get the keys and move my car.'

As he ran off to move his Mercedes, the sergeant added, 'We've brought in an extra-loud siren as well. If you hear it, abandon the search and head back to base.'

'Will the siren mean good news?' asked Todd.

'It'll means news of some sort. Good or bad.'

Todd looked out at the hills, covered in thick mist. What chance would Logan have up there?

Each group of volunteers, led by an experienced searcher, clambered over the wire fence at the back of the property, and fanned out.

Todd walked alongside his mother and Jaynee.

'I hope we find Digby as well,' said Jaynee.

Paula frowned. 'Who's Digby?'

Jaynee paused, then answered, 'My new kitten.'

Paula said, 'We can't have another cat in the house, Jaynee. You know what cats do to Logan...' Then she stopped.

Todd shivered. Logan's asthma would only be a problem if Logan was still alive. And if he was dead, his mum would get some of the blame.

Which could mean the end of the new family. Something he still dreamed about. But not like this.

The front rank of the searchers had hardly covered the paddocks and penetrated the bush when the siren went off. Around him Todd saw anxious looks.

'I hope this isn't bad news,' said Paula, turning around and breaking into a run. 'Come on, kids.'

## Chapter Eleven

'And he was where?' asked Simone, not believing her ears.

'He and the kitten were in the back seat of my Mercedes,' said Mr Naidu. 'Both sound asleep under a blanket.'

All night? Simone hoped Mr Naidu had checked his seat for damp patches. And she wasn't thinking of rain.

Simone stared down at her little brother. A picture of innocence, cuddling Fluffbucket and wondering what the fuss was about.

'I only found them when I went to move the car,' Mr Naidu explained.

Sergeant Quinn grinned. 'I hoped it would be something simple like this.'

'We've put you to a lot of trouble,' said Paula.

'No worries,' said the sergeant. 'Missing children often turn up close to home. The important thing is, we found him.'

As the police dismantled their search equipment and carried it out of the house, Holly scooped up Logan in her arms. That sent Digby flying, but the kitten landed on his feet and scampered out of the room.

Logan protested, but Holly held on, giving him a fierce hug, smothering his cheek with kisses, glaring at Paula as she did.

'I'm happy, too,' said Paula.

'Not as happy as me,' said Holly. 'He's *my* brother.'

Michael flopped down on the sofa, the colour coming back to his cheeks.

'Experts say stress can kill you,' he told them. 'Well, we've all had enough stress lately to kill everyone in Hatchwood.'

'That's true,' said Paula. 'In the last few months, we've had to cope with a lost house, a lost job, a lost car, a lost child...'

'Now, if we could only lose that mouse in my room,' said Holly.

'Mice are cute,' said Jaynee.

Holly pointed at Carmen. 'When's that stupid moggy going to start earning its keep?'

'Mu-um,' said Jaynee. 'Holly's picking on Carmen again.'

'And talking of cats,' said Holly. 'Where did that kitten come from?'

'You mean Fluffbucket,' said Simone.

'His name's Digby,' said Jaynee.

Holly said, 'I don't care what his name is, you know what cats do to Logan!'

That's right, thought Simone. They give him asthma. Or do they?

'Hang on,' said Simone. 'Logan spent last night sleeping with Fluffbucket and he's fine this morning.'

'Maybe the asthma was Logan's reaction to all the stress,' said Michael. 'Come to think of it, he first got asthma when his mother left home.'

'Stress hits people in different ways,' said Paula.

Jaynee swung around to her mother. 'Then we can keep Digby?'

Simone got in first. 'Keep him? We *need* a kitten with his talents.'

On cue, Digby pranced into the room with a dead mouse in his jaws and dropped it at Holly's feet.

'Keep that thing away from me,' said Holly, stepping back. 'It's all squishy.'

Jaynee squealed. 'That's 'cos Digby's eaten some of it!'

'You mean he's not a vegetarian?' asked Simone.

Jaynee raced out of the room and came back with a cardboard box. Using a shovel from the fireplace, she scooped the tiny carcass inside.

'What's that for?' asked Todd.

'I've got to bury him. Properly.'

'Plant him next to Godzilla,' said Simone. 'Good fertilizer.'

'Mu-um!' Jaynee protested. 'Now Simone's being mean.'

'You kids fight your own battles,' said Paula. 'Let's have breakfast, I'm starving. What does everyone fancy?'

Simone's hand shot into the air. 'Is mouse-burger on the menu?'

\*\*\*

'You're all gross,' said Jaynee, grabbing a piece of toast and pushing her chair back from the table. 'I can't sit here and watch this.'

'Then stand up,' said Simone.

Jaynee poked her tongue out at Simone and ran from the room.

In the centre of the Brightside kitchen table sat a huge plate of cooked sausages.

'I like sausages,' said Todd.

'Especially by the truckload,' said Simone, wondering if she could squeeze in just one more.

'They started to defrost during the move,' said Paula, fussing around the stove, 'so I couldn't refreeze them.'

'I've been thinking,' said Michael, between bites. 'That spare room next to Holly's. Why don't I turn it into my office and set up my own accountancy business, working from home?'

'Put in two desks and we can share it,' said Paula. 'I think working for yourself is a great idea. You control your own life instead of having someone else call the shots.'

'Like a stepmother does,' Holly mumbled.

'And we wouldn't need a second car if I worked from home,' said Michael. 'I can walk to

the kindergarten to collect Logan.'

'You'll need a computer,' said Holly.

'When we can afford it,' he told her, shovelling in more sausage.

'Good,' said Holly. 'I can borrow it to do the newsletters for the Young Writer's Club.'

Her father started to cough and a piece of sausage flew across the room where Digby pounced on it.

Two seconds before Carmen pounced on him!

With a scream and flying fur, Digby wriggled out from under his heavyweight attacker and headed for the front door, the piece of sausage still in his mouth. Carmen ran a dozen steps in pursuit then flopped to the floor, exhausted.

Paula turned to Michael. 'Who does that remind you of?'

Michael said, 'Not for much longer. Northmall's within walking distance. I'm going to join Body-Blasta and workout during the day.'

'How are you going to pay for that?' asked Simone.

He paused. 'Easy. We live next door to the owner. I'm sure I can swap Keval a gym membership for some bookkeeping. He can be my first client.'

Paula smiled. 'This is more like the man I know and love.'

'Suddenly I feel much more positive about the future,' Michael said. 'I'm starting that diet as well. First thing tomorrow morning.'

He raised his fork to spear another sausage, then dropped it when he saw the look on his wife's face.

'Then again,' he added, 'maybe I'll start today!'

'I know some great diets, Dad,' said Holly, on her sixth sausage.

'You could have fooled me,' said Simone.

They heard Jaynee yell.

'What's that girl screaming about now?' asked Paula, who'd just sat down for her own breakfast. 'Todd, please go and see what she wants.'

## Chapter Twelve

Todd found his sister standing at the foot of Godzilla, pointing up.

'Digby,' she told him. 'Carmen frightened Digby so much he ran up the tree.'

Todd saw movement in the branches, but not the cause. 'It's probably that bird looking for its nest.'

'I put it back,' said Simone, joining them.

'Hush, you two, and listen,' said Jaynee.

No doubt about it, thought Todd. A kitten's meow.

'Someone's got to go up and get him,' said Jaynee. 'Please.'

Simone leaned over to Todd and whispered, 'You got me out of the bush. I'll get Fluffbucket.'

As she went to launch herself, Todd put out his hand. 'Digby is still my sister's kitten, so it's still my job.'

Simone gave him a strange look and beckoned him aside.

'Listen,' she said, 'Fluffbucket's on the top branch. Last time you turned to jelly less than halfway up. If you get stuck this time, we'll need the fire brigade to get you down.'

'I don't care. I'm going to do this if it kills me.'

'That's what I'm afraid of,' she said.

Todd grabbed Godzilla's lowest branch and swung himself up into the tree. Up and up he went.

Just don't look down, he kept telling himself. That was the problem last time. Don't look down.

In a couple of minutes, Todd had passed the point where he'd got stuck the night before. His palms felt sweaty but he didn't stop. His dead father would be proud of Todd if he could see him now.

Perhaps his father *could* see him now from wherever people went when they died!

As Todd clambered up the last few metres, he spotted Digby, above him, licking his paws. Probably enjoying what's left of the sausage, thought Todd. Or the mouse. He reached up a hand to grab the kitten.

That's when Digby leapt, past Todd's face and onto a branch below. Todd got such a shock he ducked his head - and looked down.

His body went rigid. Simone and Jaynee looked smaller than toy soldiers. He gripped the nearest branch, not just scared this time, but terrified.

They *will* have to call out the fire brigade and the long ladders, he told himself, or use a helicopter and winch me off, and it will be in the local newspaper, and the kids at school will make jokes, and I'll be the laughing stock...

He felt a hand touch his leg.

'Top marks for stupidity,' said Simone, standing on the branch below.

'I... I... can get down on my own.'

'How?' she asked. 'By parachute?'

'I'll climb... I'll climb down,' he said, trying to stop his voice from shaking.

'I'd better go for help.'

'No! Get out of the way.'

As Simone swung clear, Todd lowered himself slowly towards the branch below. The same branch where a possum had eaten off a hunk of bark, leaving a big shiny patch.

As his foot hit the spot, his shoe shot out from under him, his sweaty hands lost their grip and he sat down with a thump on the branch.

He felt Simone's arm grab for him, but too late. Over he went, tumbling backwards!

'Monkey!' she yelled, and without thinking he curled up his legs behind him. It was enough to break his fall and he hung there, frozen, upside down.

'Todd! Don't move!' said Simone.

What did she *think* he was going to do? Sky-dive?

He was so shocked, he'd even forgotten to close his eyes. His glasses, still attached to his ears by their curly ends, were wedged against his eyebrows.

Todd faced the back corner of the house, right opposite his bedroom. He could see the paint around his upside-down window frame, flaking in all directions.

Inside the room, he could see his bed stuck to the ceiling, beside the wrong-way-up bucket that wouldn't drop its water.

For a few seconds, he forgot about being stuck up a tree. Forgot where he was. Everything looked so...

'Come on, Tarzan,' said Simone, reaching down to him.

'You were right,' he said as he took her hand and pulled himself upright. 'Nothing looks as scary upside-down.'

'You didn't see yourself,' she told him. 'What about the fire brigade?'

'Don't need them,' he replied, breathing hard. 'I'm going to pretend that up is down and down is up. Trick my brain. That way it's not so frightening.'

'That's almost brilliant,' she said. 'Keep this up and you might even get your advanced tree-climbing badge.'

Still one branch at a time, but more quickly than before, Todd lowered himself down Godzilla's trunk, playing the upside-down game in his head.

Even with his new technique, he was still relieved when his shoes touched the ground. Todd hardly noticed that Jaynee and Digby had gone as he stood, gazing up to the top of

the tree, his heart finally slowing down.

'Not bad for a boy,' said Simone, dropping out of the branches to stand beside him.

'Now we can work on your speed.'

'My what?'

'Your speed. You can't keep taking a week to climb a tree.'

'That's as fast as I'm ever going to get,' said Todd, 'because that's the last tree I'll ever climb.'

'You're kidding.'

'I'm serious,' said Todd. 'I proved I can do it, but I didn't enjoy it. So why do it again?'

Simone shook her head in disgust. 'Just when you were starting to be sensible and think like a girl.'

'All that hard work's made me hungry,' he said. 'I wonder if there are any sausages left.'

'Depends if Dad's still on his diet,' said Simone.

As he turned to walk back inside, Todd heard Jaynee yelling again from around the back of the house.

'Quick, Todd, Digby's stuck again!'

'Where?' yelled Todd.

'Under the house!' she yelled back.

Todd sighed and turned to Simone. 'At least this time I can keep my feet on the ground.'

'Aren't sisters a pain?' said Simone. 'You might need your new friend for this job.'

'What friend?'

'The one with the flashing eyes,' said Simone. 'In case you do Logan's trick and get... misplaced.'

Todd grinned. 'I won't need a compass. No one can get lost under a house.'

'Don't you believe it,' said Simone. 'With a place like Brightside, anything's possible!'

The End