



T O M B R A D L E Y

FAIR WEATHER

The Brightside Bunch



FREE ebook - Book 4 of 6

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What the critics said about 'The Brightside Bunch' series

- “... good dollops of humour” (Waikato Times)
- “... Bradley weaves magic for a widening audience ... an easy-going, light-hearted manner and tone [but] they touch on a number of important themes, carefully woven into the storylines, adding depth and interest” (Greymouth Evening Star)
- “... an exciting series that tells kids how others might react to separation and remarriage” (Townsville Bulletin, Australia)

What this story is about

(Fourth book in the series)

Brightside, where Simone and Todd, both 10, live with the rest of the blended Wozinsky-Freeman family, desperately needs a new roof.

When Todd's Uncle Nick comes to visit, he helps organise a garage sale to raise money to pay for it.

But when things don't work out as planned, it's up to Simone and Todd to help solve the problem.

Chapter One

Simone Freeman looked in her bedroom mirror and patted the stubble on her head. Getting a bit long, she decided. Time to borrow dad's electric shaver again.

Then she spotted something else. Something that made her spin around and look up in shock and disbelief.

'Not again!' she yelled. 'I don't believe this!'

Simone had no sooner said it, than she heard what sounded like an elephant pounding up the stairs. No mistaking that noise. Either the circus was in town or...

The door flew open and her older sister, Holly, filled the doorway, puffing from the climb.

'How am I supposed to concentrate on my book with you making all that racket above my head?'

'Buy bigger ear-plugs,' said Simone.

'Very funny,' said Holly waving her arms around. 'What's the big deal?'

Simone stuck one finger up in the air.

'Are you being rude, you little brat?' asked Holly.

No, thought Simone. For once.

'Look up there,' she told her sister.

Holly studied the wet patch on the ceiling. 'What a big fuss over nothing.'

'It's not nothing,' said Simone. 'The roof still leaks.'

Todd Wozinsky popped his head into the room.

'How many is that?' he asked.

'The second one this week,' said Simone, as she grabbed a bucket from under her bed and placed it so the water plopped right in the middle.

'But it's stopped raining outside,' said Todd.

'Tell that to the leak,' said Simone.

Two weeks ago they'd moved into their new-but-old house, Brightside. That same day, the newly blended family discovered the roof was in even worse condition than the rest of the property.

'I thought Dad had fixed the roof,' said Holly.

Simone shook her head. Her father's idea of repairs had been to clamber up into the attic and squeeze endless tubes of some rubbery stuff called "Gunkee" into all the holes.

A waste of time because as fast as he patched one hole, two more appeared. If they got another big storm like the one that hit them on moving day, they'd need canoes, not beds.

'No more noise,' said Holly. 'I'm going back downstairs and I want some peace... tram-tracks.'

Simone flashed her braces at her sister. 'Take the elephants with you.'

'I should have throttled you years ago,' said Holly shoving past Todd and out of the room.

'And missed out on all the fun?' Simone yelled after her.

Not all fun, Simone reminded herself. Especially not when their mother walked out, but at least they'd lived in a dry house, even if it was small.

Then her father went and complicated everything by marrying Todd's mum which forced them to move to something bigger.

Todd took off his glasses and gave them a wipe. 'Mum would throw a fit if Jaynee and I fought like you and Holly.'

Simone pulled a face. 'Your sister doesn't know how to fight, she just moans all the time. "Mu-um, Simone's being gross. Mu-um, Holly's being mean to me".'

Todd put his glasses back on and laughed. 'Sounds just like her.'

A new voice carried up the stairs.

'Todd! Simone!' yelled Paula Wozinsky, Simone's new stepmother. 'Breakfast's on.'

'Race you down,' said Todd.

Simone would have preferred sneakers to run on carpet, but her slippers would have to do.

'Last one down does the breakfast dishes,' she said without warning, heading for the stairs.

'No way,' yelled Todd, chasing her. 'It's *your* turn to do the dishes.'

Simone stopped. 'But dishes can be fun.'

Todd stopped beside her. 'How can a tea towel be fun?'

She laughed. 'Just wet the end of it and flick Holly's legs,' and with that Simone leapt down the stairs ahead of him two at a time.

'I heard that,' said Simone's father, Michael Freeman, as she and Todd burst into the big kitchen.

That's what Simone liked about Brightside. Everything was big.

'I've just thought of a new name for this family,' said her father, glancing around the room - The Stropky Seven.'

'Only six of us are stropky,' said Simone walking past her little brother Logan and stopping beside Jaynee. 'One is just a moaner.'

'I am not a moaner,' said eight year old Jaynee Wozinsky, pouring chocolate-coated cereal into a bowl.

'Did I say it was you?' asked Simone.

'You looked at me,' said Jaynee.

Simone dropped her voice so the others couldn't hear. 'You couldn't stop moaning if you

tried.'

'Could, too,' said Jaynee.

'Could not,' whispered Simone. 'Not even for the next 30 seconds.'

'Could, too, could, too,' Jaynee hissed back.

'Clock's running.'

'Simone,' said her father. 'I hope you're not fighting with Jaynee.'

'We're timing something, Dad,' Simone told him, before dropping her voice again. 'Me and the little *moaner!*'

'Mu-um,' said Jaynee, 'Simone's being mean.'

Simone looked at her watch. 'That only took 23 seconds. Todd, you're off the hook. Jaynee does the breakfast dishes.'

'Mu-um...'

'It's all right, Jaynee,' said her mother, 'Simone's only joking.'

Says who, thought Simone. Trust the Wozinskys to stick together.

Paula looked around the room. 'No one changes rosters without talking to me.' She patted the bald spot on her husband's head. 'That includes you, sweetheart.'

Michael smiled, but Holly scowled.

'Living here's like being in the army,' she muttered.

'Spoken like a tank,' said Simone.

'How was your run?' Michael asked his wife.

Paula finger-combed her short blonde hair back off her face. 'The best I've had since we moved in.'

Holly looked up from her breakfast. 'I read in a magazine that people can die from too much exercise.'

'You're safe,' said Simone.

'What's everyone doing today?' asked Michael Freeman, dropping his paper.

'Saturday chores,' said Paula, getting in first. 'The latest roster's on the notice board.'

'Yes, Sergeant Major,' Holly muttered.

'My new sand pit, Daddy,' said four year old Logan Freeman, throwing down his spoon on the table.

'We'll do that when it's stopped drizzling,' said his father.

Paula reached across the table and rescued a jar of honey from beside Logan's elbow.

'If it's too wet outside, sweetheart,' she said to Michael, 'you can stay inside with me and help strip the old wallpaper in our bedroom.'

'What's the point?' Michael replied. 'We can't afford to replace it.'

'I'm sick of looking at those water stains,' said Paula.

'That's nothing,' said Simone. 'My ceiling's sprung another leak.'

'So has your face,' said Holly, lathering peanut butter and jam onto a thick slice of toast. 'Just below your nose.'

Simone ignored her. 'Before we buy anything else for this house, we need a new roof.'

'Why?' asked her father. 'That Gunkee stuff's doing the trick.'

'The birds are the ones doing tricks,' said Simone. 'Our roof's so full of that rubbery gunk, they use it as a trampoline.'

'We'll get a new roof when we have the money,' he explained, patiently. 'When I find a few more clients.'

Since losing his job, Michael Freeman had set up his own accountancy practice, working from home.

'How many clients have you got now?' asked Holly, wiping peanut butter off her nose.

'Umm...' said her father, counting on his fingers. 'One.'

'What?'

'Building a business takes time, Holly. I'm starting from the ground floor.'

'The basement, more like it,' said Holly.

'Keval Naidu likes what I've done for him so far,' said her father. 'He'll give me more work if he can.'

'He just feels guilty,' said Holly, 'for stealing our house.'

'The Naidus didn't steal anything,' said Paula. 'You can't blame them for buying number 11 next door when our deal on it fell over.'

'It would be better if Mr Naidu actually *paid* you,' Holly told her father.

'He does pay me,' he replied. 'He gave me a membership to his gym.'

'Talking of gyms,' said Paula, preparing a fresh fruit salad, 'when do I see my new, streamlined husband?'

Michael sucked in his stomach. 'I'll start at Body-Blasta any day now. When I get a spare moment.'

Paula, a full-time high school teacher, smiled and winked at Simone. 'Your dad's frantically busy shopping and running the house.'

'It's a big responsibility,' he said. 'And there's Logan to collect. Walking to kindergarten and back is a workout on its own.'

Simone's father had lost more than his job. He'd also lost the company car that went with it.

'It's tough with only one car,' said Paula, 'but unless we win the lottery, we'll have to keep juggling.'

'Wow,' said Simone. 'Never seen anyone juggle a car.'

'I've seen Uncle Nick juggle oranges,' said Todd.

'Which reminds me,' said Paula, 'We finally heard from him.'

'Is he coming to visit?' asked Todd.

Simone knew Todd idolised his uncle, the younger brother of Todd's dead father. For a Wozinsky, Nick was okay. Almost human.

'He's still restoring and selling old motorcycles,' said Paula. 'He hasn't been able to find a real job.'

'But he *had* a real job,' said Holly, jumping to his defence. 'When he was a jockey. Before the accident.'

Simone grinned. Fourteen year old big sister had a soft spot for Nick.

'Daddy,' said Logan, suddenly losing interest in the mangled remains of his honeyed toast. 'You promised.'

'You win,' said his father, getting up. 'Go and get your raincoat.'

Logan jumped down from the table. 'Weez first, Daddy, weez.'

'There goes the next half hour,' said his father.

'You'd better make sure the sandpit has good drainage,' Simone called after her father as he and Logan headed out.

'What are you lot doing today?' Paula asked as she joined the others at the kitchen table.

'I'm reading this great novel,' said Holly. 'The sort *I'm* going to write one day.'

'When you grow up,' said Simone.

Holly flared her nostrils. 'To get some peace and quiet, I'm going to lock myself in my room until I finish it.'

'What about your chores?' asked Paula.

Holly's nostrils flared even wider. 'They'll get done.'

'When?'

'When I'm ready!' said Holly.

Paula sighed. 'Holly, do we have to argue about everything?'

'Not if you stop trying to organise my life,' said Holly, marching out of the room.

Simone heard Holly's door slam, followed by a key turning in the lock.

Paula turned to Jaynee. 'Chores time for you, too, young lady.'

'Mu-um...'

'Jaynee, don't you start arguing. Todd?'

'I know what I have to do,' said Todd.

'So do I,' said Simone.

She turned to Todd as Paula and Jaynee left the room.

'Do you think your mum will win stepmother of the year?'

'If she stays sane,' said Todd. 'Life was better before you Freemans came along.'

'Same for us before you lot arrived,' said Simone, shaking the chocolate-coated cereal packet and finding it nearly empty. 'And we had more to eat back then.'

'I don't believe that,' said Todd. 'Not with Holly around.'

'Maybe your mum should adopt her,' said Simone.

'Would anyone believe Holly and Jaynee were sisters?' asked Todd.

'Not sisters, twins,' said Simone. 'Twin pests.'

Todd picked up the newspaper and started reading the front page story. 'The police still haven't caught that burglar.'

'The Balaclava Bandit?' asked Simone, tipping the cereal packet upside down and sliding the last chocolate covered crumb down the paper chute and into her mouth.

'No one's seen his face,' said Todd, skimming through the rest of the story, 'but they reckon he's big. And he always strikes at night.'

'Are they sure it's a man?' asked Simone.

'Why?'

'Because Holly sleepwalks.'

Todd laughed. 'Well, we're safe. He doesn't rob houses, only shops.'

'I suppose Mr Naidu is ready for him,' said Simone.

Their neighbour owned two businesses at Northmall. Body-Blasta, a gym, and a toy shop, KidsHeaven.

'I'll bet Mr Naidu has burglar alarms all over the place,' said Todd.

Simone suddenly remembered the bucket in her room.

She jumped up from the table. 'You start the dishes, Todd. I'll be right back.'

'Okay,' said Todd then stopped. 'Hey, it's not my turn.'

'Almost got you,' said Simone as she sprinted out of the kitchen and up the stairs, throwing open her bedroom door.

The bucket wasn't even half full.

Simone flicked off her slippers and thrust a foot into one of the sneakers beside her bed. Right into a soggy mess.

'Yuck,' she cried, pulling her foot out and wiping it on the back of her jeans.

Zip! Their slobbering dog had wrecked dozens of Freeman slippers over the years. But Zip had never chomped a sneaker before. And if Zip hadn't done it...

Simone looked up. A new bubble of water spread out on the ceiling above her before becoming so heavy it plopped down onto the faded carpet right where her sneaker had been.

Simone kept yelling until Todd arrived.

'Look at that,' she said, pointing at the new leak. 'We need a new roof and we need it now!'

'But you heard your father,' said Todd. 'We haven't got any money.'

'Then we'll have to find some,' said Simone.

Chapter Two

That night, Todd tossed and turned in his bed as the nightmare rolled on and on. Another dream about the car crash that had killed his father and injured Uncle Nick.

He stood beside the crumpled car wreck, desperately wanting to pull his father out, but his arms and legs wouldn't move. When he finally managed to reach out, he was too late. His dad and the car had disappeared.

So had Uncle Nick. All that remained in the middle of the road was a foot.

Then he heard horses hooves behind him. He spun around. His uncle was wearing a black jockey's outfit and riding a big racehorse which reared up on its hind legs.

Todd tried to tell his uncle he'd found his foot, but Nick didn't seem to care. He kept yelling at Todd to jump up on the saddle behind him, but Todd couldn't get close enough because of the horse's flashing hooves.

'Todd! Todd!'

Todd opened his eyes, but the nightmare wouldn't go away. He could still hear his uncle's voice.

'Todd! Jaynee! Anybody!'

Todd jumped out of bed and ran to the window of his upstairs bedroom.

'Uncle Nick!' he cried, looking down. 'You didn't tell us you were coming so soon.'

'Is that why I didn't find the red carpet out?'

'Hang on a minute,' said Todd. 'I'll be right down.'

Todd threw on his dressing gown and raced down the stairs two at a time. He flung open Brightside's front door.

'How's my favourite nephew?' asked Nick, wrapping his arms around Todd.

'Surviving,' said Todd.

'Spoken like a Wozinsky,' said Nick.

Todd looked into his uncle's eyes and saw a glimpse of his father. The same bright eyes. The same enthusiasm.

'You're getting bigger every time I see you,' said Nick, stepping back and looking Todd up and down.

'You're not,' said Todd with a grin.

Nick laughed. 'I'm still taller than you. Just. But you know what they say about good things in little packages...'

'The wanderer returns,' said Paula Wozinsky from the top of the stairs.

'I'm like a boomerang,' said Nick. 'Always coming back. How's the new Mrs Freeman?'

'Pleased to see you,' said Paula. 'I'll get dressed. Todd, put the jug on, will you?'

As she disappeared back into the main bedroom, Nick beckoned Todd outside and

pointed to the motorcycle standing in the drive.

'Isn't she beautiful? My dream machine. A real oldie, but a goodie.'

'Sounds like Simone's grandmother,' said Todd, walking up and inspecting the motorcycle at close range. 'Wow. You need sunglasses just to look at it.'

'I sprained both arms with all the elbow-grease I used,' said Nick.

'I've never seen one of these before,' said Todd, examining the contraption strapped to the side which turned the motorcycle into a three wheeler.

'That's the original sidecar,' said Nick.

'Are you going to keep this machine?' asked Todd.

'I won't sell it unless things get desperate,' said Nick. 'It's more than a motorcycle, it's...'

'Pregnant,' said a voice behind them.

Nick turned around. 'G'day, Simone.'

'Where did you find a pregnant motorcycle?'

'Sidecars are great for carrying passengers,' said Nick. 'Want a ride?' He laughed. 'Not that you'd feel the wind in your hair. It's even shorter than at the wedding.'

Simone grinned and rubbed her hand across the stubble. 'This is my "thousand times" special.'

'Thousand times?' asked Nick.

'Yeah,' said Simone. 'Because every time he sees it, Dad says, "Simone, I've told you a thousand times, stop using my electric shaver!"'

'How fast can it go?' asked Todd, pointing to the motorcycle.

'This thing's so fast,' said Nick, 'you're back where you started from before you've even left.'

'Todd!' his mother called from an upstairs window. 'How's that drink coming?'

'Slowly,' Simone called back. 'Todd's still picking the coffee beans.'

Chapter Three

Simone handed out the coffee as Todd moved around the lounge passing out biscuits.

Nick took a cup of bubbling liquid and blew on it. 'What did you heat this with, Simone? A blowtorch?'

'I zapped it,' said Simone, 'but I had to guess the time. Our microwave's so old, we bought it from the Flintstones.'

'Don't exaggerate,' said her father as Logan climbed all over him. 'I'll fix it later.'

'You can't fix microwaves with Gunkee, Dad,' said Simone.

'I'm handy with a screwdriver,' said Nick. 'Let me pay for my supper.'

'Supper?' asked Todd. 'Then you'll stay for a while?'

'A couple of days,' said Nick. 'If that's all right.'

'We can set up a spare bed in Todd's room,' said Paula.

'Great,' said Nick.

'What's all the noise?' asked Holly Freeman, wandering across the hall from her bedroom wearing an outsized dressing gown. She'd thrown it over patched pyjamas and a pair of different coloured slippers, the survivors of two separate Zip attacks.

Simone could tell her big sister was still half asleep.

'Can't I sleep-in even *one* day of the week?' Holly groaned, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

She suddenly saw Nick and her mouth opened and closed again. All that came out was a little squeal.

'G'day, Holly,' said Nick. 'You're looking as gorgeous as ever.'

This man needs more than a wooden foot, thought Simone. He needs a white stick and a guide dog.

Holly squealed again, spun on her yellow and purple heels and fled the room.

'What was that all about?' asked her father.

'No one likes to be caught looking their worst,' Paula explained.

'She can look much worse than that,' said Simone.

'That's not fair,' said her father, wagging his finger.

Simone shrugged. 'You're right, Dad. Holly's *never* looked worse.'

Paula changed the subject. 'What do you think of Brightside, Nick?'

'Interesting old house,' he said, carefully sipping his steaming brew.

'It's no palace,' said Michael, 'but at least we own it.'

'Us... and the bank,' said Paula.

'Looks like you've had a few leaks,' said Nick, glancing up at the ceiling.

'That's the sprinkler system,' said Simone.

'We haven't got a sprinkler system,' said her father.

'We did the night we moved in,' Simone reminded him. 'And we couldn't turn the rain off.'

'Sounds like the roof needs attention as well as the microwave,' said Nick.

'The roof needs *replacing*,' said Todd.

'Urgently,' said Simone. 'There are more holes up there than on a golf course.'

'I've been up in the attic every few days,' her father told Nick, 'trying to plug the holes from the inside. I really need to get up on the roof, but I'm not too confident on top of a ladder.'

'I'm not only good with a screwdriver,' said Nick. 'I'm pretty nifty up a ladder as well.'

Simone saw her father glance at Nick's feet.

'Is that a good idea, Nick? You know, with your...'

'Artificial foot,' said Nick, completing the sentence. 'Ninety-nine percent of me works just fine, and I can still do more with one good foot than most people can do with two.'

'Sorry,' said Michael. 'I didn't...'

'Forget it,' said Nick. 'But the offer's still there.'

'I'll come up on the roof with you,' said Simone.

'No you won't,' said her father, 'it's much too high.'

'Not as high as Godzilla,' she replied.

'What's Godzilla?' asked Nick. 'Some kind of hot air balloon?'

'The biggest tree you've ever seen,' said Simone. 'It's on our boundary with the Naidus. I climb it all the time.'

'So does Digby,' said Jaynee who sat in a corner feeding her kitten a piece of biscuit while their cat, Carmen, watched.

'Digby's not his real name,' Simone told Nick. 'It's Fluffbucket.'

'That's only *your* silly name for him,' said Jaynee.

Nick shook his head. 'How do you keep track of everyone in this house?'

'With a very long list,' said Paula.

'Simone?' asked Nick, 'can you see the roof on this place from the top of your tree?'

'Most of it.'

'Then why don't you act as my spotter and point out any holes I miss. That's if your dad doesn't mind.'

'I suppose that would be okay,' said Michael Freeman.

'I'll get the ladder,' said Todd.

A few minutes later, Simone sat on Godzilla's highest branch, looking down on Nick, who perched on the top of Brightside's roof.

As well as spotting holes, she hoped the fresh air would recharge her brain and help her come up with a money-making scheme for a new roof.

She took a deep breath and waited for an idea to pop into her head.

Nick called across to her, 'Great view from up here.'

'Even better from up here,' she called back.

He pointed off into the distance. 'What's the big building?'

'Northmall,' she explained. 'Local shopping centre.'

'Looks new.'

'It is,' she told him. 'Mr Naidu's got a toy shop up there. And a gym.'

'I'm into fitness,' said Nick, swinging the tube of Gunkee like a dumbbell. 'I've been working out with weights lately. Helps fill the days.'

'Don't fall,' said Simone.

'Me? Fall? I'm part mountain goat.'

Simone laughed. Why weren't all the Wozinskys as much fun?

Nick took a couple of steps out onto the sloping tin roof and found the first hole.

'Just as well your dad stayed down below,' he said, poking the gooey filler into the gap. 'This roof's strictly for featherweights.'

'I can see another hole,' said Simone. 'To your left.'

'There's more decent metal on my motorcycle than on this roof,' said Nick squeezing Gunkee every metre or two.

After a few minutes, he stopped and called across to Simone. 'How's that, spotter? Have we got them all?'

'I think so.' Then she saw it. A suspicious looking patch, on the steepest part of the roof.

Simone pointed. 'That looks like a big hole over there.'

'I can't tell without getting closer,' said Nick, 'but I'll take your word for it.'

'Be careful, Nick,' yelled Simone. 'That part's really steep.'

One false step and Brightside's roof would become a giant slide. And there'd be no soft landing for Nick at the bottom.

He'd fall two storeys. He could break his leg. His neck. Even kill himself.

Maybe letting him get up on the roof wasn't such a good idea after all, Simone decided. Even a mountain goat with *four* good legs would find it difficult.

Carefully, Nick worked his way towards the suspicious patch, crouching low, keeping his balance.

As he reached the spot, he started to laugh. 'It's not a hole, Simone. It's a big blob of bird poo.'

'You'd better come on down,' she called, as she saw him wobble.

'Gee, this is steeper than it looks,' he called. 'Wouldn't want to...'

Nick's shoes shot from under him. With a thump, he landed on his back and started to slide, feet first, towards the edge.

'Nick!' Simone screamed.

He was seconds away from dropping off the edge of the roof!

Simone started to close her eyes in horror, but before she could, Nick raised one foot and crashed it down.

His foot disappeared through the rusty tin!

'What's going on up there?' yelled Paula from below.

'It's okay,' Nick yelled back. 'Had to use the emergency brake.'

Simone had a terrible thought. What if Nick had cut himself on the tin? She could almost feel the pain. Worse than standing on a dozen rusty nails.

'Lucky I remembered to use the right foot,' said Nick with a laugh, 'even though the right foot in this case is the left one.'

He repositioned himself on the sloping roof and slowly tugged his left leg with the wooden foot out of the hole.

'Next time I'll wear a parachute,' he called across to Simone.

Nick examined the damage to the roof. 'A dozen tubes of Gunkee won't fix the hole I've just made. I'll have to get a piece of tin and patch it.'

'Will it hold?'

'The patch might,' said Nick, 'but I wouldn't give you 10 cents for the rest of the roof. If a decent storm blows up, the whole thing will fly away. You'll need the Coast Guard to rescue it.'

Simone started to laugh and that's when the idea hit her. An idea so simple she could have kicked herself for not thinking of it sooner.

Chapter Four

'A garage sale?' asked Todd, watching Simone scramble down Godzilla's trunk.

'More than just a garage sale,' she replied, descending fast. 'We'll set up the backyard like a mini school fair.'

Todd had been to plenty of school fairs. You needed things to sell.

'What have we got?' he asked.

'All sorts of things,' she said, dropping out of the tree and brushing off her jeans.

'Furniture for a start.'

They'd bought Brightside fully furnished and stored the stuff they didn't want in the big shed out the back.

'A Brightside fair,' said Todd's mother later as the three of them stood in the kitchen watching Nick fiddle with the insides of the microwave. 'Great idea, Todd.'

Todd felt Simone's eyes boring into him.

'Not my idea, Mum,' he explained. 'Simone thought of it.'

'It's got to be soon,' said Simone.

Paula nodded. 'How about next Saturday?'

'Will you stay for it, Uncle Nick?' asked Todd.

'If you twist both arms.'

'I'll start making a list of what we can sell,' said Paula.

'Start with this microwave,' said Nick, screwing on the back plate. 'Offer it to someone with a boat.'

'Why a boat?' asked Todd.

'To use as an anchor,' said Nick. 'That's all it's good for. I can work wonders, but getting this thing to work properly would take a miracle.'

'Talking of miracles,' said Simone.

Todd turned and saw the miracle for himself. A beaming Holly Freeman. No more dressing gown and mismatched pyjamas and slippers.

'It's Cinderella,' said Simone. 'No, it's not. It's one of the ugly sisters.'

'That role was written for you,' said Holly trying not to move her jaw too much.

'Then you can audition for the pumpkin,' said Simone. 'That outfit's perfect.'

Nick put down the screwdriver and wiped his hands. 'Gee, I really missed something not having a sister.'

'You can have mine if you like,' said Simone.

Holly's smile slipped badly. 'Listen, brush-brain...'

'Ignore them,' Paula told Nick. 'They actually like each other, even if they do fight like cats and dogs.'

'Sounds unfair to animals,' said Nick.

'Who's unfair to animals?' asked Jaynee, walking into the kitchen with Carmen in her arms.

'You,' said Simone. 'Every time I see you, you've got some poor cat by the throat.'

'Well, Zip won't *let* me carry him,' said Jaynee.

'That's 'cos Zip's a Freeman,' said Simone. 'He's got more sense.'

'Enough,' said Paula. 'Before this turns into a free-for-all...'

'I thought it already had,' said Nick.

'You should see us when we *really* get going,' said Simone.

'It gets worse?'

'A thousand times worse,' said Todd.

'Spare me,' said Nick.

'Around here,' said Paula, 'no one gets spared.'

'Then I'd better buy some extra sheets of tin,' said Nick.

'Why?' asked Simone.

'To make myself a suit of armour!'

Later that day, Todd again stood at the bottom of Godzilla, looking up.

'We haven't got time to play,' he told Simone as she swung upside down on a branch above him.

'I'm not playing,' she replied. 'I'm thinking of more ideas for the fair.'

'Mum's list is getting bigger by the minute.'

'Maybe we could sell Jaynee,' said Simone.

'You're not selling my sister,' said Todd.

'You're right. We'd have to give her away.'

'Why don't we sell Holly?'

'Offer both of them,' said Simone. 'Buy one, get the other one free.'

'We'll have to be tough with this fair,' said Todd. 'People always want to knock you down on price.'

'That's right,' said Simone. 'They always come looking for bargains at silly prices. We need top dollar for everything.'

She dropped to the ground. 'We've got to have a food stall. Gran will be a starter for that.'

'None of her weird recipes,' said Todd.

'Just 'cos she's not like every other grandmother...'

'Not on this planet, anyway,' said Todd. 'Mum's already got a food stall on her list.'

'Selling what?' said Simone. 'Jaynee's vegetarian-vittles? Holly's diet-delights?'

'No, Naidu Nosh.'

'Indian food?' asked Simone.

Todd nodded. 'Holly told Vasanti about the fair. She and her mum volunteered to cook up some spicy dishes and serve them as well.'

Simone looked up towards the sky. 'It's going to happen, Todd. I can almost see our new roof up there. Can't you?'

Todd looked up. He could only see two storeys of peeling wood.

Chapter Five

'What's that meant to be?' Simone asked Holly late that evening as Holly sat alone at the kitchen table drawing on a big sheet of paper.

'What do you think it is, dummy?'

'A mess,' said Simone.

'Ask a silly question,' replied Holly.

'You're the expert at that,' said Simone, taking a closer look at the drawing. 'Let me try again. I know. It's a self-portrait.'

Holly kept working. 'Even the thickest person in the world, which is you, should be able to see that this is a poster for the garage sale.'

'It's a fair,' Simone insisted. 'Garage sales don't have food stalls and rides.'

'Maybe our beloved stepmother could offer rides on her broomstick,' said Holly.

Simone laughed. 'I reckon Saturday will be fun.'

'I'll be totally embarrassed,' said Holly. 'All the kids from school coming around and poking through our junk.'

'Then lock your bedroom door.'

'Why don't we put *you* in the sale?' said Holly. 'With that dumb haircut we could sell you as a talking toilet-brush.'

'Playing Happy Families again, are we?' asked Nick, walking into the kitchen and plugging in the jug. 'Thanks for dyeing the coconuts, Simone.'

'Why did you dye them?' asked Holly.

'To make the coconut shy look brighter,' said Simone.

'Sounds dumb,' said Holly.

'A coconut shy's an old fairground favourite,' said Nick. 'You set the coconuts up on stands, then charge people to try and knock them off.'

'That'll buy more Gunkee if we don't reach our target,' said Michael Freeman, joining them.

'Don't say that, Dad,' said Simone. 'We'll get our new roof. One way or the other.'

Nick leaned over Holly's shoulder and pointed at the poster. 'You haven't mentioned my sidecar rides. Can you add that?'

'I could add all sorts of things,' Holly told Nick in a nicer tone of voice than she used for anyone else in the house, 'if I only had a computer to work on.'

'We can't afford one just yet,' said her father. 'Give me time to build up my new business.'

Holly threw down her coloured pens. 'Dad, hand drawn posters went out with the horse and cart.'

Nick chuckled. 'Be careful. I'm an ex-jockey. Some of my best friends are horses.'
'Hear that, Holly?' Simone whispered to her sister. 'I think Nick likes you.'

'What a madhouse,' said Simone, six days later in Brightside's kitchen.

Saturday morning. The day of the garage sale and fair, and with only an hour to go before it started, everyone was in a flap.

Simone's grandmother dragged the last of the baking out of the oven.

'What's this?' asked Simone, sniffing one of the long tins.

'Tofu and turnip loaf,' said Gran Freeman with a grin.

Simone pulled a face. 'Seriously?'

'Cross my heart and hope to diet,' said Gran.

Simone didn't know whether to believe her or not. 'Stop pulling my leg, Gran.'

'Try pulling mine,' yelled Nick from the hallway. 'You'll get more than you bargained for if you pull the left one.'

Simone laughed as Gran adjusted her SUPERGRAN apron. Then, standing up straight, Gran stretched over backwards before going the other way and gently touching her toes.

'Are you enjoying the yoga classes?' asked Simone, checking the toffee apple mix on top of the stove.

'The stretching's doing wonders for my joints,' she replied. 'It's a big help.'

'That's what I need,' said Holly, storming in. 'Help! Can you believe that... woman! I've just been given another job. As well as the book stand, I've now got to run that stupid coconut shy.'

'How do you run a coconut shy?' Simone asked Gran.

'Chase after it and pull down its pants?' Gran suggested.

'Oh, great,' said Holly. 'Everyone's a comedian.'

'Have you ever *seen* a shy coconut, Gran?' asked Simone.

'No, I haven't Simone, but I've known a few bashful bananas.'

Holly refused to laugh. 'You two are as bad as each other.'

'I hope so,' said Gran.

'Is someone going to help me put up the coconut shy or not?' Holly demanded. 'I can't do it all on my own.'

'I thought girls could do anything,' said Nick, walking into the kitchen.

Holly blushed.

'Go and help your sister, Simone,' Gran said, shooing the three of them out of the kitchen. 'I can handle the rest.'

'What's complicated about this?' Simone asked as she tied sacking onto the fence to act

as a backdrop for the shy.

The brightly coloured coconuts sat on stakes driven into the ground. Mr Naidu had donated half a dozen chipped cork cricket balls to throw at them.

‘Want to test drive the equipment?’ Nick asked Holly, picking up a couple of balls and handing them to her.

‘I’m not into throwing things,’ she replied.

‘Except when you lose your temper,’ said Simone.

‘Easy to do when you’re around,’ said Holly, suddenly letting fly at a coconut. The ball missed and thumped into the sacking.

‘Almost,’ said Nick. ‘You’ve got to put more flick in your wrist, Holly. Let me show you.’

Holly’s face turned crimson as Nick stood behind her and guided her hand in a few pretend throws.

‘Got it?’ asked Nick, stepping away.

‘I... I think so,’ said Holly, now so flustered her second throw almost missed the sacking as well.

‘Want another go?’ asked Nick.

‘No, thank you,’ said Holly, politely, and then turned to Simone. ‘I was right. It’s a dumb game.’

Nick threw Simone a couple of cricket balls. ‘Want to try and improve the family average?’

She nodded. She wouldn’t refuse a challenge from a Wozinsky, young or old. Simone stepped up to the throwing mark carved into the freshly cut grass and let fly.

A close miss.

‘Take the rubber bands off your braces and make a slingshot,’ Holly suggested, laughing at her own joke.

Simone didn’t laugh. ‘Just getting my range,’ she said as she let the second ball go, sending a coconut flying.

‘Good one,’ said Nick.

‘Beginner’s luck,’ said Holly.

‘Wanna bet?’ said Simone, grabbing another two balls. ‘Watch me do it again.’

And she did. Two out of three. The fourth ball missed by a whisker but gave the coconut a “thousand times” shave as it passed. Two out of four. Then another hit. That made it three out of five.

Simone closed her eyes and imagined the next ball sending the coconut into the paddocks behind the house. Opening her eyes, she let rip with all her strength.

The hard cork ball whacked into the coconut, rebounded into one of the fence posts

holding the sacking, and hurtled straight at Holly!

Holly screamed and jumped at the same time, but still got a glancing blow on her thigh.

'You shouldn't stand so close,' said Simone as Holly hopped around, rubbing her leg.

'You did that on purpose,' said Holly.

'It was an accident,' said Simone.

'Well, at least say you're sorry.'

'Okay,' said Simone. 'You're sorry.'

Nick scuffed out the original throw line and scraped another in the grass further back.

'This should prevent any more accidents,' he told them. 'Wouldn't want anyone to get their head knocked off.'

'With Holly, you wouldn't notice,' said Simone picking up two cricket balls and holding them out to Nick. 'Your turn.'

He looked at his watch. 'I really should go and give the old motorcycle and sidecar a final spit and shine.'

Simone grinned. 'I thought so. You don't want to get beaten by a Freeman. A chicken Wozinsky.'

'You make it sound like one of your Gran's recipes,' he replied, taking the balls.

Simone figured hitting the coconuts now would be even harder with the throw line further back. She'd only managed four out of six with her dead-eye. Nick would be lucky to knock down a couple.

Assuming he could throw at all!

Nick balanced on his right foot and with a baseball pitcher's action let fly with his left arm.

The ball and coconut rocketed into the sacking.

'That's what Holly calls beginner's luck,' said Simone.

Holly kept rubbing her leg. 'Don't drag me into this.'

Nick let fly with a second ball and another coconut went flying.

The third coconut crashed into the sacking. So did the fourth.

Holly forgot her bruised leg and her reluctance to get involved and started whooping, 'Nick's gonna beat you, Simone. He's gonna beat you.'

Simone looked away in disgust. Her own sister, cheering for the opposition.

'It's four each,' Simone reminded Nick. 'Want to keep going or call it a draw?'

'I'm just warming up,' said Nick, winding up again with his left hand. Almost faster than Simone could blink, Nick threw.

And missed. By a lot.

He looked at Simone and grinned. 'How did I manage that?'

He'd missed deliberately and she knew it.

'Still four each,' said Nick, turning to Holly. 'This is the decider. What's the prize if I beat your sister?'

'A toffee apple,' said Holly.

Bang! Down went another coconut.

'I love toffee apples,' said Nick.

Simone just stared at him, her mouth open. 'Where did you learn to throw like that?'

'Growing up,' said Nick. 'I had a real competitive older brother. Todd's father was even better.'

Chapter Six

Todd stood in the driveway of number 11, helping Mr Naidu and his son Raj unload boxes of toys from the boot of Mr Naidu's silver Mercedes.

'Thanks for all this stuff,' said Todd.

The toy shop owner had offered them several cartons of old or slightly damaged stock that he couldn't sell at KidsHeaven.

'Sorry Raj and I cannot be staying to help more,' Mr Naidu told Todd, 'but he is helping me in the shop on Saturday mornings.'

'Is this the time to ask for a raise?' asked Raj.

'You can be asking, but you know the answer. When I was a boy growing up in India, my father...'

'Dad, this isn't India,' said Raj. 'Times have changed.'

'Some things are never changing,' said Mr Naidu, grinning. 'Like children who are knowing better than their parents.'

'Dad, you're the only one who can't see it. We need better security up at the mall.'

'You are sounding like some of the other shop owners,' said his father, 'and I am telling you we have a jolly good alarm system.'

'At least get an all-night security guard,' said Raj, a box of toys under each arm as he led the way through the row of trees separating their house and Brightside.

'And who is going to be paying for all this new security?' asked Keval Naidu, putting his boxes down on the table beside the coconut shy. 'I am not in business to lose money.'

Todd glanced back at the Naidus car and the big new house. Losing money didn't seem to be a problem.

'I'll get the rest,' said Raj heading back to the car.

As he unpacked the boxes of toys and spread them out on the table, Todd had a thought.

'Mr Naidu...'

'Yes, Todd?'

'If the mall does hire a new security guard...'

'I have just been telling Raj...'

'But if you do,' said Todd, 'I know someone who'd be great.'

'Who?'

'Uncle Nick.'

Mr Naidu laughed. 'Nick? A guard?'

'He's looking for a job.'

Mr Naidu scratched his cheek, thoughtfully. 'What other jobs has your uncle had?'

'He used to be a jockey,' said Todd.

'That is explaining the size.'

'He had to give it up after the accident when he lost his foot...'

'And that is explaining the limp,' said Mr Naidu.

'He only limps a bit,' said Todd.

'A small security guard is one thing, I am thinking,' said Mr Naidu, 'but a... cripple?'

'He's not a cripple!'

'Todd, can you be seeing your little Uncle Nick chasing after a burglar?'

'Yes,' said Todd, 'because even with a wooden foot he's fast and he's brave. And he's strong. Please, Mr Naidu, give him a chance.'

'I would very much like to help, Todd, but...'

They were interrupted by Raj arriving back.

'What's next?' he asked.

'Next we put up the awning for the food stall,' said Todd's mother coming over, ticking things off a list.

'Then breakfast,' said Mr Naidu. 'I am jolly hungry.'

'Gran Freeman's just taken some food out of the oven,' said Paula, laughing. 'She might let you sample it. You can claim a helper's discount.'

Keval Naidu looked serious. 'Do not be too quick to discount anything. Not if you are wanting that new roof.'

At five minutes to eight, everything was nearly ready. Todd watched as his mother ran around ticking off the last few things.

Everyone had a job. Even Logan, who had to help Holly set up the coloured coconuts and retrieve the cricket balls.

'I wanna play in my sand pit,' Todd heard Logan say, edging away from his big sister.

'Oh no you don't, Logan,' said Holly. 'If I've got to work on this dumb fair, you're going to help me.'

'I don't want to,' said Logan.

'Come here,' said Holly.

'I wanna go weez,' said Logan.

'Later,' said Holly.

'Now,' said Logan.

'Well, go then,' said Holly, waving her hands around. 'But if you're not back in two minutes...'

Gran Freeman, standing with Mrs Naidu under the awning called over, 'He'll settle down

once the crowds arrive.'

'He'd better,' said Holly.

Over near the shed, Todd's new stepfather hovered around the furniture for sale which they'd dragged out onto the grass. An old couch, double bed with carved headboard, chests of drawers, tables, chairs.

Next to the furniture, Jaynee sat at a small table with a sign that said, "Animal grooming. \$2."

Jaynee expected to have an easy day combing a few dogs. Serve her right, thought Todd, if someone brought along an Old English Sheepdog.

When she wasn't doing that, Jaynee had to help out on her mother's bargain-bin table which included everything that didn't fit anywhere else.

Completing the backyard circle of attractions, Simone had set up her clothing stall, with the big stuff hung out on Brightside's revolving clothes line.

If they offered a prize for the most colourful stall, Todd decided, Simone would win hands down. No one could miss her, either, beneath that oversized sunhat.

Mr Naidu's daughter, Vasanti, ran over to join Todd at the toy table.

'Mum and your grandmother think they can manage the food stall on their own,' she told Todd.

'She's not my grandmother,' Todd reminded her. 'She's Simone's.'

Todd looked up at the sound of strange voices coming from the direction of the street. A few faces peered around the side of the house, then more faces. Lots of them.

The adults headed straight for the furniture and the bargain bin. The kids zeroed in on the toy table and the food stall.

Within minutes, Brightside's back lawn was buzzing with people.

'Good luck,' Keval Naidu called through the trees from next door as he and Raj climbed into the Mercedes. 'When you are finishing with the crowds, please be sending them up to us at the mall.'

'Hey, no pushing,' Vasanti told the wall of children shoving against the side of the trestle.

Todd heard a tiny voice ask, 'How much is this?' but he couldn't see who the voice belonged to.

He looked again and spotted a little boy with a mop of ginger hair and eyes that barely reached the top of the table.

The boy waved a board game in a crumpled box.

'Six dollars,' said Vasanti, serving several people at once. 'This is all I've got,' said the boy, opening his hand and showing Todd.

'Five dollars then,' said Vasanti without looking.

'He hasn't got five dollars,' Todd whispered to her.

'Don't be soft,' she whispered back which reminded him about the pledge he'd made with Simone. No silly bargains.

'Four dollars then,' said Todd, taking everything from the boy's hand.

The lip beneath the ginger mop quivered. 'Now I can't buy a toffee apple.'

Todd looked at the money in his hand. The little kid might be starving.

He handed back a dollar. 'Buy a toffee apple with this.'

'Just as well Dad's not here,' Vasanti told Todd as the boy happily shoved the game under his arm and headed for the food stall.

Next to him, Todd could hear Holly haggling over the price of a couple of paperbacks.

'Three dollars each?' asked a stern-faced older woman. 'That's ridiculous.'

'I can't give these away,' said Holly. 'The person who gave them to me got them off someone who bought them almost new.'

'Well, they're not new anymore,' said the woman, waving one under Holly's nose. 'And they're damaged. What are these dents in the cover?'

'Beats me,' said Holly.

'They look like teeth marks,' said the woman.

Holly shrugged and turned away, catching Todd's eye as she did. They both knew who the teeth belonged to. When he wasn't chewing a slipper, Zip loved a good book.

'Special price then,' Holly told the woman. 'You can have both books for five dollars.'

The woman clutched them to her chest. 'Four dollars.'

'Make it four fifty,' said Holly, 'and I'll give you a free turn on the coconut shy.'

'I hate games,' said the woman.

'How about a free toffee apple?'

'I hate toffee.'

'I suppose you hate apples as well,' said Holly.

'Apples upset my stomach,' said the woman holding out four dollars. 'They make me feel ill.'

Holly snatched the money out of her hand. 'I know the feeling.'

As the first wave of customers filtered out of the back yard, Todd turned to Vasanti. 'I want to see how the others are doing. Can you manage on your own for a bit?'

'Take your time,' said Vasanti. 'I get better prices.'

Todd spotted Logan playing happily in his sandpit, pretending not to hear Holly's repeated threats about what would happen if he didn't come and help her.

The youngest Freeman had been joined by several other children in building a lop-sided

sand castle.

Passing the food stall, Todd heard Gran Freeman say to Mrs Naidu, 'Tofu and turnip loaf would be *delicious* with that hot curry sauce. Try some.'

Over near the shed, several pieces of the old furniture had gone, and some too large to take away on the spot had "sold" signs pinned to them.

'How's the pet grooming?' Todd asked Jaynee as he walked up.

'Waste of time,' she told him. 'Why didn't Holly put something on the poster? I told her to, but she wouldn't listen to me.'

'I know the feeling,' said her mother, perching on the edge of the bargain bin table. 'How's the toy stall going, Todd?'

Depends who you ask, he thought, then said, 'Okay, Mum. What about here?'

'Some things sold straight away,' said his mother, consulting a notebook. 'Would you believe a doll with no head? Four mismatched cups and saucers. Two cushions with half their stuffing gone. Someone even bought the microwave.'

'Did you tell them it was broken?'

'Of course, but I clinched the deal by offering them a free ride in Nick's sidecar.'

'How's he going?' asked Todd.

'People are queuing up,' said his mother. 'And he just got a 50 dollar tip from a couple of tourists.'

'Fifty dollars?'

'Their campervan ran out of petrol up the road so Nick took them up to the garage. Apparently the husband is a motorcycle fanatic. He described riding in Nick's sidecar as the highlight of their world trip.'

Paula turned back to her table as two women arrived and began arguing about who'd been first to spot a silver teapot with a crooked spout.

'What a couple of sour-pusses,' Todd's mother whispered to him.

'Send them to the food stall for a serving of tofu and turnip loaf,' Todd whispered back. 'With the special hot curry sauce.'

Chapter Seven

Simone flopped down on the grass beside the half-full line of unsold clothes as the crowd thinned out. So far so good. She'd been hard-nosed in all her bargaining and sold heaps of garments at good prices.

Several of Holly's old dresses had been snapped up by a large mother and daughter. And two of her father's old business suits sold quickly to a very thin man who said they were his size. Simone couldn't believe her father had ever fitted into them.

She adjusted her sunhat, patted the money pouch around her waist and examined the sky, hoping she wouldn't find a rain cloud. Not yet, she prayed. Not until they got their new roof. That meant top dollar for everything, she reminded herself, remembering the pledge.

Simone came back to earth and jumped to her feet as a young woman walked over bouncing a crying baby on her hip. A woman about the same size as Todd's mother.

She'd be a sitter for one of Paula's dresses, Simone decided. They were all in better condition than the faded dress the woman had on.

'Any baby clothes?' asked the woman with a tired smile.

'You've come to the right place,' said Simone, rummaging through a box and dragging out two complete outfits. 'Aren't these lovely?'

'Wonderful,' said the woman. 'How much?'

Simone started high. 'For both sets. Ten dollars.'

The woman's smile faded away. 'I'm sorry, that's too much.'

Simone remembered the talk with Todd about people who always wanted to knock you down and get things for silly prices. She knew that game.

'Nine dollars,' she told the woman.

The woman took a small coin purse from her pocket and pulled out a five dollar note. She looked embarrassed as she offered it. 'How much can I buy with this?'

Simone felt uncomfortable. Maybe the woman *was* playing games, but despite Brightside's leaking roof, Simone knew which of them had the better home.

She shoved the two sets of baby clothes in a plastic supermarket bag and took the five dollars.

'Thanks,' said the woman, quietly, the smile reappearing.

'What about something for you?' asked Simone, not wanting to let a customer go, even one paying budget prices.

The woman shook her head. 'I don't think so.'

'Have a look, anyway,' said Simone.

'This is lovely,' said the woman, running her hand gently over one of Paula's dresses. 'It would make a nice change from wearing this old thing all the time.'

Simone blinked. Was the faded dress the only one the woman owned?

'Try it on,' said Simone.

The woman looked embarrassed. 'But I can't...'

'Just for fun,' said Simone, holding out her hands to take the baby. 'What's his name?'

'Her,' said the woman, hesitating, then handing the baby across. 'Her name's Jessie.

But be careful, she's just eaten. Anywhere I can change?'

Simone looked around and spotted Todd walking towards her.

'Look after my stall for a few minutes, will you?' she asked him, dropping her voice. 'I'm doing a deal.'

She turned to the woman and pointed to the house. 'Follow me.'

The woman slipped the dress on and looked at herself in the hall mirror. 'It's perfect.'

Simone smiled to herself. The customer was hooked. Another sale. All they had to do was negotiate a price.

'It's on the rack for 40 dollars,' said Simone.

The woman took a step back as if she'd been hit. Simone had a horrible feeling she was also about to burst out crying.

'But you can have it for 20,' Simone added quickly. Better to get a few dollars than nothing at all.

The woman's face didn't change. 'I'm sorry I've wasted your time,' she said as she started to unbutton the dress.

'Ten dollars, then,' said Simone.

The woman undid more buttons.

'What can you afford?' said Simone before she could stop herself, wondering how she'd explain this to the rest of the family.

The woman paused and retrieved her purse from the faded sundress. Simone watched as she poured out the contents. A handful of coins.

Jessie started to wriggle and make strange sounds, but Simone had other things on her mind.

'I've just remembered something,' said Simone spitting out the words before she had a chance to regret them. 'We're running a special deal on the clothing stall. Buy two, get one free. And you've already bought two sets of baby clothes.'

'But I couldn't...'

'Your lucky day, I guess,' said Simone, waving away the handful of coins.

The woman's face slowly opened into the biggest smile Simone had seen since the fair started.

'You don't know what this means to me,' she said, re-buttoning Paula's dress and

placing her old one in the plastic bag with the baby clothes.

Simone felt Jessie wriggle again and make more strange sounds. Very strange sounds.

'That was Mum's dress,' said Todd as Simone walked back to the clothes stall. 'What did you get for it?'

'A big smile,' she replied.

'What?'

'Don't ask.'

Todd leaned back. 'What's that awful smell?'

'The other thing I got for my troubles. Jessie's breakfast.'

Chapter Eight

Simone looked at her dad across the kitchen table, carefully counting the money and putting the bank notes into neat piles.

'I'm bushed,' he told the rest of them as he worked.

Around the table, Simone saw the other heads nod in agreement. They'd planned to stop the fair early afternoon, but people just kept coming. And the cleaning up had taken longer than planned.

So long, it was almost dark outside. Logan had already gone to bed.

'How much loot, Dad?' asked Simone. 'With all the customers we had, there should be enough money for *two* roofs.'

'Um...'. He stopped and checked his calculator. 'I'm more tired than I thought. Let me count it again.'

'I'll help you,' said Paula.

Simone watched the money moving around the table. Piles of twenties and tens. One new fifty. Simone remembered Nick's tip from the tourist.

'I got it right first time,' said her father, scooping up the piles of money and writing the amount on a piece of paper.

Paula looked at the figure and nodded. 'That's what I counted as well.'

'Can we afford a new microwave?' asked Todd.

'That's about all we can afford,' said his mother.

Simone felt her stomach knot. 'What does that mean?'

Her father answered. 'It means we've only got enough for *half* a roof.'

'What?'

He pulled a second piece of paper from his pocket and shoved it across the table. 'This came with the morning mail. The quote from the roofing company.'

Holly snatched up both bits of paper and examined them. 'You're right. They want twice as much as we've raised.'

'Get another quote,' said Gran.

'Let's see those, Holly,' said Nick, taking the papers from her hand.

He spent a few seconds studying them and frowning. Simone suddenly realised Nick had frowned a lot since the fair ended. He must be extra tired.

After a few seconds he said, 'It looks like a reasonable price.'

'It is,' said Michael. 'Believe me, those are mates-rates. That company did a lot of work for us when I worked at Hatchwood Fisheries.'

'So we still can't afford a new roof,' said Holly, glaring at Paula. 'Another disaster.'

'Why do you always look at me when you say things like that?' asked Paula.

'We could put a new roof on our Santa list,' said Jaynee.

'If Santa tries to land on Brightside, he'll go straight through the roof,' said Simone. 'The floors on Christmas morning will be covered in reindeer rugs.'

'Sorry to leave you,' said Gran, getting up from the table, 'but I've got another big day tomorrow. I start my Tai Chi class.'

'Tie tea?' asked Jaynee.

'Not tea,' said Gran. 'Chi. Tai Chi. It's a martial arts programme.'

'Don't overdo it, Mum,' said Michael. 'You're allowed to slow down as you get older.'

'I'd rather wear out than rust out,' said Gran, heading for the door. 'Bye, everyone. And don't worry. Things will look better in the morning.'

'They couldn't look much worse,' said Holly. 'After all the work I did today...'

'Did I miss something?' asked Simone.

Holly flashed a scowl at Simone and a smile at Nick before charging out of the kitchen and off to her bedroom.

'I'm going to watch some TV,' said Michael. 'Blob out.'

'Me, too,' said Paula.

'And me,' said Jaynee. 'And Zip and Carmen and Digby.'

Michael turned to Paula. 'Watching TV in this place is like a trip to the zoo.'

Simone, Todd and Nick stayed in the kitchen. Nick pushed his chair back and got up from the table.

'I need to blow out some cobwebs,' he told them, still frowning. 'I'm going for a spin on my machine.'

'You spent all day riding around,' said Simone. 'Don't you get sick of it?'

'Motorcycles are like people,' said Nick. 'You've got to enjoy them while you've got 'em.'

He turned to his nephew. 'There's something I need to tell you, Todd. Want to come with me?'

'You bet,' said Todd, 'I'll just go and tell Mum.'

Simone frowned. Probably wanted to discuss private Wozinsky stuff which meant they wouldn't want her along. She'd have to stay home and think up more ways to pay for the other half of the roof.

'Simone, if your chin drops any lower, your braces will get caught in your socks,' said Nick.

'I've got cobwebs, too,' she told him.

'Then ask your dad if you can come as well. We can squeeze in one more.'

Chapter Nine

Todd felt the cold night air race over his glasses and force its way up under the rim of his crash helmet. Beside him in the sidecar, he could feel Simone's elbows dig into his ribs.

'Uncle Nick said squeeze, not crush,' said Todd, shoving her away. 'You take up more room than Holly.'

'And you moan more than Jaynee,' said Simone.

Todd raised his voice to try and be heard above the roar of the engine.

'What did you want to tell me, Uncle Nick?'

'What?'

Nick yelled from the driver's seat.

They'd been riding around for almost half an hour. Todd still didn't know Hatchwood that well, but he realised they'd been riding in big circles.

Todd tried again. 'What did you want...'

'Can't hear a word you're saying,' said Nick. 'We'd better pull over and have that talk.'

Up ahead, Todd spotted some lights. Northmall.

Nick pulled up in the street outside KidsHeaven and parked the motorcycle. Todd and Simone scrambled out of the sidecar and ripped off their helmets.

Todd had seen the mall before at night, but it looked darker than he remembered it. Especially the car ramp running up the side of the building leading to the roof.

'If you two want to talk in private, I'll go and window shop,' said Simone.

'Thanks,' said Nick.

As Todd watched Simone walk over to the KidsHeaven window, he felt his stomach flutter.

'I'm very fond of you kids and your mum,' said Nick, 'and I'd like to do what I can to help.'

'How about finding somewhere else for the Freemans to live?' said Todd.

Nick grinned. 'Nothing's perfect. You'll get used to them.'

'Not in a million years,' said Todd.

'It won't take nearly that long,' said Nick. 'You're like your dad. You get along with everyone.'

That doesn't mean I wouldn't prefer things the way they used to be, thought Todd.

'What I'm leading up to,' Nick continued, 'is that I really came back to Hatchwood hoping to stay here, close to my family. *If* I could find a job.'

'Have you found one?' asked Todd, getting excited.

'I tried, Todd. Every day while you were at school, I went out knocking on doors. No luck.'

Todd's heart sank. 'Why wouldn't Mr Naidu give you a chance?'

'He's not the only one,' said Nick.

'So you're leaving again,' said Todd.

'I've got no choice,' said Nick. 'I thought I'd tell you first, seeing as how you've let me share your room and all.'

'What'll you do for money?' asked Todd.

'I've got a bit of unexpected cash coming to me, Todd. It'll pay my way for a bit.'

Nick picked up his helmet. 'Let's go home.'

As Todd tipped back his head to put his own helmet on, he saw something move in the shadows, near the top of the car ramp.

'What's wrong?' asked Nick, following his gaze.

'I'm not sure.'

Simone jogged over and looked up.

'Maybe it's the security guard,' said Nick.

'Mr Naidu said the mall wouldn't hire one,' said Todd.

'Then why don't I go up and take a quick look?' said Nick.

'On your own?' asked Simone.

'No,' said Nick. 'With the local footie team and the Hatchwood pipe band marching behind.'

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

'We'll both come,' said Simone.

'No, you won't,' said Nick. 'Your parents would never forgive me if I let anything happen to you and I wouldn't forgive myself. You two stay put.'

Todd watched as his uncle pocketed the motorcycle keys, then limped up the ramp at a fast jog and disappeared into the gloom at the top.

After a couple of minutes, Todd checked his watch. Uncle Nick was taking his time.

'What's up there?' he asked Simone.

'The roof,' said Simone.

'I know that,' asked Todd. 'What else?'

'There's an entrance into the mall for people who park up there,' she explained, 'but it'll be locked up at this time of night.'

Todd told himself his uncle would have come straight back down if he'd found anything wrong. Or would he? What if Uncle Nick had struck trouble?

'Maybe we should call the police,' said Todd, pointing to the phone box across the road.

'And what if a patrol car screams up just as Nick comes strolling down the ramp?'

'He wouldn't like that,' said Todd.

'We could ring Mr Naidu,' said Simone.

'No,' said Todd. '*He'd* call the police. Same problem.'

'Well, your uncle's taking forever,' said Simone. 'Typical Wozinsky.'

'Let's go and get him,' said Todd.

'What about the motorcycle?'

'It's safe enough here,' said Todd. 'Uncle Nick's got the key.'

'I dunno...,' said Simone.

Todd grinned to himself. Usually, she dared him.

'You're scared,' he said.

'I am not!'

'Well? Are you coming?'

'Race you to the top,' said Simone, sprinting for the ramp.

'Cheat!' called Todd, taking off after her.

From a slow start, he managed to gain a bit, but still reached the top a couple of paces behind.

'Wow,' he said, pulling up. In the moonlight, Northmall's flat concrete roof stretched as far as he could see, broken by a series of big bumps that looked like giant turtles.

'Skylights,' Simone explained. 'They let daylight into the mall.'

She pointed to a bigger bump. The roof entrance into the mall. It reminded Todd of the toilet block on the beach.

'Uncle Nick must be behind it,' said Todd, feeling like a space traveller on a forbidden planet.

'We could race over,' said Simone, sounding more confident than she looked. 'You can have a head start.'

Todd knew Simone always tried to act brave when she got nervous. Just like he was doing.

'You go on your own,' he said. 'I'll wait here.'

'I'm too tired to run anymore,' said Simone. 'Let's both walk over.'

With Simone close behind, Todd walked slowly towards the entrance block, trying not to make any noise.

As they passed each skylight, Todd peered over the edge but the moonlight wasn't strong enough to see the mall below.

In slow motion, he led the way around the roof entrance block.

One more corner to turn, he told himself. Hopefully, the only thing he'd find around it would be...

Uncle Nick wasn't there! But a big padlock lay on the ground and the door into the mall stood partly open.

'A burglar!' said Todd.

'I'll bet it's The Balaclava Bandit!' said Simone.

Todd's blood ran cold. 'Uncle Nick must have followed him inside.'

'This time we've got to call the police,' said Simone.

'But what if the burglar's gone by the time they get here?' asked Todd. 'If they find Uncle Nick in the mall, they'll think *he* broke in.'

'Even a Wozinsky wouldn't do that,' said Simone.

'But Uncle Nick's a stranger in town and he's out of work. They might not believe him.'

Todd pushed the door open.

'And you're going in to look for him?'

'I've got to make sure he's all right,' said Todd. 'You can stay here if you like.'

Simone shook her head as Todd pushed the door open a bit more and stepped into the darkness.

The moonlight shining through showed two lifts with their doors open. No hum of power or up and down indicators showing on the wall. Next to the lifts, a set of concrete steps led down into a black hole.

'We could do with a torch,' whispered Simone right behind him.

Todd also kept his voice down. 'If the burglar's still here, we're better off in the dark. That way he won't be able to see us.'

'Big deal. We won't be able to see *him*.'

With Simone now so close he could hear her breathing, Todd headed into the darkness of the stairwell. Down he went, one step at a time, feeling for the step below.

The first landing also had an exit. Another door that wasn't closed properly.

'Where does this come out?' he asked her.

'The top balcony. It looks down on most of the shops.'

Todd eased the door open and stepped through, stumbling forward as Simone crowded through after him.

'He's cut the power,' she whispered, staring into the shadows.

'And killed the alarms,' said Todd. 'They should be going crazy.'

'Clever burglar,' said Simone. 'He's got brains under that balaclava.'

Keeping low, Todd edged towards a gap in the railing, stepped on to a motionless escalator, and took a few careful steps down. From his vantage point, he could see empty shops and endless shadows. But nothing moved.

Then he spotted a figure below him on the other side of the mall, moving swiftly through a patch of moonlight.

Someone twice the size of Uncle Nick!

Then he spotted his uncle, right below the escalator, fiddling with a box of some sort attached to the wall.

Todd eased down a few more steps, but almost jumped out of his skin as a high pitched burglar alarm suddenly filled the mall and the lights came on!

Todd heard the burglar yell and saw him spin around, spot Uncle Nick and sprint back the way he'd come.

Heading for the escalator which had hummed to life. The *down*-escalator which now carried Todd towards the lower floor. And the intruder.

'Todd!' yelled Uncle Nick, moving fast to try and head off the intruder. 'Get out of the way!'

Todd turned and tried to scramble back against the metal tide, but slipped on the moving steps and fell.

Nick and the burglar reached the foot of the escalator at the same time. Without pausing, the ex-jockey launched himself at the bigger man, sending them both sprawling on the floor.

Todd found his feet, but the burglar did, too. He slipped free from Uncle Nick's grasp and made another dash for freedom up the escalator.

Todd threw himself down as the big man hurdled him, but then the burglar stopped as a voice from the balcony above yelled, 'Police!'

He spun on his heels and headed back down. This time, Todd spotted something new. The crowbar in his hand.

Todd ducked as the burglar's flying boots flashed past his face, propelling the intruder straight for Uncle Nick, crouched at the bottom.

The burglar hit the mall floor running, swinging the crowbar. Nick ducked back and let him pass. But, before the man had gone more than a few steps, Nick stood upright, drew back his left arm and let fly with something.

His wooden foot!

It hit the burglar right between the shoulder blades, sending him sprawling on his face as the crowbar flew from his hands.

With a few hops, Nick reached the stunned intruder, dropped on his back and twisted the man's arms up behind his back.

'Who yelled "police"?' Nick called to Todd as he sprinted over.

'Me,' said Simone, running down the escalator as the alarms kept wailing.

The burglar stirred.

Todd stepped back. 'Can you hold him?'

Nick tightened his grip on the burglar's arms. 'I've ridden ponies stronger than this

bloke. He's not going anywhere.'

Todd heard a new sound, a police siren headed their way.

'The real thing,' said Simone.

'Just don't let the police take my wooden foot as evidence,' said Nick. 'I need it to give you two kids a kick up the bum for disobeying me.'

Chapter Ten

'So then the police took the burglar away, and we all went back to the station,' Simone told the others an hour later as they gathered in Brightside's lounge. 'Nick had to do a lot of explaining. That's why he's still there.'

The whole house had woken up when the police dropped Simone and Todd home. Including Logan who now kept nodding off in Holly's lap.

'When that patrol car turned up outside, I thought something terrible had happened,' said Michael Freeman.

'It almost did,' said Todd.

'I would have called the police straight away,' said Jaynee.

'And had a good moan at them,' said Simone.

'What a dumb day,' said Holly, yawning. 'No sleep, no thanks... and no roof.'

'I'm tired,' said Logan, opening his eyes and closing them again.

'Holly, give him to me and I'll take him back to bed,' said her father, scooping up the four year old and heading out of the room.

'No more money's fallen out of the sky, I suppose?' asked Simone.

Paula shook her head and looked at the clock on the mantelpiece.

'When will Uncle Nick get home?' asked Jaynee.

'I'll bet he was *really* brave,' said Holly.

'You mean Todd?' asked Simone, playing innocent.

Holly blushed. 'No. Nick.'

'He was okay,' said Simone, 'for a Wozinsky.'

There was a knock on the door.

'Talk of the devil,' said Paula, jumping up to answer it.

Nick hobbled in, followed by Keval Naidu.

'I have something I want to be saying to all of you,' said Mr Naidu before anyone else could speak.

'Look,' said Nick, flopping into a chair, 'it's no big...'

'Yes, it is,' said Keval. 'A very big deal.' He took a deep breath. 'I am thinking I am very wrong.'

'Who's wrong?' asked Michael Freeman, rejoining them.

'Me,' said Keval. 'Nick Wozinsky is a very brave man.'

Holly started to applaud, then stopped when she realised the others hadn't joined in.

Mr Naidu glanced at Todd. 'I am sorry for what I am saying about your uncle this morning.'

'Stop,' said Nick. 'I'm getting embarrassed.'

'You are deserving a reward,' said the shop owner.

'It had to be done so I did it,' said Nick firmly. 'I don't want a reward.'

'Uncle Nick just wants a job,' said Todd.

Mr Naidu started to laugh. 'You are very much like your uncle, Todd. You do not give up.'

He turned to Nick. 'Would you accept a job?'

'Doing what?'

'I have been talking to the other shop owners up at the mall. And we are all now deciding we really do need a night-time security guard.'

Nick stared at him for several seconds before saying, 'You're on. As long as you guarantee no more than one burglar a week.'

As Michael Freeman showed their neighbour to the door, Nick stretched out on the carpet.

'Can you believe that?' he asked them. 'A real job. Now I just need to find a flat close to the mall. Don't want to spend all day walking there and back.'

'But you've got the motorcycle,' said Simone.

'Not for much longer,' said Nick.

'You sold it!' said Todd.

Nick nodded, unbuckled his wooden foot and rubbed his stump. 'Remember that tourist who ran out of petrol? Well, he loved my motorcycle so much, he made me an offer I couldn't refuse.'

'But that was your dream machine,' said Paula.

'Dreams don't pay bills,' said Nick, getting up from the floor. 'Excuse me for a sec. I hadn't planned tonight's fun and games. The nerves in my leg are doing a war dance.'

'There's aspirin in the downstairs bathroom,' Paula called after him.

As Nick hopped out, Simone just knew Todd would ask the question. And he did.

'Why can't Uncle Nick live here with us? At Brightside?'

Simone's heart flipped. They already had three Wozinskys too many.

'It's a nice idea, Todd,' said his mother, glancing at her husband, 'but there are two families here to consider.'

'I'm open to the idea,' said Simone's father after a few seconds.

'He'd pay rent, of course,' said Paula.

'We need every cent we can get,' Michael replied. 'And he's handy around the house. But it's a big decision. I think we should all vote on it.'

'Well, I vote for Uncle Nick to come and live here,' said Jaynee.

'You would,' said Simone under her breath.

'Me, too,' said Todd.

'I vote yes,' said Paula, gazing around. 'That's the Wozinsky vote. What about the Freemans?'

Michael nodded. 'He's got mine. Holly?'

'Holly would love it,' said Simone.

'Shut up,' said Holly. 'I have no objection to Nick living here.'

'Logan's too young to vote,' said her father, 'so that leaves you, Simone.'

'You don't need my vote,' said Simone.

The truth was, she didn't want to vote. She liked Nick, so half of her wanted to vote "Yes", but she also wanted to get rid of the Wozinskys.

'Come on,' said her father. 'Make up your mind.'

Simone looked around the table and, as she did, her mind drifted back to the fair and the woman with the faded dress and empty purse. Some people had to really struggle through life. The way Nick had struggled. To cope with his disability, losing his brother, finding a job.

Simone nodded. 'I suppose it's okay.'

One more Wozinsky more or less wouldn't matter that much, she told herself. The house was already full of them.

'Who's going to ask him?' Todd wanted to know.

'Ask me what?' said Nick, walking back into the lounge.

'If you want to come and live with us,' said Todd.

Nick stopped. 'Look, I wasn't trying to...'

'We understand,' said Michael. 'We took a vote. It was unanimous.'

'I don't know what to say,' said Nick, looking at all of them, one by one.

When he got to Simone, she thought she saw an extra flash to his grin.

'You're a neat bunch,' he told them, 'and I'll accept your offer if you'll let me return the favour.'

'How?' asked Todd.

'Seeing I don't have to rent a flat and buy furniture, let me pay for the other half of the roof.'

Michael Freeman broke the stunned silence. 'Now I don't know what to say.'

'Say, "Yes",' said Nick. 'It's self preservation on my part. I don't want to go to sleep on springs and wake up on a waterbed.'

He pointed to Todd and Jaynee. 'And I don't want my brother's kids turning into a couple of tadpoles.'

'Too late,' said Simone. 'Jaynee's already a toad.'

'Mu-um,' said Jaynee.

'It's a joke,' said her mother.

Michael cut in. 'Nick, I'd be more comfortable if we could treat the money as a loan. Sort of rent in advance.'

'It should pay your way well into next year,' said Paula.

Nick smiled. 'Great. That means I can use my wages to buy another old motorcycle and restore it. Gotta do something in my spare time.'

Suddenly he stopped and looked around the room. 'I should warn you. You might never get rid of me.'

'We don't want to,' said Todd. 'Ever.'

Simone sighed. At least Brightside would get a new roof. That was a big plus. And maybe while he lived with them Nick could teach her things. Like how to throw a ball faster and harder.

As her brain began to spin with the possibilities, she thought of something even better.

'Nick,' said Simone.

'What?'

'When you get another motorcycle, will you teach me to ride it?'

The End