

SEA SECRETS

GILLIAN M. WADDS

ZENA AND HER MATES

BOOK TWO

Treechange  Productions

Summer holidays at Portside are filled with sunshine, swimming and sunbaking - but under the calm sea there are dangerous secrets.

Why has Tran disappeared?
And why doesn't his mother want the police involved?



Zena and her mates are determined to find out - even when they find themselves in very deep water.

Treechange  Productions

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by

Gillian M. Wadds

Treechange  *Productions*

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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.

Sea Secrets is the second in a series of adventure stories about Zena and her mates. First published by Hachette Livre Australia, it is now available on Google eBooks or from *Treechange Productions* through the author's website.

The first book in the series, *Zena and Her Mates*, is *Chemical Leak!* also available on Google eBooks or, in hard copy from the author's website.

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REVIEWS

... a snappy, exciting environmental thriller that crackles with convincing dialogue. When you finish this one, seek out her other novel, *Chemical Leak!*, another winner that also features Zena.

Frances Atkinson – Melbourne Sunday Age.

I am writing this letter to say how much I enjoyed reading your books, *Chemical Leak!* and *Sea Secrets*. This year I read “*Sea Secrets*” and I loved it. As soon as I pick (it) up it is hard to put it down until I’m finished reading it.

Bridget Lee (Student)

... absorbing with a tasty whiff of danger, peopled by interesting characters and touching on some important issues.

www.fishpond.com.au

A bit of snorkelling on the local reef sounds like an idyllic way to spend the long hot summer holidays, but for Zena and her friends it turns into much more. It opens up a whole new world of wildlife, protected species and human greed ...

<http://www.curriculumpress.edu.au/>

Sea Secrets is a fast-moving adventure story that will keep young readers involved from start to finish.

<http://www.angusrobertson.com.au/book>

*For Stefan and Alex, for Jack, Marley, Lucas,
Olive and Harper... and for any future
grandchildren, with the hope that you will all
find lives filled with challenges and adventure
and that you will continue to take care of your
world.*

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In writing *Sea Secrets*, the second book in the series, **Zena and Her Mates**, I wanted to continue to encourage the sense of adventure in young people; to show that even in an ordinary suburban setting, risks, excitement and adventures are possible. For this belief and for the experiences to write about them, I have to thank my parents, my childhood and my brothers and sisters. I also thank them for my own belief that wrongs must be righted and, no matter how small the effort, it is worth trying.

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Chapter 1

It was so hot the sun on the back of my head was slowly cooking my brain. I blinked and stared at the board, trying to stop the science notes from jumping up and down. Somebody groaned.

‘Zena Rashid!’ said Miss Kouros, glaring right at me, ‘if you don’t stop moaning you’ll be doing *extra* work and staying till it’s finished!’ She dragged some dangling bits of hair off her face and stuck them on top of her head with another pen. ‘Okay, 7B,’ she said, ‘You’re not the only ones who are hot. Wake up and pay attention or you’ll *all* be here after the bell!’

I stifled another groan and picked up my sweaty pen. The glare from the white paper in front

of me seared my eyeballs. How was I ever going to get to the end of the period?

When the bell went at last, Jodie and I were first out the door. We leapt onto our bikes and headed for home – free at last.

‘See you at the Stingray Pool!’ I yelled as Jodie turned off down her street.

I only hoped I could persuade Mum to let me go. She’d just come home from hospital with our new baby and I’d promised Dad I’d help as much as possible; but I just *had* to have a swim first.

‘Please, Mum!’ I begged her, ‘I’ll have the quickest swim I’ve ever had, and then I promise I’ll come straight back.’

She was sitting in front of the TV feeding the baby. Her hair was sticking to her forehead and her eyes looked tired. She sighed and glared at me while I stood there, trying to look as hot as I really felt. ‘All right,’ she said at last, ‘*Saoud baad nos saa mowafka?*’

‘*Mowafka, shokran mama,*’ I said. And before she could change her mind I was out the door.

‘And no longer!’ she shouted after me.

When I arrived at the Stingray Pool, Jodie was already there putting on her mask and snorkel. We’ve got two beaches where you can swim. The sandy beach is better for lying around and sunbaking but the Stingray Pool is closer. We’ve never seen

any stingrays actually inside the pool, they're only in the deep water outside. Sometimes, when we've swum out through the opening, we see two or three and they go gliding past like slow-motion butterflies. They're not dangerous if you don't go near them, just a bit scary.

We climbed over the rocks and at last sank into the cool water. Lazily we swam out through the narrow entrance looking down through our masks at the slowly-moving underwater world: little brown waving trees, bunches of green lettuce, long strands of brown leather kelp. I hung there, weightless, floating in the clear water until I noticed something strange wedged into the rocks. I surfaced and dragged off my mask.

'Hey Jodie!' I yelled, 'Come over here!'

Jodie's head popped out of the water behind me, 'What do you want?' she asked.

'Look down here.'

We put our masks and snorkels back on and ducked under the water. I pointed to a hessian bag sitting tucked into a rocky crevice. The bottom of it bulged and it was roughly tied with frayed, orange rope. The top waved slowly in the current.

Jodie bounced to the surface dragging her mask off, 'It's probably dead kittens!' she spluttered.

'It might be,' I said, 'but it looks heavy, like rocks.'

We dived down again and swam closer. I prodded it gently – it was quite solid. I took hold of the top and tried to lift it. It was heavy but not too heavy for me to pull it up, away from the rocks.

Jodie tapped me on the arm and we came to the surface again.

‘What do you think it is?’ she asked.

‘Only one way to find out,’ I answered, ‘I mean, it might be something valuable, like gold nuggets or something. I’m going to bring it into the pool and have a look.’

I dived down and grabbed it. Then I half-lifted and half-dragged it back through the opening into the shallow water. We sat on some rocks with the bag between us and I started to pick at the knotted rope.

‘Here it comes,’ I said, and I pulled the bag open.

What a disappointment! Only abalone. They were still alive too – sticking onto each other and moving slowly around, trying to find something more solid to cling to.

‘Somebody’s been collecting them and left them behind,’ I said.

‘Yuk!’ said Jodie, ‘What do they do with them?’

‘Eat them,’ I said. ‘My Dad loves them. I’m going to take them home for him.’

‘I thought you weren’t supposed to collect shellfish.’

‘Well, we didn’t, did we? We found them. Anyway, I think you’re allowed to take a few each.’

Jodie didn’t look impressed.

‘Are you coming back into the water?’ she said.

‘No. I’d better go now; Mum’ll be waiting for me. You coming?’

‘I suppose so. I’m not staying here on my own.’

I tipped the big lump of stuck-together abalone out of the bag and wrapped them in my towel. There were about ten of them and out of the water they were really heavy. I staggered over the rocks with them and dumped them into the basket on my bike.

Jodie rode back with me and when we took the abalone into the kitchen and showed them to Mum, she wrinkled up her nose.

‘Ah, Zena!’ she wailed.

‘What’s up?’ I asked, ‘I thought you’d be glad to have them. They’re Dad’s favourites.’

‘Hah! Your father’s favourites!’ she turned them over with one finger. ‘I suppose you will clean them?’

‘Oh, Mu-um!’

She watched them slowly moving around, ‘All right,’ she said, ‘At least they are fresh. Are you taking some, Jodie?’

Jodie didn’t look too keen. ‘Um, just a couple, thanks Mrs. Rashid. What do they taste like?’

Mum smiled, ‘Ah, Jodie, they are a delicacy. You tell your mother: cut them out of the shell and wash them, then slice them thin and fry very quickly in garlic and butter. No more than a couple of seconds each side. I think you will like them.’

She put three in a plastic bag and Jodie took them doubtfully. We walked to the gate together.

‘I dunno if my Mum even knows what they are,’ she said, ‘they look pretty yuk to me.’

‘Well, *we* like them,’ I said and went back to help Mum. Sometimes Jodie makes me mad.

I hung the baby’s washing on the line and cleaned up some dishes in the sink while Mum prepared the abalone. By the time Dad was due home, she had the pan sizzling on the stove and the delicious smell of butter and garlic filled the kitchen. When he came in the door and saw the abalone slices waiting nearby his eyes lit up.

‘Mmm!’ he said, breathing in deeply, ‘Where did these come from?’

I told him about finding the bag down at the Stingray Pool and how it was stuck into a rocky

hole. He looked at Mum and frowned, then he looked at the abalone and shrugged his shoulders.

‘La daey lelkalak, fakad fat alawan,’ he said.

He threw a couple of pieces into the sizzling butter, turned them quickly and popped them into his mouth.

‘Ah, very good,’ he said, closing his eyes. ‘This reminds me of when I was a boy in Lebanon,’ and he licked the buttery garlic off his lips. ‘We lived by the sea, Zena, and my father went out fishing every day.’

‘Yeah, Dad. I know!’ I said. He’s told us about Lebanon a million times before but he doesn’t care – he didn’t even hear me.

‘And he brought home all sorts of sea food and fish,’ Dad went on, picking up another piece of abalone.

‘No more now,’ said Mum firmly. ‘Zena, go and tell Samira to wash her hands for dinner. Josef will be home soon and then we can all have some.’

‘And I will go and pick some fresh tomatoes to have with them,’ said Dad, heading for the door.

Our whole back yard is dug up for vegies and if Dad’s not at work, he’s out there, digging and weeding and planting – he calls it his farm. It’s all right, I suppose, but sometimes we live on the same vegies for weeks and weeks. Like, after this last

month, I never want to see another zucchini in my whole life.



After dinner, the phone calls started. The first one was from Jason Pirelli.

‘Jodie gave me your abalone,’ he said.

‘What for?’ I said, ‘Why did she give them to you?’

‘She said she didn’t want them, so I was on my way to Sean’s place and –

‘You didn’t take them to *Sean’s*?’

Sean’s father’s a policeman and I didn’t need *him* to know I’d taken shellfish home from the beach.

‘Yeah, sorry,’ said Jason, ‘and his Dad walked in just as we were looking at them.’

‘You are so stupid, Jason!’ I said.

‘Well, how did I know there was anything wrong? Anyway, he says he wants to talk to you.’

‘Who?’

‘Sean’s Dad.’

‘Thanks a lot!’ I said and hung up.

The next time the phone rang I took the cordless into my bedroom so Dad wouldn’t hear anything. Of course it was Sean, sounding really bossy and important – just because his Dad’s a

copper. ‘Dad wants to know exactly where you found them,’ he said.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘He says it could be dangerous.’

My stomach dropped. What could be wrong with them? We’d all just eaten them – Mum and Dad, Samira and Josef ...

‘Why? What’s wrong with them?’

‘Nothing,’ said Sean, ‘It’s just how you found them. Dad says they could belong to poachers.’

‘So? We got them instead. Bad luck to the poachers.’

‘He says – just a minute,’ he turned away from the phone, ‘What Dad?’ I waited impatiently, trying to hear what his father was saying. ‘He wants to know what you did with the bag.’

‘I just left it there.’

‘Where?’

‘Where I found them, at the Stingray Pool.’

I waited while he told his Dad.

‘He says it’s probably okay. Just don’t touch anything like that again.’

‘Why?’

‘He says there’s big money in abalone poaching and the poachers could get nasty if they knew somebody had found out about them.’

I didn’t answer while I thought about this.

‘Okay, Zena?’ asked Sean.

‘Yes, *alright!*’ I said, ‘And Sean?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Tell him – tell him, thanks.’

‘Okay.’

The next phone call was me ringing Jodie.

‘Why did you have to give them to Jason?’ I asked crossly.

‘I met him on the way home and showed them to him. He said his Dad loved them too so I thought he might as well have them. I didn’t think Mum’d want to cook them anyway.’

After I’d hung up I thought about what Sean’s father had said. I couldn’t see why finding a few abalone in a bag was dangerous. I mean, how valuable could they be? It seemed a lot of fuss about nothing to me.

I couldn’t have been more wrong.



Ms Davis

Chapter 2

Drama Class was in total chaos. Everyone trying on their costumes and you could hardly hear Shakespeare's voice over the noise.

Karen de Vries was running across the stage, squealing at the top of her voice, with Jason Pirelli right behind her. He had on a top hat and long black cloak and was shouting 'Ha-ha-hah!' and threatening her with his plastic dagger. Michael Vella and two other boys were fighting over the same jacket, and everyone else was poncing around laughing at each other and shouting 'Look at me! Look at me!' at the tops of their voices. Our drama classes often end up like this.

Suddenly two piercing whistle blasts shrieked in our ears. Ow! That stopped us mucking around. Sometimes it was the only way Shakespeare could get our attention.

He doesn't really look like Shakespeare – he looks more like a garden gnome – a balding garden gnome with a beard and a pony tail and big black-rimmed glasses. We call him Shakespeare because he's always quoting bits of old fashioned plays at us, like 'To be or not to be' or 'A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!' – then he tells us a bit about the plays they come from. Sometimes they sound all right – lots of murders and fights.

We were rehearsing a melodrama for the end-of-year concert and this was our last rehearsal. I was Sybil, the evil sister. I had a long, red, shiny dress and a black turban, and I had to carry a big black and red fan. Jason was the villain and Jodie was the heroine. Karen de Vries wanted to be the heroine so she wasn't talking to Jodie. I was glad I wasn't the heroine because Sean Aherne was the hero and they had to kiss each other. Shakespeare said they didn't have to really do it, just kiss the air near each other. I wouldn't want to do it though.

The rest of the class were in the play, too. There was Baggs the butler, Sir Herbert, the hero's father and two stage hands – Shakespeare called them the 'Blues Brothers' and gave them big blue

overalls to wear. Everyone else was the audience. They were all dressed up in costume and on the stage, too. Shakespeare got a whole lot of terrific clothes from the Op Shops – caps and jackets for the boys and long skirts and shawls for the girls. They sat on rows of chairs in front of the little platform where we were doing the melodrama and they had to boo the villain and cheer the hero, just like an old fashioned audience. ‘A play within a play’ Shakespeare called it.

It was the first time we’d had our costumes – that’s why everyone went a bit silly and Shakespeare had to use his whistle.

He gave the whistle another blast and jumped up onto a chair so he was tall enough to see everyone. We stood there, trying not to giggle while he glared through his thick glasses, inspecting us all carefully. Then he grinned widely.

‘I think you all look absolutely fabulous!’ he said, ‘Now – in the ten minutes left we are going to rehearse the opening and get it exactly right because next week you are *on*! So, full concentration everybody! Audience, off stage left; actors, off stage right. Listen for the music.’

He jumped down to sit behind the keyboard and we hurried to take our places.

‘Ready?’ He started to play the background music and everyone in the audience filed in

properly, just like we'd rehearsed. They took their seats facing our little stage and looked up expectantly.

As I watched from the wings, suddenly there was a prickle of excitement up and down my spine. This was nearly it! Next week the hall would be filled with rows and rows of a real audience. The whole school, as well as our parents and families, would be out there watching.

'Ready, Sir Herbert?' called Shakespeare. He played the music for the start of the play and Sir Herbert made his entrance.

'Okay, we'll stop there.' There was a groan from everybody. We wanted to go on – to show how well we could do it.

'Sorry, time to pack up. Take your costumes off quickly and hang them up *neatly* on the 7B rack.'

Bedlam again. Kids and costumes everywhere, noise and confusion. Then, ding-ding-ding, the bell rang for the end of the period. Shakespeare's voice rang out again, loud and clear. 'No one is leaving until everything is hung up and you are sitting quietly.' It was the last period of the day so we didn't waste time mucking around and soon we were all sitting on the floor of the hall, waiting to be dismissed.

He stood in the centre of the stage and held his arms out towards us, 'All the world's a stage,' he

said and paused dramatically, ‘and next Wednesday night, when this hall is filled with your adoring audience, this whole class is going to be quite, quite brilliant! Until then, go over your lines every day, think about them every night before you go to sleep, and’ – he stopped speaking and glared down at us – ‘if anyone doesn’t have their lines *word perfect*, by Wednesday night – I’ll have their guts for garters! All right?’

Jodie and I looked at each other – we’d both forgotten some of our lines in the rehearsal today. There was one bit I just *couldn’t* learn properly and I was sure I’d forget it on the night.

‘Off you go now and have a good week-end.’

‘What about doing our lines over the weekend?’ asked Jodie as we dodged a couple of boys wrestling in the doorway.

‘Why don’t you come to my place now?’ I asked.

‘I’ve got to go and see the Pelican; will you wait for me?’

‘I can’t. I’m supposed to go straight home because of the baby.’

‘I won’t be long. She only wants to yell at me for leaving a mess in the art room.’

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘I’ll start off and you catch up if you can.’

‘Okay.’

The Pelican is Ms Davis, our principal. She's got lots of white hair and a long skinny neck and her eyes are little and bright. When she's cross, she peers down her long nose at you and snorts – just like a pelican.

I went to the lockers and then headed for the bike rack. Karen de Vries was there, standing next to her bike pretending to look helpless.

'Have you seen Jason?' she asked me, wiggling her shoulders and flicking back her long blonde hair. 'He said he'd meet me here and help me pump my tyre up.'

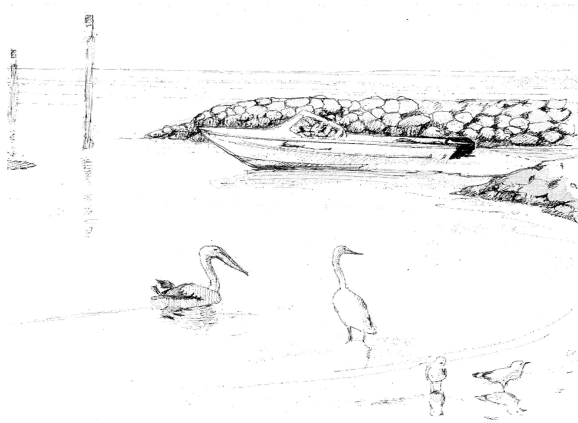
'Why don't you pump it up yourself?' I said shortly.

'I don't want to scratch my nail polish,' she said, smiling sweetly, 'and anyway, I haven't got a pump.'

'You'd better borrow mine,' I said, 'because I just saw Jason going out the gate.' Which wasn't true – but I can't help myself with Karen.

Her smile disappeared. 'It doesn't matter,' she said, 'I've been trying to avoid him anyway.'

She grabbed her bike and wheeled it away. The front tyre looked a bit soft, maybe it really did need pumping up. As I took my bike out of the rack I noticed Jason's was still there and felt a twinge of guilt.



Chapter 3

I was just riding out the gate when I heard Jodie call.

‘Hey, Zena! Wait for me, will ya?’

I stopped and looked back. She was riding at full speed across the school yard, her blonde plait flying out behind her. She skidded to a stop beside me.

‘What’s up?’ I asked.

She was puffing and had to stop and catch her breath. ‘Miss Kouros is leaving at the end of this year!’ she said, at last.

‘What? Who told you?’

‘The Pelican. Just when I thought she’d finished yelling at me and I was going to get away, she said: “and don’t think you and Zena will be getting up to your usual tricks next year. You’ll have a new science teacher and *he* won’t be putting up with any nonsense.’”

‘Oooh! She is so mean.’ I said, ‘She’s only happy when she’s being horrible. Let’s go and see Miss Kouros now.’

‘We can’t,’ said Jodie, ‘I saw her driving off as I came out of the Pelican’s office.’

‘Far out!’ I said, ‘We won’t see her till Monday now. We’ve just *got* to talk her out of leaving.’

‘Maybe she’s been sacked,’ said Jodie as we rode out the gate.

‘They couldn’t sack her!’ I said, ‘She’s the best science teacher we’ve ever had.’

Actually she’s the only one we’ve ever had, because we didn’t have a proper science teacher at primary school. Everyone in 7B loves science though, because even while she’s teaching us, she laughs and makes jokes. We do lots of ace experiments with her, too. The best one was when we dissected an ox eye and Karen de Vries accidentally swallowed the lens. Maybe that was why Ms Davis was sacking her.

We were still talking about Miss Kouros when Jason and Sean came racing past us on their bikes. Jason had Sean's footy beanie and threw it to Jodie as he passed.

'Your girlfriend's got it, Sean!' he yelled and sped off.

Jodie was furious. 'I'm *not* his girlfriend, Jason!' she screamed. She threw the beanie at me and pedalled after him. She reckons Jason is her boyfriend but I don't think he knows it yet. I haven't got a boyfriend and I don't want one.

The beanie missed me but Tran was coming up behind on his little old bike so I knew he'd pick it up.

Jodie and I chased the boys along the Esplanade and into the car park at the boat harbour. Sean cornered Jason at the start of the rock breakwater and they both ended up crashing in a heap on the ground. When Jodie and I reached them they were sitting up, bike wheels still spinning, laughing and examining grazes on their hands and elbows.

'You're stupid, Jason!' said Jodie looking down at him.

'Hey! Where's my beanie?' demanded Sean.

'Ask your stupid friend,' said Jodie.

Then Tran arrived. He jumped off his bike and dragged the beanie out from the front of his jumper.

‘Lucky I was there, eh, Sean?’

‘Yeah, thanks, mate.’ Sean took it and pulled it onto his head.

Tran’s only new at the school and doesn’t know too many kids yet. Jason and Sean don’t seem to mind if he hangs around with them but sometimes they hardly seem to notice him.

‘Coming out on the breakwater?’ said Jason, ‘My Dad’s boat might be coming in about now.’

You never know whether to believe Jason or not – he’s always telling incredible stories and sometimes they’re true and sometimes they’re sort of nearly true only not quite. He reckons his Dad owns lots of houses around the town because they’ve got big signs on the fences: ‘G. Pirelli – Builder’ but really the signs only mean that his Dad is doing the alterations or building a second floor or something. He knows we don’t believe him but he still does it.

We wandered out on the breakwater and he started mucking around again.

‘That’s *my* boat – the big white one.’

‘It’s not as big as mine,’ said Sean, ‘See that orange one coming in now? That’s mine.’

‘At least it matches your hair,’ said Jodie and Sean grinned. He says he likes having orange hair because it shows he’s Irish.

‘I wouldn’t want a boat that big, anyway,’ I said ‘I’ll have that little red one. Then I can use it for water skiing.’

‘Ace!’ said Jodie, ‘I’ll come out with you – as long as I can dive off it.’

‘Course you can dive off it.’

‘No, I mean skin-dive – snorkelling.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ I said, ‘that’d be fantastic. Better than just going in off the shore.’

‘Hey, Jason,’ said Jodie nudging me, ‘maybe your father can take us out diving in his boat. Why don’t you ask him?’

We grinned at each other. *That* put him on the spot.

Suddenly Tran jumped up.

‘Hey! That’s my uncle’s boat coming in!’

He ran out along the wall towards the entrance, waving and calling out. We couldn’t understand what he was saying because he was speaking in his own language but the man who was steering looked up. He didn’t smile and wave though, like we expected; he scowled and shouted something angrily at Tran. Tran stopped running and his arm dropped to his side. The rest of us stood and watched while the small white boat motored past us and pulled up at the pontoon.

Tran came back and sat down again. He looked like he might cry.

‘What’s up?’ asked Jason.

‘My uncle was very rude. He and my father have been fighting each other,’ he blinked his eyes and sniffed. ‘But it’s not my fault. Why did he yell at *me*?’

‘Ah, don’t worry about him,’ said Jason. ‘Tell you what, let’s race our bikes down on the sand.’

The tide was going way out and the sand stretched, hard and dry, for about a kilometre towards the rocky point. I’m not supposed to take my bike there because Dad says the salt water will ruin the wheels but if I don’t go into the water, I don’t reckon it can hurt that much.

We picked up our bikes and wheeled them over the little bridge. We stopped and looked down at the seagulls in the shallow water, paddling in their little round pools and picking stuff out with their beaks.

In a few minutes we were on the sand and the five of us were racing along together, dodging puddles and feeling the warm breeze blowing through our hair. Tran was laughing again and, even though his bike is old and rattles a lot, he was keeping up with us because no one can go fast on the sand.

Just as we reached the rocks at the end, Jason and Sean tried to do big u-eyes but both of them skidded and came off, falling flat on their faces in

the sand. Boys are so stupid, they're always throwing themselves around like that.

After they'd got the damp sand out of their eyes and hair we began walking back, wheeling our bikes.

'Anyone going away over the holidays?' asked Jason.

'I am,' said Sean, 'Our family's going to Sydney for Christmas to be with our rellos, but we'll be back in time for New Year 'cos Dad has to work.'

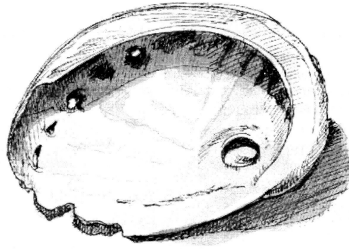
'What does he have to do?' asked Tran.

Sean shrugged. 'I dunno. Cops always have to work over the holidays.'

'What about you, Zena?' asked Jason, 'How's the new baby?'

'Far out!' I said, 'I've gotta go!'

I jumped on my bike and raced off at full speed. I had totally forgotten to go straight home. I turned the corner into our street and my heart dropped. Dad's car was in the drive.



Chapter 4

Quietly I opened the door to the kitchen – there was no sign of anyone. From the front of the house I could hear strange, dragging and thumping noises. Where was everyone, and what was going on?

I was standing there, trying to work out what the noises were, when the door from the hall opened and Dad appeared. His sleeves were rolled up and he didn't look happy.

'Ah, there you are! I thought I told you to come straight home. Go to your room, your mother needs you.'

What was he talking about? How could I go to my room and help Mum as well?

I soon found out. My bedroom was a total mess and in the middle of it was Mum – directing traffic.

Furniture was everywhere – Samira’s bed, her chest of drawers, her toys, her clothes. Some were already in my room and some half way down the hall.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked stupidly. It was only too obvious what was going on.

Samira looked up at me, holding a drawer full of clothes. She looked worried.

‘You don’t mind, do you, Zena?’

‘It’s too bad if she does, Samira,’ Mum snapped. ‘I can’t leave you and the baby in the same room any longer; you’re not getting enough sleep. Come along, Zena, we’ve got to get this finished. You can make Samira’s bed. I don’t know why you can’t come straight home when you know I need you.’

Mum did look awfully tired. There were grey streaks in her dark curly hair that I hadn’t noticed before and it wasn’t neat and pretty like it usually is.

Samira’s sheets and doona were in a heap outside the door and I dragged them in and started making her bed. I couldn’t believe what was happening. How could I possibly live without a room of my own?



We were just about to start eating when we heard the first sounds of the baby beginning to cry. I looked at Mum – she had just sat down after dishing up our dinner. She looked at me and sighed.

‘Zena, atakdarin an tohderih li men fadlek?’

‘Why always me?’ I mumbled under my breath.

Dad looked up from his plate. ‘What did you say?’

‘*Alright!*’ I said and pushed my chair back noisily. ‘I suppose you want me to change him, too!’ and without waiting for an answer I headed for the front of the house.

I peeped into the baby’s room, waiting for a minute to see if he was going to settle down again. It looked rather bare now that Samira had moved out. Maybe we could put up some baby decorations now he was the only one in it. His whimpering and grizzling started to turn into a full-scale yell and I went in and picked him up – a wet, soggy little bundle. He stopped crying and looked at me with big blue eyes. They were getting darker, like Mum said they would. She said they’d eventually turn brown like the rest of our family. Suddenly I gave him a little hug – wet nappy and all.

‘You’re like a dripping tap,’ I said to him, ‘you never stop.’

I put him down on the changing table and his face wrinkled up for another wail.

‘Come on, Josh,’ I said, ‘Nappy before food.’

His real name is Joshua but I call him Josh. He’s the first baby I’ve ever had to play with and he’s pretty cute.

I picked him up, dry and sweet smelling, and headed back to the kitchen cuddling him against my neck. I nearly forgot I was cross with everybody but when I opened the door I remembered and handed him to Mum without saying anything.

‘Thank you Zena, I put your dinner in the oven with Josef’s.’

‘Thanks,’ I grunted.

Mum took Josh into the lounge room to feed him and the three of us finished eating in silence. Dad never has much to say but usually Samira chatters non-stop. She hates it when I’m grumpy but I didn’t care.

Dad finished eating and stood up to go., Then he turned back and looked down at me.

‘Zena,’ he said, ‘I want to talk to you.’

I looked up impatiently, ‘What about?’

‘About your – your attitude.’

‘What ‘attitude’?’

‘I am not happy when you are rude – to your mother or to me.’

‘When was I rude?’

He sighed. ‘Zena, I think you know.’

‘Look, Dad, why don’t other people have to do stuff? Why can’t Josef help a bit more’

He held his hands out, ‘Josef is not here.’

‘No, he’s never here!’

‘He’s growing up. He has other things to do.’

‘Yes,’ I said, more loudly than I meant to and I felt my voice tremble, ‘and he’s also a *boy!*’

Dad’s eyes met mine and I wondered whether I’d gone too far. He stood there for a moment, not speaking, then, suddenly I jumped up and ran to the back door. I slammed out of the house and headed for the beach.

I get so mad with myself. My voice goes all shaky and I sound like I’m going to cry when really, all I am is angry. That’s why I had to run.



The beach was nearly deserted now and I ran and ran on the hard sand, out and out towards the water. The tide was so far out the seagulls at the edge looked like a scattering of tiny white pebbles.

I kicked off my sandals and kept running until the flock of seagulls rose about me like snowflakes. I splashed into the water. It was warm and silky and the tiny, shallow ripples splashed gently against my ankles. At last I could stop.

I drew a deep breath, which sounded a bit like a sob; I couldn't cope any more!

I'd just lost my bedroom without anyone even asking me; Miss Kouros was leaving; Mum was always tired from looking after the baby; and now Dad was cross with me. And on top of everything, I had to learn my lines for the play. How could I even think about that when so many other things were happening?

I started walking again. The water splashed my school dress but I didn't care. It just wasn't fair! Samira was only nine and I was nearly thirteen. What about when Jodie came round? Where would we sit and talk? Where would I listen to my music? And what about when I wanted to use the phone on my own?

I looked out over the shining sea. The sun was setting behind me, turning the clouds in front pale pink and gold. I drew another deep breath and began to feel a bit better. I knew there was no point in arguing. Samira was in my room and there was nothing I could do about it. I'd just have to get used to it.

I didn't see why Dad had to be cross with me though. I never saw *him* doing much to help. All he ever did was go to work and dig the garden. I was right about Josef, too – how he always got out of housework – just because he was a boy.

It wasn't that I minded helping Mum; I knew she was always busy. She learnt how to cut hair in Lebanon so she 's often out in the afternoons, doing people's hair. And sometimes the Council rings up and asks for her help because she can speak lots of different languages. In Lebanon she spoke Arabic and French and when she came to Australia, she learnt English as well. She can even speak German a bit.

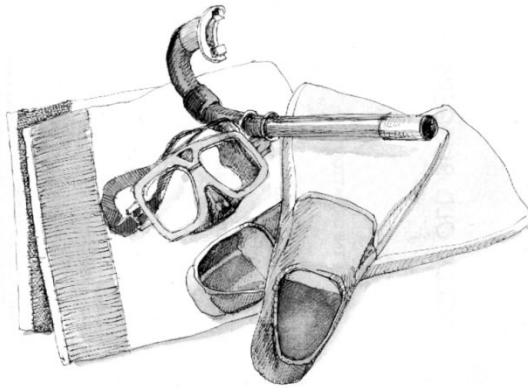
I wish I could speak all those languages. They try to get me to speak Arabic at home but I'm not very good at it. I can't be bothered. Mum says she finds languages really easy – which is funny because she can't read or write – not in any language. Her father made her leave school when she was eight years old to help look after her brothers and sisters and I think she's still cross about it. She's always saying that's not going to happen to Samira and me.

'It's too late for me' she says, 'but you and Samira will have the best education possible. Do your homework!' She's always nagging about it.

I turned and began to walk back towards home and as I passed the end of the boat harbour, I saw Tran's uncle again. He was with a couple of other men and they were backing his little white boat down into the water.

‘He must be pretty keen,’ I thought. ‘He only came in a couple of hours ago and now he’s going out again.’

I didn’t think any more about it then, but I guess I should have.



Chapter 5

When I arrived home, Mum and Samira were doing the dishes. Mum looked up and smiled gently at me and I breathed a sigh of relief. At least *she* wasn't mad at me.

'Dad wants to talk to you,' she said, 'He's in the lounge room.'

'Oh, Mu-um.'

'Go along,' she said, 'It'll be alright.'

I went in and Dad was sitting on the couch in front of the TV, a can of beer in his hand.

'Ya Zena, taaly hena'

I waited to find out what sort of mood he was in.

'Taaly. Come and sit here with me.'

I perched on the edge of the couch.

‘Your mother says you are growing up and sometimes you get upset. That is true and I know it is not easy. But with growing up, comes responsibility.’

I opened my mouth to argue but he held out his hand to stop me.

‘You ask about Josef and, yes, he has responsibilities too. That is why he works after school. He has done well to get the job at the boat shop. He earns money and he will learn good skills. He helps me too, like you help your mother. All right?’

‘I suppose so,’ I said reluctantly.

‘Now, are we friends again?’

He put his arm round me and I had to sort of hug him back. I wasn’t convinced though. I couldn’t remember when I’d last seen Josef doing anything useful round the place.



Once Samira was in bed and Mum and Dad were watching TV I took the phone into the kitchen. I was just about to ring Jodie to tell her about my bedroom when the phone rang.

‘Guess what!’ said Jodie’s voice.

‘What?’

‘Jason says he’s going to ask his father to take us out in his boat.’

‘His boat! Has he actually got one?’

‘He must have. Jason sounded as though he really meant it.’

‘Do you believe him?’

‘Dunno. But he says he’ll ask if we can go out to one of the reefs so we can snorkel.’

‘When?’

‘In the holidays, he says.’

‘Oh, yeah!’ I was still doubtful.

‘It might be true.’

‘Yeah, it might be. At least that’s a bit of *good* news. Do you know what *I* found when I got home today?’

‘What?’

‘Samira’s bed and all her furniture and stuff being moved into my bedroom!’

‘You mean – for good?’

‘Looks like it.’

‘That’s awful!’ she said, ‘how can you bear it?’

‘I can’t!’ I said. ‘I wanted to practise my lines tomorrow but where am I going to do it?’

‘I’ll come round,’ she said, ‘and we’ll go down the beach.’

‘Why should we?’ I said. ‘I’ll just tell her to get out.’



It was strange waking up in the morning and finding Samira there. She was sound asleep, sprawled half way down the bed with her head hanging over one side and her doona over the other. Scattered around her were stuffed animals – three dogs, a cat and a couple of strange creatures she’s had ever since she was a baby. With her rosy cheeks and black curly hair she looked like a little dark angel. I lay there wondering how I was going to feel finding her there every morning.

Suddenly there was the most awful roar from outside and Samira woke with a terrible jump.

‘It’s all right,’ I said, ‘it’s only Dad mowing the grass.’

There’s only a tiny bit of grass left from Dad’s vegie garden and, of course, it has to be right outside my bedroom. Samira got up and knelt on my bed to look out the window.

‘Zena – it’s not Dad – it’s Josef.’

I couldn’t believe it. It really was Josef and he didn’t look too happy, either.

Samira and I looked at each other and giggled – maybe Dad had listened to me after all.



After lunch Jodie came round and we went to my room. I opened the door and there was Samira, busily taking her toys and ornaments out of boxes and arranging them round her bed and on her chest of drawers. She looked up at me.

‘I’m gunna keep it really tidy, Zena.’ She said.

I took the play script out of my school bag and looked at Jodie. ‘Let’s go down the beach,’ I said, ‘It’s only five minutes away.’

We sat on the rock wall and went over and over our lines till we were sick of it and Jodie made me do my difficult bit a million times. By the time we’d finished I was quite sure I’d remember it for the rest of my life.

‘How’s it going with Samira in your room?’ Jodie asked.

‘Don’t ask,’ I answered. ‘I just can’t bear to think of it. I mean – I’ll never, ever have my room to myself again.’

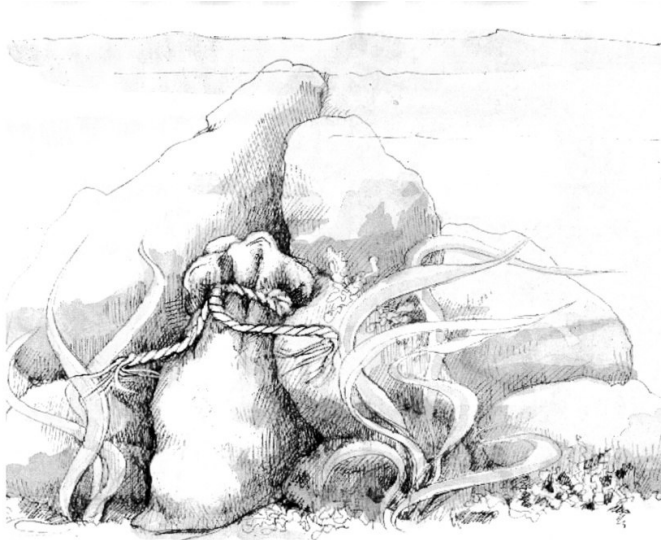
‘Well,’ said Jodie quietly, ‘at least you’re not lonely.’

I looked at her, surprised. I’d never thought of her being lonely. Jodie lives with her Mum. She doesn’t have a Dad – I don’t think she even knows who he is. Her Mum’s a nurse and works different shifts at the hospital in the next town so Jodie often has to get her own dinner. Sometimes she even spends the whole weekend on her own.

We got off the wall and began to walk home.

‘You want to come to my place for lunch tomorrow?’ I asked her.

‘No,’ she said, ‘Mum and I are going to the market.’



Chapter 6

When we got to school on Monday Jodie and I tried to find Miss Kouros to ask her about next year but as soon as we arrived we were called to a special assembly. The Pelican was there, looking down her nose at us and reading out the rules for Awards Night on Wednesday. It was just the usual stuff: how we had to remember the rules, behave properly, sit quietly and do as we were told. Most of us didn't listen anyway.

'What do you reckon about Jason's Dad's boat?' I asked Jodie as we left the hall, 'Are you going to ask him if his Dad's said any more?'

‘No way!’ she said, ‘I’m not chasing him.’

‘Probably just big noting himself again,’ I said. ‘You can’t believe anything he says. Come on, it’s Science next and we can talk to Miss Kouros.’

We were lined up outside the classroom for ages before Miss Kouros came. She was looking even more bedraggled than usual; her hair was falling down in all directions and she was rattling her bangles and earrings like she always did when she was angry.

We filed in quietly because she was obviously very bad-tempered and I wasn’t sure whether we should ask her anything at all. We didn’t have to though.

She stood silently at her desk and when we had sat down she said, ‘I believe some of you have heard that I may be leaving at the end of this year. Well, I’m not.’

She was sounding more Greek than ever; she took a deep breath and tossed her head. ‘I have just been discussing next year with Ms Davis and the only change that *may* be taking place is that another teacher could be taking you for Science.’

The whole class started calling out: ‘That’s not fair.’ ‘We want you.’ ‘Why can’t you stay with us?’

She held her hand up for silence, ‘It has not yet been decided! But Ms Davis and I will continue to talk about it.’

It was pretty clear we would just have to wait.

‘Now,’ she said firmly, ‘You all know how to do a research project.’

Some of the class groaned. We’d had to do three of her ‘research projects’ already and it was nearly the end of the year. Surely she wasn’t going to set new work *now*.

‘I *was* going to set you a special one for the school holidays,’ she said, and then she banged the desk with the flat of her hand, ‘and we will *still* discuss it, even if I do not have you next year. Pens and notebooks out immediately!’

You didn’t argue with Miss Kouros when she was like that and soon we were ready with pens poised.

She wrote a big heading on the board ‘RARE AND ENDANGERED SPECIES’ and we copied it into our notebooks.

‘This will be an important start to the new year and a very topical subject for you to investigate. Michael – what does endangered species mean?’

‘Um ...’

‘Karen de Vries?’

Karen smirked, ‘Animals becoming instinct, Miss.’

‘Extinct, Karen, not instinct. Can you give me an example?’

‘Frogs, Miss?’

‘Good. Anyone else?’

Miss Kouros always started her projects like this and soon answers were coming from every part of the room: ‘Whales’ ‘Orange Bellied Parrots’ ‘Bald Eagles’ ‘Bilbies’ and Miss Kouros was writing them down on the board as fast as we called them out.

‘Alright. Now stop a moment. Look at these: Koalas? Are they endangered? I want you to find out. Skipper Butterfly? Who called that out?’

Jodie put her hand up.

‘What do you know about the Skipper Butterfly, Jodie?’

‘It lives round our lake, Miss Kouros. And people are growing special bushes and grass for it to breed in.’

‘Yes, very good. An endangered species right on our doorstep.’

‘Murray Cod!’ Jason suddenly yelled out.

‘Murray Cod, Jason? Is that rare or endangered?’

‘I think it must be rare, Miss. My Dad goes up the Murray all the time and he never catches any!’

Miss Kouros laughed with the rest of us. That’s what we like about her. She doesn’t mind a joke. She picked up a rubber band and started to tie up bits of her falling-down hair with it, so we knew she was beginning to feel better.

‘Now, copy the list from the board into your notebooks and choose one to investigate; or you can find another one if you like. I want the results of your research handed to me on the first day of Term One.’

There were a couple of loud groans.

‘All right! All right! It’s not a big job,’ she insisted, ‘and it won’t hurt you to do a little bit of school work over the holidays.’

While we were writing, she walked around the room, sticking another pen into the untidy bun on top of her head. When we had finished, she stood at her desk again, looking serious.

‘I want you to listen to me, 7B,’ she said. ‘You have been a good class and you entertain me.’ She smiled, looking at Jason and Sean, ‘particularly the naughty ones. If you have a different teacher next year, you will still be a good class...’

‘No, we won’t!’ said Jason.

‘You will!’ said Miss Kouros firmly, ‘Whoever you have, you will do your best – all right?’

‘Okay, Miss Kouros,’ he said, but he didn’t convince me.

‘And don’t forget, I will still be watching you! And – whether I have you or not – I expect you to bring me that project. Okay?’

The bell went and we left the classroom quietly. Science wouldn't be nearly as much fun next year if she wasn't our teacher.

'I just wish they wouldn't keep changing things,' I said to Jodie.

'I wouldn't mind if they changed our Maths teacher,' she said. 'Old Boring Brian!'

I brightened up. 'Maybe they will!'



It was really hard to concentrate on school work so close to Christmas. Most of the teachers didn't care anyway so for the next couple of days we were allowed to play cards or bring in board games. Last period of the day on Wednesday we were just filing into our Maths classroom with Boring Brian when an announcement came over the PA. It was Shakespeare.

'All students who are participating in the awards concert tonight are to go straight to the hall.'

'Yay!' I said to Jodie, 'No maths!'

When we got to the hall, it was quickly filling up with students from all year levels: the school band, the choir, the P.E. group and all of 7B. Shakespeare was handing out bits of paper with instructions for each group and when everybody was in he jumped up onto the stage.

‘Quiet please!’ he yelled through the microphone.

The noise died down almost immediately; the quicker we finished there the quicker we’d be able to go home.

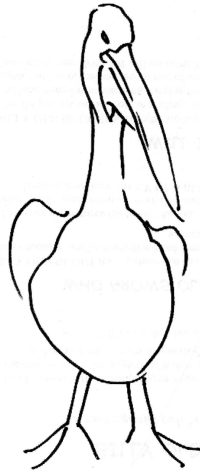
‘Hang on to those instructions,’ he said. ‘Don’t lose them! And don’t ask for another one or you’ll be dead meat! Capiche?’

Behind him teachers and senior students were busily working on the stage – up on ladders setting lights, on the floor plugging in microphones, and in the wings stacking up everything needed for the night: music stands, P.E. mats, rostrums, costumes and furniture. People were calling out, hammers were banging and it looked like total chaos, but everyone seemed to know what they were doing.

Shakespeare talked over the top of it all, going through the instructions with us and making us go up the steps onto the stage and off again until he was quite sure we would do it properly. At last he was satisfied.

‘That will do,’ he said. ‘Get off home and I’ll see you here tonight. And don’t be late!’

As we walked out the door I realised just how close the play was, and something strange started fluttering in my stomach.



Ms Davis

Chapter 7

When Dad drove us up to the school hall there were people everywhere. I'd been so nervous at tea time I'd hardly eaten anything and now my knees were starting to shake. Nothing I did could stop them.

We weren't as early as I wanted to be, either, because it had taken so long to get the whole family ready. Mum had to get Josh fed and dressed, Samira couldn't find her good shoes, Dad had to have an extra shave and hogged the bathroom and then when Josef came home, late as usual, Dad told him to get showered and dressed too.

‘What for?’ he asked.

‘Because you are coming with us,’ said Dad.

Josef wasn’t the only one surprised.

‘Why?’ he said, amazed.

‘This is a family,’ Dad said firmly. ‘It is an important night for Zena and we will *all* be there to support her.’

Josef wasn’t too happy, but even he doesn’t argue with Dad when he uses that tone of voice.

Jodie and her Mum were already there when we arrived. Mrs Forbes is tall and slim like Jodie and she had on a gorgeous long dark blue skirt and looked really young and glamorous. Sean and his family were there too. Mr Aherne was in his police uniform and the minute we walked into the foyer we could see his red hair towering over the top of everyone.

‘Sure, an’ here’s another one of the stars!’ he said loudly as soon as he saw me. He’s always joking and loves embarrassing people. He’s nice, though.

I saw Tran standing by himself – he didn’t seem to have any family with him.

‘Come and meet my Mum and Dad,’ I called to him.

I introduced him to everyone and he was admiring Josh when Jason came over. A man was with him.

‘This is my Dad,’ he said.

Mr. Pirelli was a big man with a big smile.

‘So,’ he said to me, ‘you are coming out in my boat soon?’

My mouth dropped open, ‘Oh – er – yeah. Thanks.’

Jodie and I looked at Jason. He was standing behind his father with a big smirk all over his face.

Dad looked surprised. He turned from Mr Pirelli to me and back again. ‘You are taking Zena out in a boat?’

My heart gave a sudden lurch – surely he wouldn’t stop me from going.

‘Yes, if it’s okay with you, Mr. Rashid. Jason says they want to go skin-diving.’

‘You will be there?’ asked Dad.

‘Ho, yes! No one takes my boat out but me! You can be sure I will look after them.’

Dad was still looking doubtful.

‘You like to fish, Mr Rashid?’

Dad’s face lit up. ‘Ah, yes,’ he said, ‘I haven’t been out in a fishing boat for many years – not since I left Lebanon.’

‘Maybe some time *you* will come out with me?’

‘Maybe,’ said Dad, looking as though he’d been given the biggest birthday present ever. Mr Pirelli turned to Jodie and me.

‘I know a good reef for diving, not too far out. I’ll check the tides. You’ve got masks and snorkels?’

We nodded. There didn’t seem to be anything to say. Then the bells began ringing and the crowd moved into the hall.



The 7B kids were sitting together down the front of the hall where the Pelican could keep an eye on us. We managed to sit through her welcome speech, the PE display and the School Band – which was pretty off key – then, when the choir began filing on to the stage for their item, we all got up and went backstage to get ready.

It was pretty crowded back there and some of the ‘audience’ actors started pushing and shoving and being stupid, but the ones who were in the actual show were too nervous to muck around. I put my costume on, hardly believing that the time had really arrived. Could I actually walk out onto that stage, dressed as Sybil and say those lines we’d been rehearsing all term? I wasn’t sure I could manage it.

The choir finished and the rostrums were taken off. The ‘Blues Brothers’ took over the stage and moved our platform into place; they set out the rows of chairs for our audience and put the stage furniture in position. We were ready to go.

We stood in the wings listening to Shakespeare introduce us and my heart was

pounding so loudly I thought everyone would hear it. I could hardly breathe and my knees were shaking like castanets. What was my first line? I couldn't remember a word!

I heard Shakespeare start playing the background music; the curtains opened and our 'audience' walked onto the stage, pretending to chat together quietly. They looked just perfect: the boys had moustaches and beards drawn on and the girls were in their long skirts and shawls; some of them had bonnets as well. They took their places on the rows of chairs and looked expectantly up at our platform. It was time to go.

The music changed; Sir Herbert walked on and the melodrama began.

Then Jason swept on with his black cloak billowing behind him and everyone booed and hissed. He and Sir Herbert had a couple of lines, then he held up his hand: 'Hush,' he said, 'My daughter!'

That was my cue! I still didn't know my first line but I drew a shaky breath and sailed in. Then it came to me: 'Father!' I said theatrically.

Shakespeare hit a big chord on the keyboard.

'Sybil!' said Sir Herbert, 'Why aren't you with Hilary?'

'He's given me the slip – again!' I answered.

'Fool of a girl!'

And away it went. We *did* remember our lines – well most of them. Sir Herbert forgot one or two and made something up to fill in; Jodie’s mob-cap fell off when she was making her exit and she had to go back and get it; Jason and I bumped into each other when we were hiding behind the aspidistra and the wicker whatnot – but none of it mattered.

Our onstage audience cheered and booed and the real audience out in the hall cheered and booed as well. The villain was at last thrown out into the ‘cold, cold snow’ and then the whole cast sang the final song together.

The curtain closed and the audience applauded. They clapped and clapped and clapped. We came out and took our bows and they clapped and clapped even more. It was absolutely fantastic!

Afterwards, backstage, we couldn’t stop laughing. We hugged each other; we congratulated each other; Shakespeare came back and told us how good we’d been. We were so excited we forgot to get changed.

‘We’ve missed interval!’ somebody yelled, ‘They’re coming back into the hall.’

We dragged our costumes off and went back into the hall for the second half of the night – the *really* boring bit – the speeches and the awards.

It didn’t matter though. We’d done it – and the audience had clapped!

The Pelican droned on and on and I was glad I wasn't sitting near Josef – I could just picture the scowl on his face. I was just drifting off into a day-dream of being a rich and successful actor when I heard my name called.

‘Zena Rashid, Year Seven Science Prize.’

That woke me up! I walked up the steps onto the stage and the Pelican shook my hand.

‘Congratulations, Zena. Your project on pollution at the beginning of the year brought credit upon yourself and the school.’

‘Thank you, Ms Davis.’

I stumbled back to my seat – still not believing it had happened. That was the very first project we'd had to do for Ms Kouros. I'd found a chemical leak from one of the local factories and nearly got myself killed investigating it. It was reported in the local paper and the Pelican had been absolutely furious with me, as well as with Jodie and Jason and Sean because they'd helped me. Now she'd given me a prize for it! I looked down at the book I was holding in my hands: *An Illustrated Tour of the Great Barrier Reef*. Wow! It was great – filled with big coloured photos of fish, anemones, coral... all my favourite things. Right then I made up my mind that one day I'd go there.

For the rest of the evening Jodie and I quietly turned over the pages, trying to see the pictures in the half light of the hall.

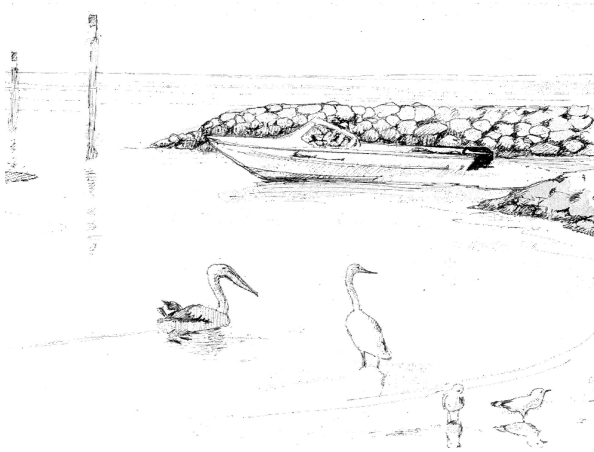
Out in the foyer afterwards, Mum and Dad were so excited about my science award they kept smiling and talking to everybody. And everyone was congratulating us about the play. Even Josef winked at me and said it was good. He started talking to Mr. Pirelli and told him about his work at the boat shop, and Mr. Pirelli said he'd come and see him whenever he needed anything. They were talking about jet-skis and Josef said he'd bring one to the boat harbour one day for Mr. Pirelli to have a test ride on.

It was a sensational night. Everything had been absolutely perfect. Even when Samira and I were going to bed, it seemed okay to have her there in my room to talk to. She snuggled down into her doona and I sat on the end of her bed.

'Is it all right, Zena?' she asked quietly, 'me being in your room?'

I smiled at her. 'Don't worry,' I said, 'It's not my room any more. It's our room now.'

She jumped up from her bed and hugged me tightly – and I hugged her back.



Chapter 8

It was the last day of school and the weather was perfect – thirty degrees and a clear, blue sky.

We got off early and most of 7B went to the park before we went home. We sat in the sun on the grass with drinks and ice creams from Charlie's Milk Bar over the road and gazed out at the sparkling water. We still didn't know whether we'd have Miss Kouros next year but right then we didn't care. Christmas was only about a week away and the whole summer stretched out before us – and soon we'd be skin-diving from Mr Pirelli's boat. Jason had shown us the reef his Dad was going to take us

to; its marker was just visible from the boat harbour.
I could hardly wait to get out there.



On Sunday the phone call we'd been waiting for came from Jason.

'Dad says it's low tide at about three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Can you be at the boat harbour by one thirty?'

'Yesss!'

'Bring your gear and a something to drink; Dad says we'll be out for a couple of hours. And don't be late – he's a bit funny about people being on time. Will you ring Jodie?'

'Okay. Who else is coming?'

'Sean's already gone to Sydney but the boat holds four passengers apart from Dad so I'll see if Tran wants to come.'

'Okay. Seeya.'

I couldn't dial Jodie's number fast enough. She came straight round with her diving gear to leave it at my place for the next day. We checked everything over and found that my flippers were badly perished and not much good. It didn't matter though, I can dive without flippers and I'd been hinting to Mum and Dad about new ones for Christmas.

Samira was nearly as excited as we were and helped us pack everything up – getting towels and water bottles ready for us. Dad was excited too – but a bit anxious.

‘You be very careful,’ he said, ‘and do everything Mr Pirelli tells you.’

‘Yes Dad.’

‘And find out how big the boat is, so you can tell me. And what sort of motor it has. And be careful.’

‘Yes, Dad.’

‘Be very careful, Zena. You promise?’

‘Yes, Dad. I promise.’

He did look worried so I put my arms round him and gave him a kiss.



In the morning Jodie came round to my place and we walked to the harbour together. The sun was shining and there was hardly any wind. It was going to be perfect.

‘D’you reckon Tran will be allowed to come?’ said Jodie.

‘Why wouldn’t he?’ I asked.

‘I rang Jason last night,’ she said, ‘and he said Tran’s Mum wasn’t too keen. She’s really frightened of the water because that’s how they came to Australia.’

‘In one of those little boats?’

‘Yes. And she was always frightened it was going to sink. But she said she’d talk to his Dad about it.’

We walked on in silence after that. I’ve never been frightened of the water, probably because I’ve been around it all my life, but when you see pictures of those little boats totally crowded with refugees, and they’re in the middle of the ocean – well, I guess you wouldn’t feel too safe.

When we got to the boat ramp we were glad to see Tran was already there with Jason and Mr Pirelli. He looked a bit nervous as, one after the other, we stepped from the jetty into the boat. Once he was in, though, he seemed all right.

‘You okay?’ I asked him.

Suddenly he had a big grin on his face and he nodded.

‘I never been snorkelling,’ he said. ‘Is it hard?’

‘It’s easy,’ said Jason. ‘I’ve got a spare mask and snorkel for you. You’ll learn in a couple of minutes.’

Mr Pirelli looked up for the controls. ‘You promise me you can swim, Tran?’

‘Sure, Mr Pirelli. I been swimming all my life. I’m a really good swimmer. It’s just snorkelling I don’t know.’

‘Just checking,’ he nodded.

He turned the key and the motor started with a roar.

‘Okay, Jason,’ he said. ‘Cast us off.’

Jason unhooked the rope, the motor settled down into a gentle burble and we slowly pulled away from the jetty.



The sky was blue and the day was hot and still as the boat chugged slowly out through the harbour entrance. ‘FIVE KNOTS LIMIT’ said the notice on the rock wall – and the depth sounder beeped continuously. There was only one metre of water beneath us and the sandy bottom was crystal clear.

The surface of the water was like a mirror and a couple of pelicans floated serenely ahead of us, looking like Ms Davis on a good day. Their reflections broke up into gentle ripples as our boat passed by.

The tide was further out than I could ever remember it. Outside the harbour, old fishing boats moored near the shore were lying on their sides on the seagrass and you could see where their chains were tethered to lumps of concrete buried in the sand. There were lines of cormorants, like sentries on duty, perched on the exposed rocks, their wings held out to dry.

There were only two seats in the boat and Jason was sitting on the one next to Mr Pirelli, so Jodie, Tran and I stood behind. Tran was gripping the back of the seat really hard and looked like he was going to burst with excitement.

As soon as we had cleared the entrance and passed the last buoy, Mr Pirelli turned round to us and grinned.

‘Hold on!’ he said. Slowly we gained speed. Up went the nose and out the back of the boat trailed a wide, white wake of foam. Faster and faster we went and the boat started to bounce on the surface of the water. Bang – bang – bang it went and we all hung on to anything we could, grinning with delight and trying to absorb the thumps with our knees.

Out to sea we sped until we were about a kilometre off shore, heading for a yellow and red marker sticking up out of the water. As we got closer to the marker, Mr Pirelli cut the motor back and we slowed down. The depth sounder started beeping again.

‘How deep is it now, Dad?’ asked Jason

‘Four metres – three – getting shallower.’

Jodie and I were hanging over the side by now, looking down into the water at the sandy bottom.

‘Look how clear it is, Zena! There’s a few rocks down there now – and more, look!’

The boat was going really slowly now, with Mr Pirelli keeping a sharp eye on the depth gauge.

‘Is this the reef, Dad? Can we go a bit closer?’

Carefully we inched closer, the motor ticking over quietly, as more and more rocks appeared.

‘Three metres, two metres, that will do, I think,’ said Mr Pirelli, ‘I can’t go any shallower, there could be big rocks just under the water. I’ll drop anchor here and you can swim the rest.’

He anchored the boat and the four of us grabbed our masks and snorkels and raced each other to be the first in. Jason and Tran swam straight over to the reef so Tran could practise and Jodie and I began to drift slowly after them, gazing down into about two metres of water.

It was clear and still – but after our first look down, Jodie and I stuck our heads out of the water and looked at each other in dismay. This wasn’t what we had expected. There were plenty of rocks but they were bare – no seaweed, no shellfish, hardly any life at all.

We swam on and the further we swam, the more desolate it became. Between clumps of bare rocks there were clear expanses of sand littered with a few broken shells and small stones. In one sandy spot I could see the outline of a stingray lying still on the bottom, covered with a sprinkling of sand. I grabbed Jodie’s arm and pointed.

Before I could stop her, she'd duck-dived straight down towards it. Suddenly she realised what was there. She tried to stop herself in mid-dive, did something that looked like an underwater somersault, and came hurtling to the surface. She burst out the water next to me like a rocket.

'What didja do that for?' she yelled, tearing off her mask and snorkel. 'It would have got me if I'd been any closer!'

I was spluttering with laughter. 'I only meant you to look at it,' I said. 'Not go diving down on top of it.'

'Well, don't do it again!'

Once she recovered – and I'd stopped laughing – we put our masks back and swam on. We were nearly to the reef and the rocks were beginning to get bigger and closer to the surface with just a few biscuit stars and periwinkles scattered over them. Then some Northern Pacific Sea Stars started to appear – great, ugly, yellow starfish, bigger than a man's hand, spread out like knobbly blankets on the black rocks. Soon they were the only living things we could see. I had seen a few in the Stingray Pool but never this many. They seemed to have destroyed every other form of life.

We swam over to a big underwater platform ahead and stood up with the water nearly up to our waists. We could see Jason and Tran about fifteen

metres away, so we put our masks back on and began to swim over to them. Jodie was behind me when, on my left, I caught a glimpse of some green lettuce seaweed. I turned towards it and found myself in a magical garden.

‘Jodie,’ I called, ‘come quickly.’

She swam over and together we drifted through the meadow of green as it slowly changed into a seaweed garden of all shapes and colours. I had never imagined that anything so lush and beautiful could exist just off my own beach. Now that we had left the Pacific Stars behind, every rock, large and small, was decorated with different forms of life: pink balls hiding amongst feathery brown seaweed, delicate red ferns, small bunches of fine brown kelp.

In front of us, standing up like a sentinel, was an enormous rock completely covered with every sort of sea-life I had ever seen. Nestled in amongst the gently waving plants I could see baby mussels, a starfish, a warrener, lumps of pink and yellow sponges, sea squirts, all half hidden by slowly moving green, brown, orange or pink fronds and leaves.

Ahead, there was another green meadow dappled with sunlight coming through the rippling water. Then, hidden deep between the rocky

gardens, a sandy pool, its floor littered with broken shells.

I saw things I had never seen before: big branches of bright orange sponge, small brown volcanos, and a miniature sponge tree, like a mushroom on a short stumpy stem. It was just like the pictures in my book on the Great Barrier Reef.

There were shellfish without number – abalone big and small, warreners, big dog winkles – and dozens of sea-urchins of all colours and sizes with bits of broken shell sticking to their spines.

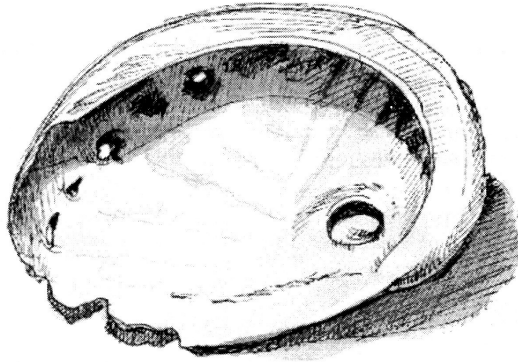
Slowly we swam on through the beautiful miniature forests until in amongst the rocks we spotted tiny fish: gobies walking on their fins, a toady hiding quickly as he saw us approaching and a whole school of small silvery fish that flashed away from us down rocky passages.

I was just turning back when Jodie grabbed my leg. I looked round and her eyes through the mask were big and excited. She pulled me round and pointed to a clump of orange seaweed growing from the side of a rocky wall. There, tucked in amongst the fronds, was a beautiful little seahorse – almost the same colour as the seaweed.

We stayed there, floating over the top of him, hardly daring to breathe and watched in wonder. His tail was hooked around one of the stems and his tiny fins were fluttering so fast you could hardly see

them, keeping him steady as the water moved gently around him.

We waited and waited for him to move but it looked like he was staying there for ever. At last I lifted my head to see where the boys were. We'd *have* to try and bring them over to see it.



Chapter 9

‘You stay here,’ I said to Jodie, ‘and I’ll get the boys.’

She nodded under the water.

Gently I turned and moved away. Once I was clear, I put my head down and swam as quickly as I could to where Jason and Tran were still practising.

‘How’s it going, Tran?’ I asked.

‘Good,’ he said, ‘I’m doing real well.’

‘Sure,’ said Jason, ‘even though your mask fills with water and you nearly choke!’

Tran laughed, ‘Sometimes I forget to breathe through my mouth.’

‘Come over to where Jodie is,’ I said, ‘and we’ll show you something really special.’

‘What?’ asked Jason.

‘Never mind,’ I said. ‘Just come really quietly and carefully.’

The seahorse was still there and the four of us hovered over him for ages – just amazed at how beautiful and unafraid he seemed to be. At last, we had to move on. There was plenty more to see and to show Tran.

We explored the reef for about an hour and everywhere we went there was something different to look at. We ended up on the other side feeling a bit shivery so we stood on some big bare rocks near the surface to rest and warm up in the sun.

‘I want to see where it drops off,’ I said, ‘over there where it gets deeper. Coming, anyone?’

‘We’ll probably have to go soon,’ said Jason.

‘I’ll only be a minute,’ I said and slipped back into the water. I followed the reef for about five metres till it started to drop off to the floor of the bay.

I was turning to go back when I noticed something strange floating just under the surface. I swam closer and saw it was a buoy – a round ball of white plastic foam, tethered with a piece of orange rope. I looked down and, with a start of surprise, recognised something I had seen before. The rope was tied to a hessian bag.

I took a deep breath and dived down for a closer look. There wasn't just one bag down there, there were four, tied together with the orange rope – and all quite full. There was something else, too; everywhere I looked were dozens of empty abalone shells.

Quickly I put out my hand and grabbed the orange rope holding the buoy. I was running out of breath but I had just enough left to pull myself down close to one of the bags. I touched it – it felt quite soft; there were no shells in this bag.

I bounced back up to the surface and pulled off my mask.

'Hey!' I shouted, 'Come over and look at this!'

'What is it?' Jodie yelled.

At almost the same time I heard Mr Pirelli's voice. 'Okay!' he called, 'Time to come in.'

'Quickly,' I called to Jodie, 'Come and see.'

'We can't, Zena,' called Jason, 'We've got to go in.'

They all started swimming towards the boat.

'Hang on,' I said, 'this is important!'

'Stop mucking around,' said Jason, 'We've got to go or he won't take us again. Come on!'

Reluctantly I began swimming. Maybe I could persuade Mr Pirelli to bring the boat round to this side of the reef before we left.

The others were just starting to clamber aboard and I was about three or four metres away when suddenly there was the roar of an outboard motor and another boat came flying towards us. I was terrified. I didn't know whether the driver had seen me so got ready to duck under the water.

The boat came within a few metres, swerved around in a big turn and stopped. The man in it began to yell at us.

'You shouldn't be diving here! It's dangerous!'

'What?' said Mr Pirelli.

'Very bad currents! Very dangerous! Come out – now!'

Quickly I swam over to the others. 'What's he talking about?' I said to Jason, 'There's no current here.'

The man kept yelling out, 'No diving here! Too dangerous!'

'Okay, okay,' said Mr Pirelli, 'Don't get your knickers in a knot. We're just going anyway.' He started the motor and turned back to us,

'Come on. Everyone on board?'

Tran was hanging onto the back of the boat and I climbed in ahead of him. As the other boat began to move away, he pulled himself in over the stern.

'Last one's just coming, Dad,' said Jason.

The man in the other boat turned back to look at us and I realised who it was. It was Tran's uncle. He stared silently at us for a moment, then turned away and kept going. I looked at Tran but he avoided my eyes.

'What was that all about, Dad?' said Jason, 'There's no current here. He's mad.'

Mr Pirelli shrugged, 'Who knows? Some people just like to make themselves important.'

I didn't mention the bags I found under the water. I wasn't too sure about why Tran's uncle was there and decided I needed to think about it. For a while, anyway.

We sat down in the bottom of the boat as it headed for the shore. We were tired and cold and glad of the warm sun on our backs. Nobody said much. The man yelling at us seemed to have taken some of the fun out of the day.

When we reached the harbour, we all piled out onto the jetty and Mr Pirelli got the car to tow the boat out. He took Jason and Tran home with him and Jodie and I walked back to my place.

As soon as we got away from the others she said, 'That was Tran's uncle in the boat, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' I said, 'and I think I know why he was trying to scare us off.'

'Yeah?' she said, 'Why?'

I told her about the bags and the orange rope, and all the abalone shells. ‘What do you reckon we should do?’ I asked.

‘Tell the police,’ she said. ‘They’ve been left there by poachers.’

‘But what about Tran? It’s his family – they might get into real trouble.’

‘Yes,’ said Jodie thoughtfully. ‘What about if we told Sean’s father? He’d know what to do.’

‘Yeah, but he won’t be back till after Christmas.’

‘It’s only a few more days, and remember what he said last time – when you found that other bag. It could be dangerous.’

‘All right,’ I said reluctantly, ‘We’ll wait. I just hope Tran’s father isn’t involved though.’



We’d only been home five minutes when the phone rang. It was Jason – full of it.

‘Did you know that was Tran’s uncle who yelled at us?’

‘Course I did.’ I said, ‘And I reckon I know why. There were bags of abalone stashed in the rocks out there. That’s what I was trying to tell you.’

‘*All right!*’ he said, ‘So that’s what Tran’s worried about.’

‘Tran’s worried?’ I said, ‘Why? Does he know what’s going on?’

‘I don’t think he knows everything but he’s worried about the uncle. He’s not really an uncle, just a sort of cousin, and he’s been visiting their place making threats about something.’

‘Like what?’

‘Tran thinks he wants his Dad to do something illegal.’

I laughed. ‘Yeah, like abalone poaching.’

‘Looks like it.’

‘Jodie and I reckon we should tell Sean’s Dad when they come home.’

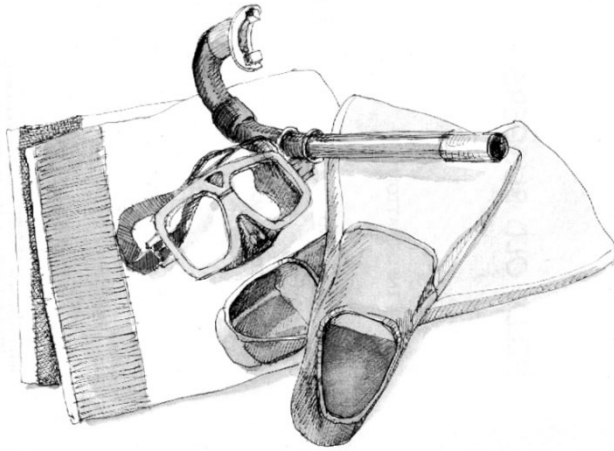
‘Yeah, good. I can’t do anything because we’re going up to Wangaratta tomorrow till after Christmas. It’s just that...’

‘What?’

‘Tran seems really frightened.’

‘What’s he frightened of?’

‘I dunno exactly.’



Chapter 10

For the next two days I didn't have time to think of Tran or abalone poachers. Our whole house was filled with cooking smells as we got things ready for Christmas Day. Dad put up the Christmas tree and Samira and I helped Mum in the kitchen: chopping things up, mixing things and endlessly washing dishes. She was preparing so much food you would think we'd have enough for a year.

Just because we're Lebanese a lot of people think we're Muslim but there are a lot of Catholic Lebanese too, and that's us. Mum says they all used to live together without any problems when she was in her village in Lebanon. She doesn't know why

they had to start fighting like they are now. I don't either. At our school we all come from so many different countries nobody cares. Sometimes when new kids come to the school they try being nasty and racist but they don't get away with it for long.

On Christmas Eve Dad finished an early shift and he drove Samira and me into the market. Mum had given us a long shopping list of salad vegies and fruit to buy and we'd nearly finished when I saw Tran with his family. He smiled and waved and brought his Mum and Dad and two little sisters over to meet us. Mr & Mrs Nguyen were quite small people and the little girls were tiny and shy and very sweet. His Mum didn't speak much English but she shook our hands and smiled when Tran told her who we were. Everyone was busy and in a hurry, so we wished them a Merry Christmas and waved goodbye.



Mum and I always go to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. I really like it, with the singing and the candles and the incense; everyone's dressed up in their best clothes and everyone's happy.

I saw Mrs Nguyen and the little girls outside the church afterwards and went over to see them. The two little girls looked like china dolls, with their straight black hair, little frilly dresses and

coloured shiny shoes. I smiled at Mrs Nguyen and wished her a Merry Christmas but suddenly her eyes filled with tears.

‘What’s the matter?’ I said, ‘Are you alright?’ but of course she couldn’t understand me. ‘Where’s Tran?’ I asked, looking around.

Mrs Nguyen took my hand and held it very tightly. The tears began to run down her cheeks and she was shaking her head and trying to tell me something in her own language. She was so upset I didn’t know what to do. Then, I had a brainwave. Ms Kouros had told us that some Vietnamese people spoke French.

‘Mum,’ I called, ‘can you come over here?’

She was in the middle of talking to some of her friends and waved her hand at me – ‘in a minute’ she meant. I ran over to her and grabbed her arm.

‘What is it, Zena?’ she asked crossly.

‘Mrs Nguyen’s in trouble. She’s crying and she can’t tell me what’s wrong. Can you try and speak to her?’

‘Of course,’ said Mum and quickly went over to her, ‘Parlez vous Francais, Madam?’

Mrs. Nguyen’s face broke into a smile of relief. ‘Ah, oui! Je parle!’ she said. She turned to me, ‘Merci, merci!’ and then turned back to Mum and began talking very quickly.

I stood by, impatiently waiting to find out what was wrong. The conversation went on and on, with Mum asking questions and Mrs. Nguyen nodding her head or shaking it and dabbing at her eyes with a hanky.

At last they seemed to be finishing. Mum was patting her on the arm and making comforting sounds. Mrs Nguyen collected her little girls and began to leave, still sniffing but trying to smile as she left.

‘What did she say, Mum? Is Tran alright?’

‘I can’t tell you now, Zena. Wait till we’ve said goodbye to everyone.’

Well, that took forever. They all wanted to talk about their families and what they were doing on Christmas Day and, by the time she’d finished, we were almost the last ones left.

‘Come along, Zena,’ she said impatiently, just as though I’d been the one keeping her waiting.

‘What did Mrs Nguyen say, Mum?’ I asked as we started to walk home, ‘Where’s Tran?’

‘She doesn’t know where he is, Zena, and she seems to be very worried about the police being informed. I don’t think you should be involved in any of this.’

‘Why doesn’t she know where he is?’

‘She says his uncle came to their place late this afternoon and offered him a job. She and Mr

Nguyen didn't want him to go but apparently he went anyway.'

That didn't sound too good to me. 'What sort of job? Did she say?'

'No, she didn't!' Mum was getting impatient. 'It seems the uncle promised that Tran would earn a lot of money, enough to bring his grandmother to Australia. She said he laughed at them when they said they were worried and promised he would look after Tran.'

'So they just let him take Tran away? Just like that?'

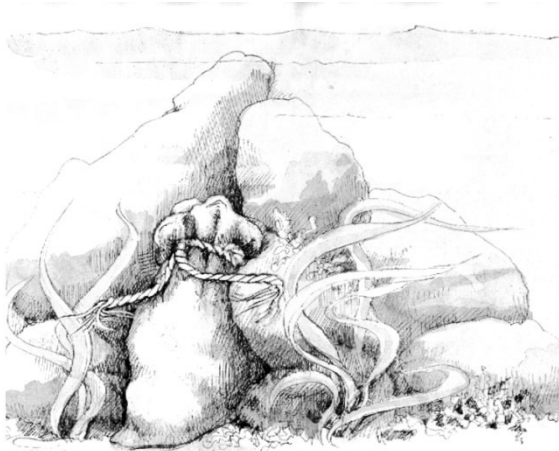
'I don't know, Zena! She said something about being threatened but she doesn't want to tell the police. I don't understand it and I don't like it one bit.'

'Poor Mrs Nguyen, no wonder she was crying. What can we do, Mum?'

'We can do nothing, Zena. If they don't want the police involved there must be something illegal going on and we are having nothing to do with it.'

'But, Mum ...'

'Zena! Tomorrow is Christmas Day and I have fifteen people to feed as well as a new baby to look after. I am not doing *anything* till that's over!'



Chapter 11

Christmas day dawned warm and clear. We didn't have much time to spend on our family presents because of all the visitors arriving but Mum and Dad gave me a new mask and snorkel – as I'd hoped – and also a terrific pair of flippers to go with them. There was a painting from Jodie too that she'd done herself and put under our tree for Christmas morning. It was a beautiful underwater scene – just the way it looked when we were diving out at the reef. She's terrific at drawing and painting – I reckon she'll be an artist one day.

The first to arrive were my very favourite relatives, Mum's sister Maria and Uncle Hakim with Brett and Wayne, the ten year-old twins and little Rainbow, who is nearly six. Even though there's

only five of them, wherever they are they seem to fill up all the space around them. Uncle Hakim is big and happy and excitable and the twins are just like him – dark curly hair, big smiles and very energetic. Rainbow is just the prettiest and sweetest little six-year-old and Aunt Maria is the biggest one of them all, and mostly she's really happy but sometimes she gets very upset and emotional.

They came in loaded up with presents and food and bottles of home-made wine, and they filled the house with noise and laughter. We all gave each other our presents and the excitement was just settling down when another car drove up.

It was Dad's brother from Bendigo, Uncle Josef and Aunt Sadie. They're both really old; they wear black all the time and hardly talk at all. They had just sat down when Aunt Sarah arrived with Uncle Con and their daughter Naomi. Naomi is nineteen and doesn't talk much. She plays with her hair or fixes her make-up and usually looks a bit bored. I feel sorry for her sometimes. They've got a big two-storey house in Greenvale and Aunt Sarah is always complaining about how much work she has to do to keep it clean and how they could never afford to have any more children.

After more hugs and kisses and everyone wishing each other Merry Christmas, Aunt Maria

gathered up all her boxes and baskets of food and bustled out to the kitchen.

I thought maybe I should go out to help but when I looked in the door she and Mum were busily unpacking all the food – into the fridge, onto the table or into the oven, clattering plates and cutlery, both talking at once and dodging each other round the kitchen table. Mum's not all that small and with Aunt Maria there as well there wasn't much space left. There was no way I was going in there.

In the lounge room, Dad and Uncle Hakim were opening the home-made wine.

'Come along Josef,' said Uncle Hakim, 'you will be the waiter. And maybe you will be able to try some of my special Christmas wine. Now, Fared,' he said, as Dad opened his mouth to object, 'there is no harm in a small glass for a big boy like Josef – hardly any alcohol in it at all!'

Josef grinned and began handing the wine round to the others. Uncle Hakim is always like that. Every Christmas he gives Josef a glass of wine and every time Dad always pretends to argue with him.

'Want a game of badminton?' Samira asked the boys. 'I got a set for Christmas.'

'Yeah,' said Wayne, 'And we've got a new cricket set. Let's go!'

'We'll go out the front,' I said. 'We can play on the footpath. Coming Rainbow?'

‘What about Naomi?’ said Brett. ‘You want to come out with us, Naomi?’

Naomi looked surprised. ‘To play cricket?’ she said. ‘No, thanks. I’ve got to make a phone call.’ She dug in her bag and took out a mobile phone. ‘Sorry,’ she said, ‘but someone’s expecting me to call.’

Brett winked at her. ‘No worries,’ he said. ‘Give him our love.’

Naomi went pink and looked away.

‘Come on,’ said Wayne. ‘Let’s get out there!’

We had about an hour out the front before Mum called us in for Christmas dinner – more like a feast really! She and Dad had set up a big trestle table on the back verandah and it was covered with food from one end to the other. There was Lebanese food, Greek – for Uncle Con – and Australian, some hot and some cold. Chicken wings, felafel, hot Turkish bread, dips, meat balls, salads – you couldn’t see the table-cloth between the plates of food.

We all sat around the table and ate and ate, and the grown-ups drank quite a bit of the home-made wine. Everyone was happy and even Uncle Josef was taking and laughing more than I’d ever seen before. As the plates began to empty, Mum and Aunt Maria brought out the cakes and sweets: baklava,

honey cakes, Turkish Delight – I thought it would never stop coming.

Uncle Hakim put on some music and started to dance. He grabbed Aunt Maria and she danced with him, stamping and turning, her big hips swaying gracefully to the hypnotic beat of the drumbakkas.

‘Come!’ she called to us, *‘Areny kayfa tarkosin ala anjam mosikana.’*

Dad jumped up and took my hand, pulling me to my feet. I didn’t think I’d be able to move, I was so full but the rhythm of the music made my body move and my legs couldn’t help dancing. Mum and Josef joined us then Brett and Wayne started and soon everyone was up, dancing and laughing and clapping to the music. We were on the verandah, down the path and inside the kitchen door. Dad changed the music to some slow Lebanese songs and even got Naomi up to dance – for a little while, anyway – and we danced and sang till everyone was exhausted.

For what was left of the afternoon, the olds sat around resting and talking. Mum fed Josh and the aunties passed him around, nursing him and cuddling and clucking over him. Josef sat out on the verandah and talked to Dad and the uncles for a little while. He tried to talk to Naomi a couple of times but she didn’t seem to be interested so he put on his headphones and listened to Techno music. Samira

and Rainbow went into our bedroom and looked at Samira's Barbie Doll collection and showed each other all their presents; and the twins and I went for a walk over to the beach. Naomi's parents made her come with us but she was talking on her phone most of the time.

Eventually the sun began to go down and the visitors drifted off home. By about nine o'clock everyone had gone and the house was quiet again. We were sitting around in front of the TV, full of food and nearly falling asleep, when the phone rang. Nobody moved.

It kept ringing and ringing so finally I dragged myself off the floor and staggered over to it. It was Jodie. She seemed nervous.

'Zena? Mum told me something today.'

'What?' I was half asleep and didn't really care.

'We went out to lunch together for Christmas, just the two of us, and – she told me something.'

'Yeah, what?'

'She *does* know who my Dad is!'

I woke up a bit at that. Jodie has always said she didn't care who her father was but just now she sounded really excited.

'What did she say?'

'She said she was only seventeen when she got pregnant and she didn't want to get married –

especially not to him. So she told him to stay away – out of her life and out of mine.’

‘Does she know where he lives or anything?’

‘Yes! A few weeks ago he rang her and said he wanted to know how I was. He said he’d like to meet me.’

‘Wow!’

‘Mum said she thought I was old enough to decide whether I wanted to or not.’

‘And are you going to?’

‘Course I am! And guess what!’

‘What?’

‘He’s an artist! He illustrates children’s books! He’s married and got a couple of kids and he only lives at Northam Springs. We’re going there this weekend!’

‘You and your Mum?’

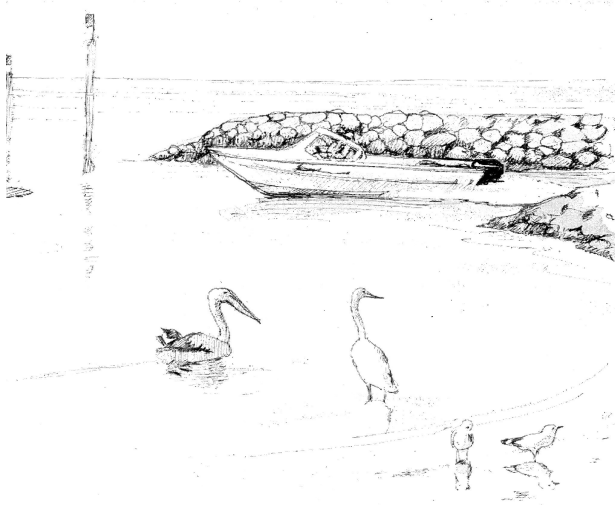
‘Yes! We’re going tomorrow morning, after Mum finishes night shift. Mum said it’s a sort of Christmas present holiday. We’re staying for two nights at a Bed and Breakfast and she said we can have a hot spa bath at the Mineral Springs and everything!’

She was so wound up she just wanted to keep talking about it. Her father had told his wife and kids about Jodie and they were all looking forward to meeting her – *and* her Mum. It sounded a bit strange to me. I didn’t think my Mum would be too happy if

she found out that Dad had another daughter somewhere. In fact, I think she'd probably murder him!

Jodie said her Dad's name was Robert and the two kids were Steven and Alice. She promised to ring me on Sunday when she got home and tell me all about it. At last she hung up and I was so tired I staggered into my bedroom, dodged all Samira's dolls and presents, and fell into bed.

Before I fell asleep I wondered how it would feel to discover a father you'd never met and a half brother and sister you'd never known existed.



Chapter 12

Boxing Day at our place was pretty much like any other morning. Dad was up early to dig the garden as usual, Mum was up looking after Josh, Josef was getting ready to work at the boat shop, and Samira and I were woken up by all the noise. The shower was running; the kettle whistled; doors banged and the sun was shining through the gap in the curtains right into my eyes.

I gave up trying to sleep and wandered into the kitchen. I got a plate of cereal and ate it sitting on the back step in the sun, wondering how I was going to fill in the day. Jodie was leaving for

Northam Springs before lunch, Sean and Jason were both away and Tran had disappeared.

Suddenly I felt guilty. I'd been having such a good time yesterday, I hadn't given Tran a single thought. I didn't even know where he lived so I couldn't ask anyone whether he'd come home or not. I sighed and wandered back into the kitchen. I was the only one who knew he was in trouble and I couldn't do a thing about it. I couldn't even ask Mum what she thought – not after what she'd said about staying out of it.

'What's up?' Josef asked as I clattered the bowl and spoon into the sink. He was just about ready to leave.

'Nothing really, ' I said, 'Just nothing to do. Everyone's gone away.'

'I'll be down at the boat harbour about two o'clock,' he said, 'I told Malcolm that Mr Pirelli was interested in jet skis and he reckons we should try them out before we demonstrate them to him. So we're bringing a couple down after we shut the shop to have a bit of a ride. You can come and have a look if you like.'

'Yeah? Can I have a ride, too?'

'Dunno. Come down and we'll see.'

'Cool!' I said, 'I'll be there. *And* I'll be in my bathers!'

'Okay.'

The door slammed behind him and I heard him jump on his push bike and ride full speed down the drive. Suddenly the day looked brighter.



At two o'clock the boat ramp was a mad-house. Cars and trailers were everywhere: in the car park, on the lawns, and there were long queues at every ramp to put boats in or take them out. Along the jetties boats of all different sizes were lined up waiting for their owners. Sometimes a car would back down the ramp when it wasn't his turn, then people would shout and yell and there'd be a big argument. There were men cleaning fish at the benches, women standing around talking, and in amongst it all were kids: playing in the water, chasing in and out of the cars and being yelled at for being in the way.

I walked out on the rock wall to the entrance where boats were going in and out through the narrow opening and sat in the sun with my feet in the water. I kept watching out for Josef to arrive and soon a ute drove into the car park with a trailer carrying two jet-skis. I ran back and was waiting at the ramp by the time Josef got out of the car and started helping his boss slide the skis into the water. They looked fantastic. There was a black one with two seats and a red single-seater with white flashes along the sides.

Malcolm looked up and grinned at me. ‘Josef said you might like a ride?’

‘Oo, yes, please,’ I said, ‘Can I?’

‘Let’s wait and see how Josef gets on first, eh? If he’s good enough I might let him take you.’

Josef’s only been out once or twice before. He had to get his jet-ski licence earlier this year and I helped him, reading out the questions from the book.

Malcolm parked the car while Josef and I looked after the skis and when he came back, he got on the red ski and slowly set off towards the harbour opening. Josef got onto the black one and started the engine. He revved the motor a few times, blowing smoke everywhere, then he set off. He didn’t go out slowly like Malcolm though; he took off at top speed, reached the middle of the little harbour and spun the ski round in a couple of fast donuts.

You should have heard the yells!

‘‘Get outside to do your practice, you hoon!’’

‘Look at the boats, you idiot!’

The ski had stirred up the harbour with waves that were bouncing back and forth between the rock walls. Boats were bobbing and banging against the jetties and drivers on the way in were struggling not to crash into boats on their way out.

Josef made a rude sign at the yelling men and turned towards the opening. He revved the motor

again and flew through it, nearly collecting a couple of boats on the way.

I got away as fast as I could. Sometimes, I'd rather not even *know* Josef. I sat on the sand outside the harbour and waited for them. Josef had raced out through the markers and caught up with Malcolm and I could see the two of them way out in the distance, bouncing off the tops of the waves, racing each other, circling and splashing, yelling and cheering. I couldn't wait to get out there.

They were out so long I got sick of waiting. I got up and wandered into the shallows, walking further and further out, watching my feet and looking at the rippled patterns in the white sand.

The water was up past my knees and I'd almost forgotten where I was when suddenly I heard a roaring noise and looked up in fright. Josef and Malcolm were almost on top of me. They went round and round me, splashing the water up and laughing.

'Ready?' called Josef.

'Course I am!'

Malcolm got off his ski, took out a life jacket from under the seat and threw it to me. He helped me climb up behind Josef and I put my arms tightly round his waist, trying to get a grip on the front of his life jacket. I knew what to expect with Josef and I was determined he wasn't going to shake me off.

I was right. He took off as if he was a Grand Prix racing driver and I hung on like a limpet.

It was fabulous! The ski bounced and jumped over the waves and shook me like a rag doll but I didn't care. Once we'd cleared the marker buoys, Josef turned along the waves instead of across them and we started to speed up even more. Faster and faster we went – even faster than I could have imagined. Then he started to do turns and jumps. I knew he expected me to fall off but I just closed my eyes and hung on.

He finally slowed down and I opened my eyes again, blinking the salt water out of them and shaking the hair off my face. We stopped right near a big red boat. A diver in a wet suit and scuba gear was just climbing in over the stern. As Josef started revving the motor again the diver lifted his mask. He looked towards us and our eyes met. It was Tran! His eyes opened wide and he looked like he was going to call out; then his face went blank and he turned his back on me.

'Hang on tight!' yelled Josef and away we went again, flying like the wind.

'Stop a minute!' I yelled in his ear but he took no notice. He just kept going faster and faster.

'Stop!' I screamed, 'It's important!'

I started bashing him on the back to get his attention and suddenly he turned the ski, spun it

right around and we both flew off into the water. The engine of the riderless ski slowed to a gentle putt-putt and it began circling quietly next to us.

‘Are you okay?’ asked Josef when we both surfaced again, ‘What were you bashing me for?’

‘That boat,’ I gurgled, coughing and spluttering, ‘That one, just leaving! Can we follow it?’

‘What for?’

‘I’ll tell you later. Come on!’

We started to clamber onto the ski but the waves were getting bigger and it took us so long to get up on the seats that by the time we were ready, the boat was well on its way. Josef started to follow it but it sped off towards Point Flinders and we didn’t have a chance.

‘Time to go back, anyway,’ Josef said, and we started bouncing back towards the shore again.

Malcolm was waiting on the jetty.

‘How was it?’ he asked me.

‘Fantastic!’ I said, ‘Thanks Malcolm.’

‘No worries.’ He turned to Josef, ‘You went alright, mate. Give us a hand to put them on the trailer and I’ll take them back to the shop. You can knock off, if you like.’



‘He’s a good bloke, Malcolm,’ said Josef as we walked home together. ‘Now, tell me why you wanted to chase that boat.’

There was just so much to explain, I didn’t know where to start.

‘That boy in the scuba gear, he’s a friend of ours – and his parents don’t know where he is.’

‘Yeah? Why not?’

‘Well – he’s supposed to be working with his uncle but that boat we saw today, that wasn’t his uncle’s. And Tran can’t even scuba dive!’ I could hear my voice beginning to tremble as I realised how serious it could be.

‘Hey,’ said Josef, ‘settle down. How did all this start?’

So I told him about finding the bags of abalone out at the reef and how Tran’s uncle had tried to frighten us off. ‘And then we met Mrs Nguyen on Christmas Eve and she was crying. Mum says we should stay out of it because it could be something illegal but ...’

‘It sounds pretty serious stuff,’ he said.

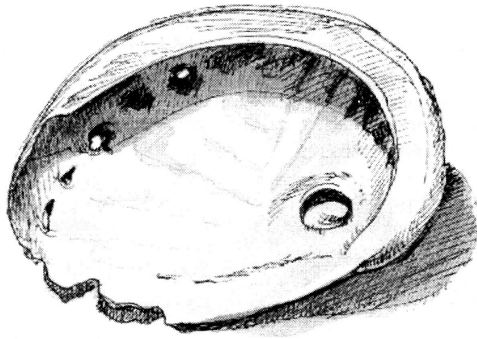
‘That’s what Sean’s father told me a few weeks ago. What’s so special about abalone? And why does everyone say it’s serious, or dangerous?’

‘There’s big money tied up in it and where there’s big money there’s danger. I think Mum’s right. You stay well away from it.’

‘But what about Tran? Do you reckon *he’s* in danger?’

‘He’s working for his uncle, isn’t he? Even if it’s a bit shonky, his uncle would look after him. He’s not likely to come to any real harm.’

‘I suppose not,’ I said but I didn’t quite believe it.



Chapter 13

I wandered along the sand the next morning with too many things on my mind. I'd escaped to the beach because I knew if I stayed home Mum would find a job for me and I needed to think.

It was pretty obvious that right off our own beach someone was illegally collecting bags of abalone. That was wrong and I knew I should tell the police, but after seeing Tran on the boat yesterday I didn't know what to do. Was he down there even now, taking abalone off the rocks, shelling them underwater and putting them into bags? What if he was caught? He was only thirteen – would they put him in jail?

What should I do about it? Who should I tell?
And why did everyone keep telling me to do
nothing? I desperately needed someone else to talk
to.

Jason was due home that afternoon and after
lunch I started ringing. I rang every half hour until
he answered.

‘Thank God you’re home!’

‘What’s up?’ he asked.

‘Tran’s in trouble,’ I said.

‘In trouble? What do you mean?’

‘I saw Mrs Nguyen on Christmas Eve. She
was crying. She said he’d gone off to work for his
uncle and ...’

‘The one he’s frightened of?’

‘Yes. And yesterday I saw him.’

You saw him? Where?’

‘He was in a big red boat and he was wearing
scuba gear.’

‘He’s scuba diving? That’s rubbish, Zena; he
couldn’t even snorkel. I had to teach him.’

‘I know that but I saw him coming out of the
water with the gear on. And, Jason, I reckon he
looked scared. What’ll we do?’

‘Why don’t his Mum and Dad tell the police?’

I hesitated. ‘I don’t think Mrs Nguyen wants
to.’

There was silence for a minute. ‘Tell you what,’ he said, ‘I’ll go round to his place and see what’s going on.’

‘Will you let me know what you find out?’

‘Okay, meet me at the park.’

‘What time?’

‘Make it about five o’clock.’

‘All right.’



When I got there Jason was already sitting in the park finishing some chips from Charlie’s Milk Bar. He was surrounded by dozens of seagulls waiting for a handout and they flew up squawking as I sat down next to him.

‘Did you see the Nguyens?’ I asked, helping myself to the last of his chips. ‘What did they say?’

‘I saw them alright. There’s no sign of Tran – and Mr Nguyen went ballistic.’

‘Why? What did you say?’

‘All I said was that you were worried about Tran and did he think he should talk to the cops – and he went right off. ‘No, no!’ he said, ‘Tran is perfectly all right. He is working over the holidays with his uncle. He will be back at school next year.’’

‘Next year! You mean we won’t see him till school starts again?’

‘That’s what it sounded like.’

‘But, Jason, he wasn’t in his uncle’s boat. And if he couldn’t even snorkel a week ago, how come he’s wearing scuba gear? I reckon someone’s pushing him around.’

‘Yeah.’ Jason looked thoughtful. ‘You know that uncle?’

‘The one who shouted at us?’

Yeah. He turned up just as I was leaving the Nguyen’s – Uncle Vo is his name. Mr Nguyen didn’t look too pleased to see him and I reckon ...’

Jason stopped and his eyes opened wide. I turned to see what he was looking at. A man had just got out of a battered green van next to the park. He closed the door, looked around and began walking towards us. It was Uncle Vo.

He stopped at our picnic table and slowly sat down on the bench facing us. His mouth smiled but his hooded eyes didn’t.

‘You are friends of Tran?’ he asked.

We both nodded.

He stared at Jason. ‘You are Jason. You were asking his father about Tran?’

‘Yeah,’ said Jason nervously. ‘Where is he?’

Uncle Vo leaned forward onto his elbows and spoke quietly and firmly. ‘You are not to worry about Tran. He is perfectly okay.’

‘But he’s only thirteen,’ I blurted out, ‘And he can’t scuba dive!’

His reaction was sharp. ‘Who said anything about scuba diving?’

Suddenly I wished I hadn’t spoken, ‘I – er – Jason, didn’t you say his Dad was worried about – um...’

Uncle Vo’s voice was suddenly harsh and menacing. ‘Stay out of this – both of you! Go swimming! Have fun! Your life is good. Not everyone is as lucky as you. Tran will be back after the holidays. You understand?’ He stood up to go and then turned back to us.

‘Do not jeopardise Tran’s future,’ he said. Then he turned and walked away.

We sat there and watched the green van drive off. It turned the corner into the Esplanade and as it disappeared, we looked at each other.

‘Far out!’ I said. ‘What do we do now?’

Jason looked as frightened as I felt. ‘Dunno.’

‘Should we go to the cops?’

Jason shook his head. ‘I’m not! Not after what Mr. Nguyen said.’

‘What, then?’

We both sat thinking for a minute, then I said, ‘I reckon we should wait for Sean to get home and talk to his Dad. When do they get back?’

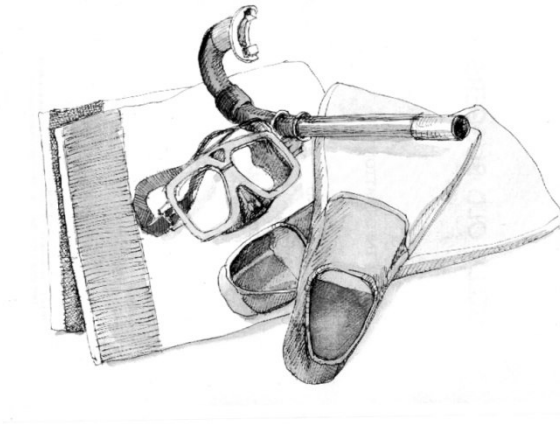
‘Soon.’ he said. ‘Maybe tomorrow. I gotta go now. I told my Dad I’d only be gone a few minutes.’

We got on our bikes and rode together along the Esplanade. The beach, clean and sparkling, was on our right – the city, visible across the bay, was under a dirty cloud of brown smog. I shivered. It felt like the dirt of the city was seeping into our fresh, clean sea water.

We turned a bend in the road and both of us immediately jammed on our brakes. The green van was ahead of us, parked on the side of the road. In front of it was a big, silver-grey car and standing on the footpath, talking to someone through the back window of the car, was Uncle Vo. His back was towards us.

‘Quick!’ Jason said, ‘Follow me.’

We turned up a side street to the left and dumped our bikes on the nature strip. Carefully we peered back round the corner just in time to see Uncle Vo taking a large brown envelope from the person in the car. As we watched, the grey car slid slowly away.



Chapter 14

On Monday at about three o'clock, Jodie rang.

‘You’re home? I’m coming round!’

When she arrived she looked like a different person. Her hair was out of its plait and hung loose around her face and her eyes were sparkling. Samira wasn’t home so we went straight to my bedroom. Jodie collapsed onto the bed and lay flat on her back ‘My Dad is gorgeous!’ she said, ‘I can’t tell you what a terrific time I’ve had.’

She sat up again and started talking and she didn’t stop for about half an hour.

She loved her Dad’s house – two storeys with a pointy roof and little rooms everywhere – attics and everything. It’s got lots of land around it with

fruit trees and flowers and a big veggie garden. She loved her Dad's wife who was little and dumpy and a terrific cook and made them apple strudel and Danish pastries. She even loved her Dad's kids who were perfect and sweet and loved her. Even her own mother said they were 'quite nice children'.

They had lunch at her Dad's place on Saturday and then Jodie stayed on for a barbecue in the evening and her Dad drove her back to where she and her Mum were staying. He showed her his studio and book illustrations and said he'd teach her about drawing and painting.

'I tell you, Zena,' she said, 'this is the best Christmas I've ever, ever had. And you know what? My Mum gave me a mobile phone! And my Dad's paying for a fifty dollar card!'

I hardly got a word in for ages. She just went on and on and on till I got tired of hearing about it.

'Listen,' I said at last, 'things have been happening here too, you know. I've got to tell you about Tran and what Jason and I have been doing.'

She looked surprised, 'You and Jason?'

'Yes. I rang him when he got home yesterday and we met at the milk bar.'

'What did you do that for?'

'What?'

'Ring him.'

'I had to tell him about Tran.'

‘And then you went and met him at the Milk Bar?’

‘Yeah – he had to tell me what Tran’s Dad said. Why?’

‘I thought he was *my* boyfriend.’

‘So? I don’t care if he’s your boyfriend or not.’

She shrugged. ‘Well, if he’s going to be like that, you can have him.’

‘Oh, get a life!’ I said crossly, ‘I don’t want him. Look! Do you want to hear about Tran or not?’

‘All right. What about Tran?’

‘He’s been kidnapped!’

‘Kidnapped?’ She looked as though she didn’t believe me. ‘Who by?’

At last I had her attention and I told her everything: about Mrs Nguyen crying on Christmas Eve, about Tran being on the boat in scuba gear and how the Nguyens didn’t want the police involved. I had just told her about how Uncle Vo had threatened Jason and me, when the phone rang. It was Jason and he was so excited he could hardly talk.

‘Tran just rang me!’

‘What? Is he home?’

‘No, he’s locked up somewhere and he doesn’t know where. He had to hang up quickly but he’s given me a message. Can you come to the park?’

‘When?’

‘Now. Sean’s just come home and he’s coming too. There’s lots to tell you.’

‘Okay. And Jodie’s here. She’ll come too.’

‘Good. See you in five.’



The four of us sat around the picnic table in the park. Everyone was talking at once; Jodie and Sean were asking questions, Jason and I were trying to answer them and no one was listening to anyone.

‘All right, shut up!’ said Jason, ‘and I’ll tell you exactly what he said.’

We sat down and listened.

‘I answered the phone,’ said Jason, ‘and this quiet voice said, “Jason?” I wasn’t sure who it was so I said, “Is that you, Tran? Are you home?” And he said, “No. They’ve locked me in a house somewhere. There’s shutters on the windows and it’s all dark.” I asked him if he was okay and he said, “sort of” but he sounded really frightened. He said they were making him dive at night-time and it was really scary and he hated it. So I said, “Where are you? How can we find you?” and he said, “I don’t know, but I heard a man say: take him to the Dove’s Roadhouse.” And he said he could sometimes hear people yelling; he thought it sounded like soccer practice. Then he suddenly said, “I gotta go now.” And he hung up.’

‘Dove’s Roadhouse,’ I said, ‘That shouldn’t be too hard to find.’

‘Specially if it’s near a soccer ground,’ said Sean. ‘Have you had a look in the phone book?’

‘No,’ said Jason. ‘I thought maybe we should tell your Dad all this stuff. He’ll know what to do.’

‘I thought you said Mr. Nguyen didn’t want the police involved,’ said Sean.

‘No, not *officially*,’ I said, ‘but your Dad can tell us what we should do.’

‘No, he can’t,’ said Sean, shaking his head. ‘If he hears anything – anything at all about stuff like this, he *has* to report it to his bosses. If he doesn’t, he gets into terrible trouble. You can’t tell him anything you don’t want the cops to know. Okay?’

Jason and I looked at each other. We’d thought Mr Aherne would tell us what to do. But if telling him was the same as reporting it to the police, we’d have to think again. The only one who wasn’t disappointed was Sean and he was really excited. He loves organising everyone.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘all we’ve got to do is find Tran. If he’s been locked up somewhere, then it’s not his fault and we *have* to tell the police. He’s being “held against his will” and no one can blame him *or* his family.’

‘Except his uncle,’ I said.

‘Yeah,’ said Sean. ‘Well by the sound of him, he’s into illegal poaching up to his neck. He deserves whatever he gets.’

Jason looked worried. ‘I’ve got to do *something*,’ he said, ‘He rang and asked me to help him. I have to try.’

‘We need a phone book and the internet,’ said Sean. ‘Whose place is best?’

‘Mine,’ said Jodie. ‘My Mum’s at work. She won’t be home till about ten o’clock.’



‘Here Zena,’ said Jodie, ‘Here’s the phone book and the Yellow Pages. You and Sean go through those. Jason and I’ll check the internet.’

There was only one entry under Roadhouses in the Yellow Pages and that was X’press Food and Fuel, nothing like Dove’s Roadhouse – besides, it was way out the other side of the city. We tried the white pages. There was Dove Transport, Dove Technology and Doves of Peace but no Dove’s Roadhouse.

Disappointed, we went into the computer room to see how the others were getting on.

‘No good,’ said Jason.

‘What did you put in?’ Sean asked.

‘Doves plus Roadhouse,’ said Jodie, ‘and we got hundreds of sites in America and England. Then

we added plus Melbourne plus Australia and got it down to just three pages.'

'They're no good though,' said Jason, 'They're either bird-watchers who've been looking at doves and staying at Roadhouses or they're a musical group called 'The Doves' with gigs at The Old Roadhouse somewhere.'

'Well, what do we do now?' I asked. 'There has to be a Dove's Roadhouse *somewhere* – and it must be round here so they can take their boat out.'

'We've *got* to find it!' said Jason angrily. 'Tran was really scared and he wants me to do something. That's why he rang me.'

'I know what to do!' said Jodie. 'Where are the soccer grounds round here? Maybe we'll find a roadhouse near one of them.'

'Okay,' said Sean, 'Let's think where they are. There's one in Millers Avenue.'

'And Creek Road,' said Jason.

'Hang on!' said Jodie, 'I'll write them down so we can think about them. Start again, you two.'

'Millers Avenue.' 'Creek Road.' 'Mason Road.' 'Challis Lane.' 'Maddox Street.'

'That's not a soccer ground.'

'Yes, it is.'

'No, it's not, it's cricket and Aussie Rules.'

'Alright. Heron Street then.'

'Where's that?' asked Jodie.

‘Other side of town,’ answered Sean, ‘right down past the end of Civic Street. It’s on the corner of...’ Sean stopped suddenly, his mouth and eyes wide open. ‘Yess!’ he yelled. ‘That’s it!’

‘What?’

‘It’s on the corner of Plover Street. You know where all those streets with bird names are? And off Plover Street there’s Doves Road; it’s a little dead-end street that backs onto the soccer ground. My Auntie Bridget used to live there; that’s how I know it. I’ll bet that’s it! Not the Dove’s Roadhouse – but the *Doves Road* house – with a soccer ground just over the back fence!’

There was a sudden silence. We all looked at Jason.

He nodded slowly, ‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘he *could* have said that – the Doves Road house.’

‘Yay!’ yelled Sean, ‘Let’s go and have a look.’

‘I can’t go now,’ I said, ‘I’ve got to go home for tea.’

‘We can’t go now,’ said Jason, ‘because Tran said they’re diving at night. We don’t want to arrive there when they’re getting ready to go out. They’ll see us.’

‘Okay,’ said Sean, ‘Tomorrow morning then?’

‘I still don’t know where it is,’ said Jodie.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said Jason. ‘We’ll show you tomorrow.’

‘Let’s work out what we’re looking for,’ said Sean. ‘We know it’s a house with shutters.’

‘*And* they’re closed in the daytime,’ I said. ‘There can’t be too many like that.’

‘A boat in the driveway?’ suggested Jason.

Sean was doubtful. ‘Yeah, it could be out the back, though.’

‘Well, if it backs onto the soccer ground, we can check over the fences too.’

‘Yeah,’ said Sean, ‘You and Zena can do that.’

I was getting a bit sick of Sean organising everything. ‘Why?’ I said.

‘Didn’t you say you’d been talking to Uncle Vo? You don’t want him to recognise you, do you?’

‘No way!’ I said. ‘He’s scary!’

‘Okay. Jodie and I’ll go along the front and tell you two which fences to look over.’

Jodie jumped up excitedly. ‘I could bring my mobile phone!’

‘Dur!’ I said, ‘Who are you going to ring?’

‘Me!’ said Sean, ‘I got a mobile from my Grandma in Sydney. Yeah, bring it Jodie.’

Jodie stuck her tongue out at me, ‘See!’ she said.



Chapter 15

By about 9 o'clock next morning we were riding towards the Heron Street soccer ground. I nearly hadn't been able to get out at all. Mum had to go to the dentist and she made me promise faithfully to be back by one o'clock for Josh and Samira.

'Don't let me down, Zena,' she said with one of her steely looks, '*Ana motameda Alek.*'

'*Ana Aref ya Ommy,*' I said. 'I'll be here – I promise.'

We rode up Plover Street towards the line of back fences, turned onto the grass behind them and dumped our bikes against the first fence. Sean and Jodie got ready to go round into Doves Road. They had a box of chocolate bars with them that Sean's father had brought home to support a police charity.

They were going to knock on every door and say they were selling them.

Sean turned his mobile on and gave it to Jason. 'Got my number in your mobile, Jodie?'

Jodie held her phone up and waved it. 'All I have to do is hit the magic button.'

'Okay, let's go.'

They walked round the corner and Jason and I waited. When they found a likely house they were going to ring us and we could check out the back yard. We wandered slowly along the line of wooden palings, trying to find the dividing fence where each back yard finished.

Suddenly the phone rang. Jason answered it and I waited impatiently.

'Okay,' he said after a few seconds and hung up.

'Just Jodie checking that it's working alright,' he said. 'Nothing suspicious-looking so far but they've sold two chocolate bars to a fat lady!'

There was a man on the soccer ground throwing a ball for an ugly looking boxer. We were watching the dog chase it, hoping it wasn't going to get too close, when the phone rang again. Jason listened for a minute.

'It's Sean,' he said, 'They've found one.' He spoke into the phone. 'Which one? ... Fourth from the corner. Yeah, okay, we're walking along now.'

Rusty iron roof? ... Yeah. White paint, old and scruffy – what colour’s the one next door? Sort of orange roof? ... Yeah – got it. Have you knocked at the door?’ There was a pause. ‘Well, tell Jodie they can’t kill you for knocking. ... Okay, come round when you’ve tried.’

We stood behind the fence of the house with the rusty iron roof. The fences were quite new – there were no holes or cracks to peep through. If we wanted to see anything we’d have to get up and look over the top.

‘See where that bush is growing in the corner,’ I said to Jason, ‘if you bunk me up there, even if there’s someone in the backyard they probably won’t see me.’

‘Why you?’ he said, ‘What about me looking over?’

‘Cos you’re too big,’ I said, ‘I can’t bunk you up.’

‘Okay,’ he said reluctantly. ‘We’d better wait a couple of minutes, though. That bloke with the dog is just leaving.’

The man put the dog on the leash and they went round into Plover Street.

Jason was just starting to give me a lift up when Sean and Jodie came round the corner. We stopped and waited for them.

‘There’s two with shutters down,’ said Jodie, ‘but the one with the rusty roof is definitely suss.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘The front garden’s a real mess,’ she said, ‘the grass is long and dry and there’s a little white boat in the drive – could be the one we saw Uncle Vo in out at the reef.’

‘And when we knocked on the door,’ said Sean, ‘We heard a noise inside but no-one came; so I reckon there’s someone in there.’

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘Bunk me up, Jason and I’ll have a look.’

Sean helped too and I ended up hanging on to the top of the fence with one foot on each of their knees. I could easily see through the bush and there was no one in sight. It was a small backyard and taking up half of it was a big red boat on a trailer – just like the one I had seen Tran climbing into. The rest of the yard had junk lying everywhere – plastic crates, petrol cans, cardboard boxes. There was a dirty cement veranda, a closed back door and three windows – all with their blinds down. The place looked deserted.

Then I noticed something else. In the narrow space between the house and the fence I thought I could see a stack of hessian bags. It was in shadow, though and I couldn’t tell for sure.

I jumped back down and told the others what I'd seen.

'It's not enough,' I said, 'We can't be sure that's where Tran is. I'm going over to have a closer look.'

'You're mad!' said Jodie.

'It'll be all right,' I said, 'If it really is the right place, they'll have been out all night and they're probably asleep. We've got to have proof.'

'Like what?' asked Jason.

'Abalone,' I said. 'Just one abalone shell would be enough. And if those are hessian bags down the side they'll smell of abalone. Come on, it'll only take a minute – then I'll come back.'

'Do you want me to go instead?' asked Sean – a bit reluctantly, I thought.

'You can't,' I said, 'Your Dad would kill you.'

He sighed. 'You're right. He's always on at me about being a copper's son.'

'Well, I'm not going,' said Jason, 'I think she's mad, too.'

'Give me another bunk up now,' I said, 'before you talk me out of it.'

They bunked me up and I clambered over the fence and slid to the ground behind the bush. My heart started to pound as I stood there, waiting to hear if there was any noise from the house.

There was nothing. Slowly I slid round between the bush and the side fence, trying to see the hessian bags properly. I still couldn't be sure so I started to run towards them, dodging round a big stack of crates as I went.

Suddenly an unearthly scream filled the air. I stopped, horrified, and saw a big white cocky chained by one foot to the veranda post.

'Get o-ou-ou-out!' it screamed. 'Get out! Get out! Get out!'

I looked back at the fence but realised I'd never get over quickly enough. I raced for the side of the house and fell on top of the hessian bags. I rolled over them and crouched down behind the pile – waiting to see what would happen.

I heard the back door open and footsteps walked towards the edge of the veranda.

A man's voice – Australian – said, 'What's up, Cocky? What have you seen, eh?'

Then I heard Jason's voice.

'Hey!' he called. 'Have you seen my ball?'

I peeked over the top of the bags and there was Jason's head, sticking up over the fence. 'Can we come and look for it?'

'No, you can't.' said the voice, 'And get off the fence before I call the cops!'

'Okay,' said Jason, sounding really hurt, 'I only asked.' And he disappeared.

I waited, hardly breathing.

‘Bloody kids,’ said the man and I heard the door close behind him.

I took a deep breath in relief – and was nearly suffocated by the stink of stale abalone. At last – real evidence. And if that wasn’t already enough, there was more. Lying on the ground next to the bags were different lengths of orange rope – exactly the same as I’d seen twice before, tied around abalone bags.

That was enough proof for me. The next thing was to get away. I didn’t want that cocky to scream at me again, so I thought maybe I could escape out the front of the house.

I crept quietly down the dark, damp sideway passing a couple more windows, both with their blinds down. I stopped outside one and heard what sounded like a lot of motors humming. Then I heard a voice. It was the Australian man again.

‘...just some kids.’ I heard him say. ‘Now, give us that stuff and I’ll hang it out.’

‘I haven’t finished,’ said another voice – and I nearly gasped out loud. It was Tran’s voice.

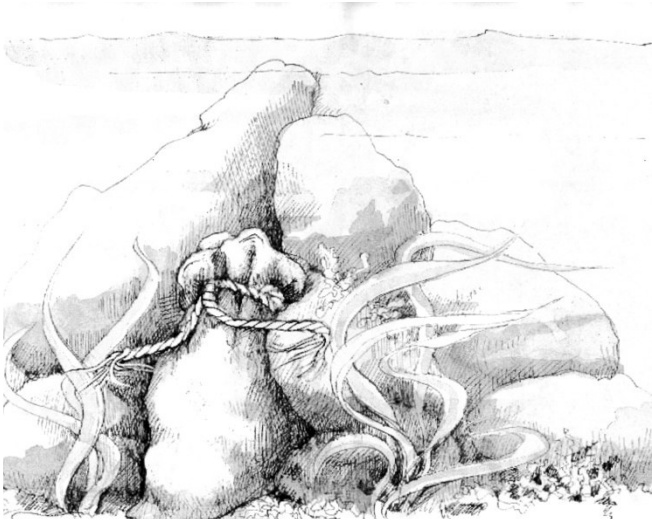
‘They’ll do,’ said the man impatiently. ‘Give ‘em here. You’d better get some rest now. It’s an early dive again tomorrow – low tide’s at three a.m.’

I heard footsteps and a door close. Then a key turned in the lock.

Should I try to call out to Tran? No, it was too risky. There might be someone else still in the room. I'd just have to try to get myself out; then we could all decide what to do.

I reached the end of the sideway where there were some wooden palings and a narrow gate. Carefully I tried the gate but it didn't move. I put my hand through the hole and felt around. There was a closed padlock on the other side. The only way out, then, was over the back fence.

Silently I crept back and peered over the pile of smelly bags. The man was out there in the back yard, hanging wet-suits and other diving gear on the clothes line. I crouched in the narrow space, waiting and waiting, hardly breathing because of the stinking abalone smell. At last he finished. He stretched, took out a packet of cigarettes and sat down on the verandah to have a smoke.



Chapter 16

My legs were starting to ache but the man was so close to me I couldn't move for fear of making even the slightest noise. The cigarette smoke drifted towards me and suddenly I wanted to sneeze. I grabbed my nose and pinched it – hard. I was nearly bursting with the effort.

Then, the worst possible thing happened: I heard Uncle Vo's voice. He came out the door and walked towards my end of the verandah.

'What do you think you're doing?' he asked nastily.

The man sighed. 'I was only havin' a break.'

‘You can have a break when we’ve gone,’ said Uncle Vo.

‘Yeah, well, the sooner you’re finished here the happier I’ll be,’ replied the man.

‘I told you – tomorrow morning is our last dive, then we move to another site. You get the packing done and by this time tomorrow we’ll be gone.’

‘Okay.’ I saw the cigarette flicked out into the yard. ‘Where are you off to next?’

‘That is not your business!’ said Uncle Vo viciously and the menace in his voice made me shiver. ‘Once we have left here you know nothing about us. All right?’

‘Yeah, all right, keep your hair on,’ said the man and I heard him walking towards the back door.

‘And when you’re finished in there,’ said Uncle Vo’s voice, ‘get those bags from down the side and put them into the red boat.’

The man stopped. ‘You haven’t got some in *your* boat, have you?’

Uncle Vo’s voice was suddenly wary, ‘Why?’

‘Nothin’. I’m just a few bags missin’, that’s all.’

‘Pah! The divers sometimes leave them below.’

‘Yeah? Like that young fella of yours, maybe? I don’t know why you keep him on. He’s not gettin’ enough to earn his keep.’

‘He is learning.’

‘What’s he learning though, eh? He wouldn’t be leavin’ any down there on purpose, would he?’ There was a pause. ‘You don’t want to double cross the boss y’know. It’s not worth it.’

The man went inside and Uncle Vo stood quietly on the verandah. I held my breath. If he came over to look at the bags I was gone.

He paced up and down a couple of times, mumbling something under his breath. Then I heard him go inside and the door close behind him.

At last I could breathe again. What was I going to do now? I couldn’t make a run for the fence; the cocky would yell out and bring Uncle Vo. I began to shake with fear.

I was freezing too. There was a cold wind blowing along the side of the house, and I was getting more and more cramped and more and more worried. I couldn’t wait much longer; I’d promised Mum I’d be home by one o’clock. What were Jason and the others doing? Had they been able to hear Uncle Vo’s voice from behind the fence? I had no idea how I was going to escape.

I edged back down the side-way where no one could see me and stood up to ease my aching knees.

Ouch! I'd banged my shoulder on the cross piece of the side fence. I rubbed it and looked up. Of course! I could escape into the next house!

Quietly I climbed up and peeked over the top. A big black Doberman the size of a small horse looked up at me. It rose to its feet, looked at me for a minute, then lifted its lips and snarled. I dropped back down in fright just as it began to bark. As my feet touched the ground, the dog hit the fence with a crash and its ferocious barking echoed down the side of the house. Again and again the fence next to me shook as the dog attacked it, barking savagely. I hunched down on the damp ground, covering my ears and praying for the noise and the crashing to stop.

Please! I thought. Please don't bring the men out!

An angry voice called out from the dog's house. 'Shuddup!' it said, 'Lie down, ya mongrel!' and the noise settled down to an occasional growl and grumble.

I was still shaking all over when suddenly I heard someone call my name. I couldn't believe it – it was Jason, yelling out at the top of his voice.

'Zena!' he yelled. 'Zena! Run now!'

I looked towards the back fence; there was no sign of him. Again he called, and there was a note of panic in his voice.

‘Over the fence, Zena! Now!’

What could I do? I had to trust him. I took a deep breath and ran as fast as I could towards the back fence. The cocky screamed even louder than before but I took no notice. I jumped for the fence, scrambled up it and, reaching the top, I rolled straight over and fell to the ground.

Jason was jumping down off his bike propped against the fence behind the tree and Jodie was holding hers and mine ready for a quick getaway.

‘Ride Zena, as fast as you can!’ said Jason and we leapt on our bikes and pedalled for our lives.

I don’t know if Uncle Vo or anyone else came out after me – we were past the back fences and onto the road before the cocky had stopped screaming. We sped down Plover Street, reached the corner and turned into Heron Street.

‘Follow me!’ yelled Jason, leading us round more corners and side streets till I had no idea where we were. At last he stopped and we fell off our bikes and collapsed, panting, onto the wide, grassy nature strip.

‘Where’s Sean?’ I asked, as soon as I could talk again.

‘He’ll be along in a minute,’ said Jason. ‘He was “creating a diversion.”’

‘What street is this?’ asked Jodie. She was dialling on her mobile.

‘Lark,’ said Jason.

‘We’re okay, Sean,’ she said. ‘We’re in Lark Street. Turn right at Heron, then right again at Robin and left into Lark. ...That’s right. See you soon.’

She put the phone down. ‘Sean’s really pumped,’ she said, ‘I think he enjoyed himself.’

‘What did he do,’ I asked.

‘He’ll tell you in a minute,’ said Jason. ‘What did you find out, anyway?’

‘Tran’s there all right,’ I said, ‘I heard his voice. Wait till I get my breath back and when Sean comes I’ll tell you everything.’

I fell back onto the grass and felt the sun on my face. It was so good to be warm again – and safe. Slowly my shaking stopped and I began to breath normally.

A couple of minutes later, Sean rode up. He dumped his bike and fell in a heap on the grass, crowing loudly.

‘Whoo-hoo!’ he said, ‘Was that ever exciting?’

‘What did you do?’ I asked him.

‘I can hardly remember,’ he said. ‘It just sort of happened. I banged on the front door – really hard – tried to sound like the cops. I wanted to get both of them out there. The big Aussie bloke came first. “Whaddya want?” he asked. I said the first thing that came to me: “You’ve gotta buy some chocolate!”

I tried to sound drunk and shouted as loud as I could. “Chocolate!” I yelled, “for the little sick kiddies! Ya gotta buy some!” I thought if I made enough noise they’d be worried the neighbours would hear. I kept on and on about chocolate and little sick kiddies till Uncle Vo came to the door too – to shut me up.’

‘Sean had his mobile on, said Jodie, ‘and I did too, so Jason and I could hear everything.’

‘Yeah,’ said Jason. ‘And as soon as we heard Uncle Vo’s voice out the front, I called out to you.’

‘I couldn’t believe it!’ I said, ‘When I heard you yelling like that.’

‘Well, it worked, didn’t it? Now, tell us what you found out.’

‘For a start,’ I said, ‘Tran’s definitely there. I heard his voice through a side window but I couldn’t talk to him. There’s a big dive on early tomorrow morning and then they’re moving out. Everything’s being packed up today.’

‘Where are they moving to?’ asked Sean.

‘Don’t know. Uncle Vo blew his stack when the man asked.’

‘Should we talk to your Dad about it now?’ Jason asked Sean.

‘We have to,’ I said. ‘If we don’t do something now, they’ll take Tran away with them and we’ll

never find him. I think he might be in some sort of danger, too.'

'Why?'

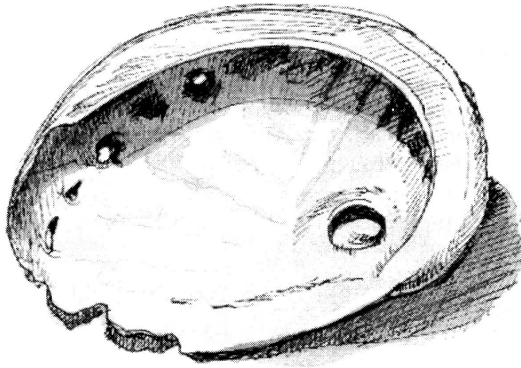
'I'm not sure. Something about Uncle Vo double crossing the boss. And I think he's making Tran help him.'

'Okay, let's go then' said Sean.

Jodie looked up from playing a game on her phone. 'Where are we going?' she asked.

'The cop shop,' said Jason. 'It's time we made an official report.'

We got on our bikes and set off for the local police station.



Chapter 17

Mr Aherne looked up from behind the counter of the police station and frowned angrily.

‘What do you kids want?’ he asked roughly putting on a strong Irish accent. ‘You’re not here to stage a hold-up, are you?’

There was a lady constable there too and she looked up in amazement.

‘It’s okay, Julie,’ he said grinning, ‘It’s only my son and his gang-o’-thieves. If you’re after money, Sean, you’re out of luck. We’ve just taken all the cash to the bank.’

‘No, Dad,’ said Sean. ‘This is serious. We’ve got to report something to you.’

‘Serious, eh?’ Mr. Aherne’s smile vanished and he looked at us suspiciously. ‘Okay. You’d

better come into the office and we'll do it properly.' He turned to the constable. 'I'll take them into an interview room, Julie and send someone out to keep you company.'

He opened a door and we went behind the counter and followed him through to a big office. There were lots of people behind desks with computers and phones everywhere. He took us through to a small room with glass walls and brought in a couple of extra chairs. He sat behind a big desk, leaned back and folded his arms. There was no sign of a smile.

'Okay, Sean,' he said, 'how serious is it?'

Jason and I both started to talk at once but Mr. Aherne held his hand up.

'I'd like Sean to tell me if he's in some sort of trouble.'

'No, Dad!' said Sean. '*We* haven't done anything.'

'Then what's this all about? I haven't got time to waste with games.'

'Dad, I wouldn't say it was serious if it wasn't. We wanted to talk to you before but – we couldn't.'

'Why not?'

Sean looked at Jason.

'Because,' said Jason nervously, 'Tran's father didn't want the police involved. But Tran rang me

and he's frightened. They're making him scuba dive for abalone – at night.'

'Abalone?' said Mr Aherne sharply.

'And his uncle's got him locked up.'

Mr Aherne looked puzzled. 'I'm trying to understand this. You say these people are diving for abalone?'

We all nodded.

'And who is Tran?'

'He's one of our friends from school.'

'And you don't know where he is?'

'Yes,' I said. 'We do now. We've just discovered it and I heard his voice; but they're moving tomorrow and if they take him ...'

'Just a moment.'

Mr. Aherne went to the door. 'Is that Fisheries feller still in the building?'

A voice answered, 'Yes.'

'Good. Ask him to come here. Now!'

In a couple of minutes, a bearded man arrived.

'This is Mr. Sands,' said Sean's father, 'He's been here today talking to us about abalone poachers. He's the head of a team investigating a local operation and I'm sure he'd like to hear what you have to say.'



I thought we'd never get out of that room. As soon as Mr Sands heard about Tran and the house in Doves Road he started writing it down and we had to go back and tell him everything all over again.

Jodie and I told him about finding the abalone at the Stingray Pool and then I had to tell him about the bags tied to a buoy out at the reef. He kept asking us questions: When did we first see Tran's Uncle Vo? When had Tran gone missing? What did Tran's father say? He wanted to know everything about the house in Doves Road: How big was it? How big was the boat in the back yard? What had Uncle Vo and the Aussie bloke said?

'They definitely said tomorrow morning would be their last dive?' he asked me.

'Yes,' I said, 'at low tide. They said, 3 am. And we've got to get Tran out of there before ...'

'We'll look after it,' he said. 'You've given us plenty of information. Enough to move in on them immediately if we wanted to.'

'Good!' said Jason. 'Will you go there now and get Tran out of there?'

He shook his head. 'Probably not. I need to report this to the surveillance team first. We've been working on this case for a couple of months and we don't want to run the risk of losing them.'

'But he's frightened!' said Jason.

He shook his head again. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

‘Well, can we go and see Mrs. Nguyen?’ I asked, ‘and tell her that Tran’s alright?’

‘No!’ he said sharply, ‘Don’t breathe a word of this to anyone! Not even your parents – you understand?’ He turned to Mr Aherne. ‘We probably won’t even strike until they’re coming ashore from their dive tomorrow morning. So, until then ...’ he paused, ‘What do you think? Are the children safe?’

I expected Mr. Aherne to laugh and say, ‘Of course!’ but he didn’t. He looked slowly and seriously at each one of us, ending with me.

‘Do you remember,’ he said, ‘I told you there was big money in abalone?’

I nodded.

‘Right. It’s *very* big money that’s at stake here. Just one of those hessian bags you saw at the reef probably holds about two hundred and fifty shelled abalone. Do you know what that would be worth?’

I shook my head.

‘Two and a half thousand dollars.’

I gasped. ‘Two and a half thousand?’

‘Each bag. And up to ten thousand dollars once they’re processed. Which is why this Vo character may have been helping himself to the odd bag or two. So you see, this is much more serious – and dangerous – than you can imagine. So serious that I’m considering protective custody overnight for all of you.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked nervously.

‘Lock us up, Dad?’ said Sean.

I was horrified. ‘Lock us up?’ I said, ‘You can’t! I’ve got to go home soon. I promised my Mum!’

Mr Sands could hear I was nearly crying and tried to calm things down.

‘Just a minute,’ he said. ‘Did those men actually see any of you children at the house – apart from Sean at the front door?’

‘No!’ I said. ‘They didn’t! I’m sure they didn’t!’

‘So, if Sean stays with his father, can the rest of you manage not to talk about it till the morning?’

We nodded.

‘But what about Tran?’ said Jason, ‘He’ll have to dive again! And he’s scared.’

‘Listen,’ said Mr. Sands, ‘if we strike now, we’ll only get a couple of them and there is no proof of a bigger operation.’

‘But the house must be full of abalone,’ I said. ‘I could smell them.’

He sighed. ‘It’s a difficult business, enforcing the law. I want you to listen carefully. If we go to that house and we find it full of abalone, we’ve certainly found an illegal haul but who is there to be arrested? Your young friend and two men. We may not even be able to pin anything on them apart from

receiving. No, we've got to do better than that. We've got to get a few of the bigger boys.'

'You see,' said Mr Aherne, 'the law says they have to be caught with the illegal abalone actually in their boat. Anywhere else and we can't prove anything.'

'Exactly,' said Mr Sands. 'Now do you see why it has to be tomorrow morning?'

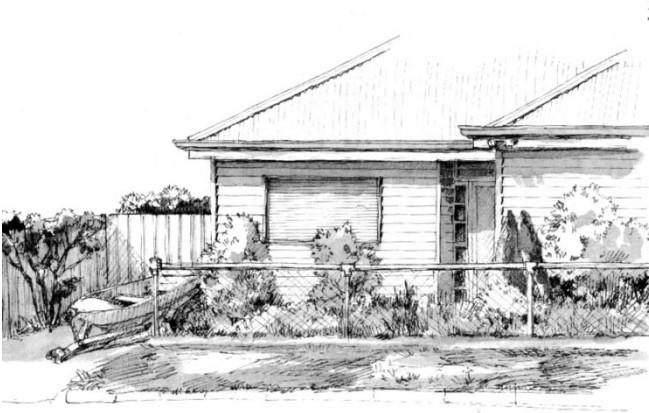
Reluctantly, we nodded again..

He looked at me. 'I don't suppose you noticed the number of the boat in the back yard?'

'Sorry,' I said, I didn't even think of it.'

'JP1275,' said Jason.

We all looked at him in surprise and he grinned. 'Jason Pirelli, twelve and three-quarters,' he said. 'That's why I remembered it.'



Chapter 18

When we got out of the police station I had twenty minutes to get home. Jodie came with me and we pedalled so fast we got there with five minutes to spare.

Mum was dressed and ready to go and very pleased to see us. Samira had one of her friends over to play and Josh was asleep, so we cooked some noodles for lunch and ate them on the back verandah.

Jodie was having tea at our place and going home afterwards because her Mum was on late shift and Mr Sands said she shouldn't be on her own. Jason was staying at Sean's place overnight – 'Just to be sure,' said Mr. Aherne.

With Samira there, we couldn't talk about what had happened but I was glad. My brain was tired from too much excitement.

When Josh woke up we took him for a walk in the pram. Jodie loved looking after him. She changed his nappy and picked out his cutest clothes to dress him in.

'I hope my Dad and Trudy have a new baby sometime,' she said.

'How would your Mum feel about that?' I asked.

'Why would she care?' asked Jodie.

'I dunno,' I said. But I thought if Jodie kept on talking about her Dad and his family, Mrs Forbes might get a bit sick of it.



Jodie, Samira and I were in the kitchen doing the dishes after tea when Mum called out from the lounge room.

'Look at this! Doves Road's on the news.'

We rushed to look at the TV and there, on the screen, was a white painted house with a rusty iron roof and closed shutters on the front windows.

Jodie nudged me. 'That's it,' she mouthed silently.

But in the driveway of the house was the smouldering remains of what had once been a small white boat.

‘... probably from a leaking petrol tank left in the boat,’ said the announcer.

Then on the screen came the big Australian man I’d seen on the back veranda; he was standing outside the house and next to him, silent and shocked, stood Uncle Vo.

‘It’s a terrible shame,’ the Australian man was saying. ‘He’d put his boat in my drive for safety.’

‘You’ve no idea how it could have happened?’ asked the reporter.

The man shook his head. ‘There were some kids here this morning, knocking on doors and making a nuisance of themselves. Maybe they came back this afternoon.’ He turned to Uncle Vo and put his arm around his shoulders, ‘Jeez, I’m sorry, mate.’

And Uncle Vo’s eyes looked blankly at the burnt out shell of his boat.

‘That’s disgraceful!’ said Mum, ‘They should get those children’s parents and fine them.’

Jodie and I retreated quietly to the kitchen. I was suddenly cold to my bones and my tummy quivered like a jellyfish. We finished the dishes as Samira chattered on about the burnt boat and who

might have done it. Jodie and I didn't say much at all.

We left Samira watching TV with Mum and Dad and went to my bedroom.

'Do you think someone did that to the boat on purpose?' asked Jodie nervously.

'Ssh!' I said, 'We can't talk about it.'

'Should we ring Sean and Jason? They mightn't have seen the news.'

I hesitated. 'What if Sean's father answers? We're not supposed to talk about it at all.'

'Yeah, but ...'

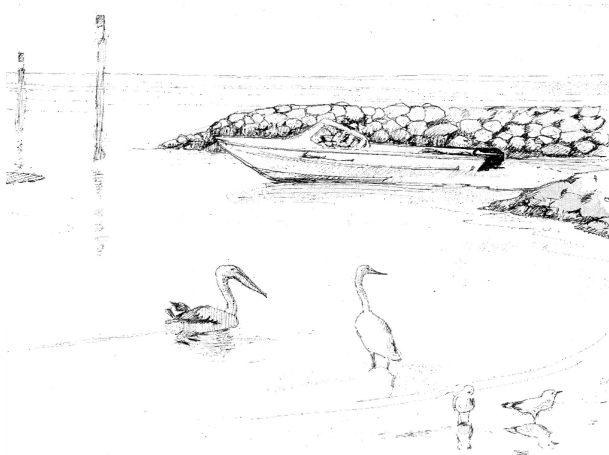
"Not even amongst yourselves" he said, didn't he? Don't forget they've still got Tran locked up; and now they've burnt Uncle Vo's boat.' I shivered. 'I think we should just stay here and not do anything.'

Jodie was silent. She looked scared.

'Do you want to stay the night?' I asked her.

She nodded.

'Okay. I'll go and talk to Mum.'



Chapter 19

I was in the water and swimming for my life as a burning boat sped towards me. Standing on the front of the boat, waving a hessian bag, was Uncle Vo. The boat was making a terrible noise, like a fire engine or a police siren. It went on and on, getting louder and louder till I suddenly woke, clutching the side of the bed to stop from falling out.

The sirens were still going in my head as I lay there, panting from fright, not sure if I was awake or asleep. I looked at my bedside table – nearly six o'clock. Then I realised the sirens were still going. They weren't in my head; they were real.

I looked to see if Jodie was awake. Mum had put a mattress on the floor next to me and Jodie was lying there, stiff and straight, her eyes wide open.

My heart started to beat faster as I realised what was happening. This was the police raid, right now. They were over at the harbour: the police, the men from the Fisheries Department – and the poachers. They were all there – and so was Tran. Was he in danger? Would he be alright?

Quietly we collected our clothes and crept out of the bedroom without waking Samira. We dressed quickly in the kitchen and went out onto the back verandah. The morning was warm and still and the police sirens had stopped.

‘Who d’you reckon they were chasing?’ Jodie whispered.

‘Dunno. Listen!’

We could hear a helicopter approaching. It came closer and closer until it was hovering almost overhead.

‘I wish I knew what was happening!’ I said urgently. ‘What if Mr Aherne’s not there? How will they know not to arrest Tran?’

‘Hey, Zena,’ it was Samira’s voice. ‘What’s going on’

She came wandering out in her pyjamas, rubbing her eyes. ‘Did you hear those sirens?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘But they’ve stopped now. Go back to bed.’

‘Why are you two dressed so early? Are you going over to have a look? Can I come?’

‘No!’ I said. ‘We’re not going anywhere.’

‘But there’s a helicopter, too. It must be something important. Why don’t we all go?’

‘Because it’s none of our business!’

‘Well, I’m going, even if you’re not.’

‘No, you’re not!’ I said. ‘Go back to bed!’

‘There’s no need to be crabby! I can go if I want to!’

‘Listen, Samira ...’

‘Zena! Samira! What’s going on?’ Now Mum arrived carrying Josh. It only needed Dad and Josef and the whole household would be up.

‘Zena says I can’t go over to the harbour to see what’s happening. Tell her she can’t boss me around!’

‘That’s enough, Samira!’ Mum looked at Jodie and me. ‘If Zena says you shouldn’t go there this morning, she’s probably right. We don’t know why there are police sirens and it may be dangerous. Isn’t that right, Zena?’ I nodded. ‘Now, come along; either go back to bed or get dressed and have your breakfast.’



Jodie and I hung around the house all morning, waiting for news. At nine o’clock the phone rang – it was for Mum and she talked and talked for half an hour.

At ten o'clock it rang again and I raced to get it. My throat was dry as I picked it up.

'The raid was successful, Zena!' said Sean's voice. 'Dad just rang me. They've got them all – and Tran's okay. Dad's just taking him to his family now.'

'He's okay!' I yelled to Jodie. Then, without warning – and without wanting to – I burst into tears.



Mum sat on Samira's bed opposite Jodie and me and waited till I'd finished blowing my nose and wiping my eyes.

'Is it your friend Tran who is okay?'

I sniffed, 'Yes, that was Sean who just rang.'

'And those police sirens at the harbour – you knew what they were doing there?'

I didn't like the way she was looking at me.

'Um, we thought they were... Sean's father said ...'

'We told Sean's father about Tran being taken by his uncle,' said Jodie suddenly, 'and he said they had a raid planned for this morning to catch some abalone poachers.'

'Ah. And Tran?'

'Tran's uncle was one of the poachers.'

‘There! You see, Zena,’ said Mum. ‘I was right! It *was* something illegal. I told you not to get involved.’

I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I nodded.

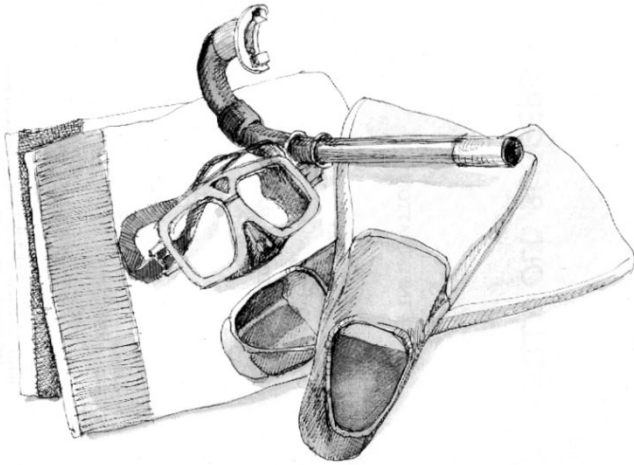
‘And they found Tran there, with the poachers?’ asked Mum.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Mr Aherne’s taking him home now.’

‘Good! His mother will be so relieved to see him.’

She got up to go. ‘I’m glad you kept Samira home this morning, Zena. You’re a good girl.’

She went – and Jodie and I breathed big sighs of relief.



Chapter 20

It was all reported in the newspaper the next morning. And when we met in the park to read about it together, Tran was there with us. We spread the paper out on the picnic table and excitedly read every word.

ABALONE POACHERS APPREHENDED

During an early morning raid at Portside Boat Harbour this morning, police successfully intercepted an illegal poaching operation. Freshly caught abalone with a commercial value of nearly \$30,000 were found packed in concealed compartments along the sides and under the floor of the poachers' boat.

At the same time, police and Fisheries Officers swooped on a house in Doves Road, Portside and discovered three rooms filled with abalone in various stages of processing – some frozen, some drying on racks and others chilled and awaiting treatment. The total value at the house has not, at this stage, been calculated but, according to Fisheries Department spokesman, Roger Sands, it will run into many tens of thousands of dollars.

The youngest offender picked up yesterday was only thirteen but Mr Sands suggests that he may have been forced to participate in the illegal operation.

Constable Patrick Aherne of Portside North police, said that local police have been specially trained to support the Fisheries officers in their duties.

A total of eight men were arrested and have been held for trial without bail. If convicted, they could face jail terms of up to ten years and fines of up to \$250,000. The boat and all equipment, as well as the car and trailer, have been seized and may be forfeited to the state by order of the courts.

‘Thirty thousand dollars!’ said Jason.

‘Plus what’s in the house!’ said Jodie.

‘You’re a hero, Tran!’ said Sean, banging him on the back.

‘No, mate,’ said Tran, ‘You guys – you’re the heroes. My father is very – ‘ His voice shook a little bit. ‘He wants to thank you.’

‘I bet your Mum was pleased to see you,’ I said.

Tran nodded. ‘She cried. She nearly hugged my head off. But my father – he is very ashamed.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘He is sorry he didn’t tell the police.’

‘Yeah. Why didn’t he want the police involved?’ asked Jason.

‘He thought they might beat him.’

‘Why would the police beat him?’ asked Sean indignantly.

‘In some countries they are not always honest,’ said Tran. ‘They might be helping the poachers.’

‘Not here,’ said Sean. ‘You tell your father – my Dad’ll look after him.’

‘He knows that now,’ said Tran. ‘Your father stayed and talked to him yesterday for a long time. He understands now that the police are his friends.’

‘What about your Uncle Vo?’ asked Jodie.

‘He is not my uncle!’ said Tran angrily. ‘He has shamed our family and I hate him! He told my father I would earn a lot of money to bring my

grandmother out here but he lied! He was keeping all the money for himself.'

'Did he really pinch bags of abalone from his boss?' I asked.

'Oh, yes,' he said. 'He made me leave them under the water for him to pick up later. But they found out and they burnt his boat to punish him.'

'Were you scared during the raid?'

'I was very frightened when I first saw the police,' said Tran. 'Thuy Hoong is the boss and he carries a gun all the time. As we came into the jetty three police cars came screaming in and when all the police jumped out I thought he would start shooting them. I thought I would be killed. Thuy Hoong tried to turn back but another boat came flying in behind us and it was full of the fisheries men.'

'Did he shoot at anyone?'

'No, he jumped off the boat and escaped into the bushes. They couldn't find him until the helicopter arrived. Then the police brought him back with handcuffs on and they pushed him into the back of the police van.'

'What were those police sirens for?' asked Jodie.

'Thuy Hoong's van was waiting on shore for us and when the driver saw the police he tried to drive away. A police car began to follow him and he

took off like a racing driver.’ Tran laughed. ‘That’s when the sirens started.’

‘Wow!’ said Jason, ‘I wish I’d been there.’

‘What’s this?’ said a big Irish voice from above us, ‘Not plotting more detective work, are you? You’ll do me out of a job.’

It was Mr Aherne. He leaned over and, on the table and in front of us, he plonked a big box of ice-creams. They were the best and most expensive ones Charlie had in his shop: Chocolate Crème Supreme, Swirling Strawberry Heaven, Melting Magic Chocconi – I’d never even tasted some of them.

‘Take your pick,’ he said, ‘I saw you here, gloating over your exploits and I thought we should have a celebration.’

He sat down with us and took the last one himself.

‘How do you feel now, Tran?’ he asked.

‘Okay, thank you, Mr Aherne,’ said Tran, licking some Classic Electric Choc from round his mouth. ‘Thank you for the ice-creams.’

‘I think you’ve earned it after yesterday. It was a good haul – of villains and of abalone.’

‘Have you really got Mr Big now?’ I asked.

‘Oh, no, I’m afraid not. That fellow, Thuy Hoong, he’s only a bit further up the ladder. Mr Big is not someone we’ll find in a boat. Our Mr Big is a business man – he’ll be the master mind behind a lot

of different poaching gangs, possibly all over the state.'

'How come abalone are so popular?' asked Jodie, wrinkling up her nose. 'I mean, what do they do with thousands and thousands of them?'

'They're sold all over the world, Jodie. Mostly to Hong Kong, China, Japan... they're a great delicacy all over Asia.'

'Don't they grow anywhere else?' asked Sean.

'They did once but not any more. They're all fished out in lots of places.'

'So now they want ours!'

'Sure, that's how it works. Australia's the last country in the world with plenty of abalone. That's why the poachers are after them and that's why we have to try to stop them. And *that's* why we're celebrating today – because you young people have helped stamp out one whole operation.'

Jodie was looking through the paper while we were talking.

'Talk about celebrating!' she said, 'Listen to this! Ten thousand dollars to go to a dinner party!'

'What?'

She began to read, '... a special New Years Eve dinner, where the tickets are \$10,000 each. At this dinner Government Consultant, Jonathan Prendergast will be officially launching the new

state-supported charity, *Fight Against Famine*. Ha! What a joke!’

We looked over her shoulder. There was a photo of a tall man with wispy blonde hair standing beside his car, waving importantly at the camera. I read out the caption:

‘Jonathan Prendergast arrives at the casino to inspect the venue for tonight’s event.’

‘Have a look at that car, Zena.’ said Jason. ‘Haven’t we seen it somewhere before?’

‘It’s just a big grey car,’ I said.

‘It’s the same one we saw on the Esplanade,’ said Jason. Look at the number plate!’

I looked carefully. ‘JP1275.’ I turned to Jason, ‘Isn’t that ...’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I *knew* I’d seen that number before. It’s the same as Thuy Hoong’s boat.’

‘That boat wasn’t really Thuy Hoong’s,’ said Tran, ‘It was owned by the ...’ he stopped.

‘By the big boss?’ asked Jason.

‘Yeah,’ said Tran slowly, ‘That’s what Uncle Vo said, anyway.’

We all turned to Mr Aherne; he was looking thoughtfully at the photo.

‘What do you think, Dad?’ asked Sean. ‘Is there a connection?’

He shook his head slowly, ‘Who knows, son; who knows? But we’ll certainly follow it up. Mr

Prendergast might have a couple of unexpected guests at his New Year's Eve party tonight – police security – just to keep an eye on things.'



EPILOGUE

It was a good start to the New Year knowing that Tran was safe.

It was an *excellent* start to the New Year knowing we had saved some of the world's last abalone from being fished out.

But what was especially good, was to wake up on New Year's Day and realise that Mum didn't know anything about my part in helping Tran – or if she did, she wasn't saying anything. She's pretty smart – sometimes she knows things but she doesn't let on – she just keeps an eye on you.

Mrs Nguyen invited Jodie and me and the boys to lunch a couple of Sundays later, to thank us for

rescuing Tran from the poachers. Luckily Mum didn't ask too many questions. She just said she was pleased that we were being friendly with new arrivals in Australia and making them feel welcome.

Mrs Nguyen was lovely. She made lots of Vietnamese food – little spring rolls, meat balls, bundles of prawns and vegies wrapped in rice paper – they were delicious. And she was using a few English words, too. Tran said his mother was always too shy to try, even though they've been here for about a year and a half. He said she felt better about trying to talk to people since meeting us.

Mr Nguyen made a speech and thanked us for 'saving Tran's life' and 'restoring the honour of the family'. Then Jason decided to tell a joke he had made up. I was nearly dying of embarrassment because I'd heard it before and I thought Mr Nguyen might be offended.

'Why are your little girls so tiny?' Jason asked him.

Mr Nguyen began to explain quite seriously that it was because he and Mrs Nguyen were not very tall but Jason stopped him. 'No, it's a joke. Why are your two daughters only little?'

Mr Nguyen shook his head warily, 'I don't know.'

'Because they're *Tran's sisters!*'

Mr Nguyen thought for a moment – and the rest of us stopped breathing; then he banged his hand on the table and laughed and laughed.

‘That is very good!’ he said, ‘because, you see, in Vietnam I am an electrician and I understand your joke very well.’

Then we all laughed – with relief.

‘Aren’t you still an electrician?’ asked Sean.

‘Not yet,’ said Mr Nguyen, ‘I am still trying to find an Australian electrician who will employ me. Then I can study and get my Australian papers.’

‘I’ll tell my Dad,’ said Jason, ‘He’s a builder; he knows lots of electricians.’

Mr Nguyen’s smile got even bigger and he shook Jason’s hand, really hard. He turned to Tran’s Mum and said something to her; her eyes filled with tears as she answered him. He turned back to Jason.

‘My wife says: we are very lucky that Tran has found such good friends.’

We haven’t heard any more suspicious news about Jonathan Prendergast. His photo is still in the newspapers, opening events and advising the government on all sorts of important things but we know the police are watching him. One day, we hope, he’ll make a mistake and be caught out.

We only had one more trip in Mr Pirelli’s boat those holidays. He was far too busy going out fishing with my Dad. They’ve become really good

mates and Dad often comes home with a feed of flathead or a big snapper for our dinner. He's begun helping Mum a bit more too. It was funny, but whenever he came home with fish to cook, Mum always had to rush off to feed Josh, or bath him, or change his nappy so Dad would start preparing the fish. Then he looked in some recipe books and started cooking them. Now he's always the one who cooks the fish and he's pretty good at it, too. In fact, I think he enjoys it.

When it was nearly time to go back to school, we remembered we had to do a project for Miss Kouros. It was pretty easy, though – the five of us did a combined one. Josef got me a book of fishing regulations from Malcolm's Boat Shop and even Samira helped. She brought us a book she'd found in the library called *Life on the Rocky Shores of S.E. Australia*.

Then the five of us got together and put down all we knew about abalone. Sean got a lot of information from his Dad; Tran told us things about what was in the poachers' house; I wrote most of it; Jason typed it up on his computer and Jodie did the illustrations. Then we all signed it. I thought it ended up looking pretty good. It's in the back of this book if you want to look at it.

We found a lot of stuff on the internet, too.

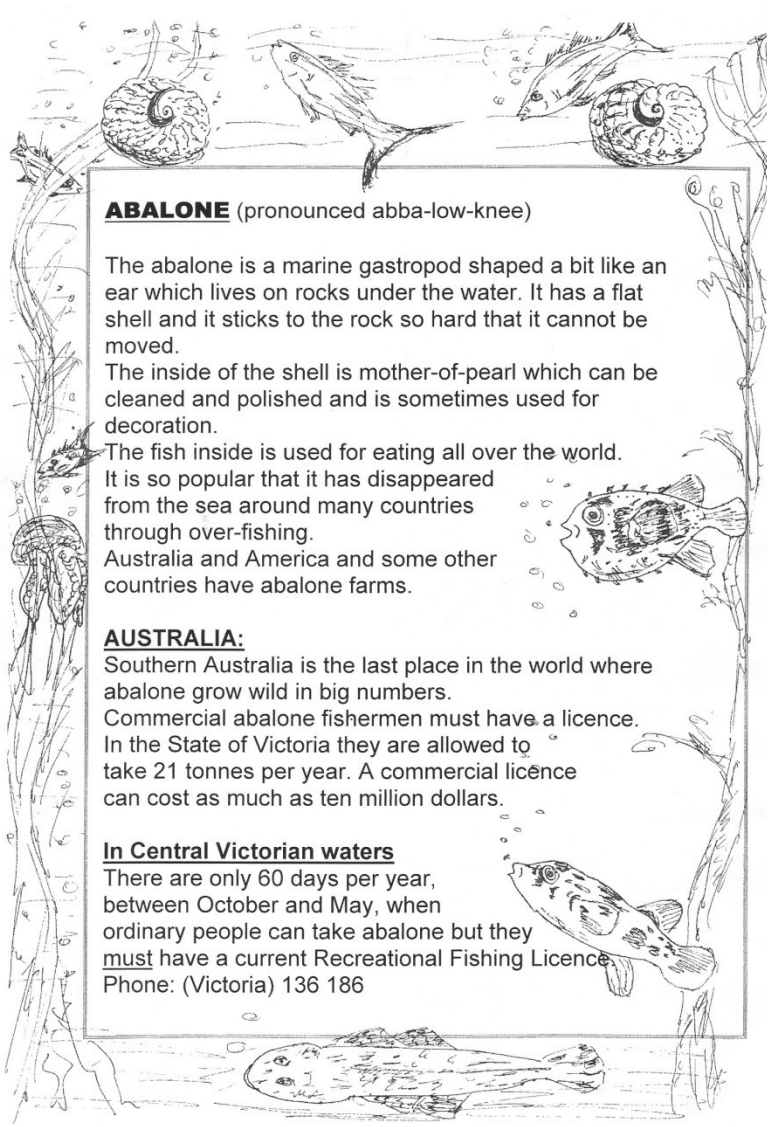
If you type in the word 'abalone' at the site: <http://www.nht.gov.au/nht1/programs/coastcare> you can get a brochure all about looking after our coastlines. The site: www.fishvictoria.com tells you all sorts of regulations and news about fishing.

And at www.fishtech.com they had all sorts of ways of cooking abalone, so we gave Miss Kouros a recipe as well.

We still don't know if she'll be our Science teacher for Year 8 but we're hoping she will.

THE END

Hey, don't forget to look at our project! It's on the next 4 pages.



ABALONE (pronounced abba-low-knee)

The abalone is a marine gastropod shaped a bit like an ear which lives on rocks under the water. It has a flat shell and it sticks to the rock so hard that it cannot be moved.

The inside of the shell is mother-of-pearl which can be cleaned and polished and is sometimes used for decoration.

The fish inside is used for eating all over the world.

It is so popular that it has disappeared from the sea around many countries through over-fishing.

Australia and America and some other countries have abalone farms.

AUSTRALIA:

Southern Australia is the last place in the world where abalone grow wild in big numbers.

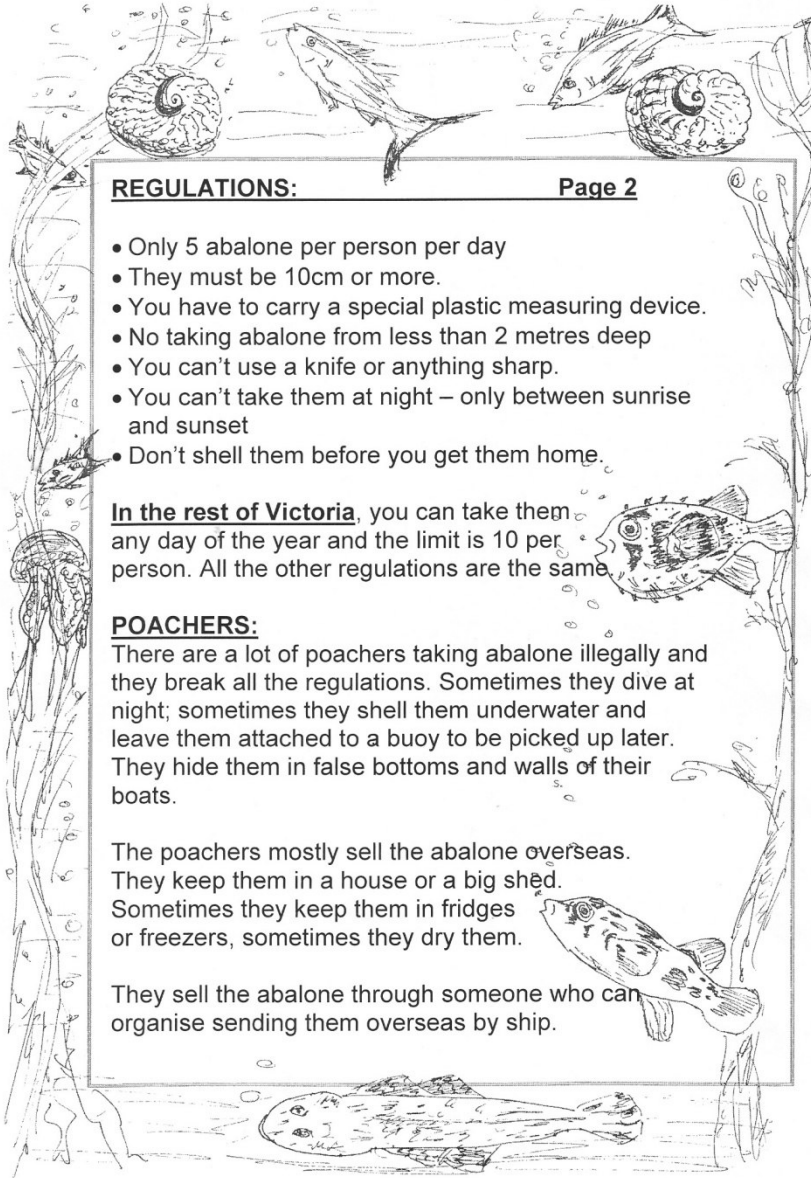
Commercial abalone fishermen must have a licence.

In the State of Victoria they are allowed to take 21 tonnes per year. A commercial licence can cost as much as ten million dollars.

In Central Victorian waters

There are only 60 days per year, between October and May, when ordinary people can take abalone but they must have a current Recreational Fishing Licence.

Phone: (Victoria) 136 186



REGULATIONS:

- Only 5 abalone per person per day
- They must be 10cm or more.
- You have to carry a special plastic measuring device.
- No taking abalone from less than 2 metres deep
- You can't use a knife or anything sharp.
- You can't take them at night – only between sunrise and sunset
- Don't shell them before you get them home.

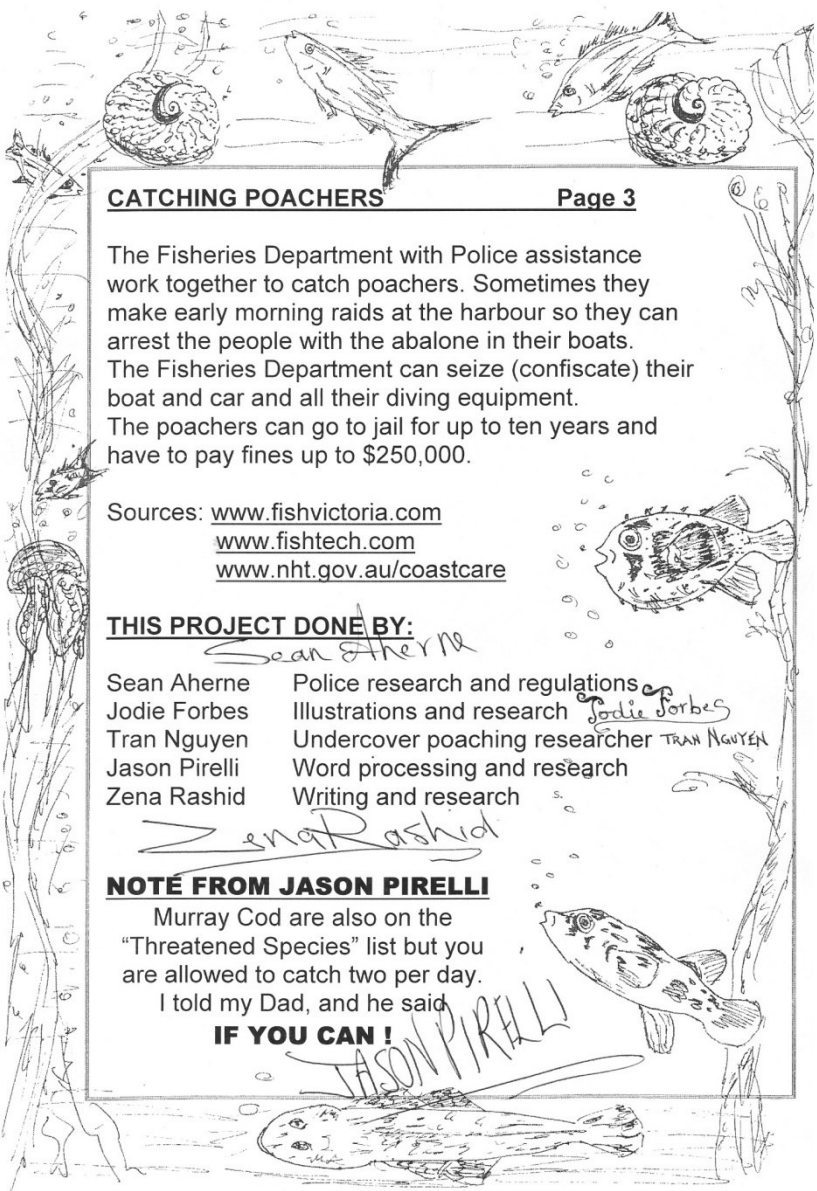
In the rest of Victoria, you can take them any day of the year and the limit is 10 per person. All the other regulations are the same.

POACHERS:

There are a lot of poachers taking abalone illegally and they break all the regulations. Sometimes they dive at night; sometimes they shell them underwater and leave them attached to a buoy to be picked up later. They hide them in false bottoms and walls of their boats.

The poachers mostly sell the abalone overseas. They keep them in a house or a big shed. Sometimes they keep them in fridges or freezers, sometimes they dry them.

They sell the abalone through someone who can organise sending them overseas by ship.



CATCHING POACHERS

The Fisheries Department with Police assistance work together to catch poachers. Sometimes they make early morning raids at the harbour so they can arrest the people with the abalone in their boats. The Fisheries Department can seize (confiscate) their boat and car and all their diving equipment. The poachers can go to jail for up to ten years and have to pay fines up to \$250,000.

Sources: www.fishvictoria.com
www.fishtech.com
www.nht.gov.au/coastcare

THIS PROJECT DONE BY:

- | | |
|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Sean Aherne | Police research and regulations |
| Jodie Forbes | Illustrations and research |
| Tran Nguyen | Undercover poaching researcher |
| Jason Pirelli | Word processing and research |
| Zena Rashid | Writing and research |

NOTE FROM JASON PIRELLI

Murray Cod are also on the "Threatened Species" list but you are allowed to catch two per day. I told my Dad, and he said

IF YOU CAN !

JASON PIRELLI



GRILLED ABALONE

**This recipe is from the internet.
The writers take NO responsibility for it!**

INGREDIENTS:

½ cup Soy Sauce
½ cup Sake (Japanese Rice Wine)
2 tablespoons Peanut Oil
2 Tablespoons Fresh Ginger
12 – 15 inch Abalone (in shells)

INSTRUCTIONS:

Bring charcoal to red hot stage in outdoor grill. Mix soy sauce, sake, oil and ginger in bowl. Remove abalone meat from shells by running knife around the inside of shell. Discard visceral parts and keep shells.

Place abalone in marinade for ten minutes. Return abalone to shells and keep marinade. Place filled shells, shell side down, on oiled grill and grill one minute. With tongs, carefully turn meat over in shells and grill 30 seconds longer until meat is lightly browned. Use heated marinade as dipping sauce.

If you have enjoyed this book, look for the earlier adventure of Zena and her mates:

“Chemical Leak!” Also available as a Google eBook.