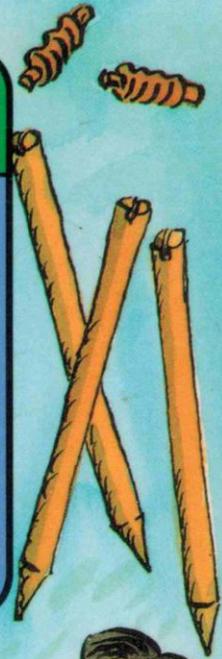
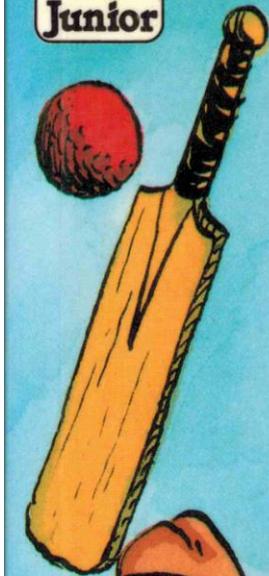




Tom Bradley

Johnny Whistler and the Madcap Cricket Match



FREE ebook
Book 4 of 4

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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

(Fourth book in the Johnny Whistler series)

Johnny Whistler’s town of Bayside has been challenged to a cricket match by its bigger rival, Ridgewood. Bayside doesn’t even have a cricket team, but this is a sporting emergency, and everyone’s dragged in to help fight off the under-handed challenge.

Johnny’s keen to play, as are his three giant, rubbery spiders, Sunshine, Rainbow, and Sky. But his sister, Debbie, and best friend, Bouncer, have a few problems. So does Johnny’s mother, Kate. And a visiting American cowboy has his own ideas about how cricket should be played.

Johnny and the ill-prepared Bayside team will need all the help they can get because Johnny’s old enemy, Herbert Hatfield, is determined Ridgewood will win. He’s also one of the umpires, and an expert at cheating.

In a thrilling, see-sawing, action-packed cricket match, it all comes down to the last ball.

Chapter One

'Howzat?' yelled Johnny Whistler and Bouncer Scott at the same time, leaping up from the couch.

Bouncer's glasses and the pizza they'd been sharing flew in different directions.

'Quiet, you two!' called Debbie Whistler from the other room. 'It's only a cricket match.'

'Only a cricket match?' Johnny protested, sitting down again. 'Sis, this is the most exciting one-day game I've ever seen.'

Bouncer was looking for his glasses. 'They must be here somewhere.'

A long, multi-coloured arm dropped them back in his lap. 'Thanks, Rainbow. Johnny, did you see which way the pizza went?'

Johnny pointed to the three giant spiders. 'Probably into one of those rubber rubbish bins. I didn't see which one. I was too busy watching that great catch.'

The TV replay showed it again.

'Brilliant!' yelled Johnny.

'I can't hear myself think with all the noise you're making,' said Johnny's mother, Kate, coming into the room. 'How's the game going?'

'Last batter's just come in. One ball left, and they still need six runs to win.'

'Difficult,' said Kate.

'Stupid, if you ask me,' said Debbie, joining them, her wet hair wrapped in a huge towel.

'You look even more big-headed than usual,' said Johnny.

Debbie patted the scarf. 'I've got curlers under here.'

'I knew it wasn't a brain.'

'You can talk, little brother. You're watching the world's most boring game.'

'You only think it's boring, 'cos you don't understand it,' said Johnny. 'Now, hush. They need six runs off this last ball.'

As they watched the television screen, the batter on strike launched himself at the final delivery.

With an enormous swing, he swiped the ball back over the head of the astonished bowler, and over the boundary fence, on the full, for a six.

Johnny hit the TV remote control button and collapsed against the back of the couch like a rag doll.

'Can you believe it?' he said. 'Winning on the last ball. I'm exhausted. Sometimes cricket is harder to *watch* than to play.'

'The game's changed a bit since my day,' said Kate.

Debbie stared at her mother. 'You didn't play cricket?'

'Yes, I did.'

'You never told us that.'

'It's not something I like to remember.'

'You just don't look the sporting type, Mum,' said Debbie.

'Nor do you, sis, with that silly towel around your head,' said Johnny.

'I haven't got time for games,' said Debbie. 'I'm a young woman, going places.'

'Where can you go at 14?' he said. 'Except to school.'

'Do you know,' said Kate 'when I was Debbie's age, I played for the Bayside School cricket team. I was even captain for one game.'

'Why only *one* game?' asked Johnny.

Kate's face clouded over. 'Because after that game, I retired from all cricket.'

'Sounds like a good story waiting to be told.'

'Some other time,' said his mother.

Johnny reached for the remote control button again.

'No, you don't, young man,' said Kate. 'Leave the TV off, and go and do your homework.'

'Oops... time for me to leave,' said Bouncer, jumping up from the couch.

'You don't have to go,' said Kate. 'Why don't you stay and have dinner with us? That way, you can meet Chuck.'

'Chuck?'

'Charleston S. Melville,' said Debbie.

Bouncer shook his head. 'I thought you said his name was Chuck?'

'Chuck's easier,' said Johnny. 'Imagine being called Charleston?'

'Wasn't the Charleston the name of a dance when you were a girl, Mum?' asked Debbie.

'I'm not *that* old,' said Kate. 'The Charleston was popular when my *grandmother* was young.'

Bouncer looked confused. 'You still haven't told me who Chuck Charleston is.'

'Chuck *Melville*,' explained Kate. 'He's the mayor of Cherokee Bend.'

'Sounds like something out of a cowboy movie,' said Johnny.

'Isn't Cherokee Bend somewhere up past Ridgewood?' asked Bouncer.

'A *long* way past Ridgewood,' said Johnny.

'Cherokee Bend,' Kate explained, 'is a little town in Texas.'

'Little, like Bayside?' asked Johnny.

'No, little as in Texas little. It's much bigger than Bayside. Apparently everything in Texas is big. Including Chuck.'

Chuck Melville had spent the last week in Ridgewood, the region's biggest town.

He'd been guest speaker at a mayors' conference, organised by the mayor of Ridgewood, Lizzy Harper.

'I'll bet Lizzy's sorry she ever invited him,' said Kate. 'Chuck and I got all the media attention. Lizzy didn't like it.'

Debbie was now painting her nails. 'Weren't you and Lizzy Harper at school together, Mum?'

'Different schools, Debs. What an awful colour.'

'The schools?'

'No, your nail polish.'

'Frightens the mosquitoes,' said Johnny. 'I wonder how big they are in Texas.'

'Ask Chuck,' said his mother. 'He's going to spend a few days with us before heading home. Part of the "Twin-Towns" scheme.'

Debbie looked at Johnny and Bouncer. 'Bayside and Cherokee Bend are twin towns. I'll bet you two clowns didn't know that.'

'Look in the mirror, sis, before you call anyone else a clown.'

Bouncer frowned. 'Are the two towns regular twins? Or identical twins?'

'Regular, I think,' said Johnny. 'Cherokee Bend is way bigger.'

Debbie glared at the two boys. 'Education is wasted on some people.'

Johnny looked at his sister. 'Will I be as smart as you when I'm 14?'

'If you grow up a bit in the next two years.'

'Does that mean I'll have to wear those stupid curlers?'

'You could wear them now,' said Kate. 'Your hair's long enough.'

As well as being mayor, Kate Whistler owned *Kate's Kuts* hairdressing salon.

'You need a haircut, Johnny,' said his mother.

'My hair's fine the way it is, Mum. I couldn't go on stage with short hair. It would spoil my image.'

'How about a trim?' suggested Kate.

'I'd like to know more about twin towns,' said Bouncer, rescuing Johnny by changing the subject.

Debbie looked pleased. 'Thank goodness someone wants to learn.'

'As long as it's not maths,' said Bouncer. 'I'm hopeless at maths.'

'You can be the teacher, sis,' said Johnny. 'You're bossy enough.'

'I'd probably get a more intelligent audience if I talked to the spiders.'

Bouncer nudged Johnny. 'You'd have to translate for us. You're the only one who speaks their language.'

'I'm listening to you, Debs,' said Kate.

'Thanks, Mum.' Debbie took a deep breath. 'Twin towns link together communities in different parts of the world, promoting international understanding. It's a way for people of all

races and cultures to come closer, and to work together for...'

Johnny cut in. 'My sister's going to make a great lawyer, Mum. She can bore the pants off anybody.'

'No one who likes cricket can talk about boring,' Debbie snapped.

Kate frowned. 'Don't forget, Debs, I like cricket, too. At least, I used to.'

'No one's calling *you* boring, Mum,' said Debbie. 'I bet you're the most interesting mayor in the whole world.'

'Wait till you meet Chuck!'

'Howdy, everyone,' said the mayor of Cherokee Bend as he ambled into the Whistler's front room and almost tripped over Rainbow, Sunshine and Sky.

He shook his head. 'I do believe, I've never seen spiders this big back home.'

'They didn't start out that way, Mr Melville,' said Johnny.

'I'd kinda like to hear that story. And call me Chuck, son. Everyone else does.'

As he spoke, Chuck took off his wide-brimmed cowboy hat and sank down into the couch.

He had long, slightly bowed legs, and on his feet he wore hand-made cowboy boots.

'We think they're the biggest spiders in the world,' said Bouncer.

'They were tiny when we first found them,' said Debbie.

'That's not quite true,' said Johnny, holding up his hand in a stop signal. 'When *Bouncer* and *I* found them, they were still tiny.'

He pointed at his sister. 'When *you* first saw them, sis, they were already the size of dinner plates. You were scared stiff.'

'I was not!'

'Mind your manners!' said Kate. 'Stop fighting in front of our guest.'

'Don't mind on my account,' said Chuck. 'I've got children *and* grandchildren. Sometimes at our house there's more hootin' and hollerin' than at a cattle stampede.'

He looked at Johnny. 'So how'd these spiders get so big?'

Johnny explained how he and Bouncer had found two leaking drums of toxic sludge washed up at Needle Point. Drums of waste from Herbert Hatfield's factories, illegally dumped at sea.

The spiders had been trapped in the chemicals, and had not only turned different colours, but grown into monsters.

'They've got bodies as big as truck tyres,' said Chuck. 'Have they stopped growin' yet?'

'I hope so,' said Johnny.

'If they haven't, we'll need a bigger house,' said Kate.

Chuck scratched his head. 'And you say this Hatfield was mayor of Bayside when all this

happened?’

‘That’s right,’ said Debbie. ‘He thought he could do whatever he liked. He used to dump the waste overboard from his ship, the *Rose Marie*. When it had an accident and sank, we thought all the evidence had gone to the bottom of the ocean.’

‘But Johnny rescued Captain Grout and the crew,’ added Bouncer. ‘And then tricked Hatfield into confessing.’

‘Well, I never,’ said Chuck. ‘Sounds even more lively than Cherokee Bend. What happened to Hatfield?’

‘He still lives in Bayside,’ Debbie explained, ‘but the town threw him out as mayor and elected Mum. Of course, I was her election campaign manager so she couldn’t lose.’

Chuck frowned. ‘I sure hope Hatfield was made to pay for all his wrong-doing.’

‘He paid all right,’ said Kate. ‘The council made him clean up his factories. He also gave Bayside the land for the new Bayside Entertainment Centre. It was the least he could do.’

Chuck grinned. ‘Back in my grandpa’s day, they used to take cheatin’ varmints like that, roll ‘em in molasses and feathers, and run ‘em out of town.’

‘Is that what they called “frontier justice”?’ asked Johnny.

Chuck started to laugh which made the whole couch shake. ‘You’ve been watchin’ too many old western movies on TV, son.’

‘But isn’t Cherokee Bend the wild west?’

‘We haven’t been the wild west for a hundred years or more.’

‘But don’t you still ride horses?’ asked Bouncer, ‘and have cattle drives and roundups?’

‘Yep, to all of those. My eldest boy runs my ranch these days. When I can get away from the mayor’s office, I always go help with the brandin’.’

‘Branding?’ said Debbie. ‘You still *brand* your cattle? With those hot irons?’

‘Ain’t too many fences round our way,’ said Chuck. ‘Brandin’ is still the best way of tellin’ our cattle from anybody else’s.’

Kate headed for the kitchen as the oven bell sounded. ‘Dinner’s almost ready. Johnny, Debbie, give me a hand, please.’

‘But doesn’t branding hurt?’ Bouncer asked Chuck as the two of them headed for the table.’

‘Doesn’t hurt the cattle, Bouncer, but it sure does hurt if one of ‘em kicks you.’

Chapter Two

'It isn't fair, Uncle Herbert. It's just *not* fair.'

Herbert Hatfield held the phone away from his ear. When his niece, Lizzy Harper, got excited, she yelled.

'The conference was a great success, Lizzy. And you organised it.'

'But everyone was more interested in what Kate Whistler had to say. "Mayor Whistler" this, and "Mayor Whistler" that. Why didn't anyone report what *I* had to say?'

'Maybe you didn't say it loud enough.'

'What?' she screamed down the phone at him. 'What do you mean, I didn't say it loud enough?'

'Just a joke, Lizzy.'

'Well I didn't think it was funny.'

Lizzy didn't laugh at other people's jokes.

'And to make it worse,' she told her uncle, 'when Kate Whistler wasn't hogging the spotlight, everyone was applauding that cowboy from Cherokee Bend.'

'Chuck Melville?'

'Chuck him in the river for all I care. That big cowboy hat and those ridiculous boots. And waving that ridiculous branding iron about while he told his "so-called" funny stories. They didn't make me laugh.'

'But you invited him,' said Hatfield.

'It was *your* suggestion, Uncle Herbert. I'm sick of Bayside getting all the publicity. Ridgewood's bigger. Who cares about Johnny Whistler and his stupid dancing spiders?'

'A lot of people,' said Hatfield. 'Tourists, for instance, with money.'

'But Bayside wouldn't have those giant spiders if it weren't for you, Uncle Herbert.'

'I know, Lizzy. But no one bothers to thank me for it. Or give me any credit for all the years *I* spent as mayor. All the people of Bayside remember is that I dumped a little bit of rubbish at sea.'

'Wasn't it highly-poisonous toxic waste?'

'Whose side are you on, Lizzy?'

'Yours, Uncle Herbert. Just thinking about those Whistlers makes me angry.'

'Me, too. I think it's time we lived up to our family motto. Don't get angry, get even!'

'How?'

'I ask myself that question every day. The Whistlers are a close-knit family. As well as Johnny, there's that smarty-pants, Debbie, and their funny-looking friend with the thick glasses and big voice. Bugler, or Bungler, or something.'

'I wish Kate and I were back at school. I sure fixed her in that last cricket match.'

'What cricket match?'

Lizzy told him.

'Perfect, Lizzy, said Hatfield. 'That's how we'll get our revenge.'

'I don't understand.'

'Just leave it to your Uncle Herbert. I want you to start by emailing your old school rival. History is about to repeat itself.'

Kate Whistler had lost interest in her breakfast as she read the email that had arrived overnight.

'It's from Tin Lizzy,' she told Johnny and Debbie as she re-read the message she'd printed off.

Debbie was about to take a mouthful of her whole grain cereal. 'Who?'

'Lizzy Harper. The mayor of Ridgewood.'

'But why do you call her "Tin" Lizzy?' asked Johnny.

'Because at school she was as tough as steel.' Kate's hands shook. 'Never gave anyone a chance. Nothing's changed.'

'What does she say?'

'Let me read it again.'

'You're not scared of her, are you, Mum?' asked Johnny, spreading gobs of peanut butter and jam on his fourth piece of toast.

'Yuck,' said Debbie. 'How can you eat that slop?'

'Easy,' said Johnny. 'I just open my mouth and pop it in.'

Kate finally put the email down. Her hands were trembling as she picked up her coffee cup.

'Want to tell us about it, Mum?' asked Johnny. 'You look really upset.'

'Is it that obvious?'

'Yes,' said Johnny and Debbie together.

'All right. Remember yesterday, when you were watching the cricket on TV?'

Debbie put down her cup of herbal tea. 'I wasn't watching.'

'Very well. When Johnny and Bouncer were watching.'

'Who could forget?' said Debbie. 'All that yelling. My ears still hurt.'

Johnny licked some jam off his lips. 'I know why your ears hurt, sis. Those hair curlers were too tight.'

'Would you two stop bickering?' said Kate. 'I thought you wanted to hear what happened.'

'Sorry, Mum,' said Debbie. 'I really should try and be nicer to little brother. It's not his fault he was born with half a brain.'

At that moment, the kitchen door flew open. Chuck stood there, filling the doorway.

'Sounds like a cattle stampede in here,' he said.

'You're just the man to stop it,' said Kate.

'Shucks, I left my lasso at home,' said the Texan, pulling out a chair and thrusting his long legs under the small kitchen table.

He was wearing a dressing gown and cowboy boots.

He saw Debbie looking at them. 'Never go anywhere without my boots.'

'Do you wear them to bed?' she asked.

'Used to,' said Chuck. 'But my wife makes me take them off.'

'Why?'

Chuck winked at Johnny as he replied. 'The spurs kept diggin' holes in the mattress.'

'You're not wearing spurs,' said Debbie.

'Left them back in Cherokee Bend with my lasso. Brought the brandin' iron, though.'

'You're kiddin' - I mean kidding,' said Debbie.

'No, he's not,' said Kate. 'He had it with him at the conference.'

'Yep,' said Chuck. 'When I'm tellin' a few Texas-sized tall tales, I wave it around. Gets a lot of laughs.'

'What's the brand?' asked Johnny.

'Why, with a name like Melville, it's got to be the "Big M", of course.'

Chuck looked around the kitchen. 'All this early mornin' talkin's makin' me thirsty. Any coffee?'

'I've got something better,' said Debbie, jumping up from the table.

'Where I come from, there's *nothin'* better than hot black coffee to start the day.'

Debbie poured him a cupful from the china tea pot. 'Just as you like it. Hot and black.'

Chuck picked up the cup and smelled the brew. 'Doggone strange smell.'

'Try it.'

Chuck took a sip. His lips curled. 'What *is* this stuff?'

'It's not "stuff".'

'Sure smells a lot like the "stuff" my cattle drop behind 'em.'

'It's not that bad,' said Debbie. 'It's herbal tea.'

'Tea?' said Chuck. 'Don't taste like no tea I ever drunk. Is this what you folks drink in Bayside?'

'Only, Debbie,' said Johnny, getting up from the table and scooping up Chuck's unwanted herbal tea.

'Thanks, Johnny. I'd prefer a regular coffee if you've got one.'

'Mum couldn't start the day without it. How about some toast?'

Chuck accepted the refilled mug. 'Thanks, Johnny. This coffee will do jes' fine for now.'

Johnny sat down again and popped the last bit of toast in his mouth. 'I recommend the peanut butter and jam.'

Chuck picked up the jam jar and studied the label. 'We call jam "jelly" back home. This, and peanut butter, used to be my all-time favourite breakfast when I was your age.'

Debbie frowned. 'But now you're an adult, you have better taste, right?'

Chuck looked at her over the top of his coffee mug. 'What does that mean, young lady?'

'It means Debbie doesn't like peanut butter and "jelly",' said Johnny.

'You don't have to answer for me, little brother. I just mean that adults, like Chuck and I...'

'Am I included in this list of oldies?' asked Kate.

'Of course, Mum. Apart from Johnny, we're all adults at this table. And adults have more mature taste buds than *kids*.'

'Is this going to become another boring speech?' asked Johnny.

Debbie glared at him. 'Cherokee Bend is Bayside's twin-town. Understanding their diet helps me understand them as people.'

She turned to Chuck. 'What do you eat for breakfast?'

Chuck put down his mug and used his fingers to count off the menu. 'Back home I like to start with fresh fruit and cereal.'

Debbie nodded, approvingly.

'Then a good-sized servin' of bacon and eggs. Followed by a plateful of sausages and hash browns.'

Debbie's eyes widened. 'All at the one meal?'

'Yep, I like a good breakfast, 'specially if I'm helpin' round the ranch. Where was I? Breakfast. Oh, yeah, after the hash browns, I'm often still a mite hungry, so I'll finish off with a dozen pancakes drippin' with maple syrup. All washed down with six or more cups of coffee.'

Johnny nudged Debbie. 'Ask him what he eats for *lunch*. I dare you!'

Chuck turned to Kate. 'What's on the agenda today, Mayor Whistler, or are you workin' at the salon?'

'Not today.' She held up the email. 'I don't trust myself with a pair of scissors. Not after reading this.'

'Sorry, Mum,' said Johnny. 'You were telling us about Tin Lizzy when Debbie interrupted you.'

'I did not interrupt her. You did.'

'Who's Tin Lizzy?' asked Chuck.

'That's all part of the story,' said Kate as she began to explain.

Although Kate and Lizzy had gone to different schools, they were strong rivals on the sports field. But, unlike Kate, Lizzy was a bully who would go to any lengths to win.

'It all came to a head during the last cricket match of the season,' said Kate. 'It was the district final, and my first game as captain. Lizzy was captain of Ridgewood.'

Chasing a big Ridgewood total, Kate had opened the batting for Bayside.

Although she kept losing partners at the other end, Kate hung in and victory was in sight.

'The closer we got to the Ridgewood total, the more abusive Lizzy got,' said Kate. 'You should have heard the things she was calling me. Of course, she made sure the umpires couldn't hear.'

'Well, I'll be,' said Chuck. 'I didn't like that woman when I met her at the conference. Now I know why.'

'I tried to ignore her,' continued Kate, 'but it wasn't easy. Anyway, the game came down to the last over. We needed one run to tie. Two to win. Lizzy was bowling and I was on strike.'

Kate frowned at the memory. 'Lizzy bowled her first ball, I blocked it. She ran towards me to pick it up on her follow-through. But she didn't stop. She kept on running. Straight into me.'

Johnny and Debbie were on the edges of their seats. 'What happened, Mum?'

'My knee gave way and I went down in a heap with her on top of me. She claimed it was an accident. I could hardly stand. The umpire asked me if I wanted a runner. As you know, that's allowed if a batter's injured.'

'I don't know nothin' about cricket,' said Chuck, 'but go on. What did you do?'

'As I was getting my knee strapped, Lizzy came up and whispered to me that I wasn't really injured, just chicken, and wanted out of the game.'

She frowned. 'I got so mad I said "no" to a runner and hobbled back to my crease. After all, we only needed two more runs to win.'

Kate paused. 'I gritted my teeth, hit the next ball she bowled, and started to run. Halfway down the pitch, my knee gave way and I collapsed. I was out of my ground so Lizzy grabbed the ball and ran me out.'

'Wow, Mum,' said Johnny. 'So you lost the game.'

'Yes, Johnny, and I was in so much pain from my injured knee, I fainted. The last thing I saw was Lizzy's face, grinning at me.'

'That's even more dramatic than yesterday's game on TV,' said Johnny.

'What's that story got to do with the email?' asked Debbie.

Kate handed it across. 'It brought back all those bad memories. Read it for yourself. Ridgewood's challenged Bayside to a cricket match. This Saturday.'

'We'll get slaughtered,' said Debbie. 'Bayside hasn't even got a cricket team.'

'We play cricket at school,' said Johnny. 'And you should see some of our backyard games.'

'I can't let this challenge pass,' said Kate. 'I've got to accept it.'

'Are you going to play, Mum?'

Kate jumped. 'No! I never want to touch a cricket bat again as long as I live. I'll organise the Bayside team, but that's all. Johnny, how would you like to be captain?'

'Sure. I'm captain at school.'

'I thought this was going to be *adult* cricket,' said Debbie.

'The odd junior player should be okay,' said Kate.

'That's my little brother, all right,' said Debbie. 'Very odd.'

'And I'm sure there'll be plenty of other volunteers besides Johnny,' said Chuck.

'What about you?' asked Johnny.

'Not me,' said the Texan, 'baseball and softball are more my style. I've never even seen a game of cricket.'

'It's very slow,' said Debbie. 'Like watching paint dry.'

'Which dries faster than your nail polish,' said Johnny.

Kate leapt up from the table. 'No more arguing, you two. We need to get organised.'

She pointed at Johnny. 'See if you can borrow some cricket gear from the school. I'm calling a pre-selection practice at the sports field tomorrow night. Everyone who wants to play should be there.'

'Don't worry, Mum,' he said. 'With the spiders playing for Bayside...'

'No, Johnny,' said his mother. 'No spiders. Not this time.'

'But they're great at things like this.'

'You should have seen them on the trapeze at Aunt Elsie's circus,' Debbie told Chuck.

'And they were stunning in the tandem race,' said Johnny.

'I thought / was the only one around here who told tall stories,' said Chuck.

'It's all true,' said Kate, 'but I can't turn up in Ridgewood with those spiders in the team. Lizzy would never let me live it down. I'm going to beat her with a regular team of everyday Bayside people.'

'Want to change your mind about the spiders playing, Mum?' asked Debbie, as she saw the small number of Baysiders who'd turned up for the practice.

'No, Debs. I can't. Johnny, introduce Chuck to everyone, while I go and check out the practice area.'

'Pleased to meet you, Chuck,' said Murphy as he shook the Texan's hand. 'I drive the buses that bring the tourists to town.'

'And this is Captain Grout,' said Johnny. 'He was the captain of the *Rose Marie*, Hatfield's old boat. Remember, I told you about it sinking?'

'Lucky Johnny was on board when it went down,' said Grout, puffing his pipe, 'or I wouldn't

be standing here today.'

'And this is Arnold,' said Johnny. 'He was the boat's engineer. He also built the bikes we rode in the Whizzbang Tandem Race.'

Chuck grinned. 'Never a dull moment round here by the sound of it.'

'And this is Mr Sneddon from the sports shop.'

As Chuck and Sneddon shook hands, Debbie turned to Bouncer.

'What a line up,' she said. 'The good, the bad, and the ugly.'

As she said it, she felt a tap on her shoulder. It was Freddy Hart, sports editor of the town's radio station, Bayside FM.

'I hope I'm in the "good" category,' said Freddy.

'Debbie's in the other two,' said Johnny, joining them.

'I am not,' she said. 'Anyway, *I'm* not playing in this stupid match.'

'What about you, Bouncer?' asked Freddy.

Bouncer tapped his thick spectacle frames. 'I'd struggle to see the ball.'

'You're pretty good in our backyard games,' said Johnny.

'That's with a tennis ball,' said Bouncer. 'Real cricket balls travel too fast.'

'And for me, sometimes,' said Freddy. 'I hope I haven't forgotten how to play. I haven't picked up a cricket bat for about five years.'

Debbie frowned. 'Captain Grout looks as though he hasn't had a game for about *fifty* years. I think we should pull out now.'

Chuck overheard her and walked across. 'That's not how we'd do it in Cherokee Bend.'

'Don't worry, Chuck,' said Johnny, 'it's not the way we do it in Bayside, either. We'll give it our best shot.'

'Spoken like a real captain, son.'

At that moment, Kate arrived back. 'Ready when you are.'

'Good,' said Johnny. 'We'll set up some stumps, have a few practice throws, and then move on to batting and bowling.'

Kate looked around. 'Where's the equipment you borrowed from the school?'

'There's a *small* problem, Mum.'

Johnny opened the top of the school sports bag he'd brought with him and pulled out a half-sized cricket bat.

'Adults can't play with that,' said Kate.

'Why don't we borrow some gear from Bayside Sports?' Bouncer suggested.

'Great idea,' said Kate, calling Mr Sneddon over.

'I thought this might happen,' said Sneddon. 'Wait here.'

In a minute he was back, dragging a big canvas cricket bag.

'There's everything in here the team could possibly need,' he told them. 'Full sized bats, gloves, helmets, pads, balls, stumps.'

'Let's get the gear out and have a look,' said Johnny, struggling to open the top of the bag. 'It's stuck.'

'It's old stock,' said Sneddon.

'Doesn't matter,' said Kate. 'It's good of you to lend us all this equipment.'

Sneddon coughed and shuffled his feet. 'I wasn't going to *lend* it to the town. I was going to sell it.'

'How much?' asked Kate.

Sneddon handed her an invoice.

Debbie looked over her mother's shoulder. 'The Entertainment Centre cost less.'

'It's old equipment,' said Sneddon. 'But still good.'

Johnny had finally got the old cricket bag open.

Sneddon picked up a bat. 'Look. Personally autographed.'

'Yes,' said Grout, taking the bat from him. 'By one of the greatest cricketers of all times. Who died before I was even *born*.'

'I said it was old stock,' said Sneddon.

'At new prices,' said Johnny.

'There's not much demand for cricket gear in Bayside,' said Sneddon. 'Especially as the town doesn't have a team.'

'At your prices, it's no wonder,' said Kate. 'We need all this equipment if we're to play Ridgewood, but I'll never get the council to pay for it.'

'I've got an idea,' said Johnny. 'Mr Sneddon, how's business?'

'Could be better.'

'I'll make you a deal,' said Johnny. 'If you lend us this cricket gear, Bouncer and I will do our busking act with the spiders outside your shop tomorrow. Never fails to draw a big crowd.'

Johnny Whistler and the Spiders had started their career performing outside *Kate's Kuts*, but these days they mostly performed at the new Bayside Entertainment Centre, with Bouncer as compere.

'I remember how to pass the hat around,' said Bouncer.

'Bouncer's voice is as loud as ever,' said Debbie. 'He can still draw a crowd as well as frighten away all the seagulls.'

'It worked for my salon,' Kate told Sneddon.

'Well...'

'I'll tell you what, Mr Sneddon,' said Johnny. 'You can also keep half the money we collect.'

'Deal,' said Sneddon.

'What's going to happen to the other half of the money?' asked Bouncer, who normally got a percentage.

'We'll use it to hire one of Murphy's buses to take us to Ridgewood.'

'I'll do you a good price on the hire,' said Murphy.

'Enough high finance,' said Kate. 'If we're going to beat Ridgewood, there are three things we need. Practice, practice and more practice.'

Chapter Three

'You were wrong, Mum,' Johnny told his mother as she drove them home. 'The three things we need are not practice, practice and more practice. They're Sunshine, Rainbow and Sky.'

'No spiders,' said Kate. 'But we do have a *few* good players. There's Freddy. And Arnold. Pity about his back.'

'Arnold got a bit carried away,' said Johnny. 'He's not as young as he used to be.'

'Who is?' asked Kate. 'What do you think, Chuck?'

'I still think you're drivin' on the wrong side of the road. Back home we drive on the right.'

'Don't worry,' said Johnny. 'Everybody around here drives on the left.'

He looked at his mother. 'And we really do need the spiders, Mum.'

'What do you think about the spiders playing?' Kate asked Chuck.

'I'm only a visitor,' he replied, 'and I wouldn't want to interfere, but after seein' that bunch tonight, I'd say you need all the help you can get. They sure ain't no world beaters.'

'We don't have to beat the world,' said Kate. 'Just Ridgewood.'

'Legally, I think the spiders are okay,' said Debbie.

'Give us your thoughts, oh wise one,' said Johnny.

Debbie scowled at him. 'The spiders were born in Bayside. That makes them eligible to represent the town.'

'But can they learn to play cricket before the weekend?' asked Chuck.

'I can teach them anything,' said Johnny. 'They're quick learners.'

'How do you communicate with 'em?'

'By whistling.'

'Like I do back home with my cattle dogs?'

Johnny nodded. 'Something like that.'

'It could be a game changer,' said Debbie. 'If we had the spiders, look out Ridgewood.'

'They're strong, fast, and indestructible,' said Johnny.

'Just like Lizzy when she was at school,' said Kate.

'Stop that, Mum,' said Johnny. 'She's not even in the Ridgewood team.'

'How do we know she won't try to veto the spiders if we put them in our team?' said Kate.

'We don't,' said Debbie. 'That's why we need to out-think her. We start by getting her to agree to each team having at least four junior players. In our team, that'll be Johnny and the three spiders.'

'But they're too big to be juniors.'

'They may be huge now, Mum, but they were only little babies when we found them.'

'When Bouncer and I found them,' said Johnny.

'A mixed team of young and old players?' said Kate. 'I wonder if Lizzy will agree.'

'Only one way to find out,' said Johnny.

'I think that's a splendid idea, Kate.'

Kate could hear the syrup in Lizzy's voice coming down the phone line. At times, she sounded exactly like her uncle, Herbert Hatfield.

'My son Nigel would love to play,' Lizzy continued. 'He's a wonderfully-talented cricketer. Just like his mother. Which is a good time to raise an idea I had that takes your suggestion of a mixed team one step further.'

Kate sensed what was coming. Her stomach started to knot.

'Why don't we captain the teams?' said Lizzy. 'We could renew our old rivalry on the sporting field.'

'I...I...' Kate stammered, the words refusing to come.

'I knew you'd agree,' said Lizzy. 'Just like the old days. You leading Bayside. Me leading Ridgewood. May the best team, and the best captain, win. Which will be me!'

Johnny came into the room as Kate hung up the phone.

'Mum, what's wrong? You look like you've just seen a ghost.'

'I have. A ghost from my past called Tin Lizzy.'

'Howzat!' screamed Johnny as Bouncer and Debbie watched.

Kate looked at the two remaining stumps behind her. The middle one had been knocked out of the ground, and the bails that normally sat on top had gone in all directions.

'I know it's only a tennis ball, Johnny, but would you mind bowling a bit slower.'

'Yes, Skipper,' said Johnny, throwing a mock salute.

'And stop calling me Skipper,' said his mother. 'I still feel bad about taking over as captain. I didn't even want to play.'

'I'm happy just being vice-captain,' said Johnny.

'I don't fully understand this modern one-day game. I'm relying on you to help me.'

'That's what kids are for,' said Johnny. 'To teach their parents.'

'Since when?' said Kate, standing the middle stump up again, and replacing the bails. 'Bowl me another one.'

Having been forced into playing against Ridgewood, Kate was trying to regain her confidence with some backyard cricket. It wasn't working.

'This is hopeless,' she cried as Johnny's next ball flattened two of the stumps. She threw down her bat. 'I'll never be ready in time.'

'Don't let Chuck hear you say that, Mum.'

Their visitor had delayed his return to Cherokee Bend until after the big game.

'Don't let me hear what?' said the Texan, coming out of the house. He was wearing one of Kate's frilly aprons around his waist.

'Do you want me to take a photo of you like that for the folks back home?' asked Johnny.

'Heck no, son. They'd laugh me outta town.'

'What's on the menu?' asked Bouncer.

'T-bone steaks,' Chuck replied. 'Not as big as the ones we get in Texas, but the biggest I could find at your local butcher. Cooked to perfection with my special "Big M" blend of secret herbs and spices.'

'You should be on television with a pitch like that,' said Johnny.

Chuck laughed. 'Will the spiders eat some, too?'

'They prefer pizza,' said Bouncer.

'How's the practice coming along?' Chuck asked Kate.

'Don't ask.'

'Just hope you don't have to bat, Mum,' said Debbie.

'That's a good idea, Debs. I'll put myself down to bat last at number 11. The spiders should make enough runs for all of us.'

'They're rearing to go,' said Johnny. 'Watch.'

On a whistled command, Rainbow picked up the bat and took guard. Johnny tossed the tennis ball to Sunshine while Sky moved to the outfield.

In a flurry of legs, Sunshine ran 10 metres and delivered a rocket, straight for the stumps.

Rainbow was even faster. With a flash of the bat, he thumped the ball long and high.

Now Sky moved. Like a blue blur, the giant spider flung himself at full stretch and pulled off a brilliant four-legged catch.

Chuck was staggered. 'I know a few baseball teams back home who'd pay a fortune for that trio.'

'They'll be even better by Saturday,' said Johnny. 'Look out, Tin Lizzy!'

Murphy was in a great mood as he steered the bus towards Ridgewood. 'Did I ever tell you about the time I was in the army?'

'Yes,' said everyone in the bus.

Kate turned around to look at Arnold. 'How's the back?'

'Getting better, thanks, Kate. It's taken longer to heal than I thought it would.'

'Everything does when you get older.'

'Love the corset,' said Debbie.

Arnold, who was a whizz at making things, had built himself a special corset, strengthened

with metal strips. It was so stiff it made him walk with a very straight back.

'We're relying on you, Arnold,' said Kate. 'You're one of our best all-rounders. We can't afford to lose you. We've only just got a team as it is.'

'If I'm careful, I'll be fine. If the worst comes to the worst, I can always bat at number 11.'

'No, you can't,' said Kate. 'That position's taken. By me.'

Mr Jennings, the editor of the Bayside Gazette, was sitting next to her. 'I'm very honoured you've asked me to umpire.'

'You did such a good job judging the Whizzbang Tandem race, you were our first choice.'

'Unfortunate business that tandem race,' said Jennings. 'That Herbert Hatfield. If Johnny hadn't come to the rescue...'

'He's everywhere, that boy of mine,' said Kate. 'Except where he should be. In his bedroom, doing his homework.'

'Come on, Mum,' said Johnny. He was sitting with the spiders who took up the two back rows of the bus. 'All work and no play is dull.'

'Your whole life is play.'

'Let him enjoy it, Kate,' said Chuck. 'You're only a kid once.'

'And once was enough for me,' said Debbie, who was touching up her nails.

She held them up for all to see. 'Look how long they're getting.'

'I'm surprised you didn't stay home,' said Kate. 'Knowing how you *love* cricket.'

'I've brought a good book with me,' said Debbie.

'Who's gonna sit with me durin' the game and explain the rules?' asked Chuck.

'I will,' said Bouncer. 'It's easy. Today's game is the fast version of cricket. One innings each.'

'In baseball, each team plays nine innings,' said Chuck. 'Won't that make your game kinda short?'

'It'll take most of the day,' said Johnny.

'That's a real long game where I come from,' said Chuck.

'Not as long as a test.'

The Texan looked puzzled. 'But every sporting contest is a test.'

'Not in cricket,' said Kate. 'A test is what we call a game between two countries.'

'In test matches, they play *two* innings each,' said Bouncer.

'Got it,' said Chuck. 'So tests last two days?'

'No, five days.'

'Five?' Chuck scratched his chin. 'Well, I suppose it's worth it for the winnin' team.'

'Sometimes it's a draw and no one wins,' said Johnny.

'Let me get this straight,' said Chuck. 'Two cricket teams can play a game that lasts five

days... and neither team wins?’

‘But test cricket can be *really* exciting,’ said Johnny.

‘Not sure I could sell that idea to the folks back home in Cherokee Bend.’

‘It grows on you,’ said Bouncer.

‘Yeah,’ said Chuck, ‘so does hair.’

‘I think hair grows faster,’ said Debbie.

Chapter Four

With Herbert Hatfield's encouragement, Lizzy Harper had worked hard on the Ridgewood team, getting them ready for the big day.

Now, as they waited at the Domain for the Bayside bus to arrive, Lizzy stood, bat in hand, putting the team through a last-minute fielding practice.

Her son, Nigel, threw her the ball which she blasted at the ring of fieldsmen.

Tony, the wicketkeeper, spilled the catch.

'Hey, Skipper,' he said. 'Not so hard. Someone will finish up with a broken finger.'

'And if you drop a catch like that in the match, Tony, you'll finish up with a broken head.'

'It's only a game,' someone muttered. 'It's supposed to be fun.'

'Who said that?' Lizzy shrieked, but no one owned up. 'I don't want to hear that again.'

She threw the bat to Nigel. 'Keep them working. Hit it even harder.'

Nigel had a tight, twisted smile, like his mother. 'With pleasure.'

She heard a scream of pain as she walked over to join Herbert Hatfield.

'This game is as good as won,' he told her. 'Don't forget, if they want the spiders to play, we simply say no.'

'Why didn't we do that at the beginning?'

'They might have turned down the invitation. This way, we catch them unprepared.'

'Sneaky,' said Lizzy. 'I like it.'

At that moment, Murphy turned the bus into the Ridgewood Domain.

It was a perfect setting for cricket. A large field, surrounded by big trees, with a freshly painted white circle indicating the boundary.

In the middle was the pitch, a strip of grass around 20 metres long with three stumps set up at each end.

'What a ground,' said Johnny as the bus pulled up. 'And what a great morning. Not a cloud anywhere.'

'I was hoping for rain,' said Kate. 'Then the whole thing could be called off.'

'It's only a game,' said Chuck.

'Try telling that to Lizzy.'

'Look,' said Johnny, pointing through the bus window. 'That's Herbert Hatfield's car. I recognise the number plate, IAMRICH. What's *he* doing here?'

'He's Lizzy's uncle,' said Kate.

'That figures,' said Chuck.

The mayor of Ridgewood led her team across to greet the visitors.

'Kate, how good to see you.'

No one who heard her, believed it.

'This is my son, Nigel. Nigel, this is my old schoolgirl rival, Kate. Remember I told you all about the last game of cricket we played.'

'Yeah,' Nigel said to Kate. 'You're the chicken. Right?'

Kate shivered but stayed polite. 'And these are *my* children, Johnny and Debbie.'

'Which one of you has the toy spiders?' asked Nigel.

He looked at Debbie. 'Hey, kid, is it you?'

When Debbie glared at him, he turned towards Bouncer.

'Hey, four-eyes,' said Nigel, 'yeah, you with the thick glasses, are you the one with the stupid toy spiders?'

'I'd thump him,' Debbie whispered to Johnny, 'but I'm too grown-up for that sort of thing.'

Lizzy raised her voice so everyone could hear.

'I'm delighted to welcome the Bayside players and supporters to Ridgewood. It must be nice, coming from such a tiny place, to have a day out in a big town.'

'You haven't changed,' said Kate.

'Just a little older and wiser,' said Lizzy.

'And sneakier, I'll bet,' Johnny whispered to Debbie.

'I have my team list here,' said Lizzy, handing it to Kate.

'And here's mine,' said Kate.

Hatfield looked over his niece's shoulder.

'Just as I thought,' he said. 'All three spiders are in their team. You object. I'll back you up.'

Lizzy walked over to Kate and pointed at the Bayside team list.

'Who are Sunshine, Rainbow and Sky?'

'You must be the only person in the world who doesn't know,' said Kate.

She pointed to Murphy's bus where the three giant spiders were making a leisurely exit.

'Sorry,' said Lizzy.

'Sorry, what?'

'No spiders.'

'Since when?' demanded Kate. 'The only thing we agreed to was mixed teams, each with a minimum of four junior players.'

'Well, if Bayside wants to cheat...'

'That's more your style,' snapped Kate.

Chuck stepped between the two captains. 'Whoa, let's talk about this sensibly.'

'I thought you'd gone home,' said Lizzy.

'Couldn't miss my first game of cricket,' said Chuck. 'Now what seems to be the problem?'

'Schoolgirl rivalry,' whispered Johnny.

Chuck grinned as he turned to Lizzy. 'Why do you object to the spiders playin'?'

'I'll answer that,' said Hatfield.

'Who are you?'

'Herbert Hatfield.'

Chuck frowned. 'Ah, the former mayor of Bayside. I've heard all about you. And *none* of it's good.'

Hatfield went bright red but, before he could reply, Lizzy raised her voice.

'If the spiders play, they'll give Bayside an unfair advantage.'

'How do you know these spiders can even *play* cricket?' said Chuck.

'I've seen them do other things,' said Hatfield. 'They have unusual talents.'

'What if only *two* of them played?' Johnny suggested.

'Is that a good idea?' Kate whispered to him.

'Two spiders would be enough,' he whispered back.

Hatfield and Lizzy held a hurried conference.

'We've got them on the run,' Hatfield whispered to his niece. 'Let's keep up the pressure.'

Lizzy raised her voice again. 'Two spiders would *not* be acceptable.'

Kate and Johnny went into a huddle.

'Would one spider be *enough*, Johnny?' she asked.

'We'd struggle, Mum. One spider can't do everything.'

'You've all forgotten something,' said Debbie, loudly. 'Both teams must have at least four junior players. If the spiders can't play, Bayside will be three juniors short.'

Hatfield scowled. 'Smart kid,' he muttered under his breath.

'Good one, Debs,' said Kate.

'How can those spiders be juniors?' demanded Lizzy.

'They were only babies when we found them,' said Johnny. 'They may be huge now, but they're younger than me.'

'So you see, Lizzy,' said Kate. 'If we only played one spider, we'd be two juniors short. It would be a hollow victory for Ridgewood if you beat us and we didn't have a full team.'

'Seems like a Texas standoff to me,' said Chuck. 'Maybe all three spiders *will* have to play.'

Hatfield suddenly smiled. 'No need for that. I can see two Bayside juniors who are not on the team list.'

He pointed. 'One is that Whistler girl...'

Debbie scowled at him. 'I'm not a girl. And I hate cricket.'

'And the other is that Bumbler boy,' said Hatfield.

'*Bouncer*,' said Johnny, coming to the aid of his friend. 'His eyesight's not good enough.'

'That's not our problem,' said Lizzy.

'Don't let them push you into it, Mum,' Debbie protested.

'I don't know, Debbie. I can't think straight at the moment.'

'Mum,' Debbie whispered, 'you're the mayor of a thriving town, and a successful businesswoman. Why are you falling to pieces? What's happening to you?'

'Lizzy,' Kate whispered back. 'A ghost that's haunted me since my schooldays.'

'Stand up to that ghost, Mum, or she'll never stop haunting you.'

'You're right, Debs.' Kate turned to Lizzy. 'I've made up my mind. I insist that all three spiders play, or...'

Lizzy lowered her voice. 'Or what? You'll go home? You're still a chicken and now you're hiding behind those silly spiders. You were a coward at school and you obviously haven't changed!'

Kate couldn't stop herself. 'No, I'm not! I've made my decision. Debbie, Bouncer and Johnny plus *one* spider will be our four junior players. Let's go!'

Lizzy was all smiles. 'You were stupid at school,' she hissed at Kate, 'and you haven't changed. Get ready to be beaten!'

'She's right,' said Kate, sitting on the ground with her head in her hands. 'That was dumb. She set the trap, got me angry, and I walked right into it.'

'Cheer up, Mum,' said Johnny. 'A game's not lost till it's won.'

'But I couldn't even win the toss.'

Each team would get 50 six-ball overs to make as many runs as they could.

Lizzy had won the toss for Ridgewood and decided to bat first.

'Which spider will play?' Bouncer asked Johnny.

'They're all good. I can't decide. Bouncer, grab a few stalks of dry grass from under the trees. We'll have to draw straws.'

Johnny broke off three stalks, one short, two long, and held them in his hand so no one could see their lengths.

'Short straw plays,' said Johnny. 'You first, Sunshine.'

The spider stretched out a yellow leg and took one. It was long.

'You next, Sky.'

The blue spider also drew a long straw.

Johnny opened his hand. 'The short one's yours, Rainbow. You play.'

Kate was trying to work out her bowling line-up without Sunshine and Sky.

'Johnny bowls fast,' she muttered to herself, 'so he can open the bowling from one end.'

Murphy came up while she was deciding. 'When I played cricket for the army, I always opened the bowling. I was lightning fast.'

Kate looked puzzled. 'You weren't bowling fast the other night at practice. In fact, you

weren't even bowling *straight*.'

'I was saving myself for the game,' said Murphy. 'Wait until I build up a head of steam. It goes with the red hair.'

No bowler was allowed to bowl more than 10 overs in a 50 over match.

Kate sighed. 'Okay, Murphy, you and Johnny open the bowling.'

'Don't forget about Freddy,' said Johnny, coming over. 'He's a good medium pacer.'

He grinned. 'So is Arnold, as long as his corset holds together. We may have lost Sunshine and Sky, but Rainbow's still a potential match winner. And you could always bowl a few overs yourself, Mum.'

'Only if we're desperate.'

'If we're *that* desperate, Debbie could bowl,' said Johnny.

'And ruin my nails?' said Debbie. 'No way.'

'And if you get really desperate, I'll have to bowl,' said Bouncer.

Kate tried hard not to smile. Bouncer was the world's slowest bowler.

'Thanks, Bouncer. You're a good man to have on the team.'

'He's not a man,' said Debbie. 'Bouncer and little brother are only 12. They're still boys.'

'Keep it for the courtroom, Debs,' said Kate. 'We've got a cricket match to play.'

Chuck was trying to help Grout buckle up his wicketkeeper's pads.

'You can't go out on the field with that pipe in your mouth,' said the Texan.

'But I don't feel complete without my favourite old pipe.'

'You can't hold that pipe while you're wearin' wicket keeping gloves.'

Grout tried and couldn't. 'Maybe I should bowl instead.'

'Stick to wicket keeping, Captain,' said Johnny.

Grout had demonstrated his bowling ability at the team practice. He was more erratic than Murphy.

It was Bouncer who first spotted the second figure in an umpire's coat.

'Who's that with Mr Jennings? Looks like...'

'Hatfield!' said Johnny. 'Mum, that's Herbert Hatfield. Is he one of the umpires?'

'You picked your umpire,' snapped Lizzy, when Kate and Johnny complained. 'We picked ours.'

'But he's from Bayside,' said Johnny.

'Then what are you complaining about?' said Lizzy. 'You've got *two* friendly umpires.'

'I'm neutral,' insisted Jennings as both umpires walked over. 'I object to being called a "friendly" umpire.'

'I'm not friendly, either,' said Hatfield.

'We know that,' said Johnny.

Hatfield scowled at him. 'Listen boy, when I umpire, I call them as I see them.'

'I sure hope you do,' said Chuck, standing up on his toes and glaring down.

Hatfield looked up at the tall Texan. 'Are you threatening me?'

'No, sir. Just stretchin' these new boots.'

As the umpires walked out to get ready to start play, Chuck turned to Johnny. 'What can I do while you're out there fieldin'?'

'Help Sunshine and Sky carry the drinks,' said Johnny. 'And cheer loudly.'

As Kate led the Bayside team onto the ground, someone called Arnold's name.

He spun around to see who it was and, as he did, his home-made corset snapped and he slumped to the ground.

Johnny raced to his side.

'I'm sorry,' said Arnold as Johnny helped him to his feet, 'I should have used more elastic.'

'Can you fix it?'

'It wouldn't help,' said Arnold. 'I've twisted my back again. I hate to let you down, but there's no way I can play.'

Lizzy, already padded up to open the batting for Ridgewood, saw the drama and raced over. 'Another Bayside chicken?'

Kate struggled to keep her cool. 'Arnold's injured. I want to replace him.'

'Where are you going to get another player?'

'Cherokee Bend,' called Chuck, jogging up to join the two captains.

'You?' asked Lizzy.

'Yep, unless there's someone else here from Cherokee Bend.'

'What do you know about cricket?'

'I've learned a lot in the last few days,' said the Texan. 'Shucks, it's just another game where you use a bat to hit a ball to make a few runs. It's not that different from baseball.'

'When you put it like that...' said Kate.

'If you want the cowboy, you can have him,' said Lizzy, putting on her helmet. 'You can bring on a herd of Texas longhorns for all I care. Let's get going.'

'What are you going to wear?' Johnny asked Chuck. Both teams were dressed in traditional white.

Chuck was dressed in a frilled shirt, jeans, cowboy hat and boots.

'Sorry', he said. 'I didn't bring nothin' else.'

'At least you're not wearing spurs,' said Johnny. 'They'd really dig up the pitch.'

Kate tossed the ball to Johnny to open the bowling, then moved the Bayside team into their fielding positions for the opening over.

'Chuck,' she called, 'fine leg!'

'Why thank you, Kate. My wife thinks I've got nice ankles as well.'

'No, go to the fine leg position.'

Chuck looked blank.

Kate pointed. 'Over there.'

Lizzy smirked. 'A real Texas turkey. This is going to be a walkover!'

Chapter Five

Johnny Whistler ran in to bowl the first ball of the game.

He was strong and wiry and bowled fast, swinging the ball away from the right-handed Lizzy.

'Nice one, son,' yelled Chuck, from fine leg. 'What was that? Some kind of cricketing curve ball?'

Hatfield glared at Kate, who was fielding at first slip beside Grout. 'I hope that cowboy isn't going to give us a running commentary.'

'He's new to the game,' said Kate.

'Just keep him under control.'

Lizzy played the next four deliveries from Johnny very defensively, then took a single off the last ball to keep the strike.

'Over,' called Hatfield.

Chuck came running up. 'How can it be over? We jes' started.'

Hatfield turned to Kate. 'I warned you...'

'It's all right, Chuck,' said Johnny as he passed, 'over doesn't mean the *game* is over. It just means my first over is over.'

'Clear as Texas mud,' said Chuck.

Murphy got ready to bowl his first over from the other end. He waved to Grout, the wicketkeeper.

'Stand well back, Grout,' he called. 'If you're too close, you won't even see the ball, much less catch it!'

Grout looked at Kate for confirmation.

Kate shrugged. 'Better do as he says. He apparently bowls like lightning.'

'Says who?' asked Grout.

'Says Murphy,' replied Johnny, who'd come in as second slip and now stood beside his mother.

Murphy spent several seconds loosening his shoulders and flexing his back. Then he started pacing out his long run-up.

'I hope he stops pacing before he gets to the boundary,' said Johnny.

Grout was impressed. 'Maybe he *does* bowl like lightning.'

Even Lizzy, who was on strike, looked unsettled as Murphy turned and started his run in.

His bright red hair made him look like a sprinting rooster.

The first ball left Murphy's hands at tremendous speed.

It bounced half way down the pitch and took off like a rocket, well wide of Lizzy and climbing fast.

Johnny threw up his hand in desperation, but the ball flew over his head and bounced its way to the boundary.

'Four wides,' said Jennings, signalling it to scorers.

'Terrific!' said Johnny. 'Murphy's just given Ridgewood four runs and they didn't have to do a thing.'

'He might settle down,' said Kate. 'Maybe he's just getting his direction sorted out. Finding his line and length.'

Murphy *did* bowl like lightning, but his lightning never struck twice in the same place.

And three times he overstepped the line near the stumps called the popping crease and was no-balled.

Each no-ball not only gifted the batting team an extra run, the ball had to be bowled again.

'Could be worse,' said Kate as the over came to an end. 'They only hit five off that over.'

'Plus those four wides and three no-balls,' Johnny reminded her. 'A total of 12 runs.'

'It's early days, yet,' said Kate, trying to be brave.

Johnny made the breakthrough in his third over.

He dropped the ball in short. The Ridgewood batter, thinking that it was going to rear up off the pitch and straight at his head, tried to duck under it.

Unfortunately for him, the ball kept low, hitting him on the helmet.

'Howzat!' Johnny screamed at Hatfield.

'How was what?' Chuck asked Bouncer who was fielding near him.

'Johnny's appealing for LBW.'

'Sounds like a disease.'

'Stands for "leg before wicket",' said Bouncer.

'Leg? But it hit the batter on the *helmet*.'

'Chuck, any part of your body counts for LBW. The umpire has to decide if the ball would have hit the stumps if the batter hadn't got some of his body in the way.'

Hatfield was taking his time. 'Close, but not close enough, Whistler. If there's any doubt, I have to give it to the batter. Not out.'

Johnny couldn't believe it. 'That was out. His helmet was right in front of the stumps.'

'My decision is the one that counts, boy. Don't you forget it.'

'But...'

'No arguments. Bowl your next ball.'

'If I can't get a fair LBW,' Johnny muttered, 'I'll have to get a wicket the hard way.'

With that he ran in and bowled an extra quick delivery.

The batter played at it, but instead of swinging out, the ball swung in, and sneaked in between bat and pad.

It shattered the middle stump, sending the bails flying over Grout's head.

'Doggone, that boy can almost make that cricket ball *talk*,' cried Chuck, running up to congratulate Johnny.

On the sideline, Sky and Sunshine leapt into the air in a high-five, which with eight legs became a spidery "high-sixteen".

'One Ridgewood batter down, only nine to go,' said Kate.

After 12 overs, Ridgewood were 55 for the loss of two wickets.

Kate and Johnny held a conference.

'What should I do, Johnny?'

With each bowler limited to 10 overs, Kate could only use her four main bowlers, Johnny, Freddy, Murphy and Rainbow, for a total of 40 overs.

But she also had to keep a couple of her best bowlers for the end of the innings, which is when batting teams hit out and sometimes made a lot of their runs.

That meant she had to find some part-time bowlers to bowl the other 10 overs.

Kate frowned. 'If I bring on my part-timers too early, Ridgewood might slog the extra runs *now*.'

'Why don't *you* bowl, Mum?'

'Is that a serious suggestion from my vice-captain, Johnny, or do you just want to laugh at your poor old mother?'

'Who says you're poor?'

'Joking aside, they're two wickets down, but Lizzy's still there. What do you suggest?'

'Give me and Murphy another over each, then bring on Rainbow and Freddy.'

While Kate and Johnny struggled with their game plan, Chuck continued to struggle with the jargon.

'Great,' said Bouncer, after Freddy finished his first over. 'He's bowled a maiden over.'

Chuck looked shocked. 'Why, that miserable critter!'

'What?'

'Freddy. Knockin' over a woman.'

Bouncer looked around. 'Where?'

'Don't ask me? You're the one who saw him do it.'

Bouncer suddenly laughed. 'No, Chuck, Freddy bowled a *maiden over*. That's cricket talk for bowling six balls without any runs being scored off them.'

'Thank goodness for that. I couldn't imagine Freddy hittin' anyone.'

Now Rainbow got ready to open up from the same end Johnny had bowled from, while Kate re-thought her field placings.

'Chuck,' she called. 'Square leg.'

The Texan looked baffled. 'One minute you tell me my legs are fine, then you tell me they're square.'

Johnny translated for Chuck, then whistled last minute instructions to Rainbow.

'What are you tellin' him?' asked Chuck.

'Not to do a "Murphy". To forget about speed, and concentrate on accuracy.'

'And you can do all of that with a few whistles?'

'He already knows a lot from bowling from our back yard games,' said Johnny. 'He's a natural.'

When Rainbow bowled, he rolled in more than ran in, his eight legs spinning like the spokes on a wheel.

Lizzy played at the first ball and missed as it whizzed past, centimetres from her stumps.

'What is this?' she demanded as the ball was taken by Grout behind the stumps.

'Our secret weapon,' said Johnny.

Lizzy missed the second delivery, too.

As Grout collected the ball and threw it back to Rainbow, Lizzy marched up to Hatfield.

'That monster is going to bowl me out any minute, Uncle Herbert,' she whispered. 'I can't even see which arm he's using to hold the ball.'

'Spiders don't have arms, Lizzy. He's holding it with his leg.'

Lizzy glared at her uncle. 'Is that your pathetic idea of a joke? If that spider bowls me out, I'm going to be upset, Uncle Herbert. *Very* upset.'

'Don't worry. I've thought of everything. Watch me put the skids under that rubber spinning-wheel.'

'Good, I knew I could count on you.'

'Is this a private family conference, or can we all join in?' asked Kate.

'Just asking Unc...umpire Hatfield for an opinion.'

'I've got an opinion if you want it,' Johnny told Lizzy, and gave her a big grin.

'My opinion is that before this over's through, Rainbow's going to knock all your stumps out of the ground.'

He was right.

'Howzat!' chorused the whole Bayside team as Rainbow bowled an unplayable ball, sending Lizzy's stumps flying in all directions.

Lizzy stood her ground and looked down the pitch at Hatfield.

'No-ball!' he called, making the signal to the scorers.

The Bayside team couldn't believe it.

'What did Rainbow do?' asked Johnny.

'Overstepped the popping crease,' said Hatfield.'

'Are you sure he put his foot over the line?' Johnny asked the umpire.

'He put *three* feet over it,' said Hatfield.

'And Lizzy can't be given out off a no-ball,' Johnny told Chuck when he ran over.

'That cheating!' yelled Murphy.

'If I still had a ship, I'd take Hatfield out to sea and throw him overboard!' cried ex-sea captain Grout.

'In all my years of sports reporting, I've never seen anything like this!' said Freddy.

'Dear, oh dear,' said Jennings, the other umpire.

Chuck planted himself in front of Hatfield.

'In baseball,' said the Texan, 'if we don't like the umpire's decision, we tell 'em what we think of 'em. Hatfield, you're nothing but a dirty, rotten, cheatin'...'

'We don't do that in cricket,' said Johnny, pulling Chuck away.

'You mean that sneaky varmint can jes' do what he likes?'

'Unless we can think of a way to stop him,' said Johnny.

It took several minutes for tempers to cool and the game to restart.

'What are we going to do?' Kate asked Johnny. 'If Rainbow bowls Lizzy again, Hatfield will just no-ball him.'

'Switch him to the other end where Mr Jennings is umpiring.'

That helped, but now Lizzy had her second wind and was batting with even more confidence.

Ridgewood had already scored over 100 runs and looked set for a big total.

Johnny tossed the ball to his mother. 'As vice-captain, I'm asking you to bowl... please?'

'I've forgotten how, Johnny. I haven't played cricket since I was at school.'

'Nor has Lizzy, Mum, but it's not stopping *her*.'

Lizzy spotted Kate holding the ball. 'Bayside's *second* secret weapon?'

She dissolved into laughter. 'Come on, Kate. It'll be like old times. When I used to hit you out of the ground.'

Debbie ran up. 'She's trying to get into your head, Mum. Put you off. Don't let her. Remember... ghosts.'

Kate gritted her teeth. 'You're right, Debs. That was then. This is now.'

'Atta girl, Mum,' said Debbie. 'I mean, *atta woman*.'

Kate was full of new confidence as she ran in to bowl her medium pacers.

Her confidence flew straight out of the ground along with the first ball as Lizzy hit it for six.

'Thanks for the gift, Kate,' yelled Lizzy, 'but you don't have to go easy on me. You can bowl properly if you want to. That's if you can.'

Kate's bowling was all downhill from there.

At the end of two overs, she took herself off.

'Sorry, Johnny, I cost us more runs than Murphy did.'

'We still need someone to bowl a few overs. How about Mr Sneddon?'

Kate walked over to the sports store owner and handed him the ball.

'Here,' she said. 'This ball belongs to you. See if you can do something with it.'

Chuck was fascinated, watching Sneddon warm up.

'He's a leg spinner,' explained Johnny.

'Don't you mean leg *puller*?' said Chuck. 'Like me with my tall tales?'

'No, leg *spinner*.'

'He's going to spin his leg? What is he? A contortionist?'

Chuck watched closely as Sneddon shuffled in like a demented crab and bowled his first ball.

'I was right,' said the Texan. 'He *is* a contortionist.'

'Spin bowlers are a different breed,' said Johnny.

Sneddon was not a success, and Kate was soon forced to bring back her main strike bowlers to finish up their 10 overs each.

With only a couple of overs still left in the Ridgewood innings, the score was fast approaching 200, with Lizzy on 99, one run short of her century.

Nigel was batting with her.

Kate looked worried. 'We've still got to bowl two overs, Johnny, and I've run out of good bowlers.'

'*You* could bowl again, Mum.'

Kate frowned. 'No way.'

'But they've only got one batter left.'

'The way Lizzy and that brat of hers are batting, they won't need anyone else.'

'Hey,' said Nigel, 'why not give that funny looking kid a bowl?'

Debbie threw him a look of thunder.

'Not you, girl.'

Debbie's look grew even more thunderous.

'The funny kid with the big glasses,' said Nigel. 'Four-eyes. What's his name... Bloop?'

'Bouncer,' said Johnny.

He turned to Kate. 'Might work.'

'But Bouncer doesn't even play cricket.'

'Have you got a better idea, Mum?'

'No.'

'Anyway,' said Johnny, waving Bouncer over. 'What's the worst that could happen?'

'The worst that could happen,' said Kate, 'is they could hit six runs off every ball.'

'As long as you don't ask me to add that up,' said Bouncer, taking the ball and staring at the hard leather object in his hand.

'You know my maths is even worse than my bowling.'

'You can do it, Bouncer,' said Johnny. 'Just imagine we're playing in the back yard.'

Bouncer was to bowl from Jennings's end.

'What are you going to bowl, Bouncer?' Jennings asked.

Bouncer looked puzzled. 'I'm going to bowl this ball.'

'No,' said the umpire. 'I mean, what kind of bowler are you?'

'Very slow.'

'Right or left arm?'

Bouncer looked from one hand to the other. 'Right. Um... I think.'

'And which side of the stumps are you going to bowl from? Are you going to come over the wicket, or around the wicket?'

'Why doesn't four-eyes come *under* the wicket?' said Nigel. 'He's short enough.'

Bouncer did bowl very slowly. Tumbling little spinners that floated through the air and took forever to arrive.

They were harder to hit than they looked and Nigel missed the first one.

'You've got him worried, Bouncer,' said Johnny.

Nigel missed the second ball as well. His face went scarlet.

'Bayside's *third* secret weapon,' Johnny told the batter.

Nigel connected with the third ball, and he and his mother ran two which brought him back on strike.

He missed the fourth, but hit the fifth back along the ground to the boundary for four.

Which brought up Ridgewood's 200.

'Sorry, Johnny,' said Bouncer.

'There's nothing to be sorry about,' said Johnny. 'He's only hit six runs off you so far.'

Nigel looked down the wicket at Bouncer.

'Come on, four-eyes,' he called. 'This time, I'm going to hit you out of the ground.'

Bouncer bowled and Nigel tried to make good on his threat.

He leapt out of his crease and took a big swing, but instead of going high, the ball flew straight back along the pitch at head height.

Straight at Bouncer's face.

'Look out!' screamed Johnny.

Bouncer was too slow to get his body out of the way.

All he could do as the ball rocketed towards his nose was throw up his right hand to protect

his face.

The ball hit his hand and stuck like glue.

Nigel was out! Caught by Bouncer.

As Sunshine and Sky did more “high-sixteens” on the boundary, the Bayside team crowded around to congratulate Bouncer.

The last Ridgewood batter, Tony, made his way to the crease.

‘The kid took a great catch,’ Tony said to Nigel as they passed.

‘Cut that out,’ Nigel snapped back. ‘He’s the enemy.’

‘It was a good piece of cricket,’ Tony protested.

‘I don’t care what it was,’ said Nigel. ‘This is war, and we take no prisoners.’

With Nigel out on the last ball of Bouncer’s over, Lizzy found herself on strike for the last over of the innings.

She was still on 99, with only one run needed to make her century.

‘I’d love to stop her getting it,’ Kate told Johnny, ‘but with only one over left, and all our good bowlers gone, what options have I got?’

As they spoke, Chuck ambled up.

‘I’ve been watching closely,’ said the Texan, ‘and I’ve almost got this game figured out. You need someone to bowl the last six balls, right?’

‘Right.’

‘How ‘bout me?’

Kate’s mouth fell open. ‘But you don’t play cricket.’

‘What d’ya think I’ve been doin’ all day? Brandin’ cattle?’

‘Have you ever bowled a cricket ball in your life?’ asked Johnny.

‘Nope,’ said Chuck. ‘Never even seen one till I came to Bayside. But I’m a quick learner.’

He grinned. ‘All I gotta do is knock over Lizzy’s stumps and she’s out. Same if she hits the ball in the air and gets caught.’

‘You make it sound so simple,’ said Kate.

She turned to Johnny. ‘Okay, vice-captain. What do you say?’

‘I say, yes.’

‘But he’ll be bowling from Hatfield’s end,’ said Kate.

‘You leave that Bayside bandit to me,’ said Chuck.

Lizzy thought it was a great joke when she was told about the bowling change.

‘That Texas longhorn is going to bowl?’ she said, laughing.

‘Are you sure you know *how* to bowl?’ asked Hatfield.

‘That’s right, Chuck,’ said Lizzy from the other end. ‘It’s not baseball. You can’t *chuck* the ball, Chuck.’

'Small things amuse small minds,' Debbie said to Johnny.

'You should know, sis.'

Kate had her fingers crossed.

'If Lizzy doesn't get that run she needs for her century, she'll be laughing on the other side of her face.'

'I guess my bowlin's kinda... underarm,' Chuck told Hatfield and Lizzy.

'Underarm?' Hatfield called to Jennings. 'Is that even allowed?'

'Not in test matches,' Jennings replied, scratching his chin, 'but I suppose in this kind of game, it's up to the captains to say Yes or No.'

'What kind of underarm bowling?' Lizzy asked Chuck.

'Jes' a gentle softball pitch,' said Chuck.

Hatfield looked at Lizzy. 'Does Ridgewood's captain have any objection?'

'I think it's a great idea,' said Lizzy. 'I'll hit this cowboy's *soft-ball* pitches out of the park and all the way back to Cherokee Bend.'

'Do you want me to hold your... hat, or whatever it is?' Hatfield asked Chuck.

'Nope,' he said. 'Like to keep it on. Same with my boots.'

Chuck swung both arms in a circling motion, backwards and forwards, warming up.

'Ready?' he called to Lizzy.

'Bring it on,' she replied, and, as she did, Chuck wound up like a spring and pitched the first ball.

'Wow!' yelled Johnny as the ball flew low and fast, just missing Lizzy's stumps.

'What sort of delivery was that, umpire?' she yelled up the pitch. 'I thought the cowboy was going to do a softball pitch.'

Chuck grinned. 'That was a softball pitch.'

'Not like we pitched when I was young,' said Lizzy.'

'That's *soft-pitch* softball,' said Chuck, laughing. 'Like I play back home with my grandkids. But this is how I pitch in the *fast-pitch* softball games I play with my buddies.'

Chuck let fly with the second ball.

It was lower and faster and Lizzy barely managed to get her bat in the way to stop it hitting her stumps, but in doing it she fell over.

'Why didn't you tell us you were a natural at this game?' said Johnny, running up and patting Chuck on the back. 'Tin Lizzy's in trouble.'

'Wait till I finish adjustin' my aim,' said the Texan, straightening his hat.

Lizzy untangled her pads, struggled to her feet and ran down the wicket to Hatfield.

'I've decided I *do* object to underarm bowling,' she told him.

'But we both agreed it was okay,' said Kate. 'You can't change your mind now.'

'Tough,' said Lizzy. 'I just have.'

'No more underarm bowling,' Hatfield told Kate. 'If the cowboy can't bowl properly, someone else will have to complete the over.'

'Hatfield's at it again,' Johnny said to his mother.

He suddenly remembered one of Chuck's tales about the Texas town where he was mayor.

'Chuck,' said Johnny. 'Tell Mr Hatfield how they used to deal with cheats in Cherokee Bend back in your grandpa's day.'

The Texan looked puzzled for a few seconds, but then suddenly grinned at Johnny and winked.

'Oooh, right, you mean how they used to roll 'em in molasses and feathers and run 'em out of town.'

'That's terrible,' said Hatfield.

'It sure worked a treat,' said Chuck.

'I've... I've changed my mind,' Hatfield told the players. 'As it's the last over of the innings, the cowboy can finish it bowling underarm.'

Lizzy ran up the pitch, pulled Hatfield aside and whispered in his ear.

'Don't forget whose side you're on, *Uncle* Herbert. This cowboy will be going home soon and you'll never see him again. But I'll still be here and I can make your life miserable. *Forever!*'

Lizzy went back to her end. She was still on 99, one run short of her century and with only four balls left in the over.

She missed Chuck's next three deliveries as they whizzed past, but luckily for her none of them hit the stumps.

Chuck stepped up to his mark for the final ball.

'Always did need a few pitches to warm up,' he called down the pitch. 'This one will make you feel real dizzy, *Mizz* Lizzy.'

Chuck now pitched the last and fastest ball of the innings.

It was not only lightning quick, it was like a smart bomb, zeroing in on its target.

Before Lizzy could react, the ball had raced past her bat and knocked all three stumps out of the ground.

'Bulls eye!' yelled Johnny.

'No-ball!' said Hatfield.

A shocked silence fell over the ground.

'Pardon me?' said Chuck. 'I don't believe I heard you right.'

'No-ball!' repeated Hatfield. 'The batter is not out. The ball will have to be bowled again.'

Lizzy grinned. 'Good decision, umpire.'

Johnny couldn't believe it. 'What did Chuck do wrong?'

'He overstepped the line,' said Hatfield.

Johnny looked closely at the area. 'Chuck's wearing cowboy boots, right?'

'I can see that,' said Hatfield.

'And they've got heels.'

'I can see that, too. Get on with it, boy.'

'Then,' said Johnny, 'how come there are no boot heel prints anywhere near the popping crease? Chuck's delivered every ball from well behind the line.'

'I'm the umpire,' said Hatfield, 'and I say that was a no-ball. Lizzy's not out.'

Chuck reached up and took off his hat.

'Why are you doing that?' asked Hatfield.

'Well, *Mr Hatfield*,' said Chuck, loudly, glaring at the umpire, 'back home, I always take my hat off before I dig a big hole and bury anythin' that smells as bad as that plum awful decision you jes' made.'

Hatfield coughed, nervously. 'Um... um...'

'Don't you let that cowboy bully you, Uncle Herbert,' Lizzy yelled. 'I need one more run for my century!'

'Sorry, Lizzy,' said Hatfield. 'I've decided that it *wasn't* a no-ball after all. You're out. And the Ridgewood innings is over!'

Hatfield turned and raced off the field, chased by Lizzy, waving her bat in the air.

Chapter Six

During the meal break between innings, the Bayside team sat in the shade under the big trees around the ground.

Johnny and Bouncer began exploring the picnic hamper.

'If I'd known I was going to play, I'd have made you pack your own lunch,' said Debbie.

Bouncer rummaged around and came up with a brown object, wrapped in paper. He held it in the palm of his hand and peered at it.

'What's this, Debbie?' he asked. 'A muffin?'

'Could be a hand grenade,' said Johnny. 'With Debbie's baking, it's hard to tell the difference.'

'I'm sorry I bothered,' she said, trying to ignore them.

Johnny leaned across and took the brown package out of Bouncer's hand.

'If this *is* a muffin,' he said, 'we'll know sis is playing for the other team.'

Debbie suddenly realised what it was and snatched the package from her brother's hand.

'If you must know, it's my makeup. I put it in the hamper to keep cool.'

'Lucky I didn't eat it,' said Bouncer.

'It would taste better than her muffins,' said Johnny.

Bouncer tucked into a filled roll. 'Can we get 200?'

'If we keep our heads and stay calm,' replied Johnny, nibbling on a cold pie.

'We're still in the game,' he told the others between bites. 'Ridgewood probably expected to get 300, but we held them at the end, thanks to your crafty slow bowling, Bouncer, and great catching.'

Bouncer looked pleased as he took another bite of his filled roll.

As he did, Chuck and Kate wandered over to join them.

'This cricket is more excitin' than I thought,' said the Texan, stretching his body out in the shade. 'I wonder if I should introduce it to the folks of Cherokee Bend.'

'We could bring our team over and play your team,' said Johnny.

'Let's beat Ridgewood first,' said Kate, double-checking the Bayside batting line-up on the paper in her hand.

'Let's see that, Mum,' said Johnny.

He studied the names. 'Are you sure you still want to bat last at number 11?'

'I'd rather bat at number 12,' said his mother.

'Jes' a minute,' said Chuck, sitting up. 'I thought there were only 11 players in a team.'

'That's why I want to be number 12,' said Kate.

Johnny was down to open the Bayside innings and, as he selected his batting pads, helmet, gloves and bat, Chuck came and knelt down beside him.

'We're countin' on you, son.'

Johnny adjusted his helmet. 'Thanks. Hey, Chuck, that molasses and feathers story? Is that true?'

Chuck laughed. 'That's what my grandpa told me. Course, these days in Cherokee Bend we got our own way of dealin' with cheats.'

'What do you do?' asked Johnny.

'Well, Johnny, I take my trusty old Big M brandin' iron and heat it up till it's glowin' red hot. Then I use it to...'

Johnny listened as Chuck explained what he did with the branding iron.

'Does it work?' he asked Chuck.

'Every time,' said the Texan with a grin.

Although there was a lot resting on Johnny's shoulders, he felt confident as he walked out to the centre with his opening partner, Mr Sneddon.

Lizzy didn't appreciate Johnny's high spirits.

'We'll soon take that smile off your face,' she said and tossed the ball to her son.

'Nigel, knock his head off.'

'A few hours ago, you put out the welcome mat for us,' said Johnny.

'And now I'm about to pull that mat out from under you.'

Nigel held up the shiny new cricket ball so the sun reflected off the surface.

'See this ball, Whistler?' he said to Johnny. 'It's got your name on it.'

Nigel marked out his run and came charging in like an express train.

Johnny leaned back to give his arms some room to swing the bat and cracked the ball to the boundary for four runs.

Nigel's face fell.

'What's the problem?' said Johnny. 'You said it had my name on it, so if it's my ball, I can hit it where I like.'

'He's like his mother,' Lizzy told Nigel in a voice loud enough for Johnny to hear. 'His mouth's bigger than his brain.'

While Johnny handled the Ridgewood opening attack with ease, Mr Sneddon was in all sorts of trouble.

His batting style was as crab-like as his bowling, and every time he hit the ball, he seemed about to tie himself in knots.

With only 20 runs on the board, Sneddon was out, caught by Tony behind the stumps.

Johnny walked off with Sneddon and escorted Freddy, the next batter, back out to the middle.

'That Nigel kid is quick,' said Freddy.

‘Not that quick,’ said Johnny. ‘We still need another 180 runs so we need to keep the score moving along.’

Freddy batted left handed, which meant Lizzy had to keep changing the fielding positions, and the Ridgewood bowlers had to keep adjusting their line of attack.

‘Look at Johnny and Freddy,’ said Kate, sitting under a tree. ‘They make it look so easy. If I’m lucky, I won’t even have to bat.’

‘Don’t speak too soon, Mrs Whistler,’ said Bouncer. ‘We’re still... ah... quite a few runs short.’

‘And another batter down,’ cried Grout, who was sitting nearby.

Freddy had been given out, caught behind.

As Murphy walked out to replace him, Freddy arrived back and flung down his bat.

‘This is a farce,’ he said.

‘I thought it was a game of cricket,’ said Debbie.

‘What happened?’ asked Kate.

‘I missed the ball by this much.’

Freddy held out both hands wide, like an angler describing the big fish that got away.

‘And Ridgewood’s captain knew I didn’t hit it,’ said Freddy, ‘but she still appealed.’

‘And Hatfield went along with it,’ said Chuck. ‘That man makes our old-time wild west bandits look like beginners.’

Freddy threw his pads down beside the bat and flopped on the grass. ‘It’ll take a miracle to win this match.’

Out in the middle, Johnny was doing everything he could to make that miracle happen.

‘Take it easy, Mr Murphy,’ he told the incoming batter.

‘Johnny, I’ve played this game all my life. Did I ever tell you about the time I played cricket for the army?’

‘Yes,’ said Johnny. ‘And you can tell me again all the way back to Bayside, *if* you make some runs.’

‘Deal,’ said the bus driver.

If Murphy was an erratic bowler, he was an even more erratic batter.

When he attempted to hit the ball straight, it always finished up behind him.

And balls he’d attempt to hit to one side of the ground would somehow end up on the other.

‘How am I supposed to set a field with that idiot Murphy batting,’ Lizzy complained to Nigel. ‘Even *he* doesn’t know where the ball’s going.’

‘Strange, but it works,’ Johnny told Murphy as one of his mistimed and misdirected shots raced to the boundary for four runs.

But by now Bayside's run rate was slower than they needed to win.

'Don't spend so much time standing around looking at where the ball's gone,' Johnny told his batting partner. 'Just be ready to run.'

Next ball Murphy forgot Johnny's advice and was run out.

Bayside had lost three wickets for 60 runs.

Murphy's departure brought Rainbow to the wicket.

He was a spectacular sight.

Rainbow's head was much too big for a batting helmet, but he had pads on six of his eight legs and batting gloves on the other two.

Jennings called a halt in play, ran off to get his camera, and had Johnny stand beside the giant spider.

'What a great picture for the front page of the Bayside Gazette,' he told them.

'And I can see the headline,' said Lizzy. "LOSER LINE-UP!"

With Rainbow's arrival, Bayside's run rate took a turn for the better and they were soon back on track for a winning total.

As the multi-coloured spider seemed about to run away with the game, Lizzy brought herself on to bowl.

'This should be good,' Kate said to Chuck as they watched. 'Lizzy versus Rainbow.'

The Texan grinned back at her. 'And may the best monster win.'

Rainbow hit three boundaries off Lizzy's first three balls.

'Do something,' she pleaded with Hatfield as she passed him on the way back to her bowling mark.

'Appeal,' whispered Hatfield.

'For what?'

'You're the bowler. Think of something.'

The next delivery Rainbow played defensively. The ball hit the bottom of his bat with a dull thud, and dropped down in front of him.

'Howzat?' demanded Lizzy, spinning around to face Hatfield.

'What are you appealing for?' asked Johnny.

'Shut up, kid,' said Lizzy. 'I'm talking to the umpire. How about that, umpire? That was right in front. LBW.'

'But he hit it with his bat,' said Johnny.

'It hit his pad,' insisted Lizzy.

'Which pad?' said Johnny.

'It doesn't matter which pad. Any one of the six he's wearing.'

'Out!' said Hatfield.

As Rainbow left the field, Jennings came running over.

'Look here, Hatfield, 'I hope you're not up to your old tricks again. Like cheating.'

Hatfield looked indignant. 'Who, me?'

'Yes, you,' said Jennings.

'I've never cheated in my life.'

'I've published some stories in the Bayside Gazette which tell a different tale.'

'That's history, Jennings. You umpire from your end, and leave me to umpire from mine.'

Grout was the next batter, with his pipe clamped firmly between his teeth.

'I don't feel complete without it,' he explained to Johnny.

Grout was old, but he was cunning and had first played cricket before most of the other players had been born.

The run rate slowly crept up.

Lizzy brought Nigel back on to bowl.

'Scuttle that old sea-dog,' she told her son.

Nigel bowled his first ball straight at Grout's stumps and he whacked it to the boundary.

'Go for the old fool's weak spot,' Lizzy told Nigel.

The second ball bounced part way up the pitch, reared up at a sharp angle, and knocked the end off Grout's pipe.

The old ship's captain was heartbroken. 'I've had that pipe since I first went to sea.'

Losing his pipe knocked the wind out of the old man's sails and he was clean bowled next ball.

Nigel was now fired up and the batter who followed Grout was unlucky enough to edge a catch to Tony from the first ball he received.

'Oh, no! A golden duck,' Kate explained to Chuck.

Chuck looked around, puzzled.

'A golden duck? Sure would like to see one. Where I come from, most ducks are brown.'

'It means someone is out first ball,' said Kate, 'and without scoring.'

As they talked, Debbie arrived at the wicket. It was a bad time for any newcomer.

Nigel now had two wickets off two consecutive balls. And he planned for Debbie to be his third victim.

Kate explained to Chuck what was happening. 'If Nigel takes Debbie's wicket first ball, that'll be his hat trick.'

'I can do those,' said Chuck, whipping off his cowboy hat and flipping it like a coin.

'Good,' said Kate, 'but not the sort of hat trick I'm talking about.'

Johnny tried to show Debbie where to stand in front of the stumps, but his advice wasn't appreciated.

'I'm not dumb, little brother. I've seen this stupid game on TV. He bowls the ball to me and I hit it. It's that easy. Right?'

'You've been listening to Chuck,' said Johnny.

Debbie adjusted her helmet, pulled on her batting gloves, flexed her fingers, and then pulled the gloves off again.

'These things will ruin my nails.'

'But all batters wear them,' said Johnny.

'When I want your advice, little brother, I'll ask for it. But don't hold your breath.'

She handed the gloves to Jennings. 'Will you hold these for me, please?'

Nigel winked at his mother as he walked back to his bowling mark.

'Same as with Grout?' he asked his mother.

'That's my boy,' she said. 'Go for the weak spot.'

Debbie crouched over her bat, watching as Nigel ran towards her.

Lizzy had called all the Ridgewood fieldsmen up close to put more pressure on the new batter.

Debbie saw the ball bounce part way down the pitch, then climb quickly towards the handle of her bat.

'Ahhh!' she screamed as the ball hit her hand.

Johnny ran down to see what damage had been done. 'What did he hit?'

'My finger,' said Debbie with a snarl. 'That creep's broken one of my nails. It took weeks to grow it.'

'I told you to wear batting gloves,' said Johnny.

'Don't you start that *I-told-you-so* stuff.'

'You're way better at that than I am, sis. Anyway, look on the bright side. You stopped Nigel getting a hat trick.'

Debbie glared at her finger. 'No one does this to a future lawyer and gets away with it.'

'What are you going to do? Send him to jail?'

'Worse,' said Debbie.

'One ball left in the over,' Jennings told her as she settled down again over her bat.

This time Debbie's face was set like concrete as the ball hit the pitch in front of her.

Closing her eyes, she swung with all her strength. And connected.

The ball sailed straight back over Nigel's head and over the boundary on the full for six.

'That's my girl!' yelled Kate from the sidelines.

'Don't let Debbie hear you call her a girl,' said Bouncer, who was padded up, waiting his turn to bat.

'It's all right, Bouncer. Mothers can say things like that and get away with it.'

Debbie's hit-and-hope batting couldn't last, and Lizzy bowled her one over later.

By this stage in the game, Bayside had managed to get to 140 runs, but they still needed another 60 to reach Ridgewood's total. And they'd already lost seven wickets.

Bouncer was apologising even before he got out to the middle. 'Don't get your hopes up, Johnny. I can't bat to save myself.'

'Do the same as you did when you were bowling.' Johnny told his best friend. 'Pretend you're playing cricket with us in the backyard.'

'Leave the funny little kid for me,' Nigel begged his mother. 'I owe him for getting me out. Let me knock his glasses off.'

'Not if I can do it first,' said Lizzy.

She bounced the first ball at Bouncer's head and he threw up his bat to protect his face.

The ball nicked an edge and flew down to the boundary for four runs.

'Beginner's luck,' Lizzy snarled.

She tried the same delivery again with the same results.

'Great batting,' Johnny called to his friend. 'Eight runs off two balls. You'll win the game for us the way you're going.'

Lizzy had other ideas. She stopped worrying about knocking Bouncer's glasses off and aimed the next ball at his stumps.

By the time Bouncer got his bat into position, his middle stump had been knocked out of the ground.

Bayside were now eight wickets down for 148.

With only two batters to come, and more than 50 runs needed, they were on the brink of defeat!

Chapter Seven

'It's hopeless,' said Kate as Chuck climbed slowly to his feet. 'After you, there's only me left to bat.'

Chuck was wearing pads, but had decided not to wear a helmet, just his cowboy hat.

'Where I come from,' said the Texan, grabbing a bat and gloves, 'we always say a game's not lost till it's won.'

'That's what Johnny says, too.'

'Then your son and I agree,' said Chuck. 'This game is not over yet.'

The Ridgewood captain had come to the same conclusion as her old school rival.

'This game's all over bar the shouting,' Lizzy told Hatfield as Chuck ambled out to the wicket.

She smirked. 'Look at that cowboy. He walks as if he's just got off his horse.'

'Do you want middle stump?' Jennings asked Chuck as he arrived at the crease.

'Why would I want middle stump? Don't we still need all three stumps for the game?'

'It's to help batters figure out where they're standing.'

'I know where I'm standin'. On the battin' mound.'

'Don't worry,' Lizzy told the umpire. 'He won't be here very long.'

Chuck spat on his hands, tipped his hat back, and lifted his bat on to his shoulders. 'Play ball!'

Jennings nodded. 'Good idea.'

He turned to Nigel, signalling that he could now bowl to the new batter.

As Nigel ran in, Tony crouched down behind the stumps.

Chuck had never played cricket before, but that didn't stop him treating Nigel's first delivery like a baseball pitch and whacking it over the boundary on the full.

'Great shot,' said Tony before Lizzy could stop him.

'Hot diggety,' said Chuck. 'Home run.'

'That's baseball,' said Jennings. 'In cricket you get six runs for that.'

'I really like this game,' said Chuck.

Lizzy ran up to Hatfield. 'This cowboy could mean trouble.'

'How do you suggest we stop him?'

Lizzy spotted the boots. 'Make him take them off. Those heels could damage the pitch when he's running between the wickets.'

When Hatfield made the ruling, Chuck started to argue, but for once, both umpires agreed.

'Do you want to borrow some shoes?' asked Kate, running out to see what was happening.

'No, thank you,' said Chuck, handing her his boots. 'Can't run in regular shoes. I'll play barefoot. Like I did when I was a kid growin' up.'

Lizzy turned to Nigel. 'You know where to aim.'

Nigel ran in to bowl the next ball as fast as he could.

His aim was perfect - Chuck's big toe.

'Doggone!' yelled the Texan, throwing his bat away and hopping up and down in pain.

'Is that how they dance in Cherokee Bend?' Lizzy asked.

As Chuck slumped down on the grass, the rest of the Bayside team arrived.

'Leave it to me,' cried Murphy. 'I was a medic in the army.'

'I hope you're better with a bandage than you are with a cricket ball,' said Chuck, whose face had gone grey with the pain.

Murphy's examination didn't take long.

'It's broken,' he told the Texan. 'And you can't bat with a broken toe. You'll have to come off.'

Chuck looked at Kate. 'But I've just got started. And if I go off, *you* have to come on.'

'Don't remind me,' she said.

'What about a runner?' said Johnny.

'A runner?' said Chuck. 'I've never run away from anythin' in my life.'

'No. Someone to do your running for you while you keep batting. That's if you can still bat.'

'Watch me,' said Chuck, struggling to his feet, taking the weight on his undamaged foot.

He waved the bat in the air. 'You pitch 'em. I'll hit 'em.'

'We're going to bring on a runner,' Kate told the umpires.

Hatfield started to argue, but Jennings stopped him.

'Perfectly legal,' said Jennings. 'As long as it's someone who's already batted, and they're dressed like the injured batter.'

'I ain't got a spare hat to lend 'em,' said Chuck.

'As long as the runner wears pads and carries a bat, that'll be enough.'

Bayside's captain and vice-captain held a quick conference.

'Who should we use?' Kate asked Johnny.

'Rainbow,' he replied. 'He's the fastest runner in the team.'

As the multi-coloured spider walked out towards the middle, Johnny came to meet him.

With a series of whistles and hand signals, Johnny explained to Rainbow what he had to do.

'Do you think he's got it?' called Chuck.

'You forget,' said Johnny, 'these spiders can do anything.'

Even though he couldn't run, Chuck swung his bat at every ball bowled at him, connecting with most.

With Johnny also hitting out at the other end, the Bayside score edged closer to

Ridgewood's total of 200.

With only two overs left in the game, Bayside were up to 185.

For the Ridgewood captain, that was too close for comfort.

'Don't worry,' Hatfield told her. 'Get ready to appeal for a caught behind.'

'Off who? Whistler or the cowboy?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'What if they miss it?' said Lizzy. 'Like Freddy did. Can we pull the same trick twice?'

'Just make it look good,' said Hatfield and explained how to do it.

Lizzy called over Tony, and some of the close-in fielders.

'Okay, listen,' she told them. 'The first time either batter swings and misses the ball, we all jump up and appeal for a catch.'

'That's cheating' said Tony. 'I don't like it.'

Some of the others grumbled as well.

'You don't have to like it,' she told them. 'I'm the captain. Just do it.'

The second to last over was a good one for Bayside.

Nigel was bowling his final over, but nothing could stop the flow of runs.

From the first five balls of the over, Chuck picked up three runs and Johnny added six taking the Bayside total to 194.

Lizzy turned to Tony. 'One ball left in the over. Whistler won't miss this, unless we help him.'

As Nigel released the last ball of his over, Johnny's bat started to swing.

'Look out!' hissed Lizzy.

It was enough to put Johnny off. He missed the ball completely and it flew through to the wicketkeeper.

'Now!' said Lizzy to Tony and the close-in fielders.

'Howzat!' they all yelled.

'Out!' said Hatfield.

Johnny shook his head. 'How?'

'Caught behind.'

'But I didn't hit it,' Johnny protested.

Chuck was standing next to Hatfield at the non-strikers end.

'Johnny didn't come within a longhorn's tail of that ball, umpire, and you know it.'

Hatfield pointed to Lizzy and the close-in fielders. 'Well they all heard him hit it. Whistler. You're out.'

Kate was still sitting on the grass as Johnny came off the field.

'Come on, Mum. Get out there and win the game for us.'

'Me? Win the game? That's a joke.'

'You can do it,' insisted Johnny.

'Yes,' said Bouncer. 'Just a few more runs to win. Only another...? How many, Johnny?'

'We're 194. That means we need six runs to tie the game. Seven to win. And one over to do it.'

'It's over *now*,' said Kate, getting to her feet and picking up her bat and helmet.

'At least I was out on the last ball of Nigel's over,' said Johnny. 'That means Chuck's on strike.'

Kate brightened a little. 'With any luck, he might hit all the runs we need.'

'And if that doesn't work,' Debbie suggested, 'try my idea. Just close your eyes and swing the bat.'

'It may come to that, Debs.'

It was a cricketing tradition for teams to applaud the arrival of the opposing captain.

As Kate walked out, Tony started to clap, but Lizzy stopped him with a glare.

'Don't encourage her,' said Lizzy. 'This one's mine.'

She intercepted Kate, part way to the wicket.

'Doesn't this take you back a few years?' said Lizzy. 'Me bowling the last over and you batting? You failed back then, and you'll fail now.'

Kate couldn't think of anything to say as Lizzy turned her back and stalked away.

But to get at Kate, Lizzy first had to find some way to get her on strike.

The Ridgewood captain glared down the pitch at Chuck and ran in to bowl.

His bat flashed, the ball shot away into the outfield, and his runner, Rainbow, took off.

'Two,' Kate yelled at Rainbow, running as fast as she could for the first run.

She was even faster on the second run, keen to get back to the other end so Chuck could keep the strike.

The score was now 196. Four runs to tie. Five runs to win.

Lizzy bowled again. Chuck swung, lost his balance, and missed.

He re-balanced himself on his undamaged foot and gave the third ball a hard thump.

Kate and Rainbow sprinted up and down the pitch for another two runs.

The score was now 198. Two needed to tie the game. Three to win.

On the fourth delivery, Chuck connected again, even harder and another two runs seemed certain as Kate took off.

Lizzy had other ideas and as Kate started to run, Lizzy, pretending to try and field the ball, deliberately collided with her.

Kate felt her knee give way, and barely managed to hobble to the other end.

But there was no time to come back and the certain two runs had been reduced to one.

Lizzy's smirk could be seen from all over the ground.

'Still having trouble with that knee?' she called to Kate. 'You're too old for this sort of thing.'

Bayside were now 199. One run needed to tie the game. Two runs to win.

Johnny and Murphy ran out and Murphy wrapped a big bandage around Kate's damaged knee.

'You look as white as a ghost, Mum,' said Johnny.

'The same old ghost that's been haunting me since I was at school.'

Johnny saw his mother looking at Lizzy as she spoke.

He made the decision and told both umpires. 'Mum needs a runner, too.'

'Very well,' said Jennings.

'Who?' asked Hatfield.

'Me!' said Johnny.

A few minutes later, Johnny jogged back out to be his mother's runner, wearing pads and carrying a bat.

As the field settled down, Lizzy walked up to Kate and eyeballed her.

'Wanna quit, Whistler?'

Kate shook her head, and took her guard as she tried to keep her hands from shaking.

Johnny and Rainbow stood, ready to run for the two injured batters.

Lizzy ran in like a steam train and bowled.

Taking Debbie's advice, Kate closed her eyes and swung, heaving her bat at the ball.

She missed it by a metre or more and the ball passed through to Tony.

'Howzat!' demanded Lizzy.

Jennings scowled at her. 'When I give a batter out caught, I like them to have actually hit the ball.'

One ball left in the game, still one run needed to tie, two runs to win.

Kate's hands were now shaking hard and so was her bat.

Johnny jogged across to his mother and pretended to adjust the bandage around her knee.

'I can't do it, Johnny. She's beaten me again.'

'If you don't get rid of this ghost now, Mum, you'll never get rid of her.'

'Okay, vice-captain,' said Kate. 'Give me some advice. My brain's turned to jelly.'

'Same as last time. Take a big swing at it. You've got nothing to lose.'

'Except this cricket match,' said Kate, 'and my pride, and the respect of my town and my family and...'

'It's only a game, Mum.'

'Not from where I'm standing.'

'Then give it all you've got.' Johnny ran back to his position.

Complete silence fell over the Ridgewood Domain as Lizzy thundered in to bowl the last ball of the game.

Kate closed her eyes and again swung her bat at the ball.

And hit it!

The ball came off the edge of her bat, sailed over the wicketkeeper's head, and raced across the grass towards the boundary.

'Stop that ball!' screamed Lizzy as Nigel gave chase.

Johnny and Rainbow took the first run at break-neck speed.

Which brought up their 200. The game was now tied!

Johnny turned, looking for the second run when he saw Nigel had picked up the ball and was ready to fire it in to Tony.

At the end Johnny would be running to!

But they needed that one run for victory.

'Yes!' he yelled at Rainbow and set off.

Nigel's throw was coming straight for the Ridgewood wicketkeeper, hard and low.

Johnny ran faster than he'd ever run in his life.

The ball was now only metres from the wicketkeeper.

Johnny threw himself at full length, with his bat out in front of him, and dived for the line.

As his body slid to safety, Tony took the ball and whipped off the bails.

Too late!

Johnny had made his ground and was home, safe, for everyone to see.

'Howzat!' cried Lizzy.

'What?' cried Tony. 'Johnny was home.'

'Shut your mouth,' Lizzy snarled as she ran up to Hatfield.

'It was close,' said Hatfield.

'Close?' cried Kate.

'Even I could see he was home safe,' yelled Chuck from the other end, using his bat like a crutch to hobble up the pitch.

'He looked safe from where I was,' added Jennings, running over to join his fellow umpire.

'But it's my decision,' Hatfield reminded everyone.

'I say he was *out* of his ground,' insisted Lizzy. 'The game is tied!'

Kate glared at her old school rival. 'And I say Johnny was *in*. Bayside *wins*!'

Hatfield was enjoying his moment of power.

'I say, the umpire's decision is final, and I rule that Johnny Whistler was...'

'Stop,' said Johnny, turning to Chuck. 'Before umpire Hatfield gives his final decision, tell

him that *other* story about how you deal with cheats in Cherokee Bend.'

'I've heard all about the molasses and feathers,' said Hatfield.

'Not that story,' said Johnny. 'This is *much* worse.'

'What's worse than molasses and feathers?'

Johnny looked serious. 'When Chuck takes his Big M branding iron and heats it up until it's glowing, red-hot.'

Hatfield didn't like the sound of that. 'And?'

'Tell him, Chuck,' said Johnny.

'You tell him, son. You're doin' a good job.'

There was complete silence. Everyone wanted to hear the story.

'Well,' continued Johnny, 'after Chuck's got his branding iron nice and hot, he takes it, and he uses it to burn the word CHEAT...'

Hatfield's imagination was working overtime. 'With a branding iron?'

'Hot as I can get it,' said the Texan.

Lizzy could see what was happening.

'Don't you let them frighten you, Uncle Herbert. This is not the wild west.'

'I knew I'd brought my trusty brandin' iron on this trip for a reason,' said Chuck.

'Come on, Uncle Herbert,' screamed Lizzy. 'Make your decision. Johnny was out, wasn't he? Out, out, out!'

Hatfield held up his hand for silence. Johnny could see he was sweating.

'I've made my decision,' said Hatfield, 'and the umpire's decision is final. Johnny Whistler was... home safe. Bayside wins!'

Sunshine and Sky jumped up and down on the sideline doing more "high-sixteens" as both teams erupted in cheers.

All except Lizzy.

'I'll get you for this, Uncle Herbert!'

'I'd rather have that than a hot branding iron,' Hatfield yelled as he ran from the field for the second time in the game, with Lizzy close behind.

Chapter Eight

'Why don't we all sing a song or something?' suggested Murphy as he drove the victorious Baysiders home.

'Who's got the energy to sing?' asked Debbie.

'You should have plenty of energy, sis,' said Johnny. 'You didn't do much.'

'But what I did do was important. Did you see that creep, Nigel's, face when I hit him for six?'

'I'll always remember the lesson I learned from you today, Debs,' said Kate, adjusting her knee bandage. 'When in doubt, close your eyes and swing hard.'

Chuck was sitting at the back of the bus with the spiders, his injured foot extended along the seat.

'I'm sure gonna have some *real* tall tales to tell when I get back to Cherokee Bend,' said the Texan. 'The only trouble is, no one'll believe me.'

'The most exciting day I can remember since my ship sank,' said Captain Grout.

'The most dramatic cricket match I've ever seen, much less played in,' said Freddy, the radio sports reporter.

'I wonder how much I can sell the used cricket gear for?' mumbled Mr Sneddon from the sports shop.

'I don't know how on earth I'll describe this match for the readers of the Bayside Gazette,' said Jennings, the newspaper's editor.

'Just tell the truth,' said Johnny. 'We won.'

'Don't forget the high standard of umpiring.'

The new voice belonged to Herbert Hatfield.

Chuck frowned at him. 'We've heard enough from you today, Hatfield. You're lucky we didn't leave you up that tree.'

Kate tried not to grin. 'It wasn't very nice of Lizzy to let down the tyres of her Uncle Herbert's car and make him take the bus back to Bayside.'

Hatfield nodded. 'Sometimes family are more trouble than they're worth.'

'Tell me about it,' muttered Debbie.

'Just make sure that's the last time you try and cheat the good folks of Bayside,' said Chuck.

Johnny leaned across. 'Don't hold your breath, Chuck. He's one leopard who'll *never* change his spots.'

Chuck raised his voice so everyone on the bus could hear.

'Maybe I should leave my brandin' iron in Bayside. In case it's needed.'

'But I made the right decision,' Hatfield protested. 'Johnny was in. Everyone could see

that.'

'The same way everyone could see I *didn't* hit the ball when you gave me out, caught,' said Freddy.

'Me, too,' said Johnny.

'And Rainbow's LBW,' said Grout. 'It came off his *bat*.'

'Everyone makes mistakes,' said Hatfield.

'Look, Chuck,' he said. 'Bayside's a civilised town. You can't go around threatening people. This is not the wild west.'

'Did anyone hear me threaten Mr Hatfield?' asked Chuck.

'No,' came the unanimous reply.

'But, that story about what you do with a hot branding iron...'

Hatfield looked uncomfortable just thinking about it.

'Tell him the rest of the story, Johnny,' said Chuck.

Johnny grinned. 'Mr Hatfield,' he said, 'for the real big cheats, the worst of the worse, it's true that Chuck takes his branding iron, heats it until it's red hot and then burns the word CHEAT...'

'There,' said Hatfield. 'There's that threat again.'

No one spoke. The only sound was the hum of the tyres on the road.

Johnny continued. 'Chuck burns the word CHEAT... into a big *wooden board* which is nailed to the cheat's front fence!'

The bus erupted in laughter.

'Them cheatin' varmints sure hate it,' said Chuck. 'The shame of bein' branded like that, in public, and the sign stays up till they change their ways.'

'What?' yelled Hatfield. 'But you told me...'

'You only listened to half the story,' said Johnny. 'It's your own fault if you didn't wait for the ending.'

Hatfield almost exploded. 'You've made a fool out of me!'

'You didn't need any help from us,' said Chuck. 'Now, hush up. I'm a mite sleepy.'

'Aren't we all?' said Johnny.

Murphy was still chuckling to himself 10 minutes later when he thought of something.

'Johnny,' he called back into the bus. 'You said if I made a few runs today, I could tell you that story again on the way home. The one about me and the...'

Murphy looked in his rear vision mirror. Everyone was sound asleep.

'On second thoughts,' he said to himself, 'maybe what happened today is an even *better* story.'

The End