

# Chemical Leak!

Gillian M. Wadds

*Treechange*  *Productions*

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[www.gillianmwadds.com.au](http://www.gillianmwadds.com.au)

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Gillian M. Wadds has worked in theatre as an actor, a director and a writer. She has written television scripts, stage plays and musicals and, from 1996-2003, was writer/director for the Titanic re-enactment and

Theatre Restaurant in Williamstown, Victoria. Her play, *Who Cares?* is published in Australia, USA and the UK.

*Chemical Leak!* is her first junior fiction novel. Originally published by Lothian Books, it has now been reprinted by *Treechange Productions* and is available from the author's website.

Gillian and her husband, Geoff Senior, left the city in 2003 to live in a country town in Western Victoria.

Gillian can be contacted through her website:

[www.gillianmwadds.com.au](http://www.gillianmwadds.com.au)

The second book in the series, *Zena and Her Mates*,

## **Sea Secrets**

is published by Hachette Livre Australia Pty Ltd  
and available at all good bookshops

or

from the author's website

### **The Wilderness Society**

**Short listed: 2007 Environment Award for Children's Literature.**

... absorbing adventure novel.

### **Magpies – Volume Twenty-one**

*Chemical Leak!* will have much appeal for lovers of realistic adventure and ... for a class embarking on an environmental theme.

### **Corangamite Extra**

... a glimpse into the life of an immigrant family, their rich culture and their fear of being persecuted. It fills a gap in the junior fiction market for books about .... feisty girl heroes.

### **YARA Website**

It is extremely gripping and has quite a few heart clenching moments; at stages I felt like I was in a trance.

### **Illawarra Mercury**

... this book is extremely well-written with many unexpected twists. It contains a roller-coaster of emotion.

### **aussiereviews.com**

*Chemical Leak!* is an exciting read for young teens. As well as the mystery of the chemical leak, there is also exploration of family relations, ethnicity and racism, and friendship.

**For Sadie Rashid – she knows why.**

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## CHAPTER 1

‘I can do it myself!’ I yelled impatiently. *‘Etrukni fe hali ya baba!’*

But Dad didn’t even look up. He just kept on slowly pumping the tyre. ‘It’s my job to help my little girl,’ he said quietly.

I sighed with frustration. ‘Dad, I’m twelve years old. And I’m running late!’

He was Robot Man. He tested the tyre pressure, pumped it some more, screwed on the valve and ever so slowly put the pump back onto the bike. I couldn’t believe anything could take so long. At last he straightened up and smiled at me. I grabbed the handlebars and headed for the side gate.

Then Mum's voice came out the kitchen window, *'La tansi ya Zena, weirgaai alatool!'*

'Yes, Mum, I know.'

'I'm cutting Mrs. Jackson's hair so I'll be late home. Pick up Samira after school.'

'Okay.'

'And chop some tomatoes and parsley for me.'

***'Haader!'***

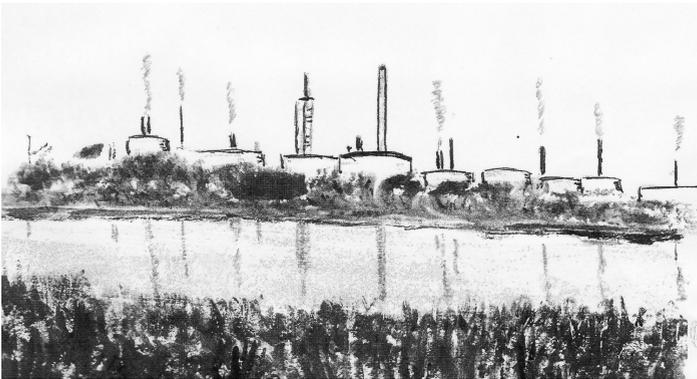
I slammed the gate and jumped on my bike. At last, I was free – spinning along the beach road with the cold air blowing in my face.

Why me? Why wasn't Josef told to pick up Samira after school? Why didn't *he* have to cut up vegetables?

I sighed and looked out across the water. The sky was pale blue and cloudless and the air so cold and crisp you could crunch it. The sea gleamed and the rocks were black stepping stones just begging to be walked on with bare, freezing feet. As soon as school was over, that's where I'd go. I'd pick up Samira and take her with me and she could play on the sand. Maybe the tide would be out and we could explore the

rock pools. I could feel myself relaxing as I got further and further away from home.

As I passed the Primary School I saw Samira already there, playing skippy with a group of little girls in the front yard. I couldn't believe how small the school yard looked. Only last year I'd been there myself but now it seemed such a long time ago. I rang my bike bell and she looked up and waved. I waved back and felt myself relax a bit more.



Ahead of me the sun was glinting off the factories at the end of town. The smoke and steam from the silver chimneys rose straight up into the still air looking like smoking candles on a giant birthday cake.

I skidded to a stop at the bike rack just as the school bell started. Jodie was there, waiting for me.

‘Where’ve you been?’ she asked impatiently, ‘I’ve been waiting for ages.’

‘Don’t ask,’ I said, grabbing my bag off the carrier. ‘My father thinks he still lives in a village in Lebanon.’

‘What?’

‘I haven’t got time to explain. Just sometimes I wish I could turn into a boy.’

‘That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,’ she said.

I stared at her. ‘About turning into a boy?’

‘No, stupid! About Jason.’ She paused, ‘I reckon he likes me.’

‘Jason Pirelli? Ha! Tell him to get lost.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ she said. ‘Of course – only...’

‘Come on,’ I said, ‘we’re late.’

Not that I cared. We had double maths first up with Boring Brian.

At the end of recess, we lined up outside the science room and at last the day began to look a bit

better. Most of us like science because Miss Kouros is fantastic. She looks a bit like a gipsy, with long floaty dresses and lots of bangles and big dangling earrings. Whenever she gets excited – which she often does – bits of her black crinkly hair come loose and she’s always sticking it back up on top of her head with anything she finds, like a pencil or a rubber band, so the top of her head ends up looking like a giant pincushion.



She let us in and finished writing labels on a big coloured drawing of an eye. Then she turned round

from the board. ‘Now, 7B, you remember we’ve been learning about cameras and ...’ She glared across the room. ‘*Jason, sit down and pay attention!*’

She used her "Kouros the Killer" voice that she keeps for special occasions and Jason stopped trying to drag Jodie’s head off with her plait and sat back in his seat. A pretty funny way to show he liked her, I thought.

‘Zena, what does the lens in a camera do?’

That was easy, we’d been doing cameras all week. ‘It focuses the light and – um – and it makes an upside-down picture.’

‘Yes! And you all have a lens just like that in your own eyes.’ She pointed to the drawing on the board, ‘This is it just here, the same sort of lens.’

She looked over the class, ‘Sean Aherne, how do we know that the human eye has a lens like this?’

Sean looked very serious and thought for a minute. ‘Cut open dead people’s eyes, Miss?’

Err! Yuuuuk! Yay! Cool!

The girls groaned and the boys cheered – but Miss Kouros clapped her hands.

‘Yes, Sean, you are quite right!’

Her eyes began to sparkle and the first piece of hair escaped from her combs. ‘And how would you all like to do something like that today?’

More groans and cheers: ‘Whaaat?’ ‘Oh, Mi-iss!’ ‘Dead people’s eyes?’ ‘Wicked!’

Miss Kouros leant down behind her desk and, like a conjurer pulling a rabbit out of a hat, she held up a white plastic supermarket bag. It hung round and heavy and a little bit of blood dripped from one corner.



## CHAPTER 2

The cries of horror turned to groans and shrieks. Everyone was calling out: ‘Yuk!’ ‘What’s that?’ ‘Take them away!’ – everyone except me. My mouth was hanging open with fascination. What had she got for us, *now?*

Miss Kouros stood like a statue, gazing over our heads, waiting for the racket to die down.

‘Have you quite finished?’ she said at last.

‘But what’s in the bag, Miss?’ asked Susie Tan.

‘When you’re perfectly quiet, I’ll tell you.’

That’s another thing about Miss Kouros, she hardly ever yells at us – and when she does we know she really means it. Usually she just waits. She stares

out the window or up at the ceiling, drumming her fingers on the desk, waiting for us all to shut up.

We're used to it now, so it didn't take long for everyone to be sitting quietly. Then a squeaky little voice came from the back of the class, 'That's not *really* dead people's eyes, is it, Miss?'

It was Karen de Vries. She is the stupidest girl in the whole school, with long blonde curls and baby blue eyes. She always pretends to be scared of everything and makes a terrible fuss if she has to get her beautiful hands dirty.

'Just relax, Karen, and listen,' said Miss Kouros. 'You are all about to have your first dissection class and we are starting with...' she paused and held up the bag, '...ox eyes.'

What? Ox eyes? Some of the girls groaned and pretended to be sick at the thought and Karen said, 'Do we *have* to do it, Miss?' in her stupid little babyish voice.

'Oh, stop complaining, Karen! If you feel squeamish you can be excused.'

She drew a deep breath. Her earrings and bangles quivered and another piece of hair escaped.

‘You are on the threshold of your lives,’ she said dramatically, ‘and you must grasp every opportunity to discover the unknown! I hope you are ready for it!’

Suddenly she was very businesslike. ‘Jason, take these newspapers and pass them around. Every table is to be covered with at least three or four layers of newspaper. Karen, you can pass around the wooden boards – one for each table. I have enough ox eyes for one to be shared between every two students.’

Everyone in the class became totally involved – Karen included. We set up our tables feeling just like real scientists and sat quietly, waiting for instructions. Even Jason and Sean were being sensible.

Each pair of students was given a small razor blade with a safety back on it.

‘You will be very, very careful with this,’ said Miss Kouros firmly as she handed them out. ‘It is extremely sharp and I am trusting you to use it properly and safely.’

Then, at last, she went to each table and gave out the thing we'd been waiting to see, the ox eye.

It was huge! Well, a lot bigger than I had expected. It was a big lump – a whole handful – of hairy skin and fat and gristle, and encased in that was the eyeball itself. It was a hard, slimy globe about the size of a golf ball.

‘The first thing you have to do,’ said Miss Kouros, ‘is cut away the layers of fat and muscle from the eyeball. Once you have that clear, you cut right into the eyeball where you will find a clear jelly-like substance. Your aim is to find the lens – a small, hard, transparent disc – that is the very heart of the eye.’

I was sharing a table with Michael Vella because Jodie and I aren't allowed sit together. Michael is a short, fat boy who only started at our school a couple of weeks ago and already I don't like him. He's always got a bored look on his face and every time we start something new he says he's 'already done it at his last school'.

The ox eye sat in front of us – slimy, fatty and a bit smelly. Michael’s nose wrinkled up and he pushed his chair away from the desk.

‘I’ve already done that,’ he said.

‘Good!’ I said, ‘You won’t mind if I do it all then.’

I picked up the blade and began slicing away the outside fat and skin. It was tough and wobbly and it wasn’t easy but at last the eyeball was clear. I picked it up and held it in my hand, gazing at it and feeling its weight. It was heavier than a golf ball, dark brown and glistening. I couldn’t believe that this thing in my hand was really an eye, something that had been looking at the world and showing it to a great big ox.

Suddenly it was snatched from my hand. Michael was holding it up to his face, pretending to look through it, making silly faces and mooing like a cow. I reached out for it and he dodged away.

‘Stop it, Michael!’ I said, ‘Don’t be stupid!’

He pushed it onto my arm, really hard. ‘I’ve got my eye on you!’ he said in a silly voice.

I grabbed for it again and it slipped and fell to the ground.

‘You idiot!’ I shrieked. I pushed him away and scooped the eye up, holding it carefully in both hands.

But he wasn’t giving up. ‘Give us a go!’ he yelled, ‘You’ve been doing it all’

He made another grab for it and it slithered away and fell onto the table where he covered it with both of his big, fat hands. ‘It’s my turn now, nick off!’

‘You’ll squash it!’ I screamed. I tried to pull his hands off but he leaned down on the table even harder. He was going to wreck it and I would never be able to find the lens.

Then I made the biggest mistake of the whole day. I don’t *think* I meant to do it, I just wanted to get rid of him. I was so angry I grabbed his wrist and – suddenly Michael screamed and jerked his hand away.

‘She cut me! The stupid wog cut my thumb!’

Miss Kouros gasped. ‘Michael!’ she said angrily. Then she saw the blood. She leapt from her desk and grabbed his wrist. She dragged him over to the

first aid cabinet and dunked his hand into a bowl of antiseptic.

‘Stop screaming, Michael! Let me have a look.’

Everyone had stopped and was staring, open-mouthed. ‘All right 7B, it’s not a circus. Get back to work.’

They looked back down at their desks and went on with the dissection. They were very quiet.

Miss Kouros’s lips were tightly pressed together and her face was like thunder as she quickly washed and bound up Michael’s hand. I sat at my desk, quaking with fear, waiting for the world to fall on me.

Only after she had finished with Michael did she look in my direction and I didn’t like her expression.

‘Now, Zena, perhaps you can explain?’



### CHAPTER 3

I was saved by someone yelling out from the other side of the room. ‘Miss! Miss! We’ve got it!’

Sean Aherne was standing up, holding something small and round between his finger and thumb.

Miss Kouros looked at Sean and then back to me again. I could see she didn’t want me to ruin the whole class.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you after class, Zena!’

I sighed with relief as she headed in the other direction.

‘Well done, Sean!’ she said. ‘Hold it up to the light. See? Face the window.’

Miss Kouros's face was as excited as though it was the first time she had ever seen such a wonderful thing. 'Now, look through it. What can you see?'

Sean squinted and peered through the lens. 'Upside-down chimneys.'

'Yes, yes! Now, put it down here on the newspaper. See how it magnifies?'

Cool! Other kids crowded around Sean, trying to see what the lens looked like. I stayed where I was, out of sight and, hopefully, forgotten. Michael had been put with another couple of students so I quietly got on with trying to discover my own lens.

Soon there were more calls of excitement and kids were holding lenses up and looking through them all over the classroom. Even Karen de Vries was caught up in it.

'Look, Miss, look!' she called out squeakily. She stood up, holding the lens in the palm of her hand like a little shining jewel. She was gazing down at it, open mouthed when suddenly, whack! Jason Pirelli smacked her hand from underneath. Karen's head shot up in surprise.

‘Guk!’ she said.

She grabbed Jason’s shirt. ‘Gukka!’

‘Miss! Miss!’ shouts came from all around,  
‘Karen’s swallowed one!’

Everyone was laughing and calling out. ‘What?’  
‘Yum-yum!’ ‘What’s it taste like, Karen?’

Karen stood there looking amazed and horrified. Her eyes and mouth were wide open and she turned her head from side to side like one of those clowns in a side-show. A small gurgling sound was coming from her throat.

Everyone jumped up to look. Even Miss Kouros just stared at her.

Then Karen’s mouth began to open wider; her head stopped moving and her stomach heaved. The circle round her widened – fast.

Somebody screamed, ‘She’s going to be sick!’ and the whole class went wild.

‘She’s gunna be sick! Did she really swallow it? Get out of the way!’

Miss Kouros banged her on the back – hard. Karen’s eyes opened wider. She looked puzzled. Then

her stomach stopped heaving, her mouth closed and she swallowed gingerly.

‘Are you all right, Karen?’ asked Miss Kouros cautiously.

Karen licked her lips and smiled prettily, ‘Delicious!’ she said. She gave Jason Pirelli a glare that should have killed him on the spot and then, with a toss of her golden curls, she turned away and sat down at her desk.

Poor Miss Kouros, by the end of the double period her hair was falling down in all directions.

She hadn’t spoken to me again but I knew she hadn’t forgotten. Even Jodie didn’t look my way. I kept my head down, quietly cutting through the eyeball until at last I found the lens. Even though I knew I was in deep trouble, I still felt an excited flutter in my tummy. It was like I’d found something precious – a tiny, polished crystal ball. No matter what Miss Kouros said to me afterwards, I didn’t care. I had the lens in my hand and I’d found it all on my own.

I sat alone at my table and looked through it. ‘I wonder what was the last thing this eye saw,’ I thought

to myself. Then I remembered that the ox was dead – and its eye had come to us in a plastic bag – and I shivered.

It took about fifteen minutes to clean everything up. We wrapped up the newspapers and rubbish, scrubbed the boards down with disinfectant and finally washed our hands thoroughly. Karen had escaped the cleaning up because she said she felt sick and had to go to the sick bay for a glass of Alka Seltzer. By the time we'd finished she was back at her table, talking loudly about how *terrible* she felt when Jason had made her swallow the lens – and loving every minute of being the centre of attention.

Miss Kouros had found a bulldog clip and a couple of pens to keep her hair up and when the classroom was all tidy again, she clapped her hands for attention.

‘You see how exciting discovering something can be? Now I am going to tell you about your major assignment this term. Your mission is: to discover a problem, research it by yourselves, and come up with a solution.’

What? What did she think we were? Genius scientists?

‘Don’t look at me like that. It won’t be as difficult as you think. Sean, what is pollution?’

‘Um – dirt?’

‘Good.’ Miss Kouros quickly wrote the words ‘pollution’ and ‘dirt’ on the board. ‘Now, some examples of pollution? Anybody?’

‘Rubbish!’ ‘Oil slicks!’ ‘Graffiti!’ ‘Plastic bags!’ ‘Cans!’ ‘Old cars!’ ‘Paper!’

The words came from all over the room and Miss Kouros was frantically scribbling on the board to keep up with them.

‘Stop, stop! That’ll be enough for now. Look at this list. Think about it as you walk home from school. Perhaps you see rubbish on the beach or in the gutters: icy-pole sticks, cigarette packets. Look in your own garden. Is there rubbish there?’

‘Dog poo!’

‘No more calling out, Jason! Now, where does this pollution come from?’

‘From dogs!’

‘That will *do*, Jason! I said no more calling out.’

‘Sorry, Miss.’

Miss Kouros sighed.

‘I want you to think about it. Who makes this pollution? Where does it come from? And what can we do about it?’

‘What can kids do about it, Miss?’

‘Maybe you can’t do anything about it yourself, but just thinking and writing about it can be the first step to a solution. Think of yourself as a reporter. Ask questions, read newspapers, take notes.’

‘That’s too hard, Miss!’

‘No, not too hard, Karen. It just means a bit of work.’

‘Well, I don’t understand.’

‘You don’t have to understand it right now.’ She walked around the class, handing out notes. ‘Take this sheet of instructions home with you and look at it tonight. We’ll do some more work on it in class before you have to get started.’

‘Miss! Miss!’ Jason’s hand was jumping around in the air.

‘Yes, Jason?’

‘Bad smells are pollution, aren’t they, Miss?’

‘Yes, indeed they are. And we shouldn’t have to put up with them.’

‘Cool!’ said Jason. ‘I reckon we shouldn’t have to put up with Karen, then, ‘cos she just made a *really* bad one!’



## CHAPTER 4

When the bell went for lunchtime, I stayed sitting at my table, waiting for the worst. Miss Kouros shut the door and stood there, looking at me and frowning. That made me even more worried. Then she sighed and shook her head.

‘Unfortunately, I haven’t time to talk to you now, Zena; I have to go on yard duty. You’ll have to come back and see me after school.’

Oh, no! I had to go straight home for Samira! I didn’t think now was a good time to tell her that, though. She opened the door and I got out as fast as I could.

Jodie was waiting for me. ‘Don’t worry,’ she said, ‘You didn’t do it on purpose. You can’t get into trouble for an accident.’

Somehow, I didn’t think Miss Kouros would see it quite like that.

We picked up our lunches from the locker-room and we were crossing the playground when Michael Vella stepped out in front of us. He had two older boys with him – they looked like they could be his brothers.

‘There she is,’ he said. ‘That’s the bloody wog terrorist that cut me!’

I stopped in shock. I’d never been called names like that before.

‘You shut up, Michael!’ I said. ‘If you hadn’t been so stupid...’

‘Shuddup, Lebbo!’ said one of the big kids and the three of them moved round us so we couldn’t go anywhere.

‘You leave her alone!’ said Jodie.

‘Go back to Lebanon with your other Muslim mates!’ said the other big one.

‘I’m *not* Muslim!’ I said, ‘I’m Catholic.’

‘Sure!’ he said. ‘I’ve never seen you at Mass.’

‘Well, I’ve never seen you either,’ I said.

‘You dunno what you’re talking about,’ said Jodie. ‘Get out of the way!’ and she pushed past them, dragging me after her.

‘Go and find yourself a Muslim school!’ Michael yelled after us.

‘And you go back to reform school – where you came from!’ I yelled back at him.

‘Hah! Good one!’ said Jodie and she put her arm through mine – giving me a friendly squeeze.

I was so angry I felt like crying but I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction.

‘They are just totally stupid!’ I said.

‘That’s racism!’ said Jodie. ‘You tell Miss Kouros.’

‘No way!’ I said. ‘I’m in enough strife already. I don’t care about them, anyway.’

‘It’s only ‘cos they’re new,’ said Jodie.

‘Yeah, I know,’ I said. ‘I’m more worried about what Miss Kouros is going to say. I mean, I didn’t *mean*



to cut him. Do you think she'll tell the principal? What if my mum and dad find out?'

That was the longest and worst afternoon of my life. I sat through all the other classes dreaming about escaping. Maybe I could just walk out the school gate and never come back – leave home, get a job – anything to avoid seeing Miss Kouros again. It was no use, though. When everyone was streaming out the school gates, there I was, standing outside the science room, ready for the end of the world.

Miss Kouros opened the door and I walked in – shaking.

'Come and sit down, Zena,' she said, sitting at one of the student tables.

She sighed and began pinning up bits of falling-down hair, then she stopped. She pulled out all the things that were holding it up, untwisted her hair and ran her fingers through it till it stuck out, black and crinkly, all round her head.

‘Ah, Zena,’ she said, shaking her hair out even more, ‘what you did this morning was very, very bad! And very dangerous.’

I bit my lip and nodded, ‘Yes, Miss Kouros.’

‘You are a bright girl, Zena and with that brain of yours you could do great things but you must not allow yourself to lose control like that!’

‘I’m sorry, Miss Kouros.’

‘*You* know how important it is to behave responsibly. Some of the others being silly, yes, I expected that, but not you, Zena. I was very disappointed.’

I looked hard at my hands on the desk and tried not to cry.

She got up and walked around the room. ‘I had to go to the principal, you know, and report this – this *incident* this morning.’

The principal? My parents would kill me!

‘She was, naturally, very annoyed but I assured her that you were normally an excellent student.’ She turned to me, ‘I spoke very strongly on your behalf,

Zena, and Ms Davis has agreed that she will take no further action...’

‘Oh, thank you, Miss Kouros!’

‘...*unless* there is a formal complaint from Michael’s family.’

‘Oh!’

‘I don’t believe there will be a complaint because I have already spoken to Michael and told him his behaviour was inexcusable.’

She was still walking restlessly around the classroom. ‘Of course, the principal asked how this accident had happened and – it was necessary that I tell her all about the ox eye experiment.’

She sat down next to me again.

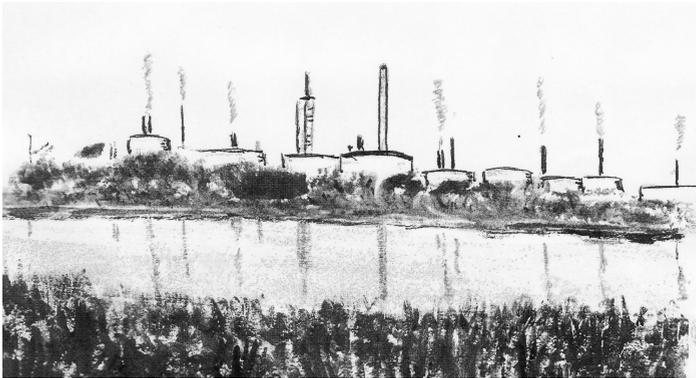
‘Zena, this dissection of ox eyes is not normally on the Year 7 curriculum. Maybe Year 10 or 11, but not junior classes. Never!’ Unexpectedly, she gave a wide grin, ‘But I do so enjoy my 7B science classes, Zena! There are so many bright and interesting students there – you and Jodie, those very naughty but entertaining boys – that I wanted to share this wonderful thing with you. You understand?’

Her big dark eyes were flashing with excitement and I nodded; I did understand excitement like that. She leaned her head closer to mine and spoke softly.

‘I have a friend who works in the abattoirs, you see, and he agreed to get me these eyes. I called in on my way to school this morning to pick them up.’

She jumped up and began pacing again, her hands dragging through her hair, pulling it back from her face.

‘But when I tell this to the principal, she is shocked! “Ooh, Soula!” she says, “the abattoirs? What



are you thinking of? The children could have caught all sorts of terrible diseases!” “Nonsense!” I tell her. “I am always very careful! Everyone has washed their hands properly in disinfectant!” But, no, she would not listen

to me. “You must never, ever do that dissection again!” she says.’ Miss Kouros shook her head sadly. ‘She could not understand.’

She walked over to the window. ‘I do not think I’m going to be a teacher for very much longer. It is too difficult – too many rules and regulations!’

I was stunned. How could Miss Kouros not be a teacher any more?

‘Come over here, Zena.’

I joined her at the window.

‘There is a big world, out there,’ she said. ‘And it is full of wonderful things. I want you to remember today, Zena.’ (As if I could forget it!) She turned to me and held both my hands. ‘Yes, you made a bad mistake this morning but you will learn from it. To get excited about discovering knowledge is a *wonderful* thing but scientists, particularly, must be *very* aware of behaving responsibly. Will you try to remember that?’

‘Yes, Miss Kouros. I really will try.’

‘Good. Don’t disappoint me again, Zena. As for this morning, I don’t think there will be any more

trouble. It was a very small scratch and I have told Michael that he was just as irresponsible as you.’

I wondered if I should tell her what he said to me in the playground but she went on talking.

‘You will do well, Zena, so long as you learn to think before you act. And now, I think we have had enough serious talk; maybe you can smile a little, eh?’

I decided to forget about Michael and get out while I could, so I managed a weak smile. Miss Kouros walked to the door with me but, before I left, there was something I just had to ask her.

‘Miss Kouros,’ I said, ‘are you really going to stop being a teacher?’

She smiled and shrugged, ‘Who knows? Maybe tomorrow I’ll feel differently.’



## CHAPTER 5

I sat on the rock wall at the beach trying to juggle some shells we'd collected and watched Samira finish her sandcastle. She'd been cross with me when I picked her up because I was late, but when I said we were going to the beach, she soon cheered up. Now, she was collecting shells and seaweed for decorations, chattering to herself and looking just like a little brown pixie.

She's small for eight years, with black curls all over her head, big dark eyes and a gorgeous smile. Sometimes, when Samira smiles, even get Dad forgets he's in a bad mood.

We'd been paddling in the rock pools and the sun was warm on my back. I should have been happy but what Miss Kouros said kept nagging at me. 'Act responsibly ... think before you act.' Was I really that bad? All right, I lost my cool with Michael but he was being stupid and wrecking the experiment. Now I knew how horrible he really was, I wished I'd slit his wrist not just his thumb! Anyway, at least Miss Kouros said he was in just as much trouble as me.

I started feeling angry again and chucked the shells away.

'Zena!' Samira looked up crossly. 'That nearly got me!'

'Sorry,' I said and sighed. Everything I did today seemed to be wrong and it was all Michael's fault. First he gets me into trouble with Miss Kouros and then he brings his brothers along and they all start hassling me.

I'd show him. Him and his stupid brothers. But how? I looked along the beach – at the rocks, the gentle ripples in the water and the rubbish caught in the seaweed along the edge. Then it hit me! The pollution assignment. That's how I'd show them. All of them!

I'd find something special – something no one else would ever think of. I'd discover something new – yes! I would find out something important that had *never* been discovered before and I'd write a proper report about it – just like a scientist. Once I'd found the right subject I would do the best assignment anyone had ever done before. Miss Kouros would be pleased with me again and Michael and his brothers could get lost!

I sat thinking about how good it would be, planning how I would take it to school and hand it in to Miss Kouros. I'd take it to her in the staffroom so that when she opened it up and began to read it, she'd gasp with amazement. The other teachers would gather round and look at it and they'd say, 'Who did this? Zena Rashid? Year Seven? Impossible!'

The whole school would hear about how clever I was – even Michael's brothers. I might even get my picture in the local paper – probably would. The headline would read, 'BRILLIANT WORK BY YOUNG RESEARCHER'. It was going to work out brilliantly. All my problems were solved!

‘Zena!’ Samira called, and suddenly I was back in the real world. ‘Can you help me with the moat?’

I jumped down off the wall and joined her. Together we dug a big moat around her sandcastle. I found a piece of old cigarette packet and made a drawbridge. (Would that do for the pollution project? No, too boring!) Then I dug a deep channel down to the edge of the water and in it flowed, lapping around the castle walls.

‘Careful, Zena!’ yelled Samira, ‘It’s flooding the garden!’

‘That’s okay. Look, we’ll build a dam. And over here we can have a swimming pool.’

Together we built dam walls, channels, lakes and islands. It wasn’t until I noticed the sky was clouding over that I checked my watch.

‘Help! We’ve got to go, Samira. Mum’ll be home soon and I have to do tomatoes and stuff.’

We grabbed our shoes and socks and, with bare feet flying, raced off the beach and up the street, holding hands and giggling.



The side gate banged behind us and we saw Dad was already home, kneeling among his vegies – digging and weeding. We've only got a small back yard but Dad calls it his farm. He couldn't get any more vegies into it if he tried. He always goes there straight after work and stays until Mum calls him in for dinner.

'It's late,' he said, as Samira and I sat on the back step putting our shoes and socks on. 'Where have you been?'

'Just the beach, Dad.'

'On your own?'

'Yes!' I said impatiently. 'On our own!' He opened his mouth to start objecting but I got in first. 'You don't have to worry, Dad, we're back now!'

Samira escaped inside but, before I could get through the door, Dad stopped me.

'Zena!'

I turned back to him. 'What!'

He gave me a 'not happy, Zena' look but all he said was, 'Here, I have some zucchinis for you to take inside.'

I sighed and went back. Zucchinis! Once Dad starts picking zucchinis, a continuous stream of them comes into our kitchen and doesn't stop for six months. When I grow up and leave home that is one thing I will never, ever eat again.

I dumped them on the bench and started cutting up some tomatoes and parsley while Samira set the table. I had the radio on the bench next to me blasting out dance music and I'd nearly finished when the back door opened and Mum dragged herself up the step. She dropped two plastic bags of lemons on the floor beside her as she fell into a chair.

'Ach!' she said, 'I have never seen so many lemons like Olga's tree has.'

She was puffing slightly as she rubbed the red marks on her wrists left by the plastic bags. Her eyes looked tired and some of her black hair was hanging over her eyes. I noticed a few streaks of grey in it.

Her hand went to her head and she winced.

'Zena, turn that radio down!'

I sighed and turned it off.

Josef barged in through the back door, spattered with mud from footy training and nearly bursting out of his last year's tee-shirt. He goes to training twice a week and drinks gallons of milk every day because he reckons he's going to be a professional footballer. Last week he came home with his head shaved and Mum almost killed him.

'G'day,' he said as he grabbed a piece of tomato and went through the other door. He's about as talkative as Dad sometimes. Techno music blared out from the bathroom.

'Josef! My head!'

'Wha-at?' he yelled.

'Turn that radio off!'

The noise stopped and Mum sat at the table holding her head.

'Are you okay, Mum?'

'Yes, Zena, I'm fine.'

I turned back to the bench and went on cutting up the parsley. 'You know what I did today? I cut up an ox eye.'

‘An ox eye?’ Mum’s voice sounded a bit faint.  
‘What for?’

‘To learn about it. And inside it was yucky, jelly sort of stuff. We had to go through all the jelly stuff and find the lens.’

‘Zena! That’s – disgusting!’

‘It wasn’t, Mum; it was interesting. Then, when we found the lens we held it up to our eye and looked through it.’

I turned round and saw that Mum had gone pale. Abruptly she stood up. She held the table with one hand and put the other to her mouth.

‘I don’t think I – I’m sorry, I don’t feel very well.’ Suddenly she sat down again. ‘Zena, I think you had better get your father.’

I stared at her, ‘Dad? Why? I’m sorry if I made you...’

‘Just do it, Zena! Get him!’

I rushed out the back door, ‘Dad! Dad! Come inside, quick!’

He looked up from his weeding. ‘What for now? Eh?’

I grabbed his hand and dragged him to his feet.  
‘Mum wants you. She’s sick! Come on!’

Mum was still sitting at the kitchen table, her head resting on her hand. Dad bent over her. ‘Rita? What is it? Did you see the doctor? Zena, get her some water!’

‘Why has she been to the doctor?’ I was frightened. Mum *never* goes to the doctor. ‘What’s wrong?’ I asked, and the glass of water was shaking as I handed it to her.

Mum sipped the water and then looked at me, ‘It’s all right. Nothing is wrong. It’s just...’ she gave a small smile and turned to Dad. Her head nodded slightly, ‘*Aataged en ahsan an naqul laha ya Fared?*’

And Dad smiled, too and put his arm around her shoulder.

‘Of course. Why not?’

‘Tell me what?’

Mum put out her hand and drew me to her. What was going on?

‘You’re going to have another little brother or sister. I’m having a baby.’





## CHAPTER 6

‘Yay!’ said Samira when they told her. ‘When’s it coming? Is it a boy or a girl? Can I nurse it?’

Josef just grinned and said, ‘Congratulations.’ I think he was pleased but with him, it’s hard to tell.

Mum even had a picture of it the next day. An ultrasound scan of the baby inside her tummy. It was weird. A big head with a little body and tiny, skinny arms and legs. I didn’t really like looking at it. They didn’t know whether it was a girl or boy; they said they’d rather be surprised.

I didn’t know what to think about a new baby. I mean, why did they want another one? Weren’t three children enough?

For the next two days at school I didn't tell anyone, not even Jodie. I needed to think.

Michael and his brothers were still giving me a hard time at recess and lunchtimes but he was too chicken to do anything in class. We're a bit like the United Nations in 7B – everyone comes from somewhere else and nobody cares. I mean, even Michael's got a Maltese surname, so I don't know what he's on about.

Mostly I didn't care what they said but on our way home on Friday, the three of them rode their bikes up behind Jodie and me.

'All Lebanese are camel drivers, aren't they?' said one of the brothers in a loud voice.

'Yeah,' said Michael. 'Lebbos *love* camels.'

Jodie and I kept riding.

'If her father's a camel driver, maybe her *mother's* a camel,' said the other brother.

'Is that why she's got hairy legs?' said Michael.

Jodie turned round, furious.

'Listen, you!' she said, 'If you don't shut your face you'll be reported to the cops!'

‘It’s a free country,’ said one of the brothers.  
‘We’re allowed ride on the road.’

‘Well, ride on some other road!’ I said.

‘And wash your mouth out,’ said Jodie. ‘We don’t have to listen to your ravings.’

‘Don’t worry, girls,’ said the biggest one. ‘We won’t follow you any more – today. Come on guys,’ he said, ‘we don’t really want to be seen with them, do we?’

And the three of them rode on past us, nearly knocking me off my bike as they went.

‘They’re just pigs!’ said Jodie after they’d gone.  
‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘I’m not,’ I said but I couldn’t trust my voice to say anything more.

‘You coming in?’ asked Jodie when we got to her place.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’

When I got home I went straight to my room. I sat on my bed, stretched my legs out in front of me and, for the first time, I really looked at them. They were

short and stocky, brown skinned and covered in black hairs.

I thought of Jodie. She's tall and thin – just like a model. Miss Kouros sometimes calls us Snow White and Rose Red – that's how different we are. We both have dead straight hair and we both wear it in one long pigtail down our back – but hers is ash blonde and mine is jet black. She's tall and I'm short. Her legs are slim and white, and I've never seen a single hair on them.

I went into the bathroom and locked the door. I'd never shaved my legs before but other girls did it so why shouldn't I?

I shook up Dad's tin of shaving cream and put a layer of foam all down my left leg. I rubbed it in like I'd seen him do on his face and then I took his razor and ran it down from my knee to my ankle. It was easy.

Suddenly there were running footsteps, the bathroom door handle turned and a body hit the door.

'What the...? Who's in there?' yelled Josef.

'Go away!', I said. 'I'm busy.'

'Get out! Now!' he said, 'I need the shower. I've got to be at the boat shop in twenty minutes.'

‘I can’t,’ I said. ‘I won’t be long.’

‘Jeez!’ he said under his breath. Then he shouted, ‘Mu-um! Tell Zena to get outa the bathroom!’

I heard Mum’s footsteps coming closer and I tried to finish in a hurry. My left leg was nearly done but there were little bits of blood popping up through the foam and there were a couple of big trickles of blood running down my leg and dripping on the floor.

It wasn’t hurting but when I tried to wash it clean, the bleeding got worse and worse and it started to sting.

‘Zena!’ Now Mum was outside the door. ‘Get out of there at once! You know Josef needs a shower before work.’

‘But Mum...’ I could feel myself starting to cry. My leg was really stinging, there was blood everywhere and I didn’t know what to do.

Mum was getting angry. ‘Zena, open the door at once!’

There was no arguing with *that* voice. I hopped over and undid the latch. As soon as I saw Mum I burst into tears.

She saw my leg, covered in foam and blood.

‘Ohh, Zena!’ she said. ‘What are you doing?’

She grabbed a towel and put it round my leg and then she took me in her arms and held me tight. I buried my head in her shoulder, sobbing. I didn’t want to look at Josef.

‘Look at the mess she’s made!’ he said crossly.

‘*You* clean it up, Josef!’ said Mum. She pushed past him and, with her arm round me, she took me to my bedroom.

She closed the door and sat with me on the bed. She turned me to her and took both my hands in hers.

‘Look at me, Zena,’ she said. ‘Am I so frightening that you can’t tell me you want to shave your legs?’

I couldn’t stop crying. ‘I didn’t know I wanted to shave them till today!’ I said through my sobs.

Mum looked concerned. ‘And why today? What made you suddenly decide?’

I couldn’t tell her. I just shook my head and the tears kept rolling down my face. She put her arm round me again and stroked my hair.

‘You can tell me,’ she said quietly. ‘We’ve all had people say bad things to us. That’s why your father and I left Lebanon.’

I was so surprised, my tears nearly stopped. ‘But you were born there! That was your home! Why would people say things to you?’

She didn’t answer straight away. She just sat staring at nothing, mechanically stroking my hair. At last she spoke.

‘When we left, there had been a war in Lebanon for a long time. People didn’t just say cruel things – they did them too. There were guns and bombs – people were killed and houses destroyed. If you were on the wrong side, or in the wrong place at the wrong time, you were the enemy. When Fared and I married, Beirut was being bombed and sometimes, at night, people were shot, just because they were out in the streets. We decided we wanted our children to grow up in a peaceful country.’

She’d never spoken much about Lebanon before – or maybe I’d never listened. Now I wanted to know.

‘Who was fighting who?’ I asked.

‘Muslims and Christians, Palestinians and Israelis – they were *all* fighting. It was called a civil war – and there was no end in sight.’

‘But what were they fighting *for*?’

She sighed. ‘War is a very strange thing, Zena – they were all fighting for the right to live in peace.’

‘But that’s stupid!’ I said.

‘Yes.’ She nodded and held me closer. ‘So I want you to be glad we’re here in Australia. And if people call you names or are nasty to you, defend yourself with words but never let it become anything more.’

We sat in silence for a moment or two; then she said, ‘Do you want to tell me now?’

After hearing about people being bombed and killed, what Michael and his brothers had said didn’t sound very important.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I said, sniffing. ‘I can handle it.’

‘Good,’ she said. Then she smiled at me. ‘Now, maybe we can talk about waxing your legs to get rid of the hairs. It’s not nearly as dangerous as shaving and lasts much, much longer.’

I peeled the towel off my left leg – it looked awful. It was still streaked with foam and half-dried blood and was stinging badly. I smiled back at her and nodded.

‘And, Zena...’

‘Yes, Mum?’

‘Remember this: you might have black hairs on your legs but that means you also have beautiful long, black eyelashes that many girls will envy.’

She was right! Jodie was always complaining about her eyelashes. She said they were so fair you couldn’t see them and she wished she had dark ones like me.



## CHAPTER 7

When I woke the next morning and felt the little scabs all over my left leg I felt very glad it was Saturday. At least it had the weekend to get better. Mum had put some cream on it and said when it was properly healed she'd show me how to wax them.

I snuggled down into the blankets and was drifting off to sleep again when – BRUMMM! – Dad started up the lawn mower. We've only got about one square metre of grass and it has to be right outside my window.

Then Mum's voice, 'Zena! It's nearly nine o'clock.'

‘So who cares? I don’t care if it’s ten o’clock!’  
(But that was only whispered under the blankets – not  
out loud if I wanted to live!)

‘Okay,’ I called, ‘I’m getting up in a minute.’

‘No, now!’ said Mum. ‘We go shopping in half  
an hour and you must help.’

There was no fighting it. I dragged myself out of  
bed and into the shower.

By the time I grabbed some breakfast, Dad had  
finished mowing and was ready to go. Every Saturday’s  
the same at our place – full of excitement. Dad drives  
the car down to the shops and waits outside talking to  
his mates. Mum and Samira and I do the supermarket  
shopping and Dad loads it into the boot of the car.

Of course, Josef doesn’t have to help. He gets  
out of it because he works at the boat shop on Saturday  
mornings.

I rang Jodie before we left and we decided we’d  
go down the beach together after lunch. Maybe I’d tell  
her about the baby then.

On the way out of the supermarket, Mum  
stopped to talk to Mrs Feldman from up the road about

cutting her hair next week, so Samira and I started taking the trolley up the street towards the car.

Suddenly we were in the middle of a dog fight! A blue heeler tied to a seat on the footpath jumped out to bark at a big German shepherd going past on a lead. The German shepherd's owner dragged his dog away but the lead got tangled up in our trolley.

Samira was screaming, the owners were shouting, the dogs were growling and snarling and all round my legs were big snapping teeth.

I couldn't believe what happened next. I could have died. Jason Pirelli was coming down the street, heard the barking and screaming, and came to the rescue! He pulled Samira and me backwards, grabbed the trolley and rammed it into the dogs.

That stopped them. The heeler crawled under the seat, whimpering and the German shepherd's owner dragged his dog away, shouting, 'Bad girl! Bad girl!' as he went off down the street. He didn't apologise or anything.

And I had to stand there in the main street and thank Jason Pirelli!

‘No worries,’ he said, hitching his jeans. He ran a hand through his messy, black hair. ‘Happy to help a damsel in distress!’

I was just trying to think of something clever to say when Dad arrived. He’d heard the racket but didn’t know we’d been in the middle of it. A lady who’d seen everything told Dad the whole story and made a great big drama out of it.

‘The girls were *so* lucky this boy was nearby,’ she raved, ‘They could have been savaged by those dogs!’

Dad shook Jason’s hand. ‘You are a brave boy,’ he said, ‘and I thank you for looking after my daughters.’

Then Mum came hurrying up to see what the fuss was about and the lady told it all over again. She wiped Samira’s eyes and told Mum how brave she’d been, then she gave her a packet of chocolate biscuits ‘to cheer her up’. She grabbed Jason by the elbow, ‘Such a big, good-looking boy, he is, too!’ she cooed. I thought it was never going to end.

At last we started for the car but then Dad turned back.

‘You come and visit us,’ he said to Jason, ‘Any time you like. My house is yours.’

‘Thanks, Mr Rashid,’ he was being *so* polite, ‘I might one day.’

Over my dead body!

‘Come and visit soon,’ Dad insisted, ‘and I will give you some beautiful fresh zucchinis.’

Before he could answer, somebody called Jason’s name and he looked round. I didn’t think the day could possibly get any worse but I was wrong. I could see Sean Aherne’s bright orange hair and freckled face as he loped along towards us on his long, skinny legs. I turned and ran for the car, got into the back seat and stayed there.

‘Zena, come along!’ said Mum, holding the door open, ‘We have to buy a windcheater for Samira.’

‘You don’t need me for that!’

She frowned angrily, ‘Zena!’

Then my Dad spoke, ‘*Etrukiha, ya Rita*. She’s had a shock. She was probably very frightened.’

Ooooh! That made me so mad! I was *not* frightened! I was just angry! Why couldn't they just leave me alone?

I turned my face into the corner of the seat breathing very hard and biting my lips. For some reason I felt like crying and I certainly wasn't going to let anyone see that. Out the window I saw Mum and Samira crossing the road, Samira holding Mum's hand and jumping and skipping without a care in the world.

Dad got into the driver's seat. He didn't say anything, just smiled at me. Good! I didn't want to talk to anybody.



## CHAPTER 8

After we got home and unloaded the car, we sat around the kitchen table having fresh bread rolls for lunch. Josef rushed in to grab some food before going off to football. He plays for the under eighteens and he won't even be seventeen for a couple more months.

Samira was still excited about the dog fight and wanted to tell Josef the whole story. He listened while he piled his roll high with just about everything on the table then he looked at me and grinned.

'So Jason Pirelli saved you, did he? Whoo! Your knight in shining armour, eh?'

‘Very funny!’ I said and pushed my chair away from the table. ‘Can I go now, Mum? I’m meeting Jodie down the beach.’

‘And what about the dishes?’

‘Oh, Mu-um!’ I gave a *very* big sigh.

‘Oh, go along, then!’

Before she could change her mind I headed for the door.

‘And come back in a better mood!’ she called after me.

So I slammed it.



Jodie and I had already walked all the way along the beach to the far end before I’d found the right time or the right words to tell her about the baby.

I’d been telling her what happened with the dogs that morning and the way Jason Pirelli had barged in and made a big hero of himself.

‘You must have felt awful!’ she said. ‘He’ll be impossible at school next week. He’d better not try to

talk to me!’ She stuck her nose in the air. ‘And fancy saying “damsels in distress” – who does he think he is? Sir Lancelot?’

‘And why did my father have to invite him to our place?’ I groaned. ‘He’d better not come!’

‘If he does,’ said Jodie, ‘You ring me up straightaway and I’ll come over.’

‘What for?’

‘So you don’t have to be alone with him.’

‘I wouldn’t be!’ I said, ‘He can go out into the garden and help Dad pick zucchinis.’

‘What?’

‘Don’t ask. He probably won’t come, anyway.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Probably not, but if he does – you’d better call me.’

I shrugged. ‘All right.’

We walked along for a while and I glanced at Jodie, trying to decide how to tell her about our new baby. I started to a couple of times but each time she got in first and asked me some more about Jason and the dogs. She wanted to know everything about him, even what he was wearing. As if I’d noticed.

After a while, I just blurted it out.

‘Mum’s having a new baby.’

‘Far out!’ she said. ‘When’s it due?’

‘Early December, they reckon.’

We walked on in silence, then, ‘How old’s your mum?’

‘Thirty-eight.’ I watched my feet scuffing through the sand. ‘And Dad’s even older. He’s forty-something.’

We glanced quickly at each other and then back down to our feet. I suppose we were both thinking the same thoughts. These were *parents* we were talking about.

‘It’ll be good, though,’ Jodie said, ‘having a baby to play with and that. I wish my mum’d had more than just me.’

I didn’t know what to say because Jodie doesn’t have a father – she doesn’t even know who he is. Her mum’s a nurse and works different shifts so Jodie is often at home on her own. I’d hate that – not having anyone else to talk to.

But another brother or sister? I wasn't sure I wanted any more. Where would it sleep? Would I have to help look after it? I bet Josef wouldn't. Or Samira, she was too young.

We came to the end of the sand and turned away from the water, walking up beside a creek that runs down into the bay. It's a soggy, marshy area, where lots of water birds live and there were plenty of swamp hens and small grebes around.

It was cold and still, with a heavy mist starting to come down and in the grey sky you could just see a faint glow where the sun was. By now we were walking on grassy tussocks, balancing shakily on each one and jumping across shallow pools of slowly moving water.

We stopped for a moment and looked around. Ahead of us, the ground rose a little and about half a kilometre away were the looming chimneys of the factories. Blankets of white steam hung in big clouds over some of them and others were sending long plumes of grey smoke way up into the still air.

We were at the back of the Chemical Complex, factories where a lot of people in the town work. They

make things like car tyres, plastics and chemicals, and they have pipes snaking from one factory to another, twisting round corners and along the roads. There are oil tanks of all sizes and white metal spheres on space-rocket legs. Some of the chimneys have flames coming out the top that burn all day and night.

It might sound dirty or ugly but sometimes it's beautiful. Like at night time, when the lights are on and the flames are blowing in the wind, you can see it from all over our town. When Samira was little, she used to think it was fairyland.

Something moved in the water at my feet and I looked down and saw the dead body of a little brown grebe drift slowly past my tussock of grass.

Suddenly a water rat darted out of the water and almost ran over Jodie's feet. She screamed and jumped in fright, slipping off the grass and ending up with one foot ankle-deep in the mud and water. She grabbed at me to stop falling over.

'Let go!' I yelled, struggling to keep my own balance. We clung to each other, wobbling back and forth as we tried to hold each other up.

‘Hang on to me, I’m going to sit on the dead bird!’ screamed Jodie.

‘Stop pulling me over!’ I yelled back, beginning to giggle.

We struggled there, squealing and giggling and teetering backwards and forwards until, at last, my foot slipped. Jodie let me go and I fell backwards and sat down right in the mud.

‘Oh, yuuuuk!’ I yelled as I felt the cold and smelly water seep into my jeans.

Jodie was still standing and started to haul me up. Suddenly, I stopped laughing.

‘Ow! Oooh! My ankle!’ I leapt up, rubbing at my right leg. ‘It’s burning!’

‘What’s happened? Did you get bitten? What by?’



‘I don’t know. I don’t think it’s a bite – just burning. Oooh!’ It was stinging badly.

We looked into the water. There were small patches of yellowy-brown, oily-looking stuff floating on it. It was around the dead grebe too – a thin line of yellow encircling its little floating body.

I hopped over to a pool of clean water and pulled my sock down to splash my leg clean. There was a nasty red patch just above my ankle.

‘It must be some sort of acid.’ I said.

Jodie looked frightened, ‘Let’s get out of here! It’s probably poisonous.’

I looked around. ‘Just a minute, it looks like it’s coming from over there.’ Avoiding the oily water, I splashed across to the other side.

‘Yes, here it is,’ I said. ‘It’s coming through the grass here.’

I bent down and examined the edge of the creek. There was a tiny trickle of yellowish liquid dripping slowly into the water – just a few drops at a time.

Jodie was hopping about nervously, ‘Let’s go, Zena. It could be dangerous.’

‘Well, if it is, I want to know where it’s coming from.’ I began to follow the yellow trickle away from the creek. ‘Come on, Jodie.’

‘It’s too muddy,’ she wailed, ‘And I’ve got my good jeans on!’

‘Well, why didn’t you wear old ones?’ I asked crossly.

‘*Sometimes* I like to dress properly!’ she retorted. ‘Anyway, isn’t your ankle supposed to be sore?’

‘It’s all right since I washed it. Come on, this could be important.’

‘Important to who?’

Suddenly I realised just how important it was. *This* was going to be my science assignment! There’d been too many other things happening – the baby, Michael and his brothers, my leg-shaving disaster. I’d almost forgotten about schoolwork. But this was the sort of project I’d dreamed of, something really important. It was perfect.

‘Listen, Jodie,’ I said, ‘I’m going to follow this and find out where it’s coming from. If you don’t want to come, then okay, I’ll do it on my own.’

‘All right,’ she said, ‘I’ll come. We’ll have to go soon though, it’s getting late and Mum’ll kill me when she sees my shoes.’

She paddled soggily across to me and together we peered at the grass. It wasn’t easy to see the tiny amount of yellowish liquid in the damp ground and we had to search inch by inch to trace it. After about ten minutes of slow tracking, we came to a small pool of the liquid.

‘There it is, Zena. Somebody’s tipped something out here. Dirty pigs!’

But I wasn’t sure. ‘Why would somebody come right out here to dump stuff?’

‘‘Cos they don’t want to be seen, I suppose.’

I wandered further up the slope, searching the ground for another sign of it.

‘Here it is again!’ I called. ‘Come and look! Now the ground’s drier you can see where it’s killed the grass. I bet it’s coming from one of those factories.’

I looked up towards the line of silver tanks and chimneys. This was marvellous! I was a real detective, following clues and finding out things. Even Jodie started to get excited and together we followed the trail to the end – well, it wasn't quite the end but it was as far as we could go. We came up against a high chain-wire fence. On the other side was a line of enormous shipping containers that totally blocked our view. The trickle of yellow stuff was coming through the narrow space between two containers.

‘Now what are we going to do?’ I said. ‘We can't see anything.’

The fence was behind the whole chemical complex and it stretched for kilometres. I walked along, trying to get a clear view but always there was something in the way – containers, stacks of pipes, drums.

‘Perhaps we could climb over,’ I said.

Jodie was horrified. ‘We can't! We gotta go now, Zena.’

‘Yeah, okay,’ I nodded. ‘It's starting to get dark, anyway.’ Then I had an idea.

‘Jodie! Have you got a hanky or anything?’

‘What for?’

‘I want to mark the spot. I could ride in along the fence from the road and then I could stand on my bike and I might be able to see over.’

‘What for?’

‘I want to know where it’s coming from. Have you got anything?’

‘No, I haven’t!’ she said. ‘Nothing I’m going to leave here, anyway.’

‘Never mind.’ I was on the ground, pulling off one of my runners and peeling off my wet, white sock. I dragged my shoe back on again and twisted the sock in and out of the strands of wire. I stood back and nodded.

‘There! I should be able to find it again, now.’

‘Are you really coming back here?’ asked Jodie.

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Will you promise you won’t tell anyone else?’ I said.

‘Okay.’

‘Let’s walk back along the fence and I’ll tell you as we go.’

By the time I’d finished telling Jodie about my idea for the science assignment we’d reached the road and it was nearly dark. It was getting cold, too. We looked back the way we’d come and I could just make out a small, white mark on the long wire fence.

I felt a flutter of excitement in my stomach. This was the best idea I’d ever had and I could hardly wait to get back there to investigate!



## CHAPTER 9

That night I set my alarm for six o'clock in the morning. We were all going out to Brunswick to have Sunday lunch with Aunt Maria and Uncle Hakim and I wanted a couple of hours to myself before we left. I was going to ride my bike to the factory fence to see if I could discover a bit more – maybe even collect a sample of the chemical. If I got up early enough, I'd be back in plenty of time.

I was too excited to sleep properly and woke up before the alarm went off. I crept around the kitchen as quietly as I could, collecting everything I wanted while I gulped down a bowl of cereal. The only glass bottle I could find with a good screw-on lid was a small bottle of soda water in the fridge so I drank a couple of

mouthfuls and tipped the rest down the sink. Then I washed it out in hot water and zipped it into the big pocket of my parka.

I remembered how the chemical had stung my ankle, so I took Mum's dishwashing gloves from under the sink. I grabbed a couple of small plastic bags and some tissues and stuffed them all into my other pocket. I was ready to go.

It was still dark as I wheeled my bike down the side path and there was frost crackling under my feet. My hands were freezing but I wasn't going to risk waking anyone by going back for gloves. I zipped my parka right up to my chin and put on my bike helmet. At least my head would be warm.

Once I was out the gate I jumped on the bike and headed for the dirt track that went along the back of the factories. It was hard to see in the half light but I found it and turned off the main road.

There was no sun yet but the day was slowly getting lighter and I was just able to see enough to dodge the rocks and pot-holes. There were lots of

puddles with ice on them and they crackled and splashed icy water onto my shoes as I rode through them.

The road stopped going along the fence and turned off to the right between two factories, so I had to get off the bike and walk. There wasn't even a track – I was on the grassy vacant land behind the long back fence of the chemical complex. I wished I had some gum-boots; my runners were soaking wet and my feet were so cold I could hardly feel them.

I looked along the wire fence. It stretched away from me, long and straight and in the distance, I could just make out a small white mark. I was so excited I tried jumping on my bike to get there more quickly but I couldn't keep my balance properly on the wet grass. I gave up and trudged along, pushing the bike, till at last I got there. There was my white sock and there was the chemical, still oozing slowly out from between the shipping containers.

I leant the bike against a rusty 'Trespassers Prosecuted' sign and made sure it wasn't going to fall, then I clambered up and stood on the seat. I was *still* not high enough to see over the container. I couldn't climb

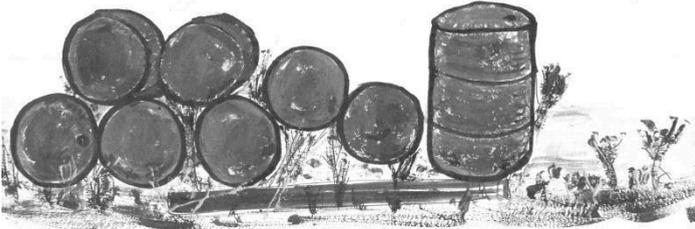
the fence, either because there were four strands of rusty barbed wire leaning out over my head.

I looked to each side. Yes! There was a place where the barbed wire had broken away. I jumped down, pushed the bike further along and climbed up again. Now it was easy. I dug my toes into the wire fence and pulled myself up and over, right onto the top of the container. I looked into the factory yard and hugged myself with delight – I could see everything!

It was a forest of pipes and chimneys – coming out of the tops of buildings or straight out of the ground. They had gauges and taps on them and some were enclosed in large wire cages. Smoke and steam rose in the air, and all I could hear was a gentle hissing and puffing just as though there was an enormous engine down below and it was building up steam ready to set off on some mysterious journey.

The ground around the container was like a rubbish tip, with junk and weeds everywhere. A pile of big metal pipes was stacked against the front of my container, reaching almost to the top. In front of me of me was a heap of rusty drums half covered with

creeping grass. A line of dead grass came from under



the drums and led to the fence.

This was it! I'd found a chemical leak!

I clambered back down the fence and pulled on the rubber gloves to collect a sample. It was hard to make the liquid go into the bottle because it was oozing out under the fence very slowly and the ground was quite flat. Then I had an idea. I found a sharp stone and scraped a hole right up against the bottom edge of the fence, then I propped the bottle in the hole so the liquid would drip into it. I watched for a minute – it was working perfectly. Drop after drop was going right into the glass bottle.

While the bottle was filling, I looked around to see if there was anything else that could be useful.

Yes! There was the body of a lizard – a tiny skink about seven centimetres long. It was lying in the dry grass that had been killed by the yellow stuff. I wrapped the skink in a couple of tissues and put it in a plastic bag and into my pocket. I searched for a couple of metres around but I couldn't see anything else. I could smell something though – it was a sharp smell that I couldn't quite recognise.

By the time I got back to the bottle, it had about a centimetre of liquid in it. I hoped that would be enough for testing but I could always come back for more. I screwed the top back on, put it into a plastic bag and stowed it in my other pocket.

I climbed up onto the container again for a final check. The chemical certainly looked as though it was coming from the pile of drums but if I was doing a real investigation, I needed to be absolutely sure.

Quickly I crossed the top of the container and clambered down the pile of rusty pipes. As I hit the ground I suddenly realised what I had done. On a wire

cage next to me was a notice. It said: ‘Danger. Keep Out.’

I stood there for a moment, looking and listening. There was no sign of anyone, just the constant hissing from the dozens of chimneys and pipes around me.

I tiptoed over and looked carefully at the stack of drums. They were rusty, with peeling paint and the writing on them was unreadable. The bottom of the pile was half buried in the creeping grass. I made sure my rubber gloves were on properly and pulled some of the grass away. There! Now I could see what was happening. One of the rusty drums on the bottom had cracked around the edges and the yellowish liquid was slowly seeping out.

I squatted there, watching the stuff as it oozed onto the ground. I sniffed. There was that smell again, only stronger. I bent closer and sniffed again. Pew! Nail polish remover – that’s what it reminded me of.

Suddenly I heard a footstep. I froze, then carefully peered around the stack of drums. Oh, no! A man was standing at the corner of a building with a dog

on a leash. As I watched, he bent down and unclipped the leash from the dog's collar.

I dodged back. Quickly I replaced the grass and leapt back just as the dog came sniffing around the edge of the drums. It stopped and looked at me and its lips parted in a snarl. A deep growl came from behind sharp, yellow teeth and the hairs on the back of its neck stood straight up.

I stared, unmoving, as stiff-legged, it came slowly towards me. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest and I wondered if I was going to faint with terror.

Then the man appeared. He was wearing a security guard's uniform and was holding a gun in his hand. He looked surprised.

'Well! A little girl,' he said and he smiled; but it wasn't a friendly smile and he still held the gun ready. Without taking his eyes off me, he yelled at the dog.

'Giddown, Prince! Sit!'

The dog stopped growling and sat, panting, at the guard's feet.

The guard stared at me. ‘And just what do you think you’re doing here? Can’t read, eh?’

I took a step back, my gloved hands out of sight behind me.

‘Um – my ball. I was looking for my ball.’

‘At this hour?’ He didn’t believe me. ‘You’ll have to do better than that, girlie.’

‘No, truly!’ I *had* to convince him. ‘I lost it yesterday.’

‘Yeah? Just what sort of ball was it?’

‘It was a – a baseball. We were throwing it round near here yesterday and – it belongs to my brother. I was scared to tell him. I thought it went over this fence –’ I was babbling anything that came into my head.

‘You *thought*?’

‘Yes.’

Behind my back I was frantically trying to get the rubber gloves off. I’d managed to get one off and shove it up the sleeve of my parka. Now I was working on the other one.

‘Well, you just listen here, *girlie*.’ he said, and he sort of smirked, sending shivers up my spine, ‘You’re lucky I didn’t shoot you.’

He looked slowly around. ‘All alone, are you?’

I nodded, my mouth dry with fear.

‘What do you think I should do, *girlie*? Call the police?’

‘No! I’m – I’m really sorry, I didn’t know.’

I couldn’t take my eyes off him as, very slowly, he began to put the gun back into the holster on his hip.

‘Well, you know now, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I nodded. I’d just about got the second glove off behind my back.

‘So – you know what I reckon you should do?’

I shook my head.

His eyes narrowed and he spoke very slowly and menacingly, ‘Get the hell out of here. As fast as you can, right?’

‘Yes, sir.’

The only way I could get back on top of the container was to edge around the front of the drums and

that meant getting quite close to the guard and the dog. Neither of them moved as I crept sideways past them, hardly daring to look where I was going. As soon as I reached the pipes I turned and scrambled up.

‘And don’t come back!’ he yelled as I reached the top. ‘Tell her, Prince!’

I saw a flash of black fur and glistening teeth as the dog sprang up towards me. Dropping the second glove in fright, I flung myself across the top of the container and down over the wire fence landing in a heap on the ground.

The dog stood on top of the container, legs apart and eyes flashing, barking angrily down at me. From behind it I could hear the guard laughing and calling the dog back.

I scrambled onto the bike. I didn’t care how hard it was to ride over the wet grass, I just did it. I slid in the mud; I crashed over rocks; I bounced in and out of pot-holes but somehow I stayed upright and at last I made it to the road.



## CHAPTER 10

As soon as I reached the road I started to shake: first my knees, then my feet and hands, until my whole body was shaking so much I could hardly ride.

I got as far as a bus shelter on the side of the road, dropped the bike on the ground and collapsed onto the seat. For the second time that morning I thought I was going to faint. Black spots came and went in front of my eyes and there was a zinging sound in my head. My throat was dry and sore and I leant back against the wall, struggling to breathe.

Slowly, the graffiti on the inside of the bus shelter came into focus. ‘School sux’, ‘Brad l’s Kylie’, ‘Lincoln Louts Rool’.

My brain cleared at last and I sat up and began to think. What if there’d just been a guard-dog and no

man? I might have been killed – torn apart by those terrible teeth. I shivered at the thought.

I'd found out some important stuff though. I had the dead skink, a sample of the chemical and I knew *exactly* where it was coming from. I was well on the way to a first-class assignment. Miss Kouros was going to be very pleased with me and Michael Vella would see just how stupid he was!

I looked at my watch – after eight-thirty! I'd have to get home.

I picked up my bike and started walking home. I'd just about stopped shaking but my knees still didn't feel quite up to riding. Anyway, I needed a bit more time to think.

Should I tell my Mum and Dad what happened this morning? I didn't think so. Was it really dangerous? Maybe the guard had been frightening me just for fun. How serious was it to trespass on land belonging to a chemical company?

I was still thinking it over when I came in sight of home. I stopped – horrified. The car wasn't in the drive. Had they'd gone without me? Maybe they'd gone

down the beach looking for me. I jumped on the bike and pedalled the last few metres. I skidded round the corner into the drive, braked too late and slammed into the side gate.

‘What’s going on?’ called Josef from behind it and he opened the gate to investigate. ‘Oh, there you are. Where’ve *you* been?’

‘I’ll tell you in a minute. Am I in trouble?’

‘Huh! What do you reckon? Didja forget you were supposed to go to Mass?’

‘Oh, no!’ I groaned.

We nearly always go to Mass before we visit Aunt Maria. Mum reckons she’s got to set a good example because she’s the oldest sister but I don’t think she cares all that much really. And since we talked about the war in Lebanon, I think religion’s pretty strange. It’s supposed to be all about love and peace but everyone fights about it.

It looked like I was going to be in real strife now but there was nothing I could do about it till they got home. Right now, all I wanted was a drink. I dumped my bike and Joe followed me into the kitchen.

‘What have you been up to?’ he said. ‘And look at your shoes! Mum’ll kill you.’

I looked at them, ‘It doesn’t matter,’ I said, ‘they’re the ones I got soaking yesterday. I’ve got others. How come *you* didn’t have to go to Mass, anyway?’ When Mum decides we’re going to church, we all go and no questions asked.

‘Just lucky!’ grinned Joe, ‘They said I had to wait here for you. They’re not happy, though. You’d better have a good excuse.’

I gulped down some water and began to empty the pockets of my parka. How could I explain?

‘I was doing something for school.’

‘Oh, yeah?’

‘I was! Listen, I’ll tell you what happened but I don’t want you to tell Mum and Dad. Not yet, anyway. All right?’

‘Well, I dunno. Depends on what you’ve been doing.’

‘Look, Joe! Nothing wrong! I won’t tell you unless you promise.’

He shrugged. ‘Okay.’

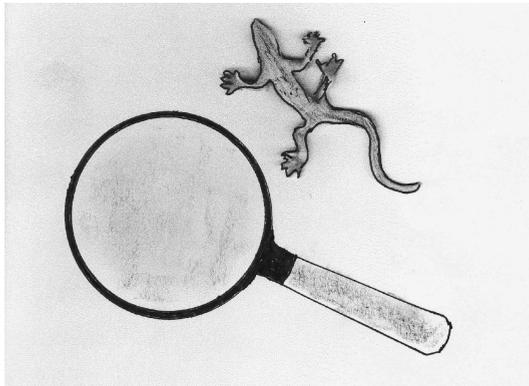
‘See this stuff?’ I handed him the bottle, ‘It’s leaking out of one of the factories.’

‘So what?’

‘It’s pollution! And that’s what I’ve got to do a science assignment on. And this is a dead lizard I found.’

He laughed. ‘Is this what you’ve been doing? Picking up dead lizards?’

‘It’s not funny, Joe. It’s important!’



He cautiously sniffed the stuff in the bottle, then screwed the top back on and handed it to me.

‘Just report this leak if you want to and forget about it.’

He wasn't smiling now, so I decided not to tell him any more – certainly not about the guard and the dog.

'I don't *want* to forget about it.'

'What do you think you are, some kind of detective? You shouldn't be mucking around with stuff like this, Zena.'

'I've got to!' I said. 'It's exactly the sort of thing we're supposed to be doing. And it's not just kids' stuff – it could be really serious.'

'That's what I mean,' said Joe. 'Which factory is it coming from?'

'I don't know; they all look the same from the back. How can I find out?'

'Isn't there a name written on anything?'

'I couldn't see any. It looks like they just dump rubbish down the back.'

'Well, don't worry about it. You've got enough stuff for your assignment, anyway.'

'No, I haven't. I've got to find out more!'

Josef looked at his watch. 'Well, you'd better forget it now and get ready. You've got twenty minutes.'

As I headed for the shower, I stopped at the bathroom door. I'd had the most brilliant idea.

'Joe?'

'What?'

'Can I borrow your camera?'

'My new digital? No way!'

I ran back to him.

'Oh, come on, Joe. If I had a camera I could take a photo through the fence. Then I could show it to someone and find out which factory it is.'

'I saved up for months for that camera. You're not having it.'

'I'd look after it,' I said. 'I promise.'

'You're not having it, Zena, so forget it!'

'You are so mean!' I said, nearly crying. 'I only want a couple of shots. Why can't you be nice for once?'

'Zena!' he yelled, and he glared at me, looking just like Dad. Then suddenly he said, 'Hang on.'

He went to his bedroom and I heard him scrabbling about in a drawer. He came back holding an old disposable camera.

‘Here,’ he said. ‘You can take this if you like. There’s four shots left.’

‘Will it work?’ I asked doubtfully.

‘Course it’ll work. But you’ll have to pay to get the film developed.’

‘Oh, Josef, don’t be so mean! I haven’t got any money.’

He grinned and shrugged.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘You take them and I’ll get them developed. I don’t even remember what’s on it.’

‘Thanks, Joe, you’re terrific! And Joe?’

‘What now?’

‘You won’t tell Mum and Dad about this morning, will you?’

‘I said I wouldn’t. They’ll want to know where you’ve been, though.’

‘I’ll tell them about the project.’ I picked up the bottle and the plastic bags and headed for my room. ‘Miss Kouros said we had to look everywhere, so I’ll just say I was looking along the beach.’

‘You’ve got fifteen minutes!’ he called after me.

I had the quickest shower in the world and by the time I heard the car coming up the drive I was ready. I had made my bed, put away the breakfast dishes and there was a pot of fresh coffee waiting on the kitchen table.

It was worth a try.



## CHAPTER 11

When Mum and Dad walked in the kitchen door they looked like thunder. All Dad said was, ‘Go and pick up your bike off the path and put it away properly!’

Right then I knew I wasn’t going to tell them anything at all.

Then I got the usual lecture from Dad: I mustn’t go out alone; I have to tell them where I’m going; there are lots of bad people in the world; and it’s dangerous for a little girl to be on her own.

‘I’m not little!’ I said.

‘I will decide when you are no longer little,’ said Dad firmly.

‘And don’t answer back, Zena!’ said Mum.

I know I shouldn't argue – it only makes it worse, but sometimes I just can't help myself.

Then Mum started: she thought I was grown up enough to be responsible; she was very disappointed; she thought she could rely on me; didn't I care that she was worried?

She always gets to me more than Dad. He only makes me angry but Mum manages to make me feel guilty.

So the car trip to Brunswick started off in silence. Mum and Dad weren't speaking to me and I wasn't speaking to anyone. Josef had his headphones on listening to music and Samira was looking miserable because the rest of us were so bad tempered. At last she decided to do something about it. She's only little but she's always good at cheering people up. "The little peacemaker" Mum calls her.

'Remember the spit-roasted pig?' she said to the silent car.

I smiled at her. 'Oh, yuk!' I groaned and Mum laughed.

The icy atmosphere started to melt.

Josef took off his headphones. ‘What?’ he asked.

‘Uncle Hakim’s spit-roasted pig,’ I said.

He laughed. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘That was some Christmas, all right.’

It was an unforgettable Christmas dinner we’d had at Uncle Hakim and Aunt Maria’s. The whole family had gathered there – uncles and aunts from the country as well as others from all over the city. Uncle Hakim had promised to do the cooking and when lunchtime came, there we were, standing in the milk bar’s small back yard, plates in hand, looking at a revolting, burnt-black pig on a spit.

‘Remember how he came out sharpening his big carving knife?’ said Josef.

‘Wearing a snowy white chef’s hat and apron!’ said Mum.

‘And how everyone shrieked when he cut into it!’ I added.

Uncle Hakim had ceremoniously stuck his big knife into the pig and instantly, bright red juice gushed out all over him. The pig was practically raw inside!

We ended up with a Christmas dinner of salads. Except us kids – we were allowed make pizzas in Aunt Maria’s kitchen and we used up almost everything in her cupboards and even some stuff out of the milk bar as well. Everyone was laughing and joking and Uncle Hakim was laughing the loudest of all. It turned out to be one of the best Christmases we’d ever had.

As we drove along, Dad’s neck and shoulders slowly relaxed.

‘We’re nearly there!’ he said, joining in the conversation at last, ‘I hope Hakim is not cooking spit-roasted wallaby, today! That would be something, eh?’ and he laughed loudly at his own joke.

Uncle Hakim is crazy about everything Australian, that’s why his sons don’t have Lebanese names. They’re Wayne and Brett Malik. And when Rainbow was born about five years ago, Uncle Hakim was reading about Australian Aborigines, so he named her after the Rainbow Serpent.

When Uncle Hakim came out to greet us, his usual happy smile was missing.

‘What’s wrong, Hakim?’ asked Mum, frowning.

‘Wrong?’ he put his arms out, ‘Why you think something is wrong?’

‘Never mind,’ she said brushing past him, ‘I’ll see Maria.’

Beautiful smells were coming from the kitchen and we followed our noses inside.

‘Maria!’ exclaimed Mum when she got inside, ‘Why didn’t you say you were cooking Lebanese? I’d have brought something. What’s the celebration?’

And Maria burst into tears!

‘Now, now, now!’ said Uncle Hakim, pushing through to her. He patted her large, quivering shoulder as she collapsed onto a chair, dabbing her eyes with an already sodden handkerchief. She looked up.

*‘Hakim etrafad min shooghloh!’* she wailed.

‘Is no problem!’ said Uncle Hakim cheerfully, ‘There will be another job. I tell you already, I have spoken to a friend of a friend and he thinks he can find me a job driving a delivery van.’

He ran his fingers through his thick curly hair so it stood out all over his head. He turned to Mum. ‘Maria will be all right. She was making this big feast for you

so she would not be sad.’ He bent over Aunt Maria and looked into her face, ‘Okay, Maria? Okay now?’

She nodded and blew her nose loudly.

‘I will get this driving job, I am certain!’ said Hakim to us, ‘The company manufactures their own sausages and this is something I am very good at. I will show them the beautiful sausages I make at home – maybe they will want to buy some!’ and he laughed. ‘Everything will be okay! No problem! Now, Fared, some home-made wine, eh? I think you will like this one.’

Maria heaved herself up and began bustling around, still sniffing softly. She began carrying plates of steaming food to the table and the smells filled the kitchen – spicy dolmades, mouth-watering honey-chicken, grilled capsicums, stuffed peppers, all my favourites. Mum was helping her, talking non-stop and trying to comfort her.

‘Kulshayaa ha ykun tamam, ya Maria. Hakim rajwl hasan, wa hua sayaakhuz balo mennek.’

It must be awful not to have a job when you have a family to look after.

‘Doesn’t the milk bar make enough money?’ I asked as I helped carry dishes to the table.

Aunt Maria looked at Mum and her eyes filled with tears again. She shook her head.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Not for some weeks. Some customers have been very cruel. They say that Malik is the name for a terrorist!’

I looked at her with surprise. ‘You too?’ I said.

‘It is not fair!’ she said, ‘We have been here so many years and now people suddenly start to call us names!’

The door banged open and Wayne and Brett came tumbling in, cheerful and muddy, looking like ten-year-old copies of their father: broad foreheads, tight black curls and wide, sparkling smiles.

‘Sorry we’re late, Mum, the footy’s only just finished.’

‘Yeah! It was a great game, you should have been there.’

‘Ach! Look how dirty you are!’ Aunt Maria sniffed hard and was right back to normal. ‘Go now and

wash your face and hands! And find Rainbow. Take her with you and wash her too.'

Uncle Hakim had put on some music and was dancing around, pretending he was a belly dancer.

'Come, Zena!' he cried, pulling me to him, 'Show me how well you can dance!'

The drumbakkas thumped out their insistent beat and my feet and hips picked up the rhythm. 'Habibi, Habibi, my love, my love!' sang the vocalist, high and wavering like a cry from the desert and I began to play imaginary maracas as I sang along with him. Uncle Hakim and I danced and swayed together and soon Mum and Dad joined us, singing and clapping. The boys came back and danced with Samira and Rainbow and we all sang and laughed and danced round the kitchen.

'Enough, enough!' cried Aunt Maria, dodging through the dancing bodies to reach the table, 'How can we hear the shop bell?' but her eyes were smiling and her big hips were also swaying gracefully to the music. As the last notes died away, she clapped her hands, 'Come along, everybody, now we must eat.' And we collapsed, puffing and laughing, round the table.

It was a wonderful feast with dips and sauces of chilli, tomato, cucumber, hummous ... all the spicy, mouth-watering smells of Lebanon. And lots of warm Lebanese bread, fresh from the oven.

Then it was time for Aunt Maria's special desserts: little mouthfuls of sweet almond cakes, baklava dripping with honey, cinnamon cake with apricot jam and layers of cream. In our family, Aunt Maria is famous for her cakes.

Usually I love it when we are all together – the food, Lebanese music and dancing, everyone talking at once – but today I felt different. And it wasn't only because Uncle Hakim had lost his job and people were calling us horrible names, it was because half my brain was still back at the chemical factory that morning. I remembered the gun pointing straight at me; I saw with a shiver the sharp, wet teeth of the dog as its lips lifted in a vicious snarl and I could still hear the guard's voice when he said, 'All alone, are you, *girlie*?'

After lunch, Uncle Hakim and Dad went out into the back lane with Josef and the twins for a game of football. I watched for a while and then wandered back

inside. Samira and Rainbow were playing in Rainbow's bedroom and there was the smell of rich Turkish coffee coming from the kitchen. I went in and found Mum and Aunt Maria sitting at the table sipping and gossiping.

Aunt Maria looked up at me with a big smile.

'Zena!' she said, patting a chair next to her, 'come and sit down with me.'

She took my hand, 'So, you will be having a beautiful new baby in your house? I'm so envious! You are very lucky, Zena – you have a brother and sister already and now you will have another one.'

I smiled weakly at her; I still wasn't sure I was all *that* lucky.

'Big families are so much fun! You remember, Rita, what good times we had with our big family – ten of us! Always something to do, someone to play with. *Ya mahla al ayam al madia kanat*. But now, I think we cannot afford *any* more.'

She sighed and dabbed at another tear coming from her eye.

‘Maybe you would give me yours, eh?’ she said to me. ‘Would your mother give me her new little baby, do you think?’

I was horrified. I thought of the picture of the baby inside Mum’s tummy and I suddenly *knew* it was ours! No one else could ever have it. I must have looked shocked because I saw she and Mum were both laughing and I tried to force a smile onto my face but just at that moment I *hated* my aunt for saying such a thing. How could she even think it?

She put her arm round me and gave me a hug, ‘It’s all right,’ she said, ‘I wouldn’t take it away from you.’



## CHAPTER 12

We didn't stay late because Mum was feeling pretty tired so we were home before it was dark.

Dad and Josef were watching TV and Samira was in the bath. I could hear her splashing about with boats and plastic mugs and having conversations with her imaginary friends.

Mum was ironing our school clothes for the morning and I was sitting at the kitchen table finishing up some maths homework when I remembered how upset Aunt Maria had been when we first arrived there.

'Mum?' I said.

She looked up at me.

'Did Uncle Hakim lose his job because he's Lebanese?'

She didn't answer straight away, then she shook her head. 'I don't know. I hope not.'

'He'll get another one, won't he?'

She smiled. ‘Of course. He is a very resourceful man and a good worker.’

‘I like him,’ I said. ‘He’s fun. I hated seeing Aunt Maria crying. Why do people have to be such pigs?’

‘Things will get better soon, Zena. You’ll see.’

I thought about Michael and his brothers and I wasn’t all that sure. ‘How do you know?’ I asked her.

‘I have to believe that,’ she said, banging the iron down hard on Josef’s school shirt. ‘That is why we came here – to be free – to live our lives without fear.’

She kept ironing, bent over the board so I couldn’t see her face and I wasn’t sure if she was crying. For the first time I noticed her tummy was swelling, bumping a little against the ironing board as she quickly and expertly ironed every corner of the shirt.

It was hard to believe our baby was already there, growing inside her body, and I felt again the weird feeling I’d had when Aunt Maria had joked about taking it. That was when I realised how much I already loved our baby – because, even now, it was part of our family.

‘Does it make you tired, Mum? Having a baby?’

Mum sighed and smiled at me, ‘Yes, a bit more tired than usual, I suppose.’

‘I’m sorry about this morning,’ I said.

‘You’re a good girl, Zena, most of the time. You just have to learn to think a bit more. That will be the best help.’

‘Okay, Mum.’

‘But Zena,’ she stopped ironing and looked at me, ‘The *most* important thing in your life is school. Nothing, but *nothing* is to come in the way of your education!’

She was always on about education.

‘It’s not *that* important, Mum. I mean, as long as I go to school and...’

‘Zena, I want you to listen to me!’ She put the iron down and came and sat across the table from me holding my eyes with hers. ‘I did not have proper schooling and you will. You are my eldest daughter, as I was an eldest daughter, but when I was eight years old I had to leave school.’

She’d never told me *this* before.

‘Eight years old, Mum? But why? You’d hardly started.’

‘My father took me away from school so I could help my mother with the other children. By the time I was your age, Zena, I was doing the work of a grown woman.’

I pictured Samira – eight years old and staying at home to do housework. I just couldn’t imagine it.

‘You heard Maria today,’ said Mum. ‘Ten children, there were. And for Maria and the younger ones, oh yes, it was a wonderful, big, happy family. For me, it was a lot of hard work – and no school.’

I put my hand out and touched my mother’s arm. It was smooth and soft. She looked down at my hand and covered it with hers.

‘It wasn’t fair, Zena. I am not a stupid woman. I have brains and I understand many things about the world,’ she looked up at me and her eyes were wet, ‘but I cannot read or write.’

My mouth dropped open. ‘But, Mum – you know all those other languages!’

‘Languages are easy if they are spoken all around you. In my village we spoke Arabic but when I moved to Beirut, French was spoken just as much, so I learnt it very quickly.’

‘When did you go to Beirut?’

‘When I was fourteen. I escaped from the life of a little village and went to the big city. Ah, that was a wonderful place, Zena. I wish you could have seen it then. It was called “the Paris of the East”.’ She smiled and her eyes brightened. ‘It was a big, cosmopolitan city full of all nationalities – Germans, Italians, French, Egyptian – so many – all living and working together.’

‘Is that when you became a hairdresser?’

‘I’ll tell you a little secret, Zena,’ she said. ‘I have never been a real hairdresser.’

She laughed at my surprised look. ‘No – I cleaned houses, I looked after babies, I washed and ironed – I did anything. I worked and lived in many beautiful homes in Beirut and I learnt many languages and many skills. And only *one* of them was hairdressing.’

‘Were you sad to leave?’

‘A little sad, yes,’ she said. ‘But Beirut was slowly being destroyed. It was no longer a safe place to be. Your father and I decided to come to Australia.’

‘Did you have to go to a Detention Camp?’

‘No,’ she smiled. ‘Nothing like that existed then. Your father filled in the application forms for us both, we had an interview and we were accepted.’

‘Could you speak English?’

‘A little, but not much.’

‘Well, I just don’t understand!’

‘What don’t you understand?’

‘You learnt to speak English as well as all those other languages and you still can’t...’

‘... read and write?’ Her eyes filled again and she shook her head sadly. ‘No, I can’t, not in any language at all.’

‘And you kept it secret? You never told us?’

She drew a deep breath, brushed her eyes briefly and smiled. ‘I never needed to – until now.’ She patted my hand, ‘My father should not have done that to me, Zena. I deserved better. And that is why I will always

put your education first – no matter how many new babies I have.’

She got up and went back to her ironing. I sat at the table, stunned. I wanted to do something to help her – but what could I do?

I hesitated, ‘Would – would I be able to teach you to read, Mum?’

She smiled gently, ‘No, Zena. It’s too late for me now. I would not have the patience. You just do your own schoolwork, that is your first and most important job.’

I looked back down at my maths homework. I didn’t always *love* school but I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to stay home and just do housework. I thought about how much I had already learnt and how excited I was about my science assignment – how I was trying to find out more. That reminded me.

‘Mum, would they have scientists where Dad works?’

‘I’m sure they would. Why?’

‘Well,’ I said, thinking quickly. ‘You know I said we had to look for pollution? Well, Jodie and I found

this liquid – um – just dripping into the creek and I thought – I mean I don't know if it's pollution or not – I just thought maybe Dad could take it in and ask someone to analyse it – just to see if it is.'

It wasn't exactly a lie – well, not much of one. As long as no one asked too many questions.

'Would you ask Dad if he'd take it in for me?' I said.

'Why don't you ask him yourself?'

It's a bit hard to talk to him, sometimes.'

'Nonsense!' she said. 'Of course you can ask him.'

I was hoping she would do it for me. Dad's questions were sometimes a bit awkward.

I got the soda water bottle and took it into the living room. Dad was sitting with Josef watching the footy replay, a glass of beer in his hand.

'Dad?' I said.

His eyes stayed on the screen. 'Mm?'

'Can I ask you something?'

'Of course.'

'Would you do something for me? For school?'

He sighed and took his eyes from the television.  
‘What do you want?’

I took a deep breath, ‘See the stuff in this bottle? Well, we’re doing an assignment at school where we have to find out about pollution. I found some of this stuff and I wondered if there was someone at your work who could tell me what it is.’

‘What do you mean?’ He looked puzzled.  
‘Where did you get it?’

‘Down near the creek. Would you to take it to one of your scientists?’

‘Take it to school.’ He turned back to the TV.  
‘Let them find out what it is.’

‘I can’t, Dad. We’re supposed to do this research ourselves – not take it to school.’

Mum bustled in just as Dad was drawing breath for another objection and I guessed she’d been listening.

‘I’m sure one of your chemists would be happy to help your daughter, Fared. They like to do things to help schools – it is good for the company. Good public relations.’

We exchanged a small grin behind Dad's back. She's clever, all right.

'I don't know any chemists,' said Dad, flatly.

'Come along, Fared,' said Mum, 'Talk to your boss; he'll know who to ask.'

'But ...'

Mum's chin had that determined look that nobody argued with. 'Fared, your daughter needs your help.'

He dragged his eyes away from the footy again. 'Aargh!' he moaned. 'All right. Give it to me. I'll try.'

'Now don't spill it, Dad,' I said, handing it to him. 'I've screwed the top on tight and I've put it in a plastic bag – but please be very careful with it. Okay?'

'All right, all right!' He squinted at the bottle, 'Is this all you have'

'It's all I got this time. I can get some more if you need it.'

He handed it back to me. 'Leave it out for me to take tomorrow.'

‘Thanks, Dad,’ I said. ‘I’ll put it on the kitchen table next to your lunch box, so you won’t forget it. Okay?’

‘All right!’

‘And, Dad – you *will* ask someone, won’t you?’



## CHAPTER 13

On Monday, as soon as Dad got home from work I asked him about the bottle of liquid.

‘It is in my locker,’ he said and, ‘No, I have done nothing about it.’

Still, at least he’d taken it.

On Tuesday, I asked him again. This time he had actually spoken to his boss about it and his boss had said he knew a chemist who would probably help. But, ‘No! I have not given it to him yet. Maybe tomorrow.’

On Wednesday we had a netball match after school and I forgot to ask. At dinner time Dad was very pleased to be able to remind me.

‘Zena,’ he said cheerfully, ‘where are your questions tonight?’

I looked up, ‘What questions?’

‘She has forgotten, already,’ he said to Mum, laughing. ‘What sort of a scientist is this?’

‘Oh, my bottle! What’s happened?’

‘My boss has taken it and he says he will pass it on to a chemist. Are you happy now?’

Again I had that excited flutter in my tummy and I couldn’t help grinning.

‘Thanks, Dad!’

On Thursday, I couldn’t wait to see Dad after work but he had no more news.

On Friday I didn’t have to ask. I got home a bit late from doing some shopping after school and Dad was waiting for me. He was in the garden as usual and as soon as I opened the gate he called out.

‘Zena!’ He sounded angry, ‘Over here!’

Fearfully, I went over to him. What could have made him so annoyed?

‘Where did you get that stuff?’

‘What stuff? Oh, in the bottle? I told you – the creek.’

‘I was very upset at work today.’

‘Why?’

‘Chemists are very important men and they are very busy people. I do not like it if one of them has to come over to the factory to see me.’

‘Why? What was wrong?’

‘He called me away from my job and I had to go into the supervisor’s office. This I do not like, Zena!’

This was the very worst thing that could have happened! Dad hates it when people notice him. But I still had to know.

‘What did he say about the liquid, Dad?’

‘He *said* he was very worried but I think he was also annoyed. This chemical is extremely poisonous, he tells me. He asked if you had breathed it? Did you? Did you touch it?’

‘No! No, I didn’t.’

‘Where did you get it from, Zena? The chemist said you could not just find it. He thought you might have been telling me some stories.’

‘No, Dad, I haven’t.’

‘If I find you have been lying to me...’

‘No! I told you – the creek. It was coming from...’ I stopped. I couldn’t tell him about climbing over the fence.

‘From where?’

‘From – from a little trickle running through the grass into the creek.’

‘Whereabouts is this creek?’

‘It’s the one right up the other end of the beach, Dad, just where it gets wet and marshy.’

‘Behind the factories?’

I nodded nervously. It was getting harder to find the right answers.

‘What were you doing there?’

‘Nothing. Just walking with Jodie.’

‘So – why did you put it in a bottle?’

‘I told you. We’re supposed to be looking for pollution for school.’

He thought for a moment. ‘Okay, I will tell the chemist where you found it. But you will not go there again, do you hear me?’

‘But, Dad ...’

‘No more! You are not to go down that part of the beach again, do you understand?’

‘Yes, Dad.’

I had to leave it at that. That’s the trouble with my father, he just won’t listen. I wanted to explain to him that I needed to talk to the chemist myself. I wanted to meet him and ask him what the stuff was and tell him where it was coming from. That was what my investigation was all about. But it’s impossible to tell Dad that. He just doesn’t listen to me.

Well, all right – I wouldn’t go down that end of the beach again – I didn’t need to. But I *would* go on trying to find out which factory the stuff was coming from. If it really was dangerous then it should be cleaned up – and soon. I was glad the next day was Saturday.

I got on the phone to Jodie. ‘Jodie? Can you come round early tomorrow morning? Bring your bike. We’ve got some more investigating to do! And don’t wear your good jeans this time!’

After dinner I collected the things I’d need for the morning: the one rubber glove I’d brought back from

the last trip, the camera, another small bottle from the recycling bin and a couple of plastic bags for any more evidence we might discover. I was feeling a bit more nervous about it this time; I didn't want to be seen by that guard again.

At nine o'clock the next morning Jodie and I were at the turn-off of the dirt road. Wheeling our bikes, we made our way along the fence looking for the white marker. Of course, Jodie knew all about how I'd been caught by the guard and his dog last Sunday morning; I'd told her at school, and she wasn't at all happy about going with me.

'You don't have to worry,' I said to her, 'the dog can't get through the fence. And there's no way I'm going over again. I just hope the dog didn't take that rubber glove back to the guard.'

'Well, I think your father's right,' Jodie argued, 'We should just forget about it.'

I wasn't listening to her, I was looking along the fence ahead of us.

'The marker's gone,' I said.

‘He’s taken it!’ Jodie’s voice was starting to shake, ‘He knows you been snooping!’

‘Well, even if the sock’s gone, it doesn’t matter. I’ll know the place because of the broken barbed wire.’

We found the place but not quite the way I’d expected.

The white marker was gone all right but so was the broken barbed wire. There was new, shining razor wire coiled along the top of the fence, and hanging from one of the vicious looking coils, was a rubber glove. It hung there like a warning – and one end of the glove was shredded to bits – as though it had been savaged by dog’s teeth.

We stood there for a second or two, our breath taken away with fright.

‘Let’s go, Zena!’ cried Jodie. ‘Let’s get out of here!’

My first instinct was to run, like Jodie said; to jump on our bikes and get out of there as quickly as possible – but I hesitated.

‘I’ve got the camera, Jodie! Maybe I can just take some photos.’

‘Oh, come on, Zena!’ Jodie was nearly crying, ‘I’m scared!’

I quickly checked and saw that the tiny stream of chemical was still coming out from under the fence.

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘you start back and wait a little way along. I’ll only be here for a few seconds.’

‘Oh, no, Zena! You come too!’

‘Look, if anyone comes, I’ll yell out. Then you can start riding. They won’t do anything if they know someone’s with me.’

As Jodie turned to go back, I pulled on my rubber glove, took the lid off the empty bottle and quickly propped it in the hole under the dripping chemical. Then I stood back and pointed the camera at the bottle. Snap – that was one shot.

I pointed the camera at the dying grass which marked the path of the chemical stream. Snap – that was the second shot.

I walked backwards and pointed the camera up towards the chimneys which towered up above the containers. Snap – now I had only one shot left. Did I dare try to climb up on the container again?

I looked towards Jodie who had stopped about fifty metres along the fence. She had her foot on the pedal of her bike, ready for an immediate take off. I waved to her and looked up at the new razor wire. No, there was no way I could get over that. I'd better pack up and go.

Putting the camera in my pocket, I resealed the bottle, wrapped it in a plastic bag with the rubber glove and was about to leave when I had an idea. I went up to the fence where the liquid was coming out. Straddling the wet patch, I pressed my face against the wire mesh and peered through the small gap between the two containers. I couldn't see much but I thought that one of the distant tanks had some writing on it. Grabbing the camera again, I pressed it against the wire mesh with the lens in one of the holes and snapped. There, that was it.

Suddenly, there was a flurry of feet and in front of me was the head of the big black dog. With a snarl followed by frantic barking, he flung himself against the fence. I nearly fell backwards into the trickle of chemical but managed to get my balance and run for the bike. The dog could only just fit between the containers.

He was on his hind legs clawing at the fence with his front paws and still barking loudly.

I was on my bike in a flash and pedalling over the bumpy grass, racing behind Jodie who was already pedalling frantically ahead of me. As I caught up to her, we heard the dog's bark change. There was a yelp, as though it was in pain. We slowed down a bit and listened. The dog howled once and then the yelping began again. We looked at each other, wondering what could have happened.

Then I understood. 'The chemical, Jodie! Remember how it stung my leg? The dog had its feet in it!'

I felt the bottle in my pocket. What *was* this stuff I was carrying? I began to realise how dangerous this whole business might be and a shiver of fear ran down my spine.



As Jodie and I reached the end of the track, it began to rain – fine and misty – and we both raced for home. I

was glad. I'd had enough excitement to last me quite a while and once I was home I intended to stay there.

As for Jodie, she was so frightened she was shaking.

'Don't you ever, ever ask me to go there again,' she said, almost sobbing, 'I hate science, anyway! I'm going home!' and she pedalled off ahead of me, disappearing into the rain.

I didn't see her for the rest of the weekend. The rain went on and on and kept everyone indoors. I did my homework, watched some TV, played cards with Samira and kept very quiet about my pollution assignment.

When I found Josef on his own, I gave him the camera back and told him I'd finished the film. 'But please don't tell Dad you lent it to me,' I begged.

I was feeling a bit uneasy about Dad but, after all he'd only said I had to stay away from the end of the beach; he hadn't actually said I couldn't go on with my investigations. Deep down, of course, I knew he'd be very angry if he found out what I'd been doing but I promised myself I'd tell him later, when it was over.



## CHAPTER 14

In science class on Monday Miss Kouros put a big chart up on the wall with everyone's name on it. As soon as we decided what type of pollution we were working on, she wrote it on the chart, so we'd all have different subjects. Written along the top were the days we had to bring in our first and second drafts, and the days left till the deadline and each day Miss Kouros crossed one off. There were fourteen days left.

Michael Vella was doing 'Smoking', how it polluted your lungs and everyone else's, and the mess that smokers made with their butts and cigarette packets. He'd brought his first draft in and Miss Kouros held it up and showed the class how he was doing it. I wasn't

impressed though – it hadn't needed much investigation. That sort of stuff was easy to find. Mine was going to be much better.

Karen de Vries brought hers in too and reckoned it was finished. She had a sheet of A4 paper and the heading was: 'Icy Pole Sticks in the School Ground'. Underneath she'd written: 'I counted the icy pole sticks near the canteen for three lunchtimes. There were thirty-five sticks near the canteen one day, twenty-eight the next and thirty-seven the next. I think students should put them in the bins. Then we wouldn't have this sort of pollution.'

And that was the end of her report.

'Did you pick them up to count them, Karen?' asked Miss Kouros.

'Course not!' said Karen, wrinkling her nose. 'They were filthy.'

Miss Kouros sighed. 'So what action are you taking to stop that pollution?'

'I'm just saying,' said Karen, 'that people should pick them up.'

The class groaned.

‘All right, Karen,’ said Miss Kouros. ‘I’ll help you work on it a bit more.’ And she ticked Karen’s name off in the First Draft column.

I hadn’t registered my subject. I didn’t want to talk about it till I was sure I could do it properly, but Miss Kouros was getting impatient.



‘It’s no good leaving it till the last minute, Zena. You’ll have to start on something soon.’

‘I’m getting stuff together, Miss, but...’

‘Well, tell me the subject and I’ll put it on the chart.’

‘I’m not exactly sure what to call it,’ I said.

I was worried that Miss Kouros might think it was serious enough to go to someone in authority – then I’d never be able to complete it. I just wanted to do it *my* way.

Jodie had promised to keep it a secret – anything, as long as I didn’t involve her any more.

‘Anyway,’ she said to me, ‘I’ve got to start my own research.’

‘What are you doing?’ I asked.

‘Can’t you read?’ she said. ‘Miss Kouros put it on the chart this morning. You only care about what *you’re* doing!’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said guiltily. I looked at the chart; against her name was ‘Pollution of Bay and Beach’.

‘Why don’t we go down the beach after school today?’ I suggested, ‘I’ll help you collect stuff.’

‘Well...’ she sounded a bit reluctant. ‘I’m going down the beach anyway. You can come if you like, it’s just that...’

‘What?’

‘Well, Jason Pirelli said he’d come with me.’

‘Jason Pirelli!’ I could hardly believe I’d heard properly. ‘You’re going down the beach with Jason Pirelli?’

I’d been dodging him and Sean since that Saturday morning with the dogs and here she was getting friendly with him.

‘I couldn’t help it!’ she protested, ‘He’s doing “From the Gutters to the Bay” and he said he’d have to look down the beach where the drains come out. So he asked if he could come down with me. I couldn’t stop him!’

I had a funny feeling she hadn’t wanted to.

‘Do you want me to come?’ I asked, rather half-heartedly, ‘So you don’t have to talk to him?’

‘I don’t care,’ she said, tossing her long plait, ‘He can come if he wants. He can carry my stuff.’

We were sitting together having our lunch and, as she packed up her lunch box, I noticed her hands. Her long, slim fingers were tipped with new sparkly-green nail polish and on her wrist was her best silver bracelet.

I looked at my own hands: brown and not too clean, with scratches and a couple of broken nails. I shrugged. I was supposed to go to netball practice after school anyway. She and Jason could go to the beach on their own.



We had netball practice after school every night that week, so when Josef came home on Wednesday night with the photos, I'd hardly had time to think about them. He brought out the packet while Dad was still in the garden.

‘Don’t suppose you want to see these?’ he asked casually.

‘Yay! What are they like? Are they any good?’

Joe shook his head and laughed as he handed me the four prints. ‘You’re not much of a photographer.’

Impatiently I grabbed them and saw that two of them were out-of-focus blurs.

‘Oh, they’re rubbish!’ I said. ‘What did I do wrong?’

‘Too close, probably. What were they?’

‘That one was the bottle filling up and this one was the dead grass.’

‘Well, you need to be further back. The other two aren’t bad but you moved the camera a bit.’

The chimneys rearing up over the back of the container looked really good even though they were a little bit blurry, but the shot through the containers was great – like looking down a dark passage with light at the end.

‘Can you read that name, Joe? See, on the tank?’

Joe peered at it, ‘No, not really. It’s a bit far away.’

I was terribly disappointed. The photos were supposed to be an important part of my whole assignment but if you couldn’t see anything properly, they were useless.

Joe went off to watch some TV and I took them over to the window to try to decipher the name on the tank. Maybe a magnifying glass would help. I dropped them on the kitchen table and went to my room. I was almost sure I had a magnifying glass at the back of one of my drawers.

I was just coming back with it when I heard Dad's voice.

‘Josef?’

‘Yes, Dad.’

‘Why have you been taking these photos?’

I heard his steps going into the lounge room.

‘If my boss saw these photos, I would be in big trouble’

‘Why?’ I heard Joe ask.

‘Security regulations. Very tight security there. No cameras, no photos.’

I followed Dad into the room. ‘Is that the place where *you* work, Dad?’

‘Yes, and I would like Josef to tell me why these photos were taken.’

I gulped, ‘I took them, Dad.’

He turned in surprise, ‘You, Zena? Why?’

‘It’s where the chemical’s coming from.’

‘Eh?’

‘You know,’ I said. ‘The stuff I got you to take to work.’

His eyes fixed on me. ‘You told me it was in the creek.’

‘It was! It was dripping into the creek and – and I followed it.’

‘Didn’t I say you were not to go there again?’

‘I didn’t!’ My voice was starting to shake. ‘I went along the back fence. And I found where it was coming from.’

‘I see. And you took photos?’

I nodded, trembling.

‘So!’ he said angrily. ‘You want me to lose my job?’

‘Why would you ...’

‘Because I have taken your bottle to one of our chemists. Do you think I can tell him it is coming from our own factory?’

‘Yes! He’ll want to know!’

‘Ha! I do not think so! If there is something leaking from our factory, Zena, I am not going to be the one to tell him.’

‘Why not?’

He pointed his finger at me and spoke very slowly, ‘Because – trouble – makers – lose – jobs!’ He turned away from me, ‘I am very disappointed in you, Zena.’

‘But, Dad ...’

‘You have lied to me, you have disobeyed me and now you sneak around the place where I work, trying to make trouble!’

‘I’m not trying to ...’

‘I don’t want to hear anything more about it!’

‘But, Dad, it’s import ...’

Impatiently he turned on me. ‘Zena! That’s enough! I am not talking about it any more!’

‘You have to!’ I shouted. ‘It’s important!’

He yelled at me, furiously. ‘Don’t you *dare* speak to me like that!’

I drew a deep breath. ‘Dad, just listen to me for once! I had to find out where it was coming from

because – because it's poison, Dad.' I could feel my voice trembling and struggled to control it. 'There was a dead bird and a dead lizard, and that stuff poisoned them! And it's coming out into our creek. You can't just pretend it's not there!'

Dad was glaring at me, speechless. Then Mum's voice came from the doorway behind me.

'She's right, Fared. You can't just ignore it.'

I gave her a grateful glance and unexpectedly felt tears coming in to my eyes. 'Dad, we've got a baby coming; we've got to try and keep things safe for it.'

'You don't understand!' he said and his face was pale. 'Neither of you! Things are not like they were.'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'I do not want to be like Hakim and lose my job. I have to be careful. People are more suspicious – of us.'

'And that is why you *must* report it, Fared.' Mum's voice was strong and determined. 'We will not allow bigoted people to take away our freedom to act responsibly.'

There was a pause while both of them looked at each other. Then Mum spoke again.

‘And Zena is right about the baby.’

Dad looked me and back to Mum, then he slowly nodded his head and sighed.

‘You are right, of course.’

This was the very first time I’d ever won a battle with Dad and, suddenly, I realised how much I loved him.

He sat down heavily on the couch next to Josef. ‘I know it is what I should do, but it will be difficult.’ He looked up at Mum, ‘*Ana mish mushagheb, ya Rita.* I do not like trouble.’

Mum sat on the arm of the couch and put her hand on his shoulder, ‘But if it is the right thing to do...?’

‘It’s not my business,’ said Dad. ‘Why should I get into it? If there is a leak, let someone else report it.’

Joe took his eyes off the TV. ‘Haven’t you always said we should stand up for what’s right?’

‘Of course we should stand up for what’s right – but sometimes we have to think of other things, too. What if I lose my job, eh? What do we live on if I can’t get another one?’

‘But they wouldn’t sack you, would they, Dad?’  
asked Josef.

‘Josef, think! They may not be pleased to have  
this leak reported.’

‘Why?’ said Joe.

‘Ach! Listen!’ he got up and walked to the  
window, his back to us, ‘Because some companies do  
not care. And this is how they get rid of bad things –  
accidentally!’

‘On purpose?’ I said.

‘Yes!’ He turned back angrily, ‘*Now* do you see  
why I don’t want to report it?’

I was shocked, ‘But they couldn’t sack you for  
that, Dad! It wouldn’t be fair.’

‘Maybe not, Zena, but they could do it.’

‘Well, I think that’s stupid!’ I said, ‘Wouldn’t  
somebody do something to stop them sacking you?’

‘Yes, Dad!’ said Josef, ‘What about the union?  
They wouldn’t let anyone sack you, just for reporting a  
chemical leak.’

‘Hah! They would find some way around the  
union.’

‘Maybe Josef’s had a good idea, Fared,’ said Mum, ‘Perhaps you could do it that way. Talk to your union man. Let *him* take the information to the boss, then no one needs to know who reported it.’

I watched Dad as he stood silently thinking, obviously undecided. I didn’t like seeing him like this. I wanted him to be strong and resolute, like he always was.

‘Would that work, Dad?’ I asked hesitantly.

He nodded slowly. ‘All right, maybe I can talk to the union rep. He will know what to do.’ He looked at me, holding the photograph in his hand. ‘You’re quite sure this is where it comes from?’

‘Yes. It’s coming out from under the fence between those two containers. See – you can just see the edge of a pile of drums. I’m sure it’s coming from them.’

He didn’t ask how I knew so much about it. Maybe he didn’t want to know.

He nodded, more firmly, ‘Okay, I will tell the union.’



It took Dad a couple of days to get a chance to talk to the union man but when he came home on Friday he looked very happy. He'd spoken to him that day and the man had been very interested in everything Dad told him. Mum sat him down at the kitchen table and gave him a cup of coffee.

'The garden can wait, Fared. Tell us what happened.'

'Yes, what did he say, Dad?' I asked.

'He's a pretty good bloke,' Dad said. 'He's the storeman, Alec McDonald. He said it was a good thing I had told him about it.'

'Did you tell him I found it?'

'Yes, I did – and he asked me a lot of questions; about you, about where you found it,' he looked seriously at me, 'and about what you were doing there.'

'I wasn't doing anything wrong! Did you tell him it was going into the creek?'

'I told him what you told me, okay?' he pointed his finger at me, 'And I hope it was true!'

I was offended, ‘Of course it was true! I’m investigating it for school, I’m not likely to make it up! Did he say what it was? And what they’re going to do about it? I need to know that, too.’

Dad sighed, ‘Zena! Be satisfied! He was very concerned about this leak and he said he will take care of it. I am not going to keep asking him questions!’

Before I could argue, Mum interrupted, ‘That will do, Zena! If your father learns anything more, he will tell you. If not, you must be satisfied.’

Now it was my turn to sigh. They just didn’t seem to understand what it was I was trying to do! Time was running out for the assignment – I only had a little over a week to get it finished. I’d have to get most of it written this weekend.

Just telling the union bloke wasn’t enough. I needed to be sure it was going to be cleaned up. I wanted to know how they were going to do it – and when.



## CHAPTER 15

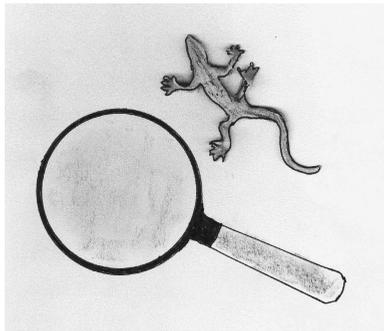
On Saturday, after lunch, I went to my bedroom to start work on the assignment. Jodie and I usually see each other on Saturday afternoon but today she'd gone shopping in the city with her mother. She didn't say what she was doing on Sunday but I saw her talking to Jason Pirelli at lunchtime on Friday. Maybe they had to go looking for pollution on the beach again.

I took out everything I had collected for the assignment and looked at them: the dead lizard in a jar of methylated spirits, the tiny bit of chemical I'd collected in the second bottle and the photos, with only two good enough to use – not much to make a prize-winning assignment.

I didn't want to just write about it – that would be boring. Maybe, I could do a table-top display, something like you would see in the museum, with cards and arrows and maps.

I dug around under my bed and dragged out some big pieces of cardboard. I'd been saving them for ages and they'd be ideal for this. I got everything else ready: a ruler, scissors, coloured pens, and started work.

I made two cardboard stands, one for the bottle of chemical and one for the lizard jar and labelled them 'Exhibit 1' and 'Exhibit 2'. Then I did a sort of diary explaining how I'd found everything.



*Saturday, June 25<sup>th</sup>*

**We found a dead bird (grebe)**

**My ankle was stung by something in the water.**

**We found a line of dead grass and followed it to the back of a chemical company.**

***Sunday, June 26<sup>th</sup>***

**I put on rubber gloves and got a sample of the liquid in a bottle.**

**I found a dead skink.**

**Inside the fence I saw a pile of rusty drums covered in grass.**

**A fierce dog was guarding them.**

***Monday, June 27<sup>th</sup>***

**I gave the bottle of liquid to my father to find out what it was.**

***Saturday, July 2<sup>nd</sup>***

**I took some photos of the place where I had found the chemical.**

I didn't say anything about going over the fence or meeting the guard. I didn't think responsible scientists were supposed to be trespassers.

I worked most of that afternoon, forgetting everything until I heard Mum calling me for tea.



We weren't going out visiting on Sunday so I was able to get back to my assignment. I traced a map of the area from Dad's street directory; it showed the beach, the creek, the long fence behind the factories and the dirt road. I marked in the place where we'd found the dead bird and the path of the chemical leading back to the factory fence. I used lots of different colours on the map and labelled everything very clearly. It was starting to look great. I stuck the map to the big piece of cardboard with the two good photos: the one of the factory chimneys and the view through the two containers.

I made 'Exhibit 3' too. That was the rubber glove – to show how careful I'd been in handling the chemical. I thought Miss Kouros would be pleased about that.

I started thinking about what Dad had said. How could he believe he'd lose his job for reporting a leaking

drum? They'd probably be glad to know so they could do something about it.

But what if they already knew? Would the union man get into trouble for telling them? What if he said that Dad had told him about it? Then Dad would be in trouble – maybe lose his job – and it would be my fault.

But I'd found a poisonous chemical leaking into the creek. Was I supposed to ignore it? No, I was doing exactly what Miss Kouros had told us to do; I was investigating pollution and doing a report on it.

I looked at my nearly completed assignment and felt a shiver of pride. I just needed to know what was going to happen to the drums and it would be finished. Surely Dad would be able to find that out for me!



On Monday, Jodie handed her assignment in. She must have been working on it over the weekend, too.

Jodie can draw absolutely anything and all her exercise books are decorated with beautiful patterns – flowers and trees twisted and twined together, suns and

moons with fantastic faces – she never stops drawing. So when she does a project on anything – even pollution – it’s never quite what you’d expect. This time she’d used an enormous sheet of art paper and had filled the whole page up with a swirling design in colours of the sea – blues, greens and browns. It was a fantastic pattern of shells, anemones, seaweed, driftwood, starfish, everything from the sea mixed up together; and half hidden in amongst these, you could pick out the pollution: crushed cigarette packets, a broken thong, supermarket bags, frayed rope, a beer can – the longer you looked at it the more things you could find.

When Jodie handed it to her, Miss Kouros gazed at it for quite a long time. Then she smiled a little and shook her head gently, ‘I’m not sure if it’s what I was asking for, Jodie but it’s beautiful.’

She pinned it up on the wall with the other completed ones and then turned to the class.

‘I hope you realise that the date for handing in your assignments is nearly here? Next Monday,’ she said firmly, ‘so those of you who have done your first and second drafts have one week to finish them. But I

see,’ and she glared at me, ‘that there are two people who haven’t handed in anything at all.’

‘Well, I still don’t know what to do,’ wailed a voice from the back. It was little Jimmy Clements - he’s a bit slow and terribly quiet and sometimes we forget he’s even in the class.

‘Never mind, Jimmy,’ sighed Miss Kouros. ‘You’d better come up here and I’ll help you pick a subject from the list. And what about you, Zena? I haven’t seen one draft or even an indication of your subject matter. Should I assume that you haven’t started either?’

‘I have! I told you I had. Don’t you believe me?’

‘Well? What’s the subject?’

‘It’s – it’s sort of – special.’ I didn’t want to say anything till I was sure Dad wasn’t going to get into trouble. ‘I can’t say what it is yet but it’s really important.’

‘Oh, yeah?’ said Michael, ‘I bet it is!’

I jumped up and turned round to yell at him. ‘It is! I just can’t tell anyone about it yet.’

A couple of kids who were hanging around with Michael started calling out. ‘Course you can’t!’ ‘Who cares?’

Michael smirked at them and sat back, folding his arms. ‘Bet you haven’t even started,’ he said.

‘You shut up, Michael!’ I shouted, ‘It’s nearly finished and it’ll be better than your stupid smoking thing!’

Miss Kouros shouted over the top of us, ‘That will do!’

‘Well,’ said Michael, ‘she thinks she’s so smart...’

‘She’s smarter than you, Michael!’ said Jodie.

‘Yeah? Why doesn’t she show us, then!’

‘*Sit down and be quiet!*’ said Miss Kouros in her killer voice.

We sat down.

*‘I don’t want to hear another word. Understood?’*

We nodded. Miss Kouros took a deep breath and pinned up a couple of stray hairs, then she glared at me.

‘Zena, I can’t *make* you tell us what your project is but I expect to see it – completed – one week from today. And because of your attitude, it had better be quite outstanding.’

I didn’t care what she said. It *was* going to be outstanding. Just as long as Dad could tell me that final bit of information.



The days dragged by and I got myself into big trouble at home by nagging Dad about the drums.

‘Please ask him what he’s doing about them, Dad! Please!’

‘Zena! If he tells me I will let you know, but I will not keep annoying him! Now do *not* ask me again!’

I decided I’d leave it till the end of the week. If he didn’t know by then, I’d just have to put the project in on Monday without the final answer.

By Thursday, everyone in the class had handed theirs in – except me.

Jason Pirelli's wasn't bad, I suppose. 'From the Gutter to the Bay' was a good title and he'd found lots of funny things that ended up in the bay after being washed off the roads and footpaths. He said he'd found them at the drain outlets on the beach but I reckon he made some of them up. There was a nearly toothless comb that was just like the ones Miss Kouros wears and he'd labelled it, 'Greek Hair Comb'. Miss Kouros laughed like anything at that. He even had some dried dog poo in a sealed plastic bag!

It was neatly done, too but I had a funny feeling when I looked at it. The title and all the labels looked just like Jodie's lettering. She hadn't said anything about helping him – so I didn't ask her.

Sean Aherne had done his assignment on the big drain that comes out into the beach. He'd called it 'Swimming in a Sewer' and he had lots of newspaper cuttings about it and a report from the local hospital. He'd even interviewed one of the councillors and he had a petition attached to his assignment for people to sign if they wanted to get rid of it.

Even Jimmy Clements' was in. It was only a scrappy piece of paper with little bits of different rubbish stuck on it – lolly paper, a bit of a pie bag, a match, a cigarette butt, a bit of plastic – just lots of small things. He said he'd found them all round his house. Well, I could believe that!

Miss Kouros was getting very cross with me.

'Don't sit there looking so smug, Zena. We haven't seen *anything* of yours yet, remember.'

'It's not quite finished yet, Miss. I just have to find out one more thing.'

'Hmm. Well, if it's not handed in on Monday, young lady, you get no marks for it!'

That was on Thursday.



That afternoon I was home before Dad and had the kettle on to make some coffee. When I heard the car pull up in the drive, I put out another mug for him.

'Any news?' I asked warily, as I put the coffee in front of him.

He sat at the kitchen table and took a sip, ‘News? What about?’

‘You know, Dad! From the union man – about what they’re doing with the leaking drums.’

‘Oh, that. Yes.’

‘Well?’

‘They’re getting rid of them.’

At last, something was happening. ‘What are they going to do with them?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. He didn’t say.’

‘Well, what *did* he say?’

‘He said they’re getting rid of them.’

‘But, Dad, is that all he said?’

‘Well, not quite all Zena.’ He wasn’t looking at me and I had a terrible feeling that something was wrong.

‘What else, then?’

‘He said you were very observant to notice this leak and you did right to talk to me about it.’

‘Yes?’

‘And he said that I did the right thing telling him because that meant he could get it cleaned up.’

‘Yes, I know’ I said. ‘He told you all that last week.’

‘But he said ...’ He looked up at me. ‘I’m sorry, Zena but he said you can’t use it in your school project.’

The world rocked. My mouth went dry.

‘What?’

‘He said it would be bad for the company and bad for our jobs if people read about it.’ He put his hand out towards me but I drew back. ‘I know you’re disappointed but – that’s the way it has to be.’



## CHAPTER 16

I begged, I pleaded, I tried to explain to him how important it was. I even showed him the work I'd already done. I cried, I slammed doors, I sobbed but it was useless.

At last Dad turned on me, 'It was you, Zena, who wanted me to tell someone! Now that I have – you are still not happy.'

'But I found it. He's got no right...'

'He knows what is best. Listen to me,' he tried to put his hand on my shoulder but I shrugged it off. 'Listen, Zena! Alec says you are a very good girl to work so hard at school. He said he was very sorry about the assignment but...'

‘Hah! Big deal!’

‘That is enough! If showing it to people at your school will cause trouble it is simple – you cannot show it to them!’ and he stamped out into his garden.

I spent the next hour flat on my bed, howling my eyes out. It was the best project I’d ever done and now I couldn’t use it.

Eventually, with no more tears left, I knew I was beaten. Dad and the union man seemed to be the best of mates now. ‘Alec says this’ and ‘Alec says that’. I hated Alec!

When Mum called me for dinner I didn’t want to come out but she talked to me through the closed door.

‘Zena? I know you’re upset and I understand how you feel.’

‘No, you don’t!’

‘But I won’t have you sulking in there. Come out now and have your dinner!’

So I came out and sat at the table. I was still sniffing and I must have looked awful but I didn’t care.

Josef was at footy practice so there was only Samira and me and Mum and Dad. Samira was excited

about a bike ride she was doing on Saturday and wanted to tell us about it but she and Mum were the only ones talking.

‘I’ve got fifteen sponsors, Mum,’ she boasted happily, ‘and each one is paying ten cents a kilometre. That’s – um – \$1.50 for every kilometre I ride.’

‘That’s wonderful,’ said Mum, ‘Where did you get them?’

‘Mrs Smith along the street, some of the teachers and Aunt Maria and Uncle Hakim said they’d sponsor me double!’

‘What time does it start?’ asked Mum.

‘We’ve got to be at the corner of Civic Parade and Creek Road at twelve o’clock. It’s six kilometres for us and the older ones have to go round twice.’

‘What is this?’ asked Dad, jolted out of his silence.

Samira looked up with alarm. ‘The “Pedal Against Poverty”, Dad, remember? I told you about it. You said you’d sponsor me.’

Dad shook his head dismissively, ‘I don’t remember. Who are you going with?’ It was a question loaded with danger and Samira knew it.

‘Just – two of the girls from school.’

‘They are both eight years old? Like you?’

By now her bottom lip was beginning to tremble, ‘Yes.’

Dad shook his head firmly, ‘Not on your own, Samira.’

Her big brown eyes got twice as big as tears suddenly filled them.

‘But – I won’t be on my own, Dad.’

‘Not just three little girls. It is not safe.’ He went on eating.

Samira looked at Mum then back at Dad and blinked. The two big tears splashed onto her plate as she bent her head. There was silence at the table.

‘I’ll go with her,’ I said.

I couldn’t believe I’d said it. Here I was, with three days to find another subject for a science assignment that had to be in by Monday and I’d just thrown away all of Saturday.

Dad nodded, 'If Zena will go with you, then it's all right. She will look after you.' He smiled a little at Samira as she brushed her tears away with her hand and sniffed. He looked at me too, but I kept my eyes on my plate.

That night when I was trying to get to sleep my mind kept asking questions that had no answers. How could I produce an assignment in two days? How could it be as good as the one I'd been bragging about? How was I going to face Miss Kouros and Michael Vella on Monday if I didn't have one? Why did I have to end up with nothing – after all my work and effort? I'd done absolutely everything Miss Kouros had asked for and no one would ever know about it. The tears came again and I cried myself to sleep.

When I woke in the morning, the screwed up sheets and twisted blankets on my bed looked the way my mind felt.

It was Friday and there was no science class, so at least I wouldn't have to face more questions from Miss Kouros.



Jodie and I sat together at lunchtime but we didn't seem to have a lot to talk about. I wanted to tell her about my project but I didn't know how to start.

'I liked your assignment,' I said. 'Did it take you long?'

'About two weekends,' she said shortly. 'What about yours? Is it finished?'

I sighed, 'I can't do it.'

'What do you mean, 'can't do it'? She didn't sound as if she cared about the answer.

'Dad won't let me.'

'What?' This time she sounded interested. 'Why?'

So I told her the whole story – about Dad being scared of losing his job, about the union man and what he said about not letting people know.

'That's ridiculous!' she said angrily. 'I think that Alec's hiding something.'

Maybe she was right! Why hadn't I thought of that? Perhaps I could – no, it was no use – I'd never find out anything more by Monday.

‘Do you want some help with another one?’  
Jodie asked after a short silence.

‘I can’t do another one,’ I said gloomily, ‘I’ve got to look after Samira tomorrow.’

‘Why?’

‘She’s going on the “Pedal Against Poverty” and Dad won’t let her go without me to keep an eye on her.’

‘Do you want me to come too? Maybe we’ll think of something while we’re riding.’

‘Yeah, okay. Thanks, Jodie.’

I felt better when I was riding home after school. Just talking to Jodie and knowing she was going to be on the bike ride helped. I began to feel a bit more optimistic. We just might come up with another project idea that I could do before Monday.

When I got home, Samira and I decided we’d better check our bikes for the next day. We oiled them and made sure the brakes were okay and I helped Samira pump up her tyres.

When we’d finished, we took them out for a quick road-test before it got dark.

We were on the main road heading towards the back of the chemical complex when Samira spoke:

‘Zena?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Could I see where you found the leaking drums? Wasn’t it somewhere round here?’

I grinned at her. ‘Have you been feeling a bit left out?’ I asked.

‘A bit,’ she said.

‘Okay. Let’s go and see if they’ve taken the drums away yet.’

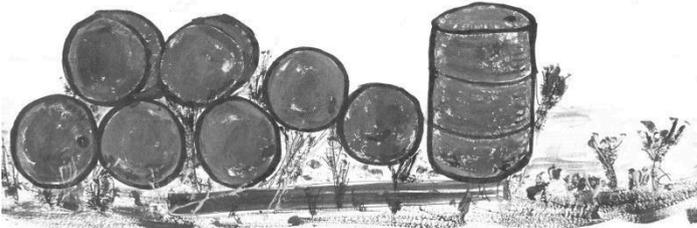
‘And will you tell me why you and Dad are cross with each other?’

‘It’s a long story,’ I said, ‘but if you promise not to tell Mum and Dad, I’ll tell you a few other bits as well.’

We took the dirt road and then left it to follow the long wire fence. The ground was quite dry now and it was much easier riding over the grass. On the way I told Samira about the guard and the ferocious dog, and how the rubber glove was left hanging on the fence like

a warning. Her eyes opened wide when I described the way the glove had been shredded.

When we arrived, I was relieved to see that the glove had gone. There was nothing leaking out under the fence any more and on the inside, between the big shipping containers, it was quite dry. The ground had been cleaned and raked, and fresh gravel covered the area. There was no sign that anything dangerous had ever been there.



We squinted through the space between the containers.

‘There are the drums, Samira. See? It was a much bigger pile before, though.’

She peered through the gap. ‘There’s not many there, now.’

‘No, and I wish I knew what they were doing with them.’

‘Didn’t they tell Dad?’ asked Samira.

‘No,’ I said. ‘And why wouldn’t they tell him? That’s what I’d like to know.’

Samira grinned, ‘You know what, Zena?’

‘What?’

‘You looked just like Mum, then.’



## CHAPTER 17

By half-past twelve next day, we were part of a crowd of nearly three hundred bike riders strung out along the course. Jodie and I were riding together and in front of us, chattering like magpies, were Samira and her two friends.

It wasn't a very good day for riding. All morning it had been overcast and windy, and dark clouds were building up in the west. If there was a storm coming I hoped we'd be home before it arrived.

I hadn't given the assignment a thought. There was nothing I could do about it and it felt good just to be out in the fresh air, riding with a friend. It didn't last

though; Michael Vella's voice came from behind us, being nasty and smart as usual.

'Couldn't you find your camel?' he said.

Suddenly there was a crash and we heard Michael yell as his bike hit the ground.

When we looked back, Sean was just straightening up his wobbling bike.

'Jeez, sorry mate!' he said to Michael.

Then he caught my eye and winked. Jason's bike came racing up behind him and just missed Michael's head as he lay on the ground tangled up in his bike.

'Look out!' he shouted at Michael. 'You'll get run over down there! Should have your brothers to look after you!'

'G'day, Zena,' said Sean, riding up beside me. 'Everything okay?'

I laughed. 'It is now,' I said.

Jason rode on the other side, next to Jodie.

'You were right,' he said. 'Good job we came.'

'What's he talking about?' I said to Jodie. 'I don't need...'

'Don't worry about it,' she said.

I didn't know whether to feel pleased or embarrassed. I just kept riding, without looking at anyone.

We were coming in to the industrial district where, off to the right, were old sheds and factories that had been there for years. There were scrap metal dealers, car wreckers, places with old tyres piled up outside; the whole area was dirty and neglected. The road began to get narrower and rougher and we'd been told to keep well to the left, so Jodie and Jason went ahead.

The two of them started talking straight away but I was struck dumb. I'd known Sean and Jason for years, we'd been right through primary school together but this year we'd hardly seen them except in class. Somehow, it felt different.

'I reckon it might rain,' said Sean.

'Yeah, it might,' I said.

I was so occupied with trying to think of something else to say, that I didn't hear the car coming up the road behind us. It passed close to me, an old blue

utility, and it was travelling too fast. I nearly fell off my bike with fright.

‘You idiot!’ I yelled at the back of it.

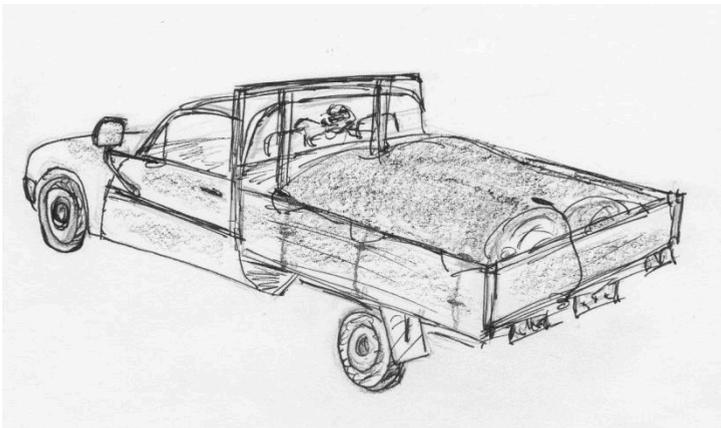
‘You okay?’ asked Sean, ‘Oh, pee-ew! What’s that awful smell?’ He hung onto his nose.

Instantly I recognized it – something like nail polish. It was a smell I wouldn’t forget in a hurry.

There was a stop sign at the next corner and as the utility slowed down, we caught up to it. The back of the ute was piled with drums covered by a tarpaulin and, from the smell, I was certain I knew what was in them.

But what could I do about it?

The traffic started to move again and, after crossing the intersection, the ute’s right indicator began to blink. It was going into the old industrial estate and I knew what I had to do.



‘Sean,’ I half whispered, ‘That blue ute – I’ve got to follow it.’

‘Eh?’

‘Ride up and tell Jodie! Please! And tell her to look after Samira.’

Sean looked at me as though I was mad. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Listen! It’s important! It’s turning off at the next street and I need to find out where it’s going.’

‘Righto,’ he said, ‘I’ll come too!’

‘No!’ I said. ‘You go on and tell Jodie. Tell her I’ve found the drums. She’ll know what you mean.’

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘And don’t worry about Samira, I’ll watch her too.’

‘Gee, thanks, Sean. I’ll catch up if I can. If I can’t, I’ll meet you at the finish line.’

He leant on his pedals and rode off ahead. As the ute turned off I went with it – but I dropped well back so the driver wouldn’t see me.

The whole estate was only two or three blocks deep, with a railway line running behind it so I was able to keep well back from the ute knowing it couldn’t get

too far away from me. It drove down one block and turned to the left. I pedalled quickly to the corner, jumped off my bike and peered around. The ute had stopped outside a large tin shed. A small door in the front of the shed was open and the big roller door next to it was slowly rising as the driver backed the ute towards it.

I waited until it had disappeared inside, then I rode up to the shed and jumped off, wheeling my bike into the long grass at the side. I propped it up behind a pile of old tyres where it couldn't be seen, then I quietly walked to the edge of the open doorway and stood pressed back against the wall next to it. I heard the driver getting down and slamming his door.

‘Phew! This place stinks! It’s not poisonous, is it?’

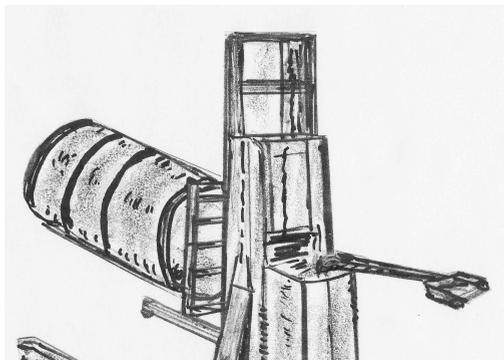
Another voice, coming from behind the ute, answered. ‘Well, it’s certainly not good for you.’

‘Jeez, Alec, you didn’t tell me I’d be carrying poisonous stuff. Go and open the side door and let some air through.’

I heard footsteps as the man called Alec began to walk towards the front, ‘It’ll soon clear with this wind,’ he said. ‘Give us the key, it’s padlocked on the outside.’

I raced back and hid behind the tyres just as the man came out the front door. He walked along the outside of the shed and opened a door about half-way down the side wall. He was fairly short, with no hair and a wispy, blonde beard. He propped the door open with a stone and went back inside. I heard a noise which sounded as though the drums were being unloaded and I crept closer to the side door and looked in. The driver of the truck was standing behind a small fork-lift and using it to lift the drums carefully off the back of the utility.

I’d never seen a fork lift like that before. It wasn’t a truck, it was just like the lifting bit from the front of a truck standing on its own, with a handle at the back and the forks at the front. A big metal arm stuck out from the back of the machine and the man was holding a handle across the end of it.



When he had a drum resting safely on the forks at the front, he twisted the handgrip towards him. This made the machine roll back away from the truck and he walked backwards with it. Then he brought the arm around and turned the fork-lift towards the drums already piled against the wall. Twisting the handgrip away from him made the machine roll forward and so he was able to walk with it over to the side of the shed. He pressed a button and the forks lowered the drum to the ground.

I couldn't see what the bald man was doing so I crept closer. Then I saw the perfect hiding place. I slipped in through the door and slid into a corner behind a big pile of wooden pallets. I was completely hidden and through cracks between the pallets, I could see and hear almost everything.

'Some of these are leaking, you know, Alec,' said the driver as he lifted another drum.

'I know, mate, that's why I've got to get rid of them.' Alec had a clip-board and was counting the drums. 'Just handle them carefully, will you. We don't want them damaged any more than they are.'

‘What are you going to do with them?’

‘I’m storing them – here.’

‘Yeah, but for how long? I said I could find you a shed in a hurry, but it’s only temporary.’

‘I dunno yet. I’ve got to think about it.’

They worked quietly for a while. The man called Alec was... Suddenly I recognised the name. Was this ‘Alec’ the union bloke who had been so helpful to Dad? He was going through some papers on the front seat of the utility. Then he called out to the man on the fork-lift.

‘Is this shed insured?’

‘I dunno, I’m only renting it. I suppose so. Why?’

‘Just thinkin’” said Alec.

‘Jeez, you wouldn’t have a fire here, mate?’ said the driver.

‘Why not?’

‘This stuff’d blow the whole block away if it went up.’

Alec laughed harshly, ‘Yeah. Destroy the evidence, wouldn’t it?’

The driver stopped working and looked at him, 'Listen, Alec, I don't mind helping you out of an awkward spot but I'm not doing anything illegal.'

'Yes, you are, mate.'

'What do you mean?'

Alec held the clip-board out. 'These papers you've been getting signed at the gate – don't they say 'empty drums'?'

'Yeah, but...'

'Well, they're not – are they?'

'Well, no, but I don't want to get in any deeper, okay?'

'Once you're in, Steve, you're in. And who knows how deep it might get?'

Steve didn't say any more but went on with his work in silence. Then he asked sullenly, 'What about the money? Have you got it with you? This is the last load, you know.'

'Course I haven't. It's not a cash job, mate. The company's paying.'

Steve looked up in surprise, 'I thought I was doin' it for *you*.'

‘You are,’ said Alec, ‘but I’m not payin’ for it.’

‘How the hell can you – ?’

‘Paper work, mate. Same as the “empty drums”.

They don’t hafta know what they’re payin’ for.’

‘You’ll get caught one day, Alec.’

‘I been all right so far, haven’t I?’

As Steve began to take the last drum from the ute, I realised, with a sudden sinking in my stomach, that I was in real trouble. Alec had left the truck and was making his way towards the side door.

‘I’ll see you round the front,’ he called and, in seconds, he was out the door and I heard the bolt shoot across and the click of the padlock.

I watched, hardly breathing, as Steve left the fork-lift and walked back to the ute. Now was my chance to make a run for the front door. I slipped along the side wall behind the pallets towards the roller door, only to see Alec standing in the opening, blocking my way. I was almost close enough to touch him as he stepped inside and waited for the ute. It drove out and he began to pull on the chains that closed the roller door. While it was rattling down, I wondered whether or not I

should take a chance and run, but then I remembered the harsh sound of Alec's laugh when he had talked about setting fire to the shed and I was too scared to move.

The door clanged onto the ground. Alec quickly locked the chains together with a padlock, turned a key in the bottom of the roller door and, with the bunch of keys dangling from his hand, he stepped out through the small front door, slamming it behind him. I heard the sound of a padlock closing on the outside, then the utility drove away and I was left alone.



## CHAPTER 18

I didn't know whether to be relieved or frightened. I was glad that the men had gone but now I was locked in.

I looked around the big shed, wondering what I could do. It looked old – a concrete floor, corrugated iron walls, a high roof and no windows, just a few clear panels above to let in some light. It was nearly empty except for the drums of chemical and the row of wooden pallets where I'd been hiding. The only doors were the roller door, the little one next to it and the one in the side wall where I'd come in. And I had seen each one securely locked! I felt my heart start to beat a little faster. How *was* I going to get out?

‘Don't panic!’ I told myself. ‘Check everything first.’

I tried the side door first. The handle turned all right but the door didn't move an inch – it was definitely bolted on the outside. I ran to the small front door where Alec had just gone out. Exactly the same – I couldn't even rattle it.

My last hope was the roller door but I could see, even without trying, that the chains were padlocked together. I gave them a good tug anyway and checked the padlock to make sure it was really closed. It was.

There was only one thing for it – I'd have to make a lot of noise to attract attention. If someone heard me they could call the police, or my father, or anyone!

I looked at my watch – it was already after one. A lot of places didn't work on Saturday and some only worked in the mornings so I hoped there would still be some people around. I searched the shed for something to make a noise with but all I could find was a small block of wood. I took it over to the roller door and banged loudly with it.

Clang, clang, clang! – it went. Clang, clang, clang! I stopped and listened. Then I heard the wind. The storm that had been building up at the start of the bike ride had arrived. Big gusts whooped round the building and I heard rattling from a loose sheet of tin. Loose tin? Maybe it would be a way out! Where was it? I found it at last, high up in the middle of the roof. There was no way I could get up there.

I banged on the door again and began to call out. Clang, clang, clang! ‘Help! I’m locked in!’ Clang, clang, clang! ‘Is anybody there?’

I kept it up for a long time, changing the block of wood from one hand to the other when my arms started to ache, then I stopped and listened again. All I could hear was the wind and the first spattering of heavy drops of rain, like a handful of gravel tossed onto the tin roof. No one would hear me in this weather. It was pointless to keep trying.

Angrily I chucked the piece of wood against the wall. How long would I have to wait till I was discovered? It could be Monday before anyone was near the place.

Then I remembered I'd told Sean. He knew where I'd turned off and if I didn't turn up at the finish of the bike ride, the others would probably come looking for me. And if *they* couldn't find me they'd tell my dad. I'd have to listen carefully. If I they called out or I heard a car, then I'd make as much noise as I possibly could.

I took a deep breath and tried to stop worrying. That was when I noticed the sharp smell of the chemical again. It caught in my throat and made me cough. Oh, no! Now that the doors were closed again, the shed was filling up with the poisonous gas. I couldn't stay here much longer; I wouldn't be able to breathe!

I panicked! I had to get out! I grabbed the piece of wood again and banged the door wildly. Harder and harder I banged, calling out at the same time. 'Help! Help me!'

I moved from the door to the tin wall beside it. I didn't care if my fingers hit the corrugations – it didn't matter if they hurt. 'Somebody help me! Let me out!' I was so frightened I wanted to cry but I had to keep trying. 'Can't you hear me? I've got to get out!' At last I

gave up. I dropped the piece of wood and collapsed onto the ground, panting and sobbing.

Thunder rolled overhead and the rain pelted down onto the tin roof so loudly I couldn't even hear myself crying.

At last I stopped and tried to dry my eyes with a soggy tissue. They were stinging and my head was starting to ache. I sniffed – the smell of the chemical was getting stronger.

I got up and carefully took a deep breath, holding it while I went over to look at the drums. I could see that two or three of the very rusty ones were badly cracked – probably damaged by the fork-lift – and they were sitting in a pool of liquid that was slowly growing bigger while I watched. The edge of the pool was creeping towards the roller door.

I couldn't hold my breath any longer. I ran back to the other side of the shed and knelt down, putting my mouth at the bottom of the roller door, gasping in some fresh air from outside. When I stopped panting, I checked my watch again. It could still be a couple of hours before anyone told Dad I was missing. I watched

the edge of the pool inching towards the door – I had to get out before then!

I coughed – and felt a raw pain in my throat. I put my hands over my mouth and nose, trying to stop the smell, trying to stop breathing. I was frightened – very frightened. I backed away against the wall furthest from the drums and tried to control my panic. It was time to think clearly. I'd got myself into this spot by acting without thinking – now I had to get myself out of it.

I looked around the shed carefully. Perhaps there was some other way out that I'd missed. Then I noticed the fork-lift. Was there some way I could use that?

I went over to it and pulled the heavy metal arm down towards me. I held the crosspiece with both hands as I'd seen Steve do it and cautiously I twisted the handgrip towards me. Nothing happened. I twisted it forwards but, again, nothing. What was wrong? Perhaps the machine had to be switched on somehow. I looked all over it and found a lock with a key in it just below the crosspiece. I breathed a small 'Yess!' to myself and turned the key.

I twisted the handgrips towards me and the machine jumped backwards, nearly running over my feet. I leapt back with fright – I'd have to be careful. But it had plenty of power and that was exactly what I needed to force my way out.

Slowly I twisted the handgrips away from me and slowly the fork lift moved forwards. I practised a few more times, moving it backwards and forwards, learning how to control the speed. The further I twisted the handle the faster it went. When I thought I knew how to handle it, I began to manoeuvre it around, trying to turn it towards the other side of the shed. It wasn't easy but I brought the arm around the way Steve had done and, after a few mistakes, I learnt the trick of going back and forth, turning to left and right, until I was standing behind it, facing a clear part of the tin wall.

I pressed a switch labelled 'RAISE' and the forks obediently began to rise up the front of the machine. I stopped them about a metre off the ground. Now I was ready.

I took a deep breath, turned the grips forward as far and as fast as I could and the machine took off with a

jerk, nearly leaving me behind. It raced across the concrete floor, hit the wall with a crash and bounced back. It stopped so suddenly that the arm banged hard into my chest and knocked me to the ground. I crashed onto the concrete, grazing my elbow and just missing the pile of pallets. My chest was hurting so much I wondered if I'd broken a rib and I lay there for a moment, trying to recover. When I thought I could move again I staggered up and inspected the wall. There was hardly a mark.

I had a rest for a couple of minutes then I got ready to try again. I backed the fork lift away from the wall and lined it up. This time, I would be prepared for the sudden stop and rebound.

Again the machine careered across the floor, like an enormous, insane lawn mower, with me hanging on behind. As it hit the wall, I dodged to the side and it bounced back without hitting me.

It was useless. It was having absolutely no effect on the metal wall. I kicked it with annoyance. I'd been sure I'd found a way to get out but I had achieved

nothing. My head was aching even more, and now my chest and elbow hurt too.

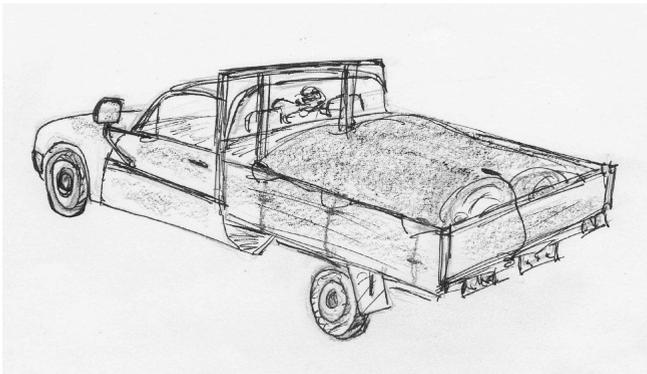
I stood in the centre of the shed and looked hopelessly around, close to giving up. The rain was pelting down even more heavily and in one corner, a small trickle of water was beginning to creep in under the roller door. If only *I* were small enough to creep underneath.

An idea began to grow in my mind. *Underneath* the door? Weren't fork-lifts meant to lift? Would it be powerful enough to lift the locked door?

I went back to the machine and steered it around until it was lined up with the centre of the roller door. Then I lowered the forks to the ground and drove it slowly forward. I slid the forks under the bottom of the door and kept driving forward until they were nearly all the way through. Crossing my fingers for good luck, I pressed the switch to raise them. For a moment nothing happened then the forks began to climb slowly upwards. I watched, trembling with excitement as the bottom part of the door bent in the middle and then – crack – it pulled out at the sides. The forks kept going higher and

higher, crumpling the door like a concertina. I grinned with delight. Slowly the opening got bigger: twenty centimetres, forty – at about sixty centimetres I stopped. That was plenty of room! Without even thinking about the puddles of water or the rain pouring down outside, I was on my knees and out under the door.

I stood in the downpour and filled my lungs with the beautiful, cold, fresh air. Then, as I turned towards where I'd hidden my bike, I stopped and gasped with fright. Driving towards me, splashing through the puddles at the edge of the road, was a blue utility. A short, bald man with a wispy beard was driving it.





## CHAPTER 19

I turned to run but the ute stopped right next to me and Alec was out of the driver's seat in a flash. In a couple of strides he caught up to me and grabbed me by the arm. 'Oh, no you don't! What the hell were you doing in there?'

'Let me go!' I pulled and wrestled, trying to break his grip but he only grasped me more tightly. He pulled me round to face him and held me by both shoulders.

'Now you listen!' he said and he gave me a shake, 'I want to know what you're up to, okay? I can get very nasty to little girls who upset me.'

I was terrified. Everything I'd ever heard about being kidnapped, attacked or murdered came flooding into my mind. I felt Alec's thumbs getting closer to my throat as he shook me and I screamed and babbled hysterically.

'Don't! Please don't! I couldn't help it! I was locked in with the poison! I had to get out! Please let me go! Please!!'

'Stop that! Stop that screaming!' He shook me even harder till I couldn't speak any more. 'There's nothing poisonous in there, do you hear me? Just a few empty drums!'

I was sobbing now. 'It's poison! It's poison! I heard you say so.'

He held me away from him, looking into my face. 'Did you now? And what else did you hear, eh?'

Too late, I realised I shouldn't have said anything. Now I was in more danger than ever.

'I think you'd better come inside with me. You've got a few questions to answer. Come on!'

He began to drag me by the arm towards the crumpled door of the shed. I pulled back, digging my

heels into the mud, slipping and sliding, and fighting as hard as I could. He turned towards me, grabbed me round the waist and lifted me, fighting and kicking, onto his hip.

As he headed for the door, he suddenly stopped and swore under his breath. I twisted around to see what had stopped him and cried out with relief.

‘Dad!’

Dad’s car was speeding down the road towards us. It screeched to a halt, sending up a spray of mud and water. The four doors opened at once and Dad and the two boys, Jodie and Samira all leapt out together.

I wrenched myself free and ran to my dad, grabbing hold of him and screaming. ‘Dad! He’s got the drums in there! And he’s going to blow them up!’

I buried my head in his coat, sobbing with relief.

For a second or two nobody spoke. The rain poured down on us as Dad and Alec stared at each other – speechless.

Alec was the first to recover. ‘Is this *your* youngster, Fared? Jeez, lucky I came along when I did. She was in a bit of strife.’

Dad was holding me tightly, patting my shoulder. I pulled back from him and glared at Alec, ‘Don’t listen to him, Dad! He’s lying!’

Alec shook his head, ‘Listen, mate, this is all a mistake.’ He pointed to the crumpled door. ‘Look what she’s done to me shed! She shouldn’t have been in there; I could have her up for trespass. Take her home, Fared, and tell her to mind her own business. If you do that, I won’t bring any charges against you for the damage.’

Dad looked at the crushed roller-door and looked at me. I shook my head, still sobbing. ‘No, Dad!’

‘I don’t know, Alec,’ he said, shaking his head, ‘I don’t understand any of this. What is in the shed?’

‘The drums of chemical, of course! The ones you told us about. We had to store them somewhere, didn’t we?’

‘And what was Zena doing here? Why were you taking her in there?’

‘To – er – to get out of the rain, mate! And don’t ask me what *she* was doin’ here – ask her!’

I looked up at Dad and felt his arm tighten protectively around me. He nodded calmly.

‘I will ask her, yes, but not here. There is too much to talk about.’

‘Yeah, sure,’ said Alec. ‘Look Fared, you know what I reckon? You take these kids home now; get ‘em inside out of the rain and I’ll see you at work on Monday. Then we can get it sorted out.’

‘I do not think so, Alec,’ he said slowly. ‘I think, if Zena has done something wrong, then we should go to the police station. We will both report it.’

‘No way, mate!’ said Alec. ‘This has got nothing to do with them. Forget it!’

Dad’s voice was hard and implacable. ‘We are both going to the police station, Alec. Get into my car.’

‘Like hell I will!’

Alec suddenly sprang towards the blue utility. Dad couldn’t move quickly enough to stop him because I was holding on to his arm but Jason and Sean both jumped forward at the same time. Sean leapt on him with a tackle round the head while Jason went for his

knees. Alec tried to break loose but the two boys just closed their eyes and hung on like terriers.

Dad shoved me towards the open car doors, ‘You girls, get in!’ he shouted. Then he turned back to Alec and the boys.

‘You’ll be in big trouble for this!’ shouted Alec. ‘All of you!’

He dragged Sean from his head and threw him on his back into the mud. By that time, Dad was there and grabbed Alec’s arms. Jason was lying on the ground hanging onto his legs and when Dad moved in on him they all fell in a great heap into the mud.

‘Go, Mr Rashid!’ yelled Sean as Dad and Alec rolled and struggled on the ground.

At last Dad got Alec face down with his arms twisted up behind his back.

‘Jason!’ said Dad, panting, ‘Go to the car and get some rope from the boot.’

‘You bet!’ said Jason, dragging himself out of the mud.

He and Sean helped Dad get Alec's hands tied behind his back and then they all stood up. They looked like the Bog Men from the Planet Mud.

Dad dragged Alec to the car. 'Get in!' he said.

'Just you wait till we get to the cop shop, mate!' said Alec. 'You'll be sorry you ever started this.'

'Get in!' said Dad again and pushed Alec into the passenger seat.

Jodie and Samira and I sat as far away as we could in the back seat – saying nothing.

Dad shut the door on Alec and turned to look at the boys.

'What can I say?' he said, his arms out to them, 'Now I have no room in the car for you.'

'Don't worry about us, Mr Rashid,' said Sean. 'Where's your bike Zena?'

'Yeah,' said Jason, 'We'll dink each other. See you at the police station!'

As we drove off towards the town, Jodie and I looked out the back window. There were the two boys, unsteadily bouncing through the puddles, laughing and waving at us through the pouring rain.



## CHAPTER 20

By the time we arrived at the police station I was shaking. I was cold and wet and tired, and my head was aching. I wanted to go home to my mother.

When we came through the door, everyone turned to look. Dad and Alec were first – Alec, with his hands tied behind his back, Dad with a face like thunder hanging on to him, and both of them covered from head to toe in mud. Jodie, Samira and I followed – not as muddy but dirty, wet and miserable.

As soon as we were inside, Alec started shouting.

‘Don’t listen to him! He’s a bloody mad wog! You can see what he’s done to me! Wait till you see what his daughter’s done to me shed! I caught her trespassing on private property and now they’re trying to put the blame on me!’

The young policeman who had been sitting behind the reception desk jumped up.

‘Righto! Righto!’ he said in a loud voice, ‘Just settle down till I get the Senior Sergeant.’

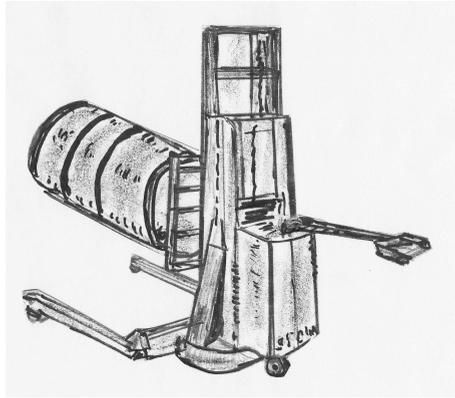
Then everything got out of hand. Dad started telling his story to the sergeant, another policeman came and untied Alec’s hands and took him through a door marked ‘Private’, and then a policewoman came and took me away. She sat me down in a small room by myself and shut the door. I was terrified. What if they believed Alec? What would happen to Dad? What would happen to me?

The policewoman came back with a cup of hot chocolate for me and told me to take off my wet jacket. She switched on a little heater and left me sitting there on my own again. I was there for more than an hour,

with a lump of fear sitting like a great big stone in the middle of my stomach.

At last the door opened and two people in ordinary clothes came in, a man and a woman. The woman said she was there to look after me, and then the man started asking questions. Why had I been in the shed? Why had I followed the utility truck? What had I seen? What had Alec and the other man said? What was the name of the other man? The questions went on and on.

He said the police had gone to look at the shed and they'd seen the smashed roller door and the drums. He wanted to know how I'd come to be locked in and exactly what I had done with the fork-lift. Then he wanted to know everything about the chemical – where I'd first seen it at the creek, how I'd followed it and found the leaking drums and what I'd seen behind the fence.



He went out and then two policemen in uniform came in and asked the same questions all over again. I don't know how long it went on but I got sick of it. I felt like yelling at them, 'I've told you already! Why don't you listen?' But, of course, I didn't.

I got more and more tired and confused till I hardly knew what I was saying. The whole day had become a blur of faces and questions and more faces and more questions.

At last they brought Dad in and sat him down with me. They asked him lots of questions too and he told them about driving down the street and seeing Alec

holding me while I was struggling to get away. Then he told them what Alec had said and how he tried to escape.

Finally they told us to go and sit out the front with the others while they typed up their reports. We weren't allowed to go home until we signed them. They had become much friendlier by now and at last seemed to believe that we were telling the truth.

When we went out into the foyer, the first person I saw was Mum. She jumped up from a chair, ran over and held me tight.

'Mum!' I said, 'How did you get here?'

'Your father rang me, of course! *Hal inta bikhair?*'

'I think so, Mum,' I said, feeling much better now I was out of that room and had my mother to hold onto. I looked around. 'Where are the others?'

'They've gone out to buy some pizzas. It's nearly six o'clock and everyone is cold and hungry. I thought they were never going to let you out!'

'So did I!' I said.

The door from outside opened and in came a very big, tall policeman with bright orange hair. He was carrying four big pizzas and was followed by Jason and Sean each with another pizza. Behind them came Jodie and Samira with bottles of drink and paper cups.

‘Are we allowed to eat them here, Dad?’ asked Sean.

I looked from Sean to the policeman and back again, aghast.

‘Not out here, son,’ said the policeman. He had a loud voice with a strong Irish accent. ‘You can bring them through to the back room.’ He stopped and looked at me. ‘So, this’d be Zena, would it?’

Everybody else in the foyer turned to stare at me and I looked up and smiled weakly.

‘Yeah,’ said Sean. ‘This is my dad, Zena.’

‘I’ve been hearin’ all about you, Zena,’ he said. ‘You’ve had a bit of excitement today I believe.’ And his big laugh boomed through the police station.

The smile was frozen on my face.

‘Come along, everybody,’ he said, ‘an’ we’ll have a bit o’ nourishment.’

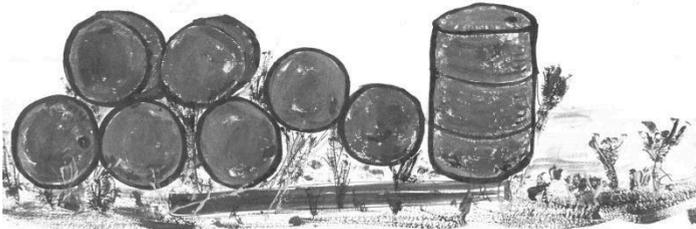
He took us through to a big room with a long table in the middle.

‘Now then,’ he said, ‘find yourself a chair and let’s eat these pizzas while they’re hot.’

They were the best pizzas I’ve *ever* tasted. I felt like I hadn’t eaten for a week but after I’d had a couple of slices I started to feel a whole lot better.

‘Hey, Sean,’ I said, ‘thanks for taking the message to Jodie. Did she know what I meant about the drums?’

‘I didn’t at first,’ said Jodie. ‘Jason and I were just pedalling along when Sean came flying up behind us. “Zena’s chasing a blue ute!” he said. “She wants you to know she’s found the drums.”’



‘Yeah,’ said Sean. ‘She thought I’d gone off me head. “Whose drums?” she said. But Samira was there and she ...’

‘I knew,’ said Samira proudly. ‘The drums with the chemical in!’ I shouted.’

‘Then I realised what you meant,’ said Jodie, ‘and on the way to the finish line I told them about how you’d been investigating the chemical leak but you weren’t allowed to use it in your project.’

‘We waited at the finish for a while,’ said Jason, ‘and when you didn’t turn up, we rode all around the factory estate looking for you. We went up and down every street but we couldn’t even see your bike.’

‘I guess hid it too well!’ I said.

‘The storm was coming,’ said Sean, ‘and it was getting cold and dark so I said we should go and tell Mr Rashid.’

‘And I thank God, you did,’ said Mum. ‘That Alec, he is a very bad man. Who knows what could have happened?’

‘What I don’t understand,’ said Samira, ‘is why Alec wanted to blow the drums up.’

‘He didn’t want the company to know anything about them,’ said Dad.

‘But wasn’t he working for the company?’ asked Mum.

‘Not this weekend he wasn’t,’ laughed Sean’s father. ‘He was covering up for his own mistake. We’ve been doing a bit of investigating since you brought him in and about half an hour ago I was speaking to the company manager.’ He turned to Dad. ‘You’d know him, Mr Rashid?’

‘Mr Vanston?’ said Dad.

‘Yeah,’ said Mr Aherne. ‘That’s him. He was pretty annoyed. It seems those drums of chemical had been delivered to the company by mistake. Alec had been told to send them back to the supplier over twelve months ago.’

‘Well why hadn’t he?’ asked Samira.

‘We’re not too sure,’ said Mr Aherne, ‘Probably he just forgot. Or maybe he thought he could sell them on the sly. Make a bit of extra money for himself.’

‘He couldn’t sell them if they were leaking,’ said Sean.

‘Certainly not!’ said his dad. ‘When Mr. Rashid told him Zena had found them leaking into the creek, he panicked. He had to get rid of them before the bosses found out.’

‘So, what’s going to happen to them now?’ I asked.

‘Mr Vanston said the company will take full responsibility,’ said Mr Aherne, ‘They’ll see that they are disposed of safely.’

‘Hey!’ exclaimed Samira, ‘Does that mean it’s okay for Zena to finish her project for school?’

Everyone looked at Dad. For a moment he said nothing, then he sat up straight and nodded.

‘Of course,’ he said firmly. ‘Pollution should *not* be kept secret.’

‘Yay!’ said Samira.

It seemed too good to be true – I was still worried.

‘But – what about your job, Dad?’ I said. ‘Do you want to check with Mr Vanston first?’

‘No, Zena, you finish your project,’ he said and he smiled at me. ‘It is the right thing to do.’





## CHAPTER 21

After we'd finished the pizzas, Dad and I were taken into an office and given the typed statements to sign. Then, at last, we were allowed to go.

As Dad drove up to the garage, the front door opened and Josef came out to meet us.

'What's been going on?' he asked.

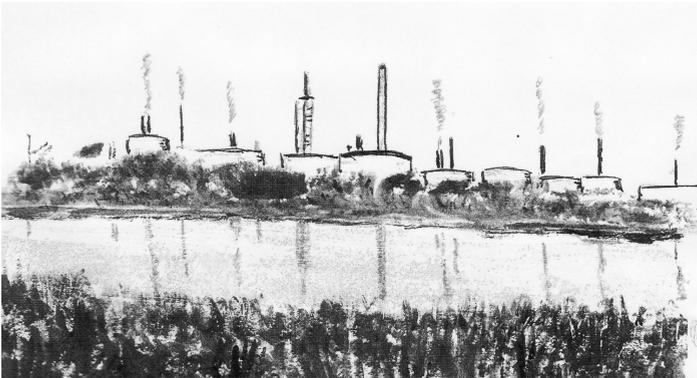
Dad had rung him from the police station and told him to get something to eat for himself but he was dying to know what had been happening.

'Let's get inside first,' said Mum, 'and we'll tell you.'

It took an hour for us to tell him the whole story and I was so tired I was just about sleep-walking.

Samira was in bed, Dad had driven Jodie and the boys to their homes and he and Josef were sitting in the lounge room watching the footy replay.

The storm had passed, leaving the sky clear and cold. Before I went to bed I stood at the open front door looking at the lights of the chemical complex in the distance. They sparkled in the clean, washed air of the night, lighting up the chimneys, the tanks and the silver pipes. Fairyland – that’s what Samira used to call it – but to me it looked more like a big engine, all ready to



travel into the future.

Mum came and stood behind me. ‘Zena?’

‘Yes, Mum?’

She put her arms around me and looked over my head at the lights. ‘You do realise that you were in very great danger, today?’

‘Yes, Mum.’

‘Please try to be more careful,’ she said quietly. ‘I don’t know what we would do if you were hurt or – something more serious happened.’

She held me close to her and then I felt the strangest thing – as though someone had gently nudged me in the middle of my back. I jumped a little in fright.

Mum’s voice whispered in my ear, ‘Did you feel it too, Zena?’

I turned round to face her, ‘What – what was it?’

She smiled gently. ‘It was our baby’s first real kick,’ she held out her arms to me, ‘and you and I felt it together.’

‘Oh, Mum!’ I said.

We hugged each other tightly for a moment and I felt very warm and safe in my mother’s arms – as warm and safe as our new, precious little baby.



When I opened my eyes the next morning I thought something had gone wrong with my clock. It was ten-thirty and no one had called me or told me to get up!

I turned over and felt a stiff ache in my chest. For a moment I couldn't think what it could be and then I remembered the thump from the fork-lift. I touched the spot and winced. It was a little bit bruised but not too bad. I stretched in the warm bed and began thinking of my plans for the day.

After breakfast I would put the finishing touches to my science assignment.

I was thinking about what I would write when something came into my head about what they said in court: 'The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth'.

Could I really report the *whole* truth? Climbing over the fence and being caught by the guard? Getting locked in the shed with the poisonous chemical? Being rescued at the last minute by my dad? I didn't think I could put all that in – not after what Miss Kouros had

said about being responsible. I'd have to dodge all those bits.

In the kitchen I found Mum and Dad having coffee.

'So,' said Mum, 'she's awake at last!'

'Come over here, Zena,' said Dad, putting his arm out. 'Can you still sit on my knee?'

I wanted to say: 'I'm not a baby!' but I stopped myself in time because, just at that moment, I realised I did want to sit on his knee. I wanted to tell him that I knew he was a good and kind man who worked hard to look after us all and sometimes had to make hard decisions. I wanted to put my arm round his neck and tell him I loved him.

Of course I didn't say anything like that, but I did sit on his knee. And I did put my arm round his neck.

His arm tightened around me and he said, 'Please take care, Zena. You are very precious – to both of us.'

I nodded. 'I know, Dad. And I will try – I promise.'

He looked at Mum, ‘I wish I could believe that!’ he said, shaking his head. I knew they were laughing at me but I didn’t mind.

‘All right,’ said Dad. ‘Get some breakfast and then go and finish that famous science project!’



Early on Monday morning Jodie and I knocked at the door of the staff room. I had my assignment packed in a big, flat cardboard box and we’d got to school early so I could hand it in, just the way I’d planned to all those weeks ago. Miss Kouros came to the door with a cup of coffee in her hand. She didn’t look happy at being disturbed.

‘Yes, Zena?’

‘I’ve got the assignment, Miss.’

‘Well, don’t give it to me now. Wait till third period.’

‘But – it’s a bit big.’

Miss Kouros sighed. ‘Oh, here. Take my key and put it in the classroom. And make sure you lock the door carefully and bring the key straight back.’

‘Where will I put it?’ I said.

‘It’ll be all right on my desk,’ she said. ‘There’s nobody in that room till after recess.’

‘This is great!’ I said to Jodie as we opened the science room door, ‘I can set it up properly and she can see it as soon as she comes in.’

Jodie helped me unpack everything – the bottles with the chemical and the dead lizard, the card with the photos and the plan, and the extra bits I’d done yesterday.

Jodie had come round to help me on Sunday afternoon. She had done a big title card for me. It said: ‘**CHEMICAL LEAK - an investigation**’, and she’d done drawings around it of tanks, pipes and chimneys. It looked fantastic.

We finished setting up the display, locked the door after us and took the key back to the staff room.

The morning slowly dragged by and after recess the whole class was lined up outside the science room. I

was so excited I couldn't stand still. At last Miss Kouros would see my project. *And* Michael Vella, too.

'All right, 7B, settle down!' Mr Black's voice roared out over our noise. 'Get into two straight lines! Come along, now!'

I couldn't believe it. Where was Miss Kouros?

'Have we got *you*, sir?' I said.

'Yes. Miss Kouros has been called away to a meeting. Come on! Stop that chattering!'

Mr. Black opened the door and we filed in and sat down quietly. Nobody mucks around in Mr. Black's classes. He's old and grumpy and doesn't believe in students even opening their mouths. All he ever says is, 'Sit quietly at your desks and get on with your work.' And if you make the slightest noise you're sent to stand outside.

My project was set up on the desk right in front of him and he didn't even look at it. He just pushed it away over to one side.

'You! Yes, you in the front row! Take these work sheets and pass them round.' Mr. Black never knows anyone's names.

I couldn't believe this was happening. After all my work, after all the hassles I went through to get it in on time, Miss Kouros wasn't here to see it. I felt my eyes fill with tears. I blinked and two drops of water landed on the page in front of me. I took a deep breath, picked up my pen and tried to concentrate on the sheet of questions.

'What is the sun?' it said. 'A star, a planet, a comet, a meteor.' What a stupid waste of time!

We were working quietly when the door opened and Miss Kouros came in. She looked around the room.

'Zena?' she said. 'Come with me for a moment, please.'

What now? What had she found out?

'Will I bring my bag, Miss?' I said.

'No, leave your things. We'll only be a minute.'

Everyone was looking at me as I followed Miss Kouros out the door.

'I believe you had a pretty busy day on Saturday?' Miss Kouros said as she steered me in the direction of the principal's office.

I nodded. I wasn't sure how much she knew or how much trouble I was in.

She smiled. 'There's a couple of people who'd like to talk to you about it.'



## CHAPTER 22

My knees were shaking and my heart was pounding as we walked up the corridor together. Before we reached the principal's office, Miss Kouros stopped and opened the door of the conference room. Inside, there were three men and a woman. One of the men was wearing a suit and looked very important, another one was carrying a camera and the third one was my father!

‘What’s the matter?’ I whispered, ‘What’s happened?’

Dad spoke first. ‘It’s all right, Zena. This is Mr Vanston from my company. He wanted to meet you, to thank you for what you did.’

‘Oh!’ I said.

Then the woman spoke. ‘I’m from the Portside Chronicle,’ she said, ‘and this is my photographer.’ The man with the camera smiled. ‘We received a police report about a chemical leak yesterday,’ she said, ‘so we’ve been interviewing Mr Vanston. He thought it might be a good idea to talk to you. Your father says you’ve been doing an assignment on it.’

‘Um – yes,’ I said, hardly breathing.

Miss Kouros could see I needed some help. ‘Where is the project, Zena?’ she asked.

‘In the classroom, Miss,’ I said gratefully. ‘It’s on your desk.’

‘Could we go along there?’ asked the photographer. ‘Then maybe I could take some shots with the whole class – get a bit of atmosphere. Would that be okay?’

Miss Kouros led the way and poor Mr Black didn’t know what was happening when six people barged into his classroom.

‘Will you set the project up properly, please Zena?’ said Miss Kouros and she stood back looking quite pleased while Mr Vanston examined it. He said it

was ‘a very good piece of work’ and I should be proud of it. Dad looked pleased too and he and Mr Vanston talked about it together, pointing at the map tracing the path of the leaking chemical.

Then Mr Vanston and the newspaper reporter started asking questions, and the more they asked the more the whole truth was coming out – how I’d been trespassing, how I got myself locked in the shed, how I nearly got poisoned – all the stuff I had hoped to hide from Miss Kouros. Then Dad told how Sean and Jason and Jodie had taken him to the shed, so the reporter asked them questions too.

Everyone in the classroom was talking and the noise was getting louder and louder. Finally, Mr Black lost his cool. ‘You obviously don’t need me any more, Miss Kouros,’ he said loudly, and with tight lips he packed up his question sheets and marched out the door.

Miss Kouros clapped her hands for attention.

‘Settle down now, 7B,’ she called and slowly everyone stopped talking and sat down.

‘Mr Vanston is a visitor who came here today to meet Zena,’ she said. ‘He wanted to see the work she’d

been doing investigating a chemical leak from his factory and he has asked me if he could speak to the class about pollution. So I'd like you to sit quietly and listen.' She turned to him. 'Mr Vanston, they're all yours.'

Mr Vanston cleared his throat and looked over the class.

'I'm not used to talking to children,' he said, 'so I'll try to make it brief.'

And then he started – and he went on and on about pollution and how good his company was about not being polluters; and how glad he was that I'd told my dad about what I'd found; and how it wasn't their fault but they were going to clean it up – and if that was a brief talk then I'm glad he didn't do a long one.

He'd have still been going if Miss Kouros hadn't got his attention and pointed to her watch. She could see we were all bored out of our brains.

'And so,' he finished up, 'it's up to us all to take care of our environment. It's the only one we have.'

The class applauded with relief and Mr Vanston looked pleased.

Then the photographer went to work. He took a photo of Miss Kouros with Jodie and me and the boys; one of me with the project and then one of me with Dad and Mr Vanston. He'd just taken a couple of photos of the whole class when the bell went for lunch.

‘Good timing,’ he said.

‘Thank you, 7B,’ said Miss Kouros. ‘The class is dismissed. And I want Zena and Jodie and the two boys to stay behind, please.’

When the classroom had emptied, Miss Kouros closed the door and turned back to us. Her smile had disappeared.

‘I think we’d better have a little talk,’ she said.

I swallowed, ‘Yes, Miss Kouros.’

Unexpectedly, she grinned widely. ‘It’s a fantastic assignment, Zena. You will make a wonderful scientist – if you live long enough! And as for you three,’ she looked at Jodie and the boys, ‘you should be very proud of yourselves.’

I laughed with relief, ‘I thought you were going to be mad at me!’

‘I should be. You nearly got yourself killed! If it hadn’t been for your friends here...’

‘I know! But I was just trying to find out...’

‘Zena! You *must* learn to be more sensible! We cannot afford to lose intrepid scientists like you.’ She picked up an ice-cream stick that had fallen off Karen’s project and twisted up a piece of dangling hair with it. ‘I don’t suppose I’ll ever be able to give up teaching,’ she said, ‘not while there are students like you four around. You make it much too interesting. Now go off to lunch and leave me in peace!’

We were just collecting our bags when the daily monitor knocked at the door and gave a note to Miss Kouros. She read it with a slight frown, then she turned to us.

‘I’m afraid it’s not over yet,’ she said, ‘The principal wants to see you all – immediately.’



Ms Davis wasn't nearly as nice to us as Miss Kouros. By the time she'd finished with us we felt like we'd committed a crime, not helped to clean up some dangerous pollution.

'Don't you think you're a hero, young lady!' she said angrily, pointing her long, thin finger at me. 'All this could have been avoided if you had simply reported what you found to the proper authorities.'

'But Ms Davis, I...'

'This is not a discussion, Zena. I didn't ask for your opinion!'

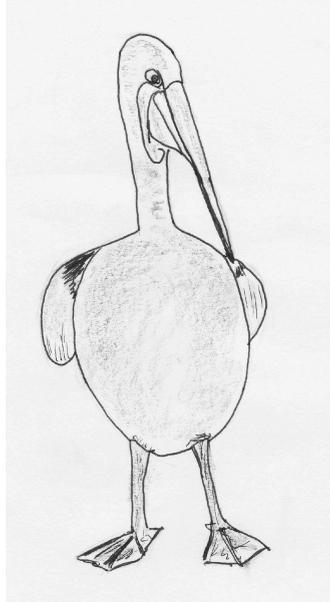
'Yes, Miss.'

'Ms Davis, if you please.'

'Yes, Ms Davis.'

That's how the interview started and it only got worse.

'The manager of the chemical company has told me the whole story,' she said, folding her skinny, angular arms across her chest. She looked down her pointy nose at us and, with the folds of loose skin hanging down under her chin, I suddenly thought of a pelican! I had to bite my lips to stop smiling.



‘I’m not impressed by the way you took things into your own hands, Zena. Trespassing. Taking photos illegally. Keeping it secret from your teacher. Do you think this was a sensible way to behave?’

‘No, Ms Davis.’

‘There are rules, Zena! Rules! They are the gears that keep society running smoothly.’ She leaned forward and waved her beak at me, ‘And when somebody throws a spanner into the works, the gears

can't operate properly. Do you understand what I am talking about?'

'Yes, Ms Davis.'

'You are a spanner-thrower, Zena!' she paused and turned her eyes accusingly towards the others. 'And I hope there are no others here.'

She got up from behind her desk and looked us over, like a sergeant major examining the troops.

'I understand that you four young people are old friends?'

'Yes, Ms Davis.'

'I don't know how much you other three were involved in this – this *escapade* but I will be watching every one of you. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Ms Davis,' we all nodded.

'There'll be no stepping out of line!'

'No, Ms Davis.'

'I don't want to hear of *any* of you getting into further trouble!'

'Yes, Ms Davis – I mean, no, Ms Davis!'

She started to pace around the office. On and on she went – 'what if something had gone wrong?' and

‘what if you had been injured?’ and we just stood there, sneaking looks at each other and waiting till she’d finished.

When at last she dismissed us, lunchtime was nearly over and we didn’t have time to eat anything. We had just got to our lockers when the bell rang and we had to go straight to computer class.

As soon as the final bell for the day went, the four of us jumped on our bikes and headed for the beach, munching our left-over lunches.

It was low tide and we sat on the wall looking out at the long, wide stretch of clean, white sand. On the rocks to our left, seagulls and terns sat, heads pointing into the cold wind blowing in from the sea. Further out were a few cormorants, ignoring the cold, standing with wings outstretched for the wind to dry them.

We were huddled together on the wall for warmth and I didn’t feel awkward or cross with the boys any more, I felt comfortable and happy. And I knew I didn’t need to worry about people like Michael and his brothers – not with friends like these. We sat in comfortable silence and finished our lunches.

‘I thought Ms Davis was going to blow a gasket!’ said Jason suddenly. ‘Stalking around the office, waving her arms at us!’

‘I know!’ said Jodie. ‘Her face was bright red and spit was coming out of her mouth!’ She imitated Ms Davis’s voice: “‘Toe the line! Stick to the rules! Obey the law!’”

‘She was right, though,’ said Sean.

‘Wha-at?’ I said.

‘You’re not a hero!’ he said to me, poking his finger repeatedly into my shoulder, ‘You’re just – a bit – stupid!’

‘I couldn’t help it,’ I said, rubbing the spot where he’d jabbed me, ‘I didn’t think ...’

‘Dur!’ he said, ‘No brains – can’t think!’

‘All right, Sean!’ I retorted. ‘Next time I’ll consult you, okay?’

‘That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said.’

‘Still,’ said Jodie, ‘It was a good job Zena did something about it.’

‘Yeah,’ said Sean, looking serious, ‘and it was okay this time because there was only one bloke

responsible and he was a crook. But what if that leak had been the company's fault? Or what if they'd been getting rid of something accidentally/on purpose?

'That's what my dad said,' I interrupted.

'I don't think they'd have sent someone to congratulate you then,' said Sean.

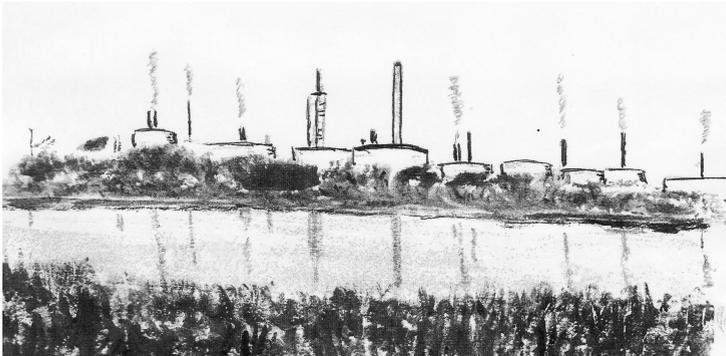
I shivered; he was probably right.

'But she'd still have had to report it,' said Jason.

'Yeah,' said Sean, 'but to the cops! Not try to handle it yourself.'

'Hah!' I said, 'you just want to keep your father in a job!'

We sat quietly on the wall, gazing out to sea – thinking.





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