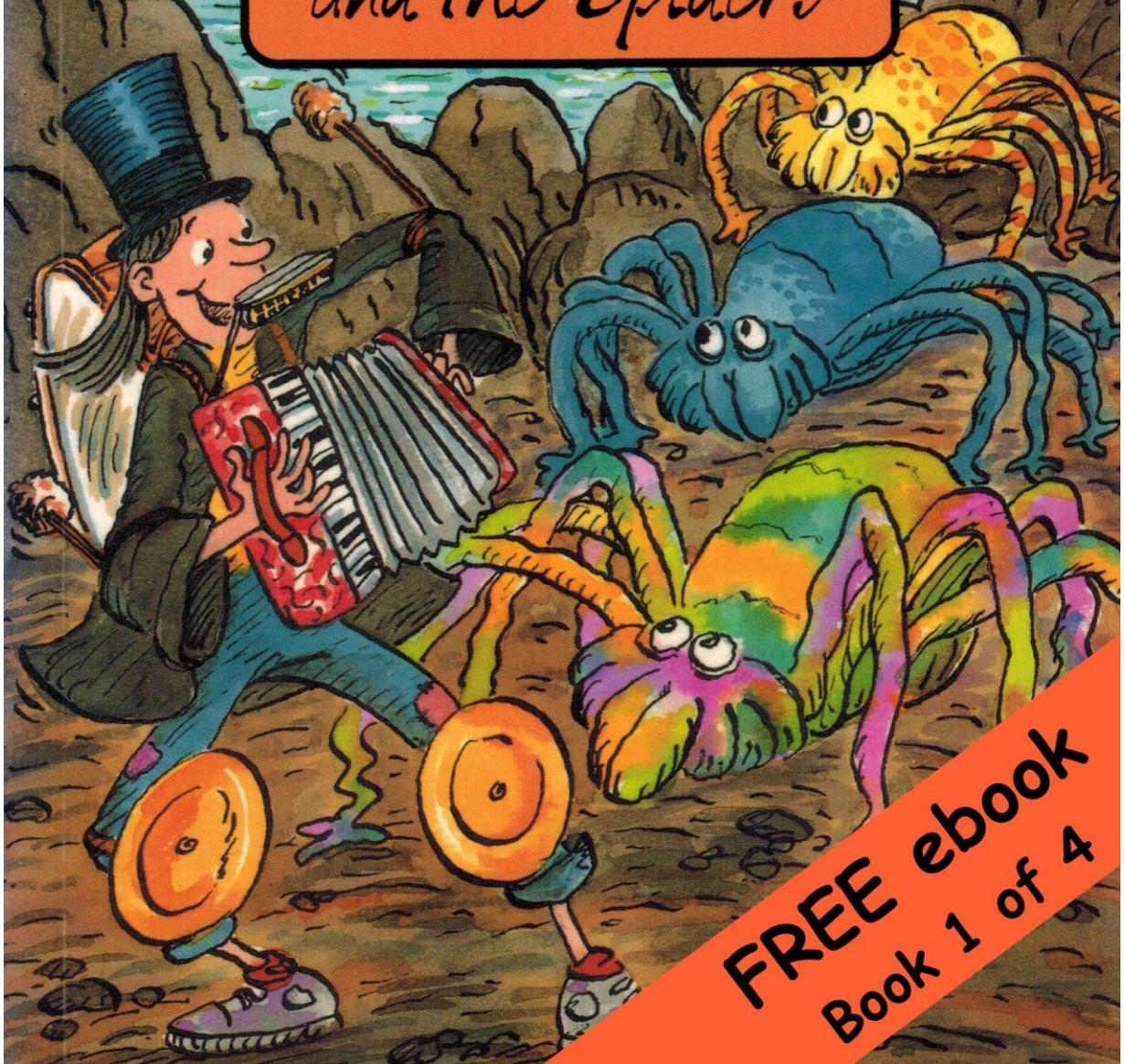




Tom Bradley

Johnny
Whistler
and the Spiders



FREE ebook
Book 1 of 4

Contents

Copyright details & more FREE ebooks	2
What the critics said about the 'Johnny Whistler' series	3
What this story is about.....	3
Chapter One	4
Chapter Two	14
Chapter Three.....	21
Chapter Four.....	24
Chapter Five	28
Chapter Six.....	35
Chapter Seven.....	41
Chapter Eight.....	47
Chapter Nine.....	53

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What the critics said about the ‘Johnny Whistler’ series

- “*Wacky fun and larger-than-life adventures*” ([Quote Unquote](#))
- “*... light entertainment with flair ... fast pace and ongoing action. These books are fun*” ([Otago Daily Times](#))
- “*The best idea would be to buy the first of four titles ... upon observance of reader rapture, spring for the series*” ([Nelson Evening Mail](#))

What this story is about

(First book in the Johnny Whistler series)

Johnny Whistler, 12, Bayside’s popular busker, and his best friend, Bouncer Scott, think life is all fun and show biz, until they discover evidence that the town’s bullying Mayor, Herbert Hatfield, has been dumping toxic waste at sea.

But Mayor Hatfield owns the local newspaper, the local radio station, and the ship that dumps his factory’s poisonous waste. And the ship’s crew quickly removes the boys’ evidence – the leaking drums they found on the rocks at Needle Point.

Then Johnny, Bouncer, and Johnny’s sister, Debbie, find unusual evidence of another kind – the three small sand spiders they rescued from the toxic spillage that have become multi-coloured monsters.

And they soon discover just how useful these huge spiders can be in tackling the Mayor and his environmentally mucky factory.

Chapter One

'Roll up! Roll up!'

Bouncer Scott's voice rang out along Beach Road. It was so loud, it not only turned the heads of people passing by, it frightened the seagulls that swooped and scavenged along the sand.

The sun was reflecting off the water, right into Bouncer's eyes. He was sorry he couldn't wear his other glasses on days like this, the ones with the self-tinting lenses.

Unfortunately, his best friend, Johnny Whistler, didn't like them. He said it made Bouncer look like a gangster.

'Roll up! Roll up!'

Johnny also said Bouncer had the loudest voice in Bayside, but everyone agreed about that. Even the seagulls. No matter how good the food scraps on offer, they weren't interested if it meant coming too close to Bouncer.

He was perched on an upturned box which made him look like an animated statue. But he needed the box as he was too short to be seen without it.

'Roll up! Roll up!'

Bouncer was standing outside *Kate's Kuts* hairdressing salon, neatly framed by signs in the window which read, "Yes, *We Can Take You Now*", and "*Special Rates For Senior Citizens*".

Kate's Kuts, like all the shops in Beach Road, had a breathtaking view across Bayside's harbour, but Bouncer wasn't there to look at the scenery.

'Roll up! Roll up! You're about to see, on this very sidewalk, Bayside's own international star, that world famous busker, Johnny Whistler!'

Across the road, next to the beach, a big yellow tourist bus pulled up and started unloading its assorted passengers. Tourism was the life blood of Bayside, and people from every country in the world passed through every year.

That was the problem. They passed through, only staying a few hours before driving on to more exciting centres.

That would all change if the town ever got its new entertainment centre. In the meantime, the sidewalk was the best stage around.

Bouncer spotted a familiar figure standing next to the bus. It was one of the regular drivers who came through town every few days.

'Mr Murphy, Mr Murphy, over here. Bring them over here.'

'Keep your shirt on, Bouncer!' yelled the bus driver, his bright red hair flying in all directions from the breeze off the ocean. He walked across the road to the salon.

'I've told you before, son, I can only do so much to round them up. They'll come, when

you start the act. I did my bit on the way down by slipping in a mention of you and Johnny.'

'Thanks, we can do with all the help we can get,' said Bouncer.

'If only you had something to keep them in town longer,' said the bus driver. 'Some sort of big attraction.'

Bouncer leapt to his friend's defence. 'Johnny is a big attraction.'

'I agree. Johnny's great. But you need more.'

'We'll get that centre. One day.'

'I'm sure you will, Bouncer. Mind you, I did have a terrific idea driving down here today. Would you like to hear it?'

Murphy was full of ideas, and he was always ready to tell anyone, whether they wanted to hear it or not.

'Sorry, Mr Murphy. Not now. I'm busy.'

'Some other time, then,' said the bus driver as he wandered back to his passengers.

Johnny always said a good advertisement could sell anything so Bouncer wound himself up again.

'Don't forget, folks, no trip to this wonderful and idyllic town of Bayside is complete without seeing Johnny Whistler. A once in a lifetime chance to witness for yourselves one of the greatest acts in the world. Bring your cameras. The show's about to start. Roll up! Roll up!'

He jumped down from the box and ran into the hairdressing salon.

'Was that okay?' He was puffing from all his yelling.

'Stunning, Bouncer,' said Johnny Whistler, 'as always.'

'Exaggerated, Bouncer,' said Johnny's mother, 'as always.'

Kate Whistler owned the salon. 'And what's this "idyllic" business?' she asked. 'No 12 year old boy uses words like that.'

'I found it for him,' said Johnny, 'in one of your women's magazines. I'm not exactly sure what it means, but I thought it would give Bouncer's warm-up a bit more class.'

He turned to his friend. 'What's the crowd like?'

'Mr Murphy's just pulled up with a full load, and there's another bus close behind. Could be the biggest audience of the week.'

'We need a big one. What did we make yesterday?' asked Johnny.

'Five dollars and 10 cents,' said Bouncer. 'But there was only one bus.'

'And that was half full. Today will be better. I can feel it in my bones.'

'Hurry up, Johnny, or we'll lose them.'

'Not if you do your job right, Bouncer. Get back out there and hold them until I'm ready.'

Within seconds Bouncer was back, standing tall on his box. The voice which frightened

seagulls started up again.

‘Roll up! Roll up!’

His whole body vibrated when he yelled and his glasses, as black as his hair, bobbed up and down on the end of his nose.

‘Roll up! Roll up!’

Johnny and Bouncer needed the tourists, but so did Kate Whistler. When the tour buses were empty, so were the chairs in her hairdressing salon.

‘My drum’s stuck, Mum.’ Johnny tugged at the shoulder harness that held it in place. ‘Lift it up for me, will you?’

Kate held the big drum in place while Johnny tightened the leather shoulder straps. ‘I was trained to cut hair, not to be a servant.’

‘I’d pay you if I could.’

‘The best way to pay me, young man, is to spend less time busking, and more time doing your homework.’

‘I can do both, Mum.’

‘Something will suffer.’

‘No it won’t, you’ll see.’

‘School is important, Johnny.’

‘Busking is like school. I learn heaps.’

‘Why any boy would want to carry a bass drum on his back beats me.’

‘Forget the bad jokes, Mum, and pass me my harmonica. It’s in the case. If I bend down to get it, I’ll fall over.’

And he would have toppled. The bass drum sat like a giant’s hump on his back.

‘Thanks,’ said Johnny, as he fitted the harmonica into the wire frame around his neck.

That left his hands free to play the accordion. At the same time, he could beat the bass drum on his back with sticks tied to his elbows.

He also had two cymbals tied to the insides of his legs which he clashed by knocking his knees together.

Bouncer burst through the door, yelling, ‘Come on, Johnny, I can’t hold them much longer,’ and burst out again.

Johnny refused to panic. ‘How many times do I have to tell him?’ he asked his mother. ‘You’ve got to keep the audience waiting. Adds to the suspense.’

He glanced in the mirror. His pencil thin body and limbs made a good frame for his busker’s uniform of old patched jeans, paint splashed sneakers, and a jacket so big he had to roll up the sleeves.

Johnny pushed his hair back from his forehead with one hand, and plonked his battered

old top hat firmly on top of his head with the other.

He reminded Kate of a scarecrow. 'Why is it, the son of the town's leading hairdresser always looks as though he needs a haircut?'

'I like it long, Mum. It's artistic.'

'That's not how I'd describe it.' She gave him a motherly once over. 'Other boys get jobs to keep them *off* the streets. Trust you to be different. If you won't let me cut your hair, would you at least let me buy you a new hat?'

'No way, Mum, it's part of the image.'

Bouncer's voice blasted from the sidewalk. 'Now, without further delay - not even *one second's* further delay - here he is, at great expense, from the entertainment capitals of the world...'

'That boy,' said Kate. 'What does he mean, "entertainment capitals of the world?"'

'I got that from the same magazine,' said Johnny.

'But it's not true.'

'It's okay, Mum, this is show business. It doesn't have to be true.'

'Please give a big welcome,' cried Bouncer, his body vibrating so much it threatened to send his glasses flying into the crowd, 'to our very own, Johnny Whistler!'

'Go get 'em, Johnny,' said Kate, holding the door open with one hand, giving him the shove he needed to propel him onto the sidewalk.

Bouncer was right. The biggest crowd of the week. The biggest this year. Most of the tourists from the buses parked across the road had gathered around, cameras poised, waiting for him to begin.

Whether he was performing for two people, or two hundred, Johnny was all show biz. And he always started slowly, building the momentum, step by step, moment by moment.

Pumping his elbows, he began a steady thump, thump, thump with the bass drum on his back, setting a steady rhythm, hitting it on the beat.

Then he added an offbeat with the cymbals by knocking his knees together. Drum-cymbal: drum-cymbal: drum-cymbal.

Bouncer started to clap along and the crowd joined in. Johnny knew from experience that while audiences loved to clap along, they could never clap in time.

He wasn't surprised when they fell behind the beat. But he knew how to fix that.

Johnny winked at Bouncer who started waving his arms, like the conductor of an orchestra.

With the crowd back on track, Johnny unwound his accordion. It was an old instrument, bright red and silver.

His right hand flashed up and down the keys on one end, picking out the tune, while his

left hand stroked the buttons that produced the chords.

He played old songs and new songs, always building.

Suddenly, Johnny lunged with his head and seemed about to devour the harmonica, held in place by the wire frame around his neck.

Instead, his mouth found the holes and a wailing sound erupted, blending perfectly with the drum, the cymbals and the accordion.

Second by second the tempo increased.

As his arms and legs went faster and faster, Johnny looked as though he would either tie himself in knots, or lift off the ground and fly away. He had it down to a fine art and the crowd loved it.

They'd stopped clapping by now. They were too busy adding a different beat of their own - the clicking of cameras.

He banged, clanged, danced, pranced, squeezed, jumped and wailed, but he kept the best for last.

Johnny Whistler was well named. As his act headed for its finale, Johnny lifted his head, and started to whistle in a high, pure tone that carried over the top of everything else.

For a second, even the cameras stopped as the tourists broke into spontaneous applause. Now was the time to strike.

Johnny winked at Bouncer again and flicked his head, sending his old top hat spinning into his friend's hands and his hair flopping all over his face.

Bouncer knew what to do, waving the hat around the crowd.

'Let's show our appreciation for the world's greatest busker, the international sensation, Johnny Whistler. Thank you, sir. Thank you, madam. No, we don't take credit cards. Very generous. Thank you. Coins are welcome. Thank you very much. Sorry, we don't give change.'

By the time the act came to its crashing climax, the hat was half full.

Johnny finished with the deepest bow he could manage without overbalancing and falling flat on his face, and ran back into his mother's salon.

As the crowd started to drift away, Bouncer hit them with his closing advertisement.

'That's our show, Ladies and Gentlemen. Those of you with time to spare might like to have your hair styled by Bayside's own Kate Whistler. Kate is not only Johnny's mother, but a world champion hair dresser, and a former winner of the America's Cup.'

Kate was helping Johnny out of his drum harness when Bouncer crashed in, waving the hat. She spun around and planted her hands on her hips.

'Bouncer, will you stop telling people I'm a world champion hairdresser.'

'Don't blame Bouncer,' said Johnny. 'I told him to say it.'

'Well, it's not true,' said Kate, 'And while we're on the subject, I assume you got that name, the America's Cup, from a magazine headline.'

'How did you know that?'

'Because it's obvious you never read the article that went with it. Johnny, the America's Cup is a yacht race! From now on, stick to the truth. Are you listening to me, Bouncer?'

'Sorry, Mrs Whistler, I'm looking at all this money. There must be at least forty dollars in here.'

Johnny and Bouncer's advertisement for Kate had obviously worked. Three large, well dressed women tourists squeezed through the door.

'Are you really world famous?' one of the women asked Kate.

'She is in Bayside,' said Johnny. 'Ask her about the America's Cup.'

Johnny winced as his mother gently stepped on his toes. 'Sorry, son, I didn't see your foot there.'

She turned to her customers. 'Come in, come in, I'll be with you in just a moment.'

Kate turned to the boys and whispered under her breath, 'You two stack your equipment in the back room and get out of here. And Johnny, I want you to go straight home and do your homework.'

As the boys retrieved their bikes from the back of the salon, Johnny counted out the money.

'There you are Bouncer. Ten dollars.'

'Only 10? Couldn't we increase it, just a bit?'

'You're getting twenty five percent already, and I'm doing most of the work.'

'You wouldn't have a crowd if it wasn't for me.'

'I'll admit your big voice saves us having to hire a sound system,' said Johnny, 'but a bargain's a bargain.' Seeing Bouncer's disappointment he changed his mind.

'Tell you what I'll do. From now on you can have twenty five percent on the first twenty dollars and thirty percent on everything over that.'

Bouncer's face went blank. Maths was not his strong point. 'Okay. Very generous - I think. Where to now?'

'Performers need time to unwind after a show. I couldn't face homework at the moment.'

'You'll get into trouble if you don't go straight home.'

'Nah. Mum's bark is worse than her bite.'

'What do you want to do?'

'Let's go up to Needle Point.'

The Point had the best views in Bayside, but because there was no road, it could only be reached up a steep track. Few locals ever ventured up, and even fewer tourists.

Both boys were breathing hard when they reached the summit.

'What a brilliant view,' said Johnny. 'I feel like an emperor, looking over my kingdom.'

'Yuck,' said Bouncer.

'What do you mean, yuck?'

'That.' Bouncer pointed south across the harbour. 'Smoke. Coming from Hatfield's place.'

Hatfield Industries had the two biggest factories in town, and the dirtiest.

Johnny stared at the ugly grey cloud. 'Old man Hatfield gets away with too much, if you ask me. Just because he's the mayor he thinks he can do what he likes. If the factories belonged to anybody else, the council would make him clean them up.'

'Why doesn't your mother do something?'

'She hasn't been on the council long enough, and everyone else is scared of him. But that'll change. Mum's going to stand for mayor at the next election.'

'Mayor Whistler? Do you think she'd let us do some advertisements for her? That one for the salon worked really well.'

'She might, but we'd have to check with Debbie.'

'What's Debbie got to do with it?'

'My big sister fancies herself as Mum's campaign manager.'

'She'd be good at that. Organising things.'

'She gets plenty of practice, she's always trying to organise me. Hey, what's that?'

'Is this a quiz?' asked Bouncer.

'Very funny.' Johnny pointed. 'There. That thing, bobbing around in the water.'

'I can't see anything.'

'Well I can, and whatever it is, it's heading for the rocks. Come on, let's go down and have a look.'

Bouncer was still puffing from the climb up to the Point.

'I'm tired. Why don't I wait here while you go and investigate?'

'You need the exercise, Bouncer. Anyway, we're a team. Come on.'

There was no path down from Needle Point to the rocks on the ocean side, just a series of hand and foot holds carved into the rough cliff face.

The area round the rocks was lonely and desolate, and few people ever went down there.

With Johnny leading the way, the boys carefully clambered to the bottom.

'I see it now,' said Bouncer. 'What is it?'

'Looks like two metal drums, tied together.'

'What are they doing here?'

'If we could get a bit closer, maybe we could find out.'

As they watched, a big wave solved their problem, picking up the drums and dumping them up on the rocks, several metres inland.

'Look at this,' said Bouncer, as he examined the drums. 'There's a label. It's a skull and crossbones. Maybe they belong to a pirate?'

'You're right.'

'Am I?' said Bouncer.

'Yes. And here's another label with the pirate's name on it. Herbert Hatfield.'

'He's not a pirate, he's the mayor.'

'With him, there's not a lot of difference,' said Johnny. 'These drums are his all right. Look at this, Bouncer. "Property of Hatfield Industries". What are they doing here?'

In the distance the boys could see the old coastal trader, the *Rose Marie*, steaming back towards the town. It had been bought recently by Hatfield Industries.

Johnny and Bouncer knew it well, and had even been on board.

'I wonder if the drums could have fallen off the ship?' said Bouncer.

'Could be,' said Johnny. 'It carries all the waste from Hatfield's factories.'

'Bad news, Johnny. These drums are leaking.'

'Then we better not touch them.'

The rough landing on the rocks had punctured both drums and a foul smelling sludge was oozing out, creating a thick, slimy, multi-coloured puddle of gunge.

As the boys watched, three small beach spiders scuttled out from under a rock, and straight into the sludgy gunge.

'Quick, Bouncer, throw me that piece of driftwood.'

Using the wood like a spoon, Johnny scooped up the hapless spiders. 'The poor little things. They're covered in it.'

Carefully, he sprinkled some sea water over them. 'That's washed some of it off, but we don't know how much they swallowed.'

He carried the piece of driftwood to a rock several metres away from the spill and carefully set the spiders down.

'I hope they survive. We can't do anything more for them. Come on, Bouncer, let's get out of here. We've got to tell someone about this.'

The boys went back up the cliff twice as fast as they'd come down.

By the time Johnny got home, Debbie was hard at work on her studies. She looked up from her textbooks as Johnny entered the room.

'You're in big trouble, little brother.'

'Don't call me little. I'm taller than you.'

'But younger makes you little. And two years younger makes you very little.'

'I'm the tallest boy in my class,' he protested, 'by half a head.'

'Is that half a head where you keep your half a brain? Maybe it's not even half otherwise you'd have come straight home when Mum said. She phoned twenty minutes ago. Wanted to know why you weren't here doing your homework.'

'I've been doing something that's more important than homework,' said Johnny.

'Nothing is more important than homework,' said his mother, throwing off her coat as she burst in the door and flopped into a chair.

'I know something that is,' said Johnny.

'Well, keep it until you've made me a nice hot cup of coffee.' Kate pointed to the kitchen. 'With a dob of cream. I'm exhausted. I was run off my feet after you and Bouncer left. I'd pay you a commission if I could afford it. Business is really tight. If it weren't for those tourists, I wouldn't have had a customer all day.'

'Bayside certainly needs a shot in the arm,' said Debbie. 'When you're the mayor...'

'Hatfield is going to be hard to get rid of.'

'What about the entertainment centre?'

'It's still only an idea, Debs. A very expensive idea.'

'But a good one, Mum. It could be a winner for you.'

'Election promises are easy to make. Finding the money to pay for them is the problem.'

Johnny called from the kitchen, 'Old Hatfield's rich enough to pay for the centre himself. If it had been his idea, we'd have it by now.'

'I wouldn't bet on it,' said Debbie. 'Hatfield's the biggest cheapskate in town.' She stopped for a moment and thought about what she'd just said. 'Which means if we're ever going to beat him, we need to hit him where it hurts. In his money belt. Which means his factories.'

'What do you have in mind, Debs?' asked Kate.

'We campaign on the environment.'

'You mean, "clean and green"?''

'Right. The exact opposite of Hatfield's factories. They spit out pollution, and they're filthy.'

'You don't have to tell me that, Debs. I'm always sounding off at him about it at council meetings. Everyone else in this country is cleaning up their act, except him.'

'Isn't that why he bought the *Rose Marie*?' asked Johnny.

'That's a joke,' said Kate. 'That old tub is held together by rust. It should have gone to the scrap yard long ago. It's far too old to be carrying dangerous cargo.'

'That's what I've been trying to tell you,' said Johnny, coming back into the room with a

steaming cup of coffee and handing it to his mother.

‘It’s why I was late home today,’ he explained. ‘Bouncer and I saw something floating in the sea off Needle Point so we climbed down to have a look.’

‘How many times have I told you that’s dangerous, Johnny? The cliff is very crumbly. You shouldn’t hang around there.’

‘Well, we did, and I don’t think you’ll complain when I tell you what we found.’

‘The other half of your brain?’ asked Debbie.

‘No, smarty. Two drums of poison, tied together. Both labelled “Hatfield Industries”.’

Kate put down her cup of coffee and sat up in the chair. ‘You didn’t touch them, did you?’

‘We’re not that stupid, Mum. They were leaking and there was a small puddle of real stinky, multi-coloured gunge. Some spiders had got trapped in it, but I rescued them.’

‘This is your lucky day, Mum,’ said Debbie. ‘Just what your campaign needs. If those drums fell overboard, it means someone was careless.’

‘Yes,’ said Johnny. ‘No way they could fall overboard by themselves. Things like that should be stored below deck in the ship’s hold.’

‘Great,’ said Debbie. ‘So if it wasn’t an accident, Hatfield has been dumping them at sea. Even better for us.’

‘That’d be very serious,’ said Kate. ‘It’s illegal, for a start. But even Hatfield wouldn’t do that, would he?’

‘However those drums got off the ship,’ said Debbie, ‘Hatfield’s the owner so he’ll have to take the blame.’

‘I wonder what the multi-coloured gunge was?’ asked Johnny.

Debbie thought about it. ‘One of the factories makes candy and the other makes rubber, right? That means the gunge was probably a mixture of by-products. The colour would have come from the food dyes.’

Kate got up and walked to the phone. ‘It’s too dark to investigate tonight, but I’m going to call our beloved and careless mayor and give him a piece of my mind.’

Debbie waved her fist in the air. ‘Go get him, Mum.’

Chapter Two

Herbert Hatfield was fuming when he put down the phone. 'How dare that upstart hairdresser talk to me like that?'

'Who's that, Mr Hatfield?' The speaker, sitting across the desk in Herbert Hatfield's office, was Captain Victor Grout of the *Rose Marie*.

Hatfield glared at him. 'Kate Whistler, that's who. You told me there were no problems this trip.'

'The only problems we had were the ones we always have. The ship needs maintenance. That engine won't last forever. If it's not overhauled, it's going to break down, or worse.'

'I'm not spending any more money on that boat. It's lasted this long, it'll last a bit longer.'

'I'm sorry to keep on about it, Mr Hatfield, but I was once on a ship...'

'Spare me the history lesson, Grout.'

'At least get the engine overhauled.'

'I'm not made of money,' said Hatfield. 'It's hard enough trying to make a profit as it is.'

'But, that engine...'

'Will probably outlast both of us.'

'The radio is playing up as well.'

'Captain Grout, that's enough. If you spent more time concentrating on your job, this wouldn't have happened.'

'What wouldn't have happened?'

'Losing those drums.'

'What drums? I didn't lose any drums.'

'That's not what I've just heard. I've told you a hundred times to make sure you're well out to sea before you dump the waste.'

'We were, Mr Hatfield. We did what you told us to do and tied blocks of concrete to the drums before we threw them overboard. That always makes them sink.'

'Not this time. A couple of them have been washed up at Needle Point and they're leaking. They were found by that obnoxious Whistler boy. The one who does the silly busking act.'

'You mean Johnny, Mr Hatfield. The tourists love him. He's good. Why, he's the best busker I've ever...' He stopped as he saw Hatfield's scowl.

'Maybe I should bring in a law, banning buskers.'

'I suppose when you're mayor, you can do what you like.'

'Within limits,' said Hatfield. 'I wonder if I could say it was an accident. Tell Jennings down at the Gazette to run a story saying the drums were washed overboard. People would

forgive an accident.'

'People would also wonder how the drums got out of the hold in the first place.'

'You're right, Grout. They would start asking questions and I can't afford that. If anyone finds out I'm dumping my waste at sea, I'm finished. They won't even elect me to sweep the streets.'

Grout pulled a pipe from his pocket and lit it. 'Maybe it's time to stop.'

'Listen, you stupid old sea dog. Too much salt air has made your brain go soft. I can't afford to stop. If I had to get rid of all my waste properly, it would cost a fortune.'

'It might be worth it.'

'Not to me. As far as this town is concerned, you carry all my waste down the coast to be disposed of, and I'm not about to tell them otherwise. Anyway. The ocean's big enough. I can't understand all the fuss about dumping a bit of stuff at sea.'

'This is not "stuff"', Mr Hatfield. 'This is highly poisonous toxic waste.'

'Don't lecture me, Grout.'

'People today want the air and the sea to be clean and safe.'

'And I don't object to that,' said Hatfield, 'as long as it doesn't cost me any money.'

Grout took another puff on his pipe. 'Times sure have changed. When I was a boy, we dumped everything at sea.'

Hatfield snorted. 'When you were a boy, ships still had sails. You maritime moron. You're lucky to have a ship to command at your age.'

'Yes, Mr Hatfield. I know it's hard to get a command when you're getting on in years.'

'"Ancient" is the word I would use. For you, and that boat.'

'Neither the *Rose Marie* or I will ever be young again, Mr Hatfield, but I'm grateful to still have a job. You can rely on me.'

'I intend to. You're going to have to do something about those drums you lost. Tonight!'

Captain Grout held the flashlight as Charlie and Sam, the two crewmen from the *Rose Marie*, rowed the ship's lifeboat towards the rocks.

'Pull on those oars, men, we're almost there.'

'Why do we have to do this in the middle of the night, Skipper?' protested Charlie, who was nearly as old as his captain.

'Because if we did it in daylight we'd be caught, and then we'd all lose our jobs. And at our age, Charlie, that's something neither of us wants to think about. Just be thankful there's no fog around.'

His flashlight beam searched the rocks. 'Where are those blasted drums?'

'Maybe we should go further off the coast when we drop the next lot? What do you

think, Skipper?’

‘Mr Hatfield doesn’t like that idea, Sam. The further out to sea we go, the more it costs him in fuel.’

‘What a miser.’

‘He won’t even pay to fix things on the ship.’ Grout’s flashlight picked up something metal, up on the rocks. ‘Got ‘em. There they are, just where Johnny said they were.’

‘Johnny? Does that mean someone else knows about these drums, Skipper?’

‘Just a couple of local kids. But if the drums are gone, so is the evidence. Charlie, bring that tin of sealant and follow me.’

While Sam anchored the lifeboat, Captain Grout and Charlie scrambled onto the rocks beneath Needle Point.

‘These drums have been holed, Skipper.’

‘I know. That’s why you’ve got that tin in your hand.’ Grout picked up a stick and tapped the drums. ‘They still sound almost full, so not too much has leaked out.’

He shone his torch around the area.

‘Good, the sea has washed any spillage away. Nothing for us to clean up. Slop that sealant around the holes in the drums. Once they’re sealed up tight, we’ll tow them back to the ship.’

The repairs only took a few minutes.

‘So far, so good,’ said Grout, as Charlie fastened a hook onto the rope around the drums. ‘Now, get Sam to give you a hand and drag them back into the water. Then we can dispose of them properly.’

‘Second time lucky,’ suggested Charlie.

‘Stop talking and pull,’ said Grout, supervising, as the two sailors took the strain.

Forty-five minutes later, the drums were floating in the water alongside the *Rose Marie*. With Grout back on the bridge, he called down to the engine room and ordered the fourth member of the crew, Arnold White the engineer, to stop engines.

Having done that, Arnold scrambled on deck and started up one of the winches that drove the ship’s crane. These were like giant fishing rods, one at either end of the hold, used to load and unload cargo.

Sam pulled the wooden hatches off the hold and stood by in case he was needed.

Charlie was still in the lifeboat, keeping a watchful eye on the drums, bobbing up and down in the water beside him.

‘Let her down,’ he called.

He reached up and caught hold of the hook on the end of the crane. Catching it on the rope around the drums, he waved his arms.

'All secure, Skipper.'

Grout, who could see the lifeboat from the bridge, called to Arnold, 'Pull them up,' and within a few minutes the drums were again being lowered into the hold of the *Rose Marie*.

As the lifeboat was being winched back on board, Grout came down from the bridge and spoke to his engineer and crewmen.

'Something like this was bound to happen one day. If we get caught, we're all in big trouble, so the best thing we can do is keep our mouths shut. You know Mr Hatfield's orders. Anyone who talks will be fired on the spot. Is that clear?'

Three heads nodded.

'All right, Arnold,' said Grout, 'get back in the engine room and get us underway. We'd better go a bit further out before we dump them this time.'

'Did you warn Mr Hatfield about the engine, Skipper? It could break down anytime.'

'He's not an easy man to deal with. Yes, I warned him, but he won't listen, so there's nothing we can do about it. Now, let's get underway. I want to be home for breakfast.'

The phone rang early the next morning in the Whistler household.

'I'll get it!' yelled Johnny, picking up the receiver. 'Hello, Johnny Whistler speaking.' He recognised the voice on the other end.

'Hello, Johnny. This is Mayor Hatfield speaking.' The voice was pure treacle. 'Tell your mother I've investigated your story about those drums at Needle Point. Tell her it was all a mistake.'

'A mistake?'

'That's what I said.'

'What sort of mistake?'

'There are no drums to be seen.'

'But I saw them,' said Johnny. 'Bouncer and I both did.'

'Our minds can sometimes play funny tricks.'

'I didn't imagine those drums.'

'Then perhaps you can tell me where they've gone?'

'I don't know,' said Johnny.

'In which case I think we should just drop the whole thing. Tell your mother I called, there's a good boy.'

Johnny heard Hatfield hang up the phone.

'Mum,' he called as Kate came out of the bathroom with a towel around her head. 'I've got some bad news.'

Debbie poured milk on her breakfast cereal. 'Who's Hatfield trying to fool? Imagination,

my foot. I don't understand it. I know you can be pretty thick at times, little brother, but even you wouldn't imagine two big steel drums sitting on the rocks.'

'Nor would Bouncer. He may be a bit short-sighted, but he's not stupid.'

'I believe you,' said Kate. She'd rung back Mayor Hatfield, but he was sticking to his story. 'He's got us. If there are no drums, what can we do?'

'I smell a rat,' said Johnny. 'I'm going past the Point on the way to school. Want to come, sis?'

'No, thank you. I don't like heights. Anyway, it's too dangerous.'

Johnny grabbed his schoolbag and sprinted for the door.

'Bye, Mum.'

'Your sister's right. Keep away from that cliff,' she called after him, but Johnny wasn't about to stop for anyone.

A light morning fog still hung over the Point as Johnny arrived. Taking extra care, he lowered himself down the cliff face and carefully picked his way across the rocks to where the drums had been washed ashore the night before.

The mayor was right. They'd gone. So had the puddle of multi-coloured gunge. That didn't surprise him because the tide would have washed it away, but Johnny felt sure the drums had been wedged securely on the rocks.

Someone must have taken them. But who?

Then he saw the spiders. He could hardly miss them. Three brightly coloured creatures scuttled around his feet. He put his hand on the ground and one of them crawled up his finger.

'Thank goodness you and your friends survived,' he said to the little spider. 'I suppose I could take you into town and show you as evidence, but without the drums, no one would believe me.'

He placed the spider back on a rock and looked at his watch. If he hurried, he'd just make it to school in time.

'I'd like to see the editor, please. I'm Debbie Whistler and this is my brother, Johnny.'

The two of them stood at the reception desk of the Bayside Gazette, the town's daily newspaper.

'I shouldn't have let you push me into this,' hissed Johnny. 'It's a waste of time. We haven't got any proof.'

'I'm not giving up,' she hissed back, 'and nor are you. Never underestimate the power of the media. If we can get the Gazette to do a story, Hatfield will be flushed out.'

A small man wearing wire rimmed glasses and a worried look on his face came out to meet them.

'I'm Mr Jennings, the editor. What can I do for you?'

'Can we go somewhere private?' asked Debbie.

Jennings frowned. 'Very well, come into my office. But I'm warning you, I'm a very busy man and I can only spare you a few minutes.'

When they were seated, Debbie dug Johnny in the ribs. 'Go on, tell Mr Jennings the story.'

The editor listened in silence.

'I see,' he said, when Johnny had finished. He took off his glasses and polished them for a moment before he spoke again.

'Let me get this right. You claim two drums of toxic waste from Hatfield Industries fell overboard from the *Rose Marie* and were washed up on the rocks below Needle Point. You say the drums were leaking. Only you,' he pointed at Johnny, 'and this other boy, Blubber...'

'Bouncer, sir.'

'...Bouncer, actually saw these drums. Your mother, who's on the council, told Mayor Hatfield, who has investigated and found nothing. I can't see any story in that.'

Johnny looked at Debbie. The way the editor told it, there *was* no story.

Debbie Whistler wanted to be a lawyer when she grew up and now she launched a case for the prosecution.

'Mr Jennings, we think the mayor's involved in a cover up. The Gazette has a civic duty to investigate. Mr Hatfield says the waste from his factories is taken to another town to be disposed of. What town? How is it disposed of? Why is dangerous waste carried on the *Rose Marie* anyway? The only thing older than that rusty tub is its captain. And another thing, why doesn't...'

Jennings slammed his fist down on the desk, cutting her off in mid-sentence. 'Have you quite finished, young lady?'

Debbie nodded. 'The prosecution rests... I think.'

'Then you listen to me. Herbert Hatfield is this town's most respected citizen. His factories are a model of efficiency and safety. He says so himself. If he says nothing is wrong, then I, for one, believe him. And so should you.'

He moved to the door and opened it for the Whistlers to leave. 'You should spend less time after school making mischief, and more time doing homework. Goodbye,' and he slammed the door behind them.

'He sounds just like Mum,' said Johnny, as he and Debbie headed for home. 'I told you it was a waste of time.'

As he watched them leave the building, the editor moved to his desk, picked up the phone, and dialled a number.

'Hello, Mayor Hatfield, this is Jennings from the Gazette. I've just had two young visitors in my office with a rather wild story I think you should know about.'

'Have you seen this?' cried Kate Whistler, slamming the latest edition of the Gazette on the kitchen table.

'We were only trying to help,' said Johnny.

'That's right,' said Debbie. 'If I'm going to be your campaign manager, I need to be out talking to the media on your behalf.'

'Listen, you two. Herbert Hatfield owns the only media in town. The Gazette and Bayside FM. There's no way Jennings would run a story that criticises his employer. Just the opposite. Listen to this.' She read from the front page editorial.

'This newspaper has uncovered a dirty-tricks campaign against Bayside's long serving and popular mayor, Herbert Hatfield. It appears the campaign is being run by Councillor Kate Whistler and members of her family. Kate Whistler's desire to be mayor is well known. The editor and staff of this newspaper want it understood that the Gazette will never support any candidate who tries to win office by underhand means...'

Kate stopped reading and put down the paper.

'What does that mean?' asked Johnny.

'I think it means I have to rethink my "Kate Whistler for Mayor" campaign,' said Debbie.

'As from today, there is no campaign,' said Kate. 'Unless you two have any other bright ideas, we've just handed the election to Herbert Hatfield.'

Chapter Three

'I shouldn't have let you talk me into this,' protested Debbie, balancing on the cliff above Needle Point.

'That makes a nice change,' said Johnny who was climbing down first.

'I wonder if they're okay?' asked Bouncer, who was bringing up the rear.

'We'll never find them.' As Debbie said it, her foot slipped and sent a boulder crashing down the cliff, just missing her brother's head.

'Careful,' warned Johnny. 'Watch where you're putting your big flat feet.'

There had been several days of heavy rain since the drums had been washed ashore, making the cliff face even more dangerous than usual.

'You know I hate heights.'

'Come on, Debs. If you want to be a lawyer, you need to see the evidence.'

'I don't ever need to see a spider.'

'Don't tell me you're frightened of them?'

'Okay, I won't tell you.'

'They could be anywhere by now,' said Bouncer.

'They won't be too far away,' said Johnny. 'They're beach spiders. This is their home.'

When they'd all reached the bottom, Johnny beckoned the others over.

'Here's the spot where they were trapped in the puddle. They're pretty small, but their bright colouring should make them easy to spot, unless it all washed off in the rain.'

Johnny picked up a tiny rock and looked underneath. 'Don't do anything to scare them.'

Debbie's scream bounced back off the cliff face.

The boys turned around to find her frozen with fright.

They followed the direction of her outstretched arm. She'd found one of the spiders. It was sitting on a rock, motionless.

It was the size of a large dinner plate.

'Don't panic, Debs. That's one of them all right. I can tell by the colour. It's just ... grown a bit.'

'Wha... what if it's poisonous?' said Debbie, still frozen with only her mouth moving.

'I've told you before, it's a beach spider. They eat insects.' Johnny moved slowly towards the spider and held out both his hands to form a platform. The spider crawled on.

'I wonder where his friends are.'

Bouncer knew. 'Right behind you.'

Johnny turned around to find the other two spiders on the rocks by his feet. They were the same size. Johnny gently put the other one down. None of the spiders made any move to flee.

'See. Friendly enough.'

Debbie started to relax. 'The colour must be permanent.'

Bouncer knelt down and touched one of them. 'They probably swallowed enough of that gunge to dye them from the inside out.'

Debbie knelt beside him. 'They're actually rather cute.'

'I thought you didn't like spiders.'

'These ones look nice. And not scary at all. Why don't we give them all names? What about the yellow one?'

'Call him, Sunshine,' said Johnny.

'Him? How do you know he's not a she?'

'I don't. Do you?'

Debbie shook her head. 'We could call the blue one, Sky.'

Johnny looked at the third spider. 'This one's been dyed all the colours of the rainbow.'

'Then that's what we'll call him,' said Debbie. 'I like it. Rainbow, Sunshine and Sky.'

'We need to keep an eye on them,' said Johnny. 'In case they grow even bigger.'

'Bigger?' said Bouncer. 'Like giants?'

'You never know.'

'You mean I've got to keep climbing up and down that crumbly old cliff?' said Debbie.

'It gets easier with practice,' said Johnny. 'Doesn't it, Bouncer?'

'I suppose I'll have to do it, then. There's no other way to get here except by boat, and we haven't got one.'

'No, Debbie, but whoever took the drums probably did.'

'Have you got a theory?'

'What's a theory?' asked Bouncer.

'A possible explanation,' said Debbie.

Johnny looked out to sea. 'I'm willing to bet when Mum rang Hatfield and told him what Bouncer and I had found, he got Captain Grout and the crew of the *Rose Marie* to come in here, drag the drums off, and dump them out at sea.'

While Johnny was talking, Bouncer had spotted an empty four litre tin, wedged in the rocks. Picking it up, he read the label. "Super Sealer". What's this?'

'More evidence,' said Debbie, 'It fits Johnny's theory. Because the drums were punctured, whoever moved them would have needed to repair them first.'

'With that sealer stuff,' said Johnny. 'Makes sense.'

'What are we going to do about the spiders?' asked Bouncer.

'They're still the best evidence we've got,' said Debbie. 'We have to protect them.'

'Shouldn't be difficult,' said Johnny. 'We're the only ones who know they exist. Let's

keep it our secret.'

He looked at Debbie and Bouncer who both nodded.

'Good. And we'll come down here every few days and check on the spiders' progress.'

Debbie looked up at the cliff above her. 'I suppose if I'm ever going to be a brave and fearless lawyer, I've got to start somewhere.'

Chapter Four

The spiders' progress was remarkable. Every time Johnny, Debbie and Bouncer visited, the once tiny creatures had grown a bit more.

By the end of a month, Sunshine, Rainbow and Sky had bodies as big as truck tyres with legs to match. Now too big to hide under rocks, the spiders had set up home in a cave under the cliff.

And there was always something to learn. For instance, the spiders' language.

'Stop that squeaking, Bouncer,' said Johnny, reaching across with his arm to whack his friend. It was a Saturday morning and, as there was no school, the trio were stretched out on a large flat rock at the bottom of the cliff, enjoying the sun.

The rocks were so warm, it was like lying on an electric blanket, and it was hard to stay awake.

Bouncer sat up and rubbed his eyes. 'Why did you hit me? I'm not doing anything.'

'Sorry, Bouncer, it must be Debbie,' and Johnny leaned over and whacked her arm as well. 'Stop all the noise. You're squeaking in your sleep.'

Debbie didn't appreciate being woken up. She stirred and rolled onto her side. 'How would you like me to rearrange your nose, little brother?'

'I may be littler, but I'm stronger, so don't try it.'

'You may be littler, but you're also stupider.'

'There's no such word.'

'It suits you. If you used even your half-brain, you'd realise who's making all the noise.'

Johnny sat up and looked for himself. It was the spiders. They were squatting close by, squeaking like rusty hinges.

'They're talking,' said Johnny.

'So are you,' said Debbie, 'and it's keeping me awake.'

Johnny listened to more of the spider noise. He shook Debbie by the shoulder.

'They're talking, they're really talking.'

Debbie blinked in the bright sunlight. 'Spiders can't talk.'

'Says who? When they were small, any noise they made would have been too soft for us to hear. Now they're big, it's different. Listen to them. They seem to be having a great conversation about something.'

'Maybe they're trying to talk to us,' said Bouncer.

'And maybe pigs can fly,' said Debbie.

'Don't be a cynic,' said Johnny.

'What's a cynic?' asked Bouncer.

'It's another name for a big sister,' explained Johnny. 'Just be thankful you haven't got

one.'

Leaping to his feet, he started to make a squeaky, whistling sound with his lips.

'You sound like a constipated mouse,' scoffed Debbie.

Johnny ignored her and concentrated on matching his sound to that of the spiders. It wasn't easy.

'Sing them a song,' suggested Debbie. 'You might have more success. Especially if they're tone-deaf.'

'Very funny. Do you want to try?'

'No thanks. One idiot in the family is enough.'

Johnny tried again. This time the spiders stopped squeaking and turned towards him.

'You've got them, Johnny,' cried Bouncer. 'They're listening.'

Debbie was enjoying herself. 'Isn't this the part in your act where Bouncer passes the hat around and asks for money?'

Johnny ignored her and started to wave his arms, and by using a combination of whistles and hand signals, the spiders started to respond.

'You've done it, Johnny,' cried Bouncer. 'They can understand you. You're speaking their language.'

'Oh sure,' said Debbie. 'Learn "Spider-ese" in one easy lesson.'

'It's not like that,' said Johnny, keeping his eyes on the spiders, 'but it is communication, of sorts. I've seen shepherds do this with their dogs. Look at this.'

With whistles and waves, he now had Rainbow crawl backwards to the base of the cliff.

If he hadn't been so excited, Johnny might have seen the big boulder start to fall off the crumbling cliff above them.

As it was, he caught only a glimpse of it out of the corner of his eye as it came loose and hurtled down towards the beach.

'Look out!' he screamed, diving for cover.

There was no time to whistle a warning to the spiders.

Rainbow was right under the falling boulder and it hit him with a sickening thud.

Johnny was the first to his feet, almost too scared to look. Nothing could survive such a blow.

He walked slowly towards the motionless multi-coloured spider.

'It's all my fault,' he said, trying hard to keep his voice under control. 'If I hadn't been playing silly games and backed him into the cliff, poor Rainbow would still be alive.'

Sunshine and Sky stood nearby. They'd stopped squeaking.

'It's not your fault,' said Debbie coming to stand beside her brother and putting her arm round his shoulder. 'You mustn't blame yourself. It was an accident.'

'It could have been one of us under that boulder.' Bouncer shivered at the thought.
'Nothing could survive that.'

'Poor Rainbow,' said Debbie. 'Such a beautiful spider.'

Johnny looked at her. 'You've certainly got over your fear of spiders.'

'How could anyone be scared of these three?'

'Two,' said Bouncer.

The trio gazed down at the body of the multi-coloured spider.

'What do we do now?' asked Debbie.

'What about some kind of spider funeral?' said Bouncer.

'I wouldn't know where to begin,' said Johnny.

That problem took care of itself as, with a mighty leap, Rainbow shot a metre into the air!

'He's alive!' yelled Johnny.

'Impossible!' yelled Debbie.

'What's going on?' yelled Bouncer.

Rainbow was now prancing round, squeaking at the top of his voice.

'Of course,' said Johnny. 'The drums. That gunge these three got stuck in did more than change their colour and make them grow.'

'Yes,' said Debbie. 'Those drums would have been full of rubber by-products which have somehow turned the *spiders* into rubber. No wonder Rainbow survived.'

'They're probably unbreakable,' said Bouncer.

'Who knows what else we'll discover,' said Johnny. 'They must be pretty strong. I wonder...'

As the others watched, he walked right up to Rainbow and patted one of his brightly coloured legs, whistling quietly.

To Debbie and Bouncer's amazement, Rainbow flopped down on the ground and let Johnny climb onto his back.

Johnny touched Rainbow lightly on the body and the spider stood up on his eight legs.

'Come on, you two,' cried Johnny. 'Your transport is waiting.'

'I'm not going to ride on a spider,' said Debbie.

'I thought you weren't scared of them.'

'I'm not.'

'Then what's the problem?'

'I'd feel stupid,' said Debbie.

'Why? You've ridden a horse.'

'That's different. Horses only have four legs.'

'And spiders have eight. It's like riding two horses at once. Come on, Debs.'

With a combination of whistles and hand signals, Johnny got Sunshine to squat while Debbie climbed aboard.

'Whoa!' she cried, uncertainly, as the giant yellow spider stood up.

'Not *whoa*, Debs. That's what you say when you want a horse to stop.'

'What do you suggest? Hi ho, Sunshine?'

'Don't forget me,' cried Bouncer. 'This looks fun.'

By the time Bouncer was on board Sky, Johnny was grinning from ear to ear. 'Want to race?'

'Where to, little brother? This is not exactly a race track.'

'Around the rocks,' said Bouncer, digging his heels into Sky's side, but instead of moving, the spider stopped.

'Whistle to him, Bouncer, don't kick him.'

Bouncer whistled. And it worked.

'Come on, Debbie,' said Johnny, 'you try it.'

'I feel ridiculous enough already. Anyway, I can't whistle.'

'You'll sit there all day if you don't,' said Johnny. 'Just try.'

Debbie let out a low, spluttering whistle. 'Don't you dare tell me I sound like a constipated mouse.'

'More like bagpipes with a puncture,' said Johnny as he and Rainbow took off.

Johnny, Debbie and Bouncer lost track of time as they and the spiders scrambled round and round the rocks.

And it was almost dusk by the time they said goodbye to their new, giant, rubbery friends and climbed back up to Needle Point.

'I have to pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming,' said Debbie, as the three of them set off for home.

'What a secret,' said Bouncer, 'and it's all ours.'

'Let's hope it stays that way,' said Johnny.

Unfortunately, in a small town, nothing stays secret for long.

Chapter Five

In fact their secret only lasted for two more days. On Monday morning, Johnny and Bouncer were cycling to school.

'What's that noise?' Johnny jumped off his bike and listened.

'It sounds like a siren,' said Bouncer.

'It is, too.'

'Fire alarm?'

Johnny didn't think so.

'What else could it be?' said Bouncer.

Johnny remembered. 'The civil defence siren. Next to the town hall.'

'That's only used for big emergencies.'

'Something's happening in town, Bouncer. Let's go.'

'Maybe we ought to stay away. If there's an emergency, we might get in the way.'

'We might also be able to help. You can stay if you like, but I'm going,' and Johnny leapt back onto his bike and headed for town at full speed.

'Wait for me!' cried Bouncer, as he took off in pursuit.

Johnny was a hundred metres in the lead as he pedalled down Beach Road and past *Kate's Kuts*. Kate ran out of the shop and waved frantically at him.

'Johnny, Johnny, stop!'

The noise of the siren was so loud, he couldn't hear her. Taking one hand off the handlebars, he turned and waved at his mother but kept going, wheeling hard left into Shell Lane, the narrow street that led to the town square.

As he reached the square, Johnny suddenly knew why the siren was wailing.

The spiders had come to town!

People were running in every direction, trying to escape the multi-coloured monsters.

Johnny could tell from the tone of the squeaking that Sunshine, Rainbow and Sky were only playing. The spiders were probably wondering why no one in town wanted to join in.

A tourist bus was parked beside the town's War Memorial and the driver, the red headed Mr Murphy, was trying to keep control.

'Don't panic, don't panic!' he yelled at his passengers.

He could have saved his breath. Even the cameras had stopped clicking as the tourists tried to outrun the invaders. Unfortunately for the tourists, they were all outnumbered eight legs to two.

Bouncer came pedalling up and screamed to a halt beside Johnny. 'What do we do?'

'Nothing, at the moment. Maybe the spiders will get bored and just leave.'

That didn't look likely. They seemed to be having too much fun.

As the boys watched, some of the people tried to counter-attack.

Old Mr Sneddon from Bayside Sporting Goods grabbed a softball bat from his store and ran into the street waving it above his head.

'Take that, and that!' he yelled as he struck out at the spiders. Not realising the spiders were rubber, he hit harder and harder, but the bat bounced off.

Mr Murphy tried a different approach. He'd had another one of his marvellous ideas and he was determined to try it out. He'd been a sergeant in the army and was used to taking charge. He ran for the bus shelter.

'Volunteers, over here, on the double!' he screamed above the noise. As a few, frightened volunteers gathered, he gave them their instructions.

'We're going to lift this wooden bench and use it as a battering ram.'

'Is that a good idea?' asked one of the volunteers.

'All my ideas are good ideas,' he told them. 'I'll lead the way. Ready. Lift. Charge!'

Like a giant beetle, the seat, with its human legs, raced out into the square and straight for Sunshine. The big yellow spider stopped in mid-stride and watched the attacker approach at high speed.

Just as the beetle was about to make contact, Sunshine stepped aside and stuck out four of his eight legs.

With a variety of screams, the volunteers went hurtling through the air, letting go of their battering ram which sailed into the side of the tour bus.

'We've got to do something, Bouncer,' cried Johnny, 'before someone gets hurt.'

'Or someone hurts the spiders.'

'No danger of that.' Johnny threw back his head and let out a high-pitched whistle. With all the commotion, only the spiders heard it.

Sunshine, Rainbow and Sky stopped and looked around. Johnny repeated it, and this time the spiders got the message.

As fast as their combined 24 legs could carry them, they scuttled out of town at high speed.

Herbert Hatfield had been nearby at his factory office. When he arrived five minutes later, he was met by a very angry crowd.

'You're the mayor. Do something,' demanded Mr Sneddon from the sports shop.

'Those spiders are a threat to life and limb,' said Murphy, the bus driver, rubbing his bruises, 'especially to limbs. I'll have to make a full report. I'm going to recommend that we don't bring any more tourists here while those spiders are loose. It's too dangerous.'

'No one should panic,' said the mayor, trying to calm the crowd.

'That's easy for you to say,' said Mr Sneddon. 'You missed all the action. What took you

so long to get here?’

Hatfield protested. ‘I came as soon as I could.’

‘Yes, as soon as the spiders had gone,’ suggested Kate Whistler. ‘Good timing,’ and the crowd murmured in agreement.

‘No one should do anything, or say anything, we might all regret later.’ Hatfield glared at Kate as he said it.

She glared back. ‘Mr Murphy’s right. The tourists will stay away. What happens to us then? If they go, the town goes with them.’

‘Councillor Whistler, you don’t have to lecture me on the importance of the tourist industry. Bayside needs tourists and, as mayor, I’ll do whatever is necessary to keep them coming here.’

‘Words, words, words,’ said Mr Sneddon, who still carried his softball bat and now waved it in the air in a threatening way. ‘Words won’t solve the problem. What are you going to do?’

Hatfield, keeping well clear of the waving bat, said, ‘I’ll call a public meeting tonight...’ but he was drowned out by cries of protest.

‘Meetings, meetings, that’s all you politicians understand!’ yelled someone in the crowd.

Hatfield raised his hand for silence and waited until everyone had quieted down.

‘Bayside is a safe and peaceful town, and as long as I’m mayor it will stay that way.’

Mr Sneddon waved his bat in the air. ‘If it doesn’t, then we can always elect ourselves a new mayor.’

As the crowd dispersed, Mayor Hatfield looked like a very worried man.

‘Perfect,’ muttered Debbie. ‘Absolutely perfect.’

The Whistlers were getting ready to eat their evening meal. Kate was taking the food out of the oven while the children set the table.

‘When are we going to tell Mum?’ said Johnny.

‘All in good time, little brother. In politics, timing is everything. You know our mother. If she found out now she’d want to do something, and that could complicate things. Sometimes parents only get in the way.’

‘What are you two muttering about?’ asked Kate, coming out of the kitchen with a steaming casserole dish in her hand and putting it on the table.

‘I was telling Johnny how Hatfield’s made a real botch of this whole business.’

‘Don’t sound so pleased, Debbie.’

‘Every time he stumbles, Mum, you’re in with a chance.’

‘Come on you two, eat up while it’s hot. Anyway, I told you, I’m pulling out of the

mayoralty race.'

'Keep your options open, Mum, this particular race isn't over yet.'

'Are you two coming to the meeting tonight?'

'Does it mean I can leave my homework?' asked Johnny.

'For once, this is something that's more important than homework.'

Johnny turned to his sister. 'I never thought I'd hear our mother say that. Did you, Debs?'

'Don't be smart, young man. Are you coming or not?'

'You bet.'

'What about you, Debbie?'

'Mum, all political meetings are important to a campaign manager.'

'I asked you if you wanted to come, Debbie, not if you wanted to make a speech. I'm on crowd control. You can help me. I must admit I'd rather be doing that than trying to run the meeting. The whole town's angry and frightened.'

'They're only spiders,' said Johnny.

Kate wasn't convinced. 'Monsters, more like it.'

'Not true,' said Debbie. 'I think they're rather cute.'

Kate looked at her, suspiciously. 'Cute? You weren't even there.'

'Umm... Johnny told me about them,' said Debbie. 'They sounded cute the way he described them.'

'There's nothing cute about them,' said Kate. 'If they drive away the tourists, they'll kill the town.'

'Something else to blame the mayor for,' said Johnny. 'It's all Hatfield's fault. When the people realise that, he'll be out of a job.'

'Just a minute,' said his mother. 'What do you mean, "Hatfield's fault?" Do you two know more about these spiders than you're letting on?'

'Who, me?' said Johnny and Debbie together.

'You've just answered my question,' said Kate.

The public meeting at the town hall that night was a shambles.

'Order, order!' yelled the mayor as the people flooded in.

The town hall had been built 50 years ago when Bayside was very small. Kate's plans for the entertainment centre included a new town hall.

This was one night Bayside could have used a bigger venue.

'What do you mean I can't come in?' thundered Mr Sneddon, waving his softball bat as he stood in the doorway. 'I'm a taxpayer. I demand to be allowed into the hall.'

Kate blocked his path. 'You play softball in the park,' she told him. 'Not inside the town hall. Leave the bat at the door and you can have it back after the meeting.'

'I'm not letting go of it while those murderous monsters are on the loose!'

'Who says they're murderous?'

'They look murderous,' said Mr Sneddon, 'and until they're dealt with, I'm going to be ready.' With that he shouldered his bat and marched back out into the night.

Mayor Hatfield started the meeting.

'We've gathered here, tonight, so that you, the citizens of Bayside can have your say on what to do about the spiders. I'll start by reading out a fax from Mr Murphy who drives the tour buses. It's good news and bad news. The bad news is, following his report about what happened here today, his company has decided to stop all tours through Bayside until the spiders are caught.'

A murmur ran round the hall, growing to an angry roar. Hatfield held up his hand for silence.

'That's the bad news. The good news is that Mr Murphy has an idea for getting rid of the spiders.'

A groan rang round the hall.

The mayor continued. 'I know Murphy is full of ideas, but I said I'd put his suggestion to the meeting. As some of you know, he was a sergeant in the army before he drove buses. He suggests we form our own citizens' army unit to fight the spiders.'

A voice at the back said, 'One of Murphy's better ideas.'

'Mr Murphy's also offered to train this unit.'

'Even better idea,' said another voice.

'As long,' said the mayor, 'as we're prepared to promote him to the rank of General...'

'Why not?' came yet another voice.

'...and pay him more money than the town can afford,' said Hatfield.

'Rotten idea,' said several people and Murphy's plan was dropped.

Two hours, and dozens of other useless ideas later, the people of Bayside were still no closer to finding a solution to their problem.

'This is getting us nowhere,' said the mayor, trying to make himself heard over the noise of so many unhappy people. 'It would be so much easier if we knew more about these spiders and where they've come from.'

The meeting might have drifted on all night if Mr Sneddon hadn't sneaked back in through a side door, yelling, and waving his bat around, which caused everyone to panic.

Kate and Debbie ran to the front doors and threw them open so the crowd could exit in a hurry and soon only Mayor Hatfield and Johnny remained in the hall.

The mayor looked down from the stage and glared. 'Don't just sit there, boy. Go home.'

'I'm waiting for Mum and Debbie to finish.'

'You're Johnny Whistler, aren't you? Remind me to pass an anti-busking law.'

'If you were nicer to people, you might have more success with the spiders.'

'Nicer to who?'

'Me, for a start,' said Johnny. 'I know where the spiders are.'

Mayor Hatfield gave Johnny his full attention. 'What? You know where they are?'

'That's what I said.'

'Why didn't you tell the meeting?'

'Mr Sneddon or someone might have done something stupid. I don't want them hurt.'

'Isn't it the other way round? They're the ones who can do the damage.'

'But they're harmless,' said Johnny.

'Nothing that big can be harmless.'

'Well, these spiders are. I can talk to them. I can even ride on them.'

'Really?' said Hatfield as he slowly came down from the stage, an oily smile now spread across his face. 'You know I've always believed Bayside should have a real entertainment centre.'

'Since when?' said Johnny, suspicious of Hatfield's slimy smile. 'You've hated the idea, ever since my mother suggested it.'

'I've changed my mind. Of course, your mother's entertainment centre would need a big attraction.'

'Like the spiders?'

'Exactly,' said Hatfield. 'What a smart young man you are. Yes, people would come from everywhere to see them. If you can control them, there could even be a job for you.'

'And Bouncer?'

'Who's Bouncer?'

'My friend,' said Johnny.

'Very well, a job for him as well. You say you can talk to these spiders?'

'Well, not exactly talk, but we communicate.'

Hatfield's smirky smile got bigger. 'If those spiders are really friendly, why not show everyone? After what happened today, people are a bit nervous, but I've thought of a solution. Bring the spiders into town tomorrow morning. Can you do that?'

Johnny nodded.

'Good. Make it bright and early before there's too much traffic about. If you can be in the town square at 7am exactly, I'll do the rest.'

'What happens in the square?'

‘As the mayor, I’ll give you and the spiders an official welcome. Tell everyone how the spiders are misunderstood, and want to be our friends. When the people hear that, they won’t be afraid anymore.’

Johnny still wasn’t sure if he could trust Hatfield. ‘What if someone tries to hurt them?’

‘That won’t happen. No one will hurt the spiders. You have my word on it,’ and the mayor offered Johnny his hand to seal the bargain.

It was like grabbing a dead fish, but as Johnny tried to let go, the mayor suddenly tightened his grip.

‘There is one more thing. You mustn’t tell your mother.’

‘Why not?’

‘I want to surprise her. In fact, I don’t want you to tell anyone. Trust me. All will be revealed tomorrow morning.’

‘Okay,’ said Johnny, struggling to pull his hand free.

‘Good. That includes your sister and your friend, what’s his name, Bungler?’

‘Bouncer. I still don’t understand why I can’t tell anyone. But if it helps the spiders and gets that entertainment centre built, *and* I can have my hand back, I’ll do it.’

Hatfield let go of Johnny’s hand. ‘Good boy. And don’t worry about a thing. Tomorrow morning, all our problems will be solved.’

Chapter Six

Johnny kept his part of the bargain and didn't tell anyone. He still wasn't sure he could trust Hatfield, but he couldn't come up with a better idea.

Early next morning he slipped out of bed before his mother or Debbie, grabbed an apple to munch on, and a thick jacket to keep him warm.

He slipped on his radio headphones, and cycled up to Needle Point to collect the spiders.

As he rode, he listened to Bayside FM, a music and news station. Although some big city stations boomed into town, the local FM still pulled most of the Bayside audience.

Like the Gazette, Bayside FM was owned by Herbert Hatfield.

It was still dark when Johnny reached the Point. The area was covered in fog and he pulled his collar up round his ears.

This was a real thick fog, the kind which sometimes hung around all day.

Johnny looked below and wondered to himself how safe it would be to climb down the cliff at this hour of the morning. Although he could faintly see the rocks below, he decided climbing down wasn't such a good idea. Instead, he tried whistling the spiders from their cave.

It worked. In a few seconds, Rainbow, Sunshine and Sky appeared.

The Point was lonely, and just to hear the sound of another human voice, he called down to them, 'Sorry to wake you up this early, but we have an appointment with the mayor.'

He gave another whistle and started waving his arms. 'It's too foggy for me to come down. How about you coming up?'

The three spiders seemed to understand and within a minute they'd scooted straight up the cliff.

'It must be great sometimes having eight legs. You may not understand this, but we're going back to town. Everything will be fine. The mayor's promised to look after us. Stay close to me. And don't wander away and get lost in the fog.'

Johnny climbed back on his bicycle, adjusted his radio headphones again and, as the sun came up over the horizon and tried, without much luck, to penetrate the swirling fog, he slowly led his rubbery convoy towards Bayside.

As the strange little procession wound its way along Harbour Drive, heads started to pop out of doorways, and curious eyes peered from behind curtains.

Soon, telephone calls were being made to friends and neighbours in other parts of town. That was how Kate and Debbie heard the news.

'He's what?' Kate yelled into the phone, bringing Debbie into the room to see what was happening. 'But he's in bed. Wait a minute. I'll be right back,' and she dropped the phone

while she checked.

When she came back to the phone, she was fuming. 'It's him all right. Thanks for letting me know.'

She put the phone back on the hook, and not realising her daughter was already in the room, screamed, 'Debbie! Get in here!'

'I'm here, Mum, stop yelling. What's the problem?'

'That was Alice from the cake shop. That brother of yours is at this moment leading those giant spiders towards Bayside. What's going on? And don't tell me you don't know.'

'I honestly don't know what he's up to this morning, but I can explain about the spiders.'

Debbie told her mother everything she knew about the town's strange visitors.

Along Harbour Drive, the foggy route was lined with people. Some were dressed for work while others were in pyjamas and dressing gowns. Somehow, seeing the spiders with Johnny made them seem less frightening, but no one came too close.

By the time Johnny passed *Kate's Kuts*, his mother and sister were there to see them pass by, like ghosts in the fog which was still thick.

'Be careful, Johnny.'

'It's okay, Mum,' he yelled back, lifting his radio headphones off one ear so he could hear her.

'I've told Mum all about them, Johnny!' yelled Debbie. 'And how harmless they are.'

'Thanks, Debbie. After today, no one will ever be frightened of them again.'

The crowd was growing by the second as Johnny and the spiders turned into Shell Lane.

As they neared the town square, right on the dot of seven o'clock, Johnny heard the Bayside FM announcer starting the news.

And couldn't believe what was booming through his headphones.

'News flash. News flash. A breaking story just to hand. The three giant spiders that attacked Bayside yesterday have been identified. They are now known to be poisonous and should not be approached. Repeating that. Bayside's giant spiders are poisonous and should not be approached...'

Johnny tore off his headphones and looked back at the crowd. He wasn't the only one who'd heard it. Panic broke out.

'It's not true, it's not true!' Johnny screamed, but no one was listening. People were trying to escape, but they were still in Shell Lane, which was very narrow, and people were falling over one another to escape.

The only way out for Johnny and the spiders was to keep moving forward.

Johnny peered ahead, into the fog. Where on earth was Mayor Hatfield?

Then he saw him, through the fog, on the other side of the square, pointing frantically to the alleyway beside the town hall.

There was no time for questions. Pedalling furiously, Johnny raced for the alleyway with the spiders close behind.

As he rode into the alleyway, he was vaguely aware of something hanging above his head, but he was in too much of a hurry to take notice of what it was.

The ear splitting squeals of the spiders caused him to slam on his brakes, spinning his bike in a circle, which faced him back the way he'd come.

There had been something hanging over his head. A huge net, which had now been dropped over Rainbow, Sunshine and Sky by Captain Grout and the crew of the *Rose Marie*.

The spiders were trapped.

Dumping his bike, Johnny ran back to Mayor Hatfield.

'What are you doing?'

'Calm down, boy. You heard the story on the radio. These spiders are dangerous. They can't be allowed to roam loose.'

'Yes,' said Debbie Whistler as she and her mother ran up. 'I heard the story as well. On your radio station. Where did they get that silly nonsense?'

Hatfield turned to Kate. 'Why don't you keep your children under control?'

'They're under control, which is more than I can say for all this. Debbie's told me the whole story. Those spiders are harmless.'

'Councillor Whistler,' said Hatfield in a loud voice, so everyone close by could hear. 'If you spent more time serving this community and less time chasing my job, you'd be a lot more use to this town.'

'I am serving the community,' replied Kate, in an equally loud voice, 'and you don't have to yell. I'm going to start by releasing those poor spiders.'

'Don't you touch them. They're poisonous.'

'Rubbish,' said Johnny.

'Watch your mouth, boy. I intend to rid the town of these monsters, once and for all. I've given my word.'

'Your word?' cried Johnny. 'You gave *me* your word. You told me to bring the spiders into town to show the people they were harmless. You promised me nothing would happen to them. We shook hands on the deal.'

'Rubbish,' said Hatfield, with a slimy smirk on his face. 'We had no such agreement. When I saw the danger the town was in this morning, I had to act quickly.'

'Very quickly,' said Kate. 'How convenient that Captain Grout and his crew just happened to be in the area, and with a net.'

'The town is most grateful for the assistance of Captain Grout and the brave crew of the *Rose Marie*. They're going to take those spiders out to sea and dispose of them.'

'You can't hurt them!' cried Johnny, trying to slip past Charlie and Sam to get to the spiders. 'You promised!'

'Keep that child away from them, Captain Grout,' said Hatfield. 'After what this brat has done I should let those monsters eat him, but it's my duty to protect the people of this town, even the trouble makers.'

Johnny wriggled and fought to get past, but the two seamen blocked him. 'You've got to believe me. They're harmless beach spiders. They're not dangerous.'

'And my Johnny isn't a trouble maker,' said Kate, pushing her face close to the mayor's. 'You're the trouble maker.'

'He endangered everyone by bringing these spiders into town.'

'You won't get away with this,' said Kate.

'And who's going to stop me?' said Hatfield. 'You?'

'Yes, me. When I tell everyone about those drums of waste that caused all this...'

'One small problem,' snarled Hatfield, in a low voice. 'You've already tried that with the Gazette and no one believed you. Why should they? You have no proof. It's your word against mine.' He dropped his voice even lower. 'Johnny Whistler's mother will never be elected mayor of this town. Not after what he's done.'

Turning his back on the Whistlers he called to Captain Grout. 'No more time to be wasted. Get those spiders out of here.'

With the mayor giving the orders, Sunshine, Rainbow, and Sky, still trapped in the net, were dragged onto a truck and driven down to the wharf.

With Arnold running the crane, and the crowd cheering, the spiders were winched off the back of the truck, high into the air, and down into the ship's hold.

'That should hold them, Mr Hatfield,' said Captain Grout from the top of the gangway.

'See that it does, Captain,' said Hatfield from the wharf. 'Take them well out to sea and dump them overboard.'

'Most sensible thing you've said in years!' yelled Mr Sneddon from the crowd, his softball bat resting on his shoulder. He waved it in the air and sent the people around him scattering.

'Maybe I can put this thing back in my shop and life around here can return to normal. I'll tell you what, Hatfield. If you really get rid of these spiders, you'll get my vote.'

That drew a big round of applause and Hatfield's smile was so greasy, it almost dripped off his face.

On the edge of the crowd, Johnny had found Bouncer. The two friends were deep in

conversation.

'It's too dangerous, Johnny.'

'I can't abandon them. I brought them into town. I feel responsible.'

'It's not your fault. It's Hatfield's.'

'We'll deal with him later. In the meantime, they're not sailing without me.'

'What's your plan?' said Bouncer?

'I haven't got one, yet. I'll think of something once I get on board.'

'How will you do that?'

'I need a diversion. You and your big mouth would be perfect.'

Bouncer grinned. 'What should I say?'

'How about...?' and Johnny gave Bouncer his new script.

'Help, Help, another giant spider!' Bouncer's voice rang out across the wharf. 'Over here, behind the shed!'

'Quick, Grout!' yelled Hatfield, 'bring your men down here with another net, and follow me.'

Confusion reigned as Grout and his crew had used the only net they could find. Mr Sneddon offered his softball bat, but it was declined.

It took several minutes before someone found another net, and by that time everyone was shouting orders.

'Help, help!' screamed Bouncer from behind the shed, getting louder and more dramatic by the second.

'Hurry, Grout!' yelled Hatfield, 'we must get all of them. We can't let any get away.'

Holding the net wide, as though they were about to hang it out for a game of tennis, Grout, Arnold, Charlie and Sam, advanced on the spot where the voice was coming from.

'How did we miss one, Mr Hatfield?' Grout whispered to his boss. 'What if it attacks us?'

'You silly old sea horse,' hissed Hatfield. 'The spiders are harmless. But don't tell anybody. We're all going to come out of this smelling like heroes.'

'Quick!' yelled Bouncer from behind the shed. 'He's getting ready to make a run for it!'

'Go on, Grout,' urged the mayor, giving the Captain a hefty shove, 'Charge!'

With that, the crew of the *Rose Marie* raced around the other side of the shed, net at the ready.

'There he is!' screamed Bouncer, pointing to a black circle in the fog. 'He's as big as a truck tyre.'

With that, Bouncer leapt out of the way as the four men threw themselves at their target.

'Grab it!' yelled Grout.

'I've got it!' yelled Charlie.

'So have I!' yelled Sam.

'Me, too!' yelled Arnold.

'It is a truck tyre, you stupid boy,' Hatfield snarled at Bouncer.

'I didn't know that,' protested Bouncer. 'It's too foggy to tell.'

The crowd watched as the mayor gave Bouncer's ear a squeeze. 'I'm warning you, Bungler...'

'It's Bouncer, sir. Ouch, that hurts.'

'And so it should. You're a trouble maker, just like your friend, Johnny Whistler.'

Hatfield let go of Bouncer's ear and turned to the crowd who'd followed the commotion.

'Nothing to worry about. A false alarm.'

Five minutes later, as the crowd dispersed, the *Rose Marie* sailed with three spiders, and a stowaway. Johnny had used Bouncer's diversion to slip on board the rusty old ship.

He still didn't know what he was going to do, but he knew he had to do something.

Chapter Seven

Johnny had stowed away in the ship's lifeboat near the stern. It was uncomfortable and cold. He was pleased he'd thought to put on a warm jacket before he'd left the house that morning.

Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do for the other problem.

Crouched under a tatty and smelly tarpaulin cover, he was starting to feel queasy as the old ship pitched and tossed as it left the calm waters of the harbour and ploughed into the open sea.

From his hiding place, Johnny could glimpse Captain Grout up on the bridge steering the ship. He could also hear Charlie and Sam in the galley helping themselves to food and coffee. The thought of it was enough to make him sick.

Even more distressingly, Johnny could hear Rainbow, Sunshine and Sky in the hold, squeaking in fright. No matter how sick he felt, he knew the spiders needed him.

Fortunately, Johnny had been on board the *Rose Marie* before Hatfield Industries bought it. He and Bouncer had sneaked on and spent an hour exploring before being discovered and thrown off.

From his memory of that time, Johnny knew there were only two ways to get into the hold - through the engine room, which meant getting past Arnold, or through a door up the front of the ship which lead into the foc'sle.

Slipping out from under the lifeboat cover, Johnny crawled the length of the ship on his stomach, keeping as low as he could.

Two things worked in his favour. The fog was even thicker out at sea so there was little danger of being seen, and the old ship's engine was so noisy there was even less danger of being heard.

Keeping one eye on the bridge, Johnny waited until Grout's head was turned. Taking his chance, he lunged for the metal door into the foc'sle, pulled it open, and was through in a flash.

In front of him was a waterproof hatch cover which was almost too heavy for him to lift, but he couldn't let it beat him because underneath it, he remembered, was the ladder leading down to the hold.

Summoning all of his strength, he gave the cover a mighty wrench and pulled it up. He was right. There was the ladder. Carefully, he lowered himself into the blackness of the hold.

So far the layout was exactly as Johnny remembered it.

He could hear the spiders now, and he crept towards them. Suddenly he bumped into something, straight in front of him. Something he didn't remember.

Using his hands to feel around and explore this unexpected barrier, he was dismayed to

find it was a partition. A solid wooden wall which hadn't been there last time he was on board, and which separated him from the spiders.

Hatfield Industries must have put in the partition when they bought the ship.

'Sunshine, Rainbow, Sky,' he called, fighting to be heard over the sound of the engine. 'It's me, Johnny. There's a wall in the way so I can't get to you. But, I won't let you down. I'll think of something.'

He could hear their squeals in reply. He hoped the spiders understood.

Retracing his steps, he was just about to climb back up the ladder when he heard the engine stop. He knew what that meant. The spiders were about to be dumped overboard.

Clambering up the ladder, two rungs at a time, he realised to his horror that the hatch cover had slammed shut above him.

Up on deck, Arnold was now operating the crane while the two crewmen pulled back the cover over the rear section of the hold where the spiders were.

Carefully, Charlie and Sam guided the hook into the slipknot they'd tied in the top of the net. Once the spiders were swung out over the side, a pull on the knot would undo the net and send them tumbling into the ocean.

When the hook was in place, Charlie waved to Arnold. Slowly, out of the hold, came the spiders, still trapped in the net and squeaking loudly.

'What's with all the noise?' asked Sam.

'Maybe they're talking,' said Charlie.

Arnold called up to the Captain. 'I didn't know spiders could talk, Skipper.'

'Nor did I,' called Grout from the bridge. 'I wonder what they're saying?'

'I can imagine,' said Arnold. 'I've been thinking. Do we really have to do this?'

'We'll all be out of a job if we don't. I wish there was another way, but there isn't. Swing them over the side and get ready to release the knot.'

Down the other end of the ship, Johnny was still struggling to raise the hatch cover above his head.

'I can't fail them!' he yelled into the darkness and found just enough strength for one, last push.

As the hatch cover flew back he jumped out, threw himself at the foc'sle door and burst out onto the deck in time to see the spiders hanging over the waves at the end of the crane.

'Stop, you can't do this!' cried Johnny, launching himself along the deck and crash-tackling Arnold who fell over, letting go of the crane's controls.

While Charlie and Sam ran to help the engineer, the spiders swung crazily in their net on the end of the crane, backwards and forwards over the ocean.

'Get this crazy kid off me!' yelled Arnold.

'How did he get on board?' yelled Grout. 'Don't let him get away.'

'He's strong!' yelled Charlie, trying to hold Johnny's legs and arms still.

'And he's slippery!' yelled Sam, trying to get Johnny in a headlock.

Grout was jumping up and down on the bridge. 'Three grown men should be able to overpower one boy!'

Eventually they did. Just.

'Enough fooling around,' said Grout. 'Everyone into position.'

Arnold picked himself up off the deck and swung the crane's arm wide of the ship while Sam held on tightly to Johnny.

Grout called from the bridge, 'Okay, Charlie, slip the knot,' and with that Sunshine, Rainbow and Sky plunged into the ocean.

Johnny could only watch, helplessly.

'Arnold, back to the engine room,' said Grout.

'Aye aye, Skipper,' and the engineer disappeared below decks.

'Can I let the kid go, Skipper?'

'Might as well, Sam. He can't go anywhere.'

Johnny ran to the railings and leaned out trying to see the spiders, but the fog was still too thick. In fact he couldn't see a thing.

In the background he could hear Grout's voice calling down to the engine room.

'Full steam ahead.'

The next second the *Rose Marie* was shaken by a tremendous explosion.

For Johnny, who was still leaning out over the railings, the jolt was enough to throw him off balance. With a loud cry, and unseen by the others, he tumbled overboard and into the ocean.

On the ship, Arnold staggered on deck, his face and clothes black from the oil that had showered the engine room.

'It's happened this time,' he cried. 'The engine's blown apart.'

Grout rushed up to him. 'But we're still afloat.'

'Not for much longer,' said Arnold.

The rod that drove the propeller had snapped and punctured the hull.

Grout ran up the steps to the bridge. 'I'll send a distress signal. The rest of you get ready to launch the lifeboat.'

He grabbed the radio, another thing on the boat that needed fixing.

'This is an S.O.S. Repeat, an S.O.S. This is the *Rose Marie*. We're holed and sinking...'

But that was as far as he got as the ship's ancient radio sparked and died.

The lifeboat launching was also in trouble.

'Swing that boat clear. Help him, Sam,' said Arnold.

'Can't. The ship's listing the wrong way.'

Instead of swinging clear, the *Rose Marie's* lifeboat had swung back towards the ship, and was now jammed up hard against the funnel.

It was a white-faced Captain Grout who addressed his crew.

'Forget the lifeboat. Put on your lifejackets and prepare to jump for it. Inflate the emergency rubber life raft and throw it overboard. We'll all swim for that.'

'If we can see it in this fog, Skipper,' said Charlie.

'We haven't got any other choice.'

Arnold suddenly thought of something. 'Where's the boy?'

Grout was shocked. 'Johnny! I'd forgotten about him. We can't leave him behind. Quick, search the ship before we sink.'

The four of them searched, and called, high and low without success.

'He must have gone overboard, Skipper,' said Charlie

'He hasn't got a chance without a lifejacket,' said Sam.

'And we won't either if we don't get off this ship before it goes under. Come on, jump for it. Captain's orders,' and with that, Grout and the others leapt into the sea.

Johnny, meantime, had been struggling to stay afloat. He couldn't see more than a few metres in either direction and he'd drifted a long way from the *Rose Marie*.

He could hear the voices of the crew calling his name, but every time he opened his mouth to reply, he got a mouthful of water. He knew his chances of surviving were slim.

Then Johnny sensed, rather than saw a movement nearby in the water. His heart did a complete somersault.

Sharks! The sea was full of them. And there was that movement again.

He was already struggling to keep his head above the water and knew he had no strength to fight off sharks or anything else.

He screamed as something brushed his leg, expecting to soon be staring down the throat of a killer shark.

Instead, he saw the friendliest face he'd ever seen. Sunshine!

The great yellow spider splashed alongside as Johnny grabbed hold of one leg and hauled himself out of the water onto Sunshine's back.

'Where did you come from?' Johnny spluttered, coughing the salt water out of his lungs. 'You're floating. How?'

He didn't have time to answer his own question because at that moment he saw another movement in the fog. This time it had to be sharks. Even a giant rubber spider would struggle against a big one.

Then what he saw made him laugh as Rainbow and Sky paddled up to join him. He'd found the answer to his earlier question.

'You're floating because you're rubber. You can't drown a rubber spider. Silly old Hatfield didn't realise that.'

In the distance he could hear the voices of Grout and the crew, trying to climb on board the life raft.

'They must have abandoned ship. That means the *Rose Marie* has sunk.'

With a low whistle, Johnny pointed the spiders in the direction of the voices.

The crew of the *Rose Marie* were alive, but miserable.

'That rotten engine,' muttered Arnold, as the others hauled him into the life raft. 'And that rotten Hatfield for not doing something about it.'

'It's my fault,' said Grout. 'I should have stood up to him. Nothing on that ship worked properly. Not even the radio.'

'What about the distress signal?'

'I tried sending an SOS, but the radio died.'

Charlie shivered. 'So no one knows we're in trouble.'

'We may never be rescued,' wailed Sam.

'That's right,' said Arnold. 'We could become ghosts, drifting the oceans of the world, forever.'

'Stop all this ghost talk,' demanded Grout. 'I don't believe in ghosts. I think it's a lot of...'

He suddenly screamed as silently, out of the fog, cruised Johnny and the spiders.

'Ghosts!' yelled Grout.

'Ghosts!' yelled the other three, in unison, two seconds behind.

The four of them looked ready to jump out of the life raft and take their chances in the ocean.

'Stop!' yelled Johnny. 'I'm no ghost, and neither are these spiders.'

'Why... why didn't they drown?' stammered Grout.

'They're unsinkable, that's why. Turned into rubber by that poison that was washed up at Needle Point.'

'That settles it,' said Grout. 'The dumping at sea's going to stop.'

'Dumping?'

'How do you think those drums got off the boat?'

'That's illegal,' said Johnny.

'I know,' said Grout. 'And my ship's at the bottom of the ocean because of Herbert Hatfield. When we get back on dry land, I'm going to tell everyone the truth.'

'If we get back, Skipper,' said Arnold.

'Where are we?' asked Johnny.

'About twenty miles off the coast,' said Grout.

Johnny converted it in his head. 'That's about thirty kilometres.'

'Right.'

'In which direction?'

'It doesn't matter,' said Grout. 'We haven't got an engine for the life raft, and paddles won't get us very far.'

'That's not what I have in mind,' said Johnny. 'Have any of you got a compass?'

'There should be one here in the raft,' said Grout, unzipping a small compartment and taking out the emergency kit. 'But what good's a compass going to do us?'

'You navigate, Captain Grout, and leave the rest to us.'

With that, Johnny whistled the spiders to link their legs, and using a rope from the life raft, he fastened a tow line around them.

'This may not have as much power as the engine on the *Rose Marie*, but twenty-four spider legs can build up a fair head of steam. Fasten your seat belts, everyone,' and with another whistle the spiders started paddling in unison.

'Next stop, Bayside,' said Johnny, as the strange little convoy set off into the fog, heading for home.

Chapter Eight

Kate was in her salon when the phone rang. It was Johnny's teacher.

'I'm sorry, I don't know why he's not at school,' said Kate, balancing the phone on her shoulder as she wound plastic curlers into a customer's hair.

'The last time I saw Johnny was this morning, on the wharf, when the *Rose Marie* sailed. Bouncer said he did what? Believe me, when my son gets home, he's going to be in big, big trouble.'

How much trouble Johnny was in already became clear a few minutes later when Bayside FM broadcast the news. Kate heard the newsflash theme and turned up the volume.

'A distress signal has been picked up from a ship at sea, believed to be the *Rose Marie*. The ship reported it was holed and sinking, but the SOS message stopped after a few seconds and wasn't heard again. The coastguard has been alerted, but any search will be hampered by the heavy fog.'

'Johnny!' yelled Kate, dropping everything, including perm solution all over her customer, 'My Johnny's on that ship!'

Flinging open the salon door, she raced for the wharf.

Over the next hour, almost the entire population of Bayside gathered on the town's wharf. Some of the people were crying. Mayor Hatfield was trying to cheer them up.

'We don't know for sure if it was the *Rose Marie*. It may have been a false alarm. The message was brief and hard to hear.'

'Did that ship even have a proper radio?' asked Mr Sneddon from the sports shop.

'I doubt it,' said Kate, 'it was hardly a proper ship. How it ever got a sea-worthy certificate I'll never know. It was more rust than metal.'

'I object to that,' said Hatfield. 'The *Rose Marie* had the most modern safety equipment money could buy.'

'Then you wasted your money,' said Mr Sneddon, 'if it broke down when it was really needed.'

'The call may not have come from the *Rose Marie*. It could have been a hoax. Kids playing with a radio somewhere,' said Hatfield, trying to deflect the blame. 'We'll have to wait it out.'

'We can't just leave them out there,' said Debbie.

'Can't we start our own search?' asked Kate.

'It's your boy out there and I understand how you're feeling,' said the mayor, 'but no one can do anything until this fog lifts.'

'What if it doesn't lift?' said Kate.

'Poor Johnny's out there, somewhere,' said Debbie, hugging her mother. 'I'm really

sorry for all the times I called him names, and told him he only had half a brain.'

'I'm going to miss him,' said Bouncer, but then stopped as he saw Debbie glaring at him. 'I... I mean I'm only going to miss him until he gets back.'

'It's all right, Bouncer,' said Kate. 'We know what you mean. Where could he be?'

At that moment, Johnny, the spiders, and the crew of the *Rose Marie* were entering the harbour.

Johnny turned to the men in the life raft. 'We're going to stop the tow here. People will panic again if they see the spiders, so I'll get them to hide under the wharf until you've landed safely and we can explain what really happened.'

Undoing the rope from around the spiders, Johnny climbed into the life raft as Grout took command again.

'Come on Charlie, Sam. Get those paddles out and start rowing.'

The crowd at the wharf were now getting really angry and Johnny could hear their voices drifting across the water and cutting through the fog.

'This is a scandal,' said one voice. 'If that ship's sunk, then we have to find out why.'

'The Gazette will launch a full investigation,' said a second voice that Johnny recognised as Mr Jennings, the newspaper's editor.

In the end it was Bouncer, not the Gazette, who broke the news. He'd been sitting on the edge of the wharf, staring into space, when he saw the movement in the fog.

Not trusting his eyes, he took his glasses off, wiped them, and put them on again. The image was even clearer.

'Johnny! It's Johnny!' Bouncer's voice echoed around the whole waterfront. 'And the crew! They're safe!'

As the life raft tied up at the wharf, Johnny bounded up the steps to hug his mother and sister.

'I never thought I'd be so pleased to see anyone,' cried Debbie.

'And you can wear your hair as long as you like,' said Kate, who was too overcome to say anything more sensible.

As the townsfolk gathered around Johnny and the crew, Jennings pushed towards them, waving his camera. 'Could I get a picture for a front page story?'

'Sure,' said Johnny, 'as long as you agree to print the whole story.'

'Of course.'

'Just a minute,' interrupted Mayor Hatfield. He pulled the editor aside and hissed, 'You don't print anything unless you clear it with me.'

'But, Mr Hatfield, this is the biggest story the town's ever had, and...'

'No buts! You clear it with me, first.'

'Mr Hatfield, I'm quite capable of covering this story without any help. You may be the boss, but I'm the editor.'

'The former editor if you don't do as you're told.'

Johnny had been listening. 'Yes, Mr Jennings, the mayor wouldn't like you printing the truth.'

'You little upstart.'

'No he's not, Mr Hatfield.' It was Captain Grout. He spoke up so everyone could hear. 'Johnny Whistler's a hero.' The crowd fell silent.

Grout continued, 'That ship was unsafe. That was proved today when the engine blew up. We couldn't even send out a proper distress signal because the radio was broken.'

'That's not true,' protested Hatfield. 'I believe in safety.'

'Sure,' said Johnny, 'that's why you've been dumping the toxic waste from your factories at sea off our coast.'

'That's a lie!' screamed the mayor. 'Tell them, Grout.'

'It's the truth,' said Grout, as the mayor started to splutter.

'Grout! How dare you say that. You take that back. Grout, do you hear me?'

'I hear you, Mr Hatfield, but I don't work for you anymore. I just quit.'

'No one quits on me. You're fired!' Hatfield turned to the crowd. 'This whole business about dumping at sea is ridiculous. Are you going to believe this silly old sea dog?'

Jennings was taking notes. 'Yes, Captain Grout, where's the proof?'

'I kept a record of every trip. It's all in my log book.'

'And where's the log book?' asked the editor of the Gazette.

'In my cabin on the *Rose Marie*.'

'And where's the *Rose Marie*?'

Grout suddenly remembered the events of the day. His voice dropped. 'At the bottom of the ocean. But my crew will support my story.'

'I'm not so sure about that, Captain,' said the mayor.

Hatfield glared at the other crewmen. 'I know Charlie, Sam and Arnold will tell the truth if we ask them. I wouldn't have employed them if they weren't honest. And I wouldn't be offering to keep them on the payroll if I thought I couldn't trust them.'

Jennings turned to the three crewmen. 'Was the *Rose Marie* dumping waste at sea?' The men looked embarrassed.

'Dumping at sea? Not that I know of,' said Charlie.

'I don't know anything, either,' said Sam.

'Don't look at me,' said Arnold.

Jennings turned to Captain Grout. 'I'm afraid it's your word against the mayor's. Without

more evidence, there's no story.'

'Good people of Bayside,' said Hatfield, in his best politician's voice, 'it's been a dramatic day for the town. I think we should all go home and get a good night's sleep. Everyone is safe and those awful spiders that threatened our town are no more.'

'Is that so?' said Johnny, giving a piercing whistle. 'Then who's this coming up the steps?'

Out of the mist, from under the wharf, burst Sunshine, Rainbow and Sky.

Before the mayor could run, he was surrounded by a multi-coloured rubber wall.

'There's no need for anyone to be frightened,' yelled Johnny, 'they're quite harmless!'

'That's right,' said Grout. 'And not only harmless, they're friendly. I think it's about time someone told the whole story. Get your notebook ready, Jennings. Tell them, Johnny.'

As everyone gathered round, Johnny told the people of Bayside everything that had happened from the time the drums of toxic waste washed up at Needle Point.

When he'd finished, Jennings was still unsure.

'Anything could have affected those spiders. Without the *Rose Marie*, it's impossible to pin this on anyone. There's still not enough evidence.'

'That's right, Jennings,' said the mayor. 'The Gazette's only interested in the truth.'

Mr Sneddon stepped forward. 'It may not be enough for you and your paper, Jennings, but it's enough for me. I happen to believe Johnny's story. This is all Hatfield's fault. I think we should teach him a lesson.'

With several other men helping, Mr Sneddon pushed past the spiders and grabbed the mayor. 'Let's throw him in the harbour.'

'I can't swim,' squealed Hatfield.

'Can I get a picture for the front page?' asked the editor, waving his camera around.

'I'm warning you, Jennings...,' said Hatfield.

'Smile, Mr Mayor.'

As everyone watched, and the Gazette's camera recorded the event, Herbert Hatfield was carried to the edge of the wharf.

With two men holding his arms, and two more holding his feet, there was nothing the hapless mayor could do as his captors started to swing him backwards and forwards.

'One, two, three,' chanted the crowd as Hatfield was swung right out into space and released, hitting the water with a great splash.

'I can't swim! I can't swim!' he screamed, as his head disappeared under the water.

'I don't believe you,' Mr Sneddon called down to him, and with that he turned away and led the people of Bayside back towards town.

'But, I really *can't* swim!' screamed Hatfield again, as his head disappeared under the

water for a second time.

Luckily for him, Johnny and the spiders were still on the wharf.

With a whistle, and a wave of his hand, Johnny jumped on Sunshine's back and the eight-legged giant yellow life raft plunged into the water.

Hatfield didn't know what was more frightening - the thought of drowning, or the sight of the spider heading straight for him.

'Thank you, thank you,' was all he could manage as he grabbed hold of one of Sunshine's legs. 'How can I ever repay you?'

'You can start by telling the truth about what's happened,' said Johnny.

Hatfield was hanging on grimly to the spider's leg. 'This water is freezing. Can we talk about this later?'

'Let's talk about it now. You may not be so chatty when we get back on dry land.'

'You can't threaten me, boy. I'm prepared to sit here in the water all night if that's what it takes. I know you won't let me drown. It's a standoff.'

Johnny smiled down at him from his seat on Sunshine's back.

'You win, Mr Hatfield. But I wouldn't want to stay there in the water all night. I don't know about you, but I'm scared of sharks.'

Hatfield face went pale. 'You can't frighten me. There are no sharks around here.'

Only one other person was aware of the drama taking place in the water below the wharf. Bouncer and Johnny were a good team. Bouncer knew what was needed.

In his loudest voice he yelled, 'What's that behind you? Look out, Johnny!'

Hatfield almost leapt out of the water in terror. 'Get me out of here!'

'Only if you tell the truth.'

'Yes, yes, get me out of here!'

Bouncer's voice had reached the crowd streaming away from the wharf and they raced back to see what was happening.

'The whole truth,' insisted Johnny.

'Yes!' cried Hatfield in panic. 'I'm guilty! The dumping at sea, the spill on the rocks, the spiders, the faulty engine and the ship sinking. Now pull me out before the sharks get me!'

'What sharks, Mr Hatfield?'

'But... but, Bungler said...'

'That's Bouncer, Mr Hatfield.' Johnny looked up at his friend and winked at him. 'What did you see, Bouncer?'

'Sorry, Johnny. False alarm. I must have seen a shadow. Same thing happened this afternoon with that tyre behind the shed. I'd better get my glasses checked.'

Only then did the mayor look up and see all the faces peering down at him from the

wharf. They'd heard everything.

'You win, Whistler,' said the mayor.

Johnny reached down his hand and hauled Hatfield up onto Sunshine's back.

With a whistle and a wave, Sunshine carried them both back up onto the wharf where the giant spider tilted to one side, causing the soggy mayor to slide off and land in a heap.

As he struggled to his feet, a flash went off in his face. It was Jennings again, with his camera.

'Good news, Mr Hatfield,' said the editor, trying hard not to smile. 'We have some new evidence. Real evidence. A confession. And I've got a wharf full of witnesses who all heard it. The other good news is, I think the Gazette can get the exclusive rights on this story.'

Chapter Nine

Johnny and Bouncer stood on Needle Point.

Down below, the town's latest arrival was steaming into the harbour. The *Rose Marie #2* was twice as big as the first *Rose Marie*, and very high tech.

'Nothing will fall overboard from that one,' said Johnny, 'and the cargo will get to its destination.' He looked around him. 'I reckon this is the best view in the whole world.'

'Compared to what?' asked Bouncer. 'You haven't been anywhere else.'

'I will one day. I'm going to travel the world, entertaining. Want to come with me?'

'You bet, Johnny.'

In the distance they could see Hatfield's two factories. The air above them was now crystal clear.

'Isn't it amazing what a little clean up can do?' said Johnny.

'A little? Hatfield had to spend a fortune on them.'

'He had no choice. The mayor and the council would have closed him down.'

Needle Point also gave the best view of the town's newest addition, the Bayside Entertainment Centre. It stood on the best land in town, donated by Herbert Hatfield.

'Wow, Bayside has sure improved lately,' said Bouncer.

'I could look at that centre all day,' said Johnny.

'What with cleaning up his factories and giving up that land, old man Hatfield must be nearly broke.'

'Not quite,' said Johnny. 'Just wiser. Debbie reckons donating the land was the least he could do after all the trouble he caused.'

'What's it like having a mother who's mayor?'

'She's tougher than ever, Bouncer. Especially about homework.'

'I wish she'd let us do her campaign commercials.'

'She didn't need any. Debbie says Mum was so popular, no one bothered to stand against her because they knew they couldn't win.'

He looked at his watch. 'Time to be going.'

'Remember when we used to entertain the tourists on the sidewalk outside your mother's shop?'

'The stage at the Entertainment Centre is better. Race you into town.'

Johnny pulled up first at the new centre, parked his bike in its reserved spot, and hurried inside, waving at the caretaker as he ran past.

'Hello, Captain Grout.'

Although he'd now retired from the sea, people still used Grout's old title, which he liked.

'Hello, Johnny, what have you been doing?'

'Watching the world go by up on Needle Point.'

'Great spot, that Point. You can see it from way out at sea. I remember once...'

Johnny would often stand and listen to the Captain tell sea stories. Not today. He headed for his dressing room. There was a show about to start.

Already he could hear Bouncer's voice booming over the new, hi-powered sound system out the front of the centre.

An amplified voice, and one that really terrified the hungry seagulls.

'Roll up! Roll up!' cried Bouncer. 'Starting in just a few minutes in the world famous Bayside Entertainment Centre, a brand new show, brought to you at great expense from the four corners of the world...'

There was a knock on Johnny's dressing room door. It was his mother. She always came by at least once a week to catch the show.

'Bouncer's in good voice,' said the new mayor. 'What's this about the four corners of the world?'

'I read it in a magazine, Mum. It sounds impressive.'

'I should have guessed. Will you be home for dinner?'

'Later. Bouncer and I are working on some new material. We're going to practise tonight.'

'That's show business, I suppose,' said his mother. 'Have a good one, Johnny. As they say in show biz, "break a leg".'

'Were did you get that from, Mum?'

She laughed. 'I must have read it in a magazine.'

The centre was almost full.

'Ready, Johnny?' Bouncer stood in the wings beside his friend.

'You bet, Bouncer. Get out there and knock 'em dead.'

Johnny always smiled when he saw his best friend these days. He was still the same old Bouncer, with the same thick black glasses perched on the end of his nose. And he still vibrated when he got excited.

But now Bouncer faced his audiences in a well-cut dinner suit, complete with bow tie.

Johnny hadn't changed much at all. He still did his busking act wearing his old blue jeans, the paint splattered shoes, and the too-big jacket.

He'd decided not to mess too much with his image, and felt more comfortable wearing his traditional busking clothes.

Johnny glanced in a nearby mirror. He even still wore the battered top hat, but there was no need to pass it around anymore. The audience these days paid at the door.

Bouncer's voice brought him out of his day dream.

'Please give a big welcome,' cried Bouncer, his whole body vibrating, 'to our very own, Johnny Whistler!'

Johnny burst onto the stage. In many ways, it was just like the old days, only with bigger crowds.

Starting slowly, he built the momentum. Pumping his elbows. Knocking his knees together. Drum-cymbal: drum-cymbal: drum-cymbal. The audience clapping out of time.

Now unwinding the accordion. The same one, bright red and silver. His right hand flashing up and down the keys. The left hand producing the chords.

Throwing his head forward at the harmonica. Wailing, blending with the drum, the cymbals, the accordion.

The tempo building. Arms and legs going faster and faster.

Then lifting his head, that high, pure whistle that carried over the top of everything.

The old act. Almost. But the whistling now had a different effect. It was the signal for the others in the act to burst out of the wings.

Sunshine! Rainbow! Sky!

They banged and they clanged, they danced and they pranced, they jumped and they bumped, every move sending the audience into a frenzy.

As the crowd came to its feet in spontaneous applause, Bouncer burst back on stage and grabbed the microphone.

'Let's hear it for Bayside's international superstars!'

For once, Bouncer wasn't exaggerating.

'JOHNNY WHISTLER AND THE SPIDERS!!'

The End