

## DARKSON HOUSE by MARCUS CLARK

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### **1. DON'T READ THIS PAGE IF YOU ARE FROM AUSTRALIA !**

(Because you know all this )

This is really an introduction to the story because there are a few unusual things about this mystery which you need to know. It happened in Australia, which is the largest island in the world, or the smallest continent. Either way it is below the equator.

Australia is in the Southern Hemisphere where all the seasons are upside down. At Christmas-time everyone is sweating and going to the beach, or lying around swimming pools eating ice creams. In July people put on coats and turn on their heaters.

Not only are the seasons upside down, but so are the light switches. When you go into a dark room, you flick the switch DOWN to turn the lights ON. Oh, and a couple more things you may need to know: we drive on the wrong side of the road!

The steering wheels on our cars are on the right-hand side, and we drive on the left side of the road. Perhaps I should also explain that a meter is about the same length as a yard, and a kilometer is a little over half a mile in length. Temperature is measured in Celsius, 38 degrees is the same as 100 degrees f.

Apart from that Australia is remarkably like America: we speak English, kids (and adults), watch The Simpsons, play Nintendo and Playstation, and eat at McDonalds.

This is the story of two girls, Karen and Jodie who, even when they are just sitting around wishing for a swimming pool, seem to get caught up in mysteries.

Karen and Jodie are best friends, but they don't always think about problems the same way. Jodie's fave subject is science, and she likes to think things through logically.

Karen loves art, and can't always follow Jodie's thinking, she uses intuition: seeing with the mind's eye, feeling with the heart, and looking for that surprising flash of inspiration to provide answers. But this is their mystery, so I'll let them tell it just the way it happened.

'So you believe the story about the people in Darkson House being vampires?' Jodie asked me. 'When you say it like that it sounds silly, but I'm beginning to think they might be. Look at the evidence.'

'Nonsense. Vampires don't exist! Think of another explanation.'

I sat thinking for about a minute while Jodie ate another melted chocolate biscuit. The weather was unbearably hot, the temperature reaching thirty-nine degrees at noon; sweat dripped from my arms and the air was like a steam bath.

The only explanation seemed to be vampires, but I didn't want to say that again. 'Jodie, I can't think of anything else. You try.'

'Well Karen, if we're going to work this mystery out, we should first gather all our facts, then try to analyse them so we can come to a conclusion. Scientific method.' Jodie was always analysing things. She cleared a spot on her bedroom desk. 'Let's list the facts. I'll write them down.'

'Well maybe,' I suggested, 'we should start with the newspaper article in last month's paper.'

'All right, cut it out and I'll paste it into this old exercise book.'

## **2. DARKSON HOUSE**

'So you believe the story about the people in Darkson House being vampires?' Jodie asked me. 'When you say it like that it sounds silly, but I'm beginning to think they might be. Look at the evidence.'

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"After thirteen years of being deserted Darkson House is now occupied again. This famous house, which is 100 years old this year, was constructed by Mr Darkson at great expense in the early days of Dayman Heads. When it was built, it was considered one of the grandest mansions in Australia. The marble floor was imported from Italy, the chandeliers from Austria, and the furniture was brought from Transylvania. During its construction two workmen died in freak accidents, and work had to be stopped at one stage when two skeletons were found buried near the side of the house. Then, Mr Darkson, forty years old, lived in the mansion for thirteen months before dying mysteriously in his sleep. Mrs Darkson was so upset after his unfortunate death that her hair turned grey in less than two weeks. Seeing herself in a mirror distressed her so much that she smashed every one of the thirteen mirrors in the house.

When she died the following year, the house was passed on to her children. But all four died of mysterious illnesses before reaching the age of twenty-five. People began to say the beautiful house was cursed with evil. Since that time Darkson house has been rented on and off for short periods until 1972. The last people who lived there were killed in a terrible car accident while on their way to see the Mt Etna Bat Caves in Queensland.

In 1985 the council took possession of the house after back rates had not been paid for 13 years. Darkson House has now been let to Mr O'Brien. He said the stories of hauntings didn't concern him, just so long as it had a cool, dark cellar. Mr O'Brien collects red wines."

‘All right. What’s next?’ Jodie held the pencil ready to write out a list.

‘It’s good we’re on school holidays, isn’t it?’ I said. ‘It gives us time to prove whether or not the new people really are vampires.’

‘Hey, hold the vampire idea for a while, Karen.’

‘Actually, I’m not sure if I believe in vampires either. It’s probably something that was just made up for TV and movies.’

‘What evidence do you have that they are vampires?’

‘Well, there’s the business of the cellar. They were supposed to want the cellar for wine, right?’

‘Sure. Quite sensible.’

‘Yet when George Blare saw the delivery from the hotel all they brought were cartons of beer and some vodka. There’s no need for a wine cellar if all you drink is beer and vodka. And it had to be a cool, dark cellar, remember? The sort of place a vampire needs for a coffin.’

‘Is that all!’

‘Of course not. What about the big box that the men carried in? George Blare reckons it was the size of a coffin. He watched four men carry it up the steps. And there’s the fact that they’ve been there six weeks and no one has ever seen them in daylight. And they have the lights on practically all night.’

‘Keep going.’ She held the pen poised over the page which was still blank.

‘Well the real evidence is from Ron Rocco.’

‘Why should we believe him? He’s always making stuff up.’

‘Not this time, he was terrified. He was asked by Mansions Real Estate to mow the grass at Darkson House. So he went around there in the daytime but they would only talk to him through the closed door. They told him to mow the whole place. It’s huge, a whole hectare. He was mowing the long grass all day. And he found there was a bat colony down the back in the trees, thousands and thousands of bats.’

‘Fruit bats no doubt. Nothing mysterious about them.’

‘Ron Rocco said the whole place was spooky. There were strange looking statues half buried in the ground, and they sort of looked like graves, because some of the statues had fallen over and were almost buried in the ground. They had gone all green and mouldy and looked like dead bodies.’

‘Ha. What else?’

‘Mr O’Brien said he couldn’t pay Ron Rocco till it was dark. So Rocco had to go back again that night. He reckons he was so scared he asked his father to go in the house with him. When they got inside it was creepy, there were long dark passageways, the floors creaked, and the people were listening to this weird organ music. When the old woman—she looks like a witch he said—opened the door and invited them inside, she was wearing a black cape and carrying a black cat!’

‘Maybe she had just been watching The Addams Family.’

‘Wait on Jodie. The old woman took them into the living room to get the money. Mr O’Brien was sitting in front of an open fire in summer, drinking a glass of blood!’ ‘Blood!’

‘Rocco swears it. When Mr O’Brien stood up, he wiped his mouth and hid the glass with the blood in it.’

‘What happened then?’

‘They got the forty dollars and took off in a hurry. Ron Rocco says he’ll never go back, even if they paid him a thousand dollars.’

‘Well I don’t believe in vampires. And I intend to disprove the vampire theory once and for all.’

Jodie said this quite calmly. ‘What is the one thing a vampire must never do?’

‘Easy. They must never go out into sunlight or they shrivel up into dust.’

‘Correct. So all we have to do is go around to Darkson House and get these so-called vampires to go out into the front yard. If they are vampires they won’t go will they?’

Suddenly I felt quite nervous. There must be a better way to test the theory—by watching with a telescope or something. I didn’t like the idea of going around to the house much. ‘Surely,’ I said, ‘we should use logic? We could analyse the facts rather than going around to Darkson House.’

Jodie smiled at me. 'No, we need to test things now. What's the matter Karen, the vampire got your tongue? You've gone as white as a ghost.'

I didn't intend to let her scare me. 'Fine by me. Let's get our bikes and go now while the sun is still shining.'

### 3. THE WITCH

It wasn't very far to ride to Darkson House, about one kilometre. But because it was on the top of a hill we were puffed out by the time we reached the front gate. The midday sun was at its hottest, but we could feel a slight sea breeze on top of the hill.

'Now what?' I asked.

'First we park the bikes in the gutter. Watch this.' She bent over and fiddled about with the chain, it was rather loose. Mr Thomas, her dad, had been promising to fix it for three weeks. 'Lift the back wheel up for me, please.'

I lifted the wheel off the ground, while she moved the chain to one side, then she pushed down on the pedal. When the back wheel turned the chain fell off the toothed wheel at the front. 'What did you do that for, Jodie?'

She smiled. 'Now we go and ask the mysterious vampires to come outside in broad daylight to fix my bike chain.'

She stood up and walked quickly toward the front gate. It had number 101 written on the dark red brick fence. I took a glance at Darkson House and followed. It was the most spooky house I had ever seen, like something out of a horror movie. It wasn't so much a house as an old mansion. The gate was one of those massive steel ones with spiked bars on the top, and it was so heavy both of us had to push it before it would open. The gate was black and rusted with weird looking faces of people moulded into the steel between the bars.

The path up to the house was about forty metres long, made of bricks that had sunk into the ground, or been lifted up by gnarled tree roots. The branches hung low over the path, thick and green, making a sort of semi-dark roof that we walked beneath.

Suddenly Jodie stopped, she gave a gasp and pushed against me. She was staring ahead but trying to walk backwards.

'There! See--a huge spider. It's hanging in its web.'

'Ugh! Maybe we should just go home. After all what if the people really are vampires?'

That was the wrong thing to say to Jodie. 'No way. Pass me that stick.' I passed across a part of a branch, she twirled it around in the web, the spider ran frantically onto the stick and started up toward her arm. Jodie flung the stick aside and into the bushes. 'All right. We can go on now.' We nervously walked along the path looking for spiders at every step. When we came to the end of the trees, I looked up at Darkson House.

It was sinister looking: made from dark sandstone, old deep red bricks and tiles. The wood was painted black and that gave it a bewitching look. It was tall and foreboding. The window frames were made from stained wood, with thick dark red curtains on the inside. The guttering was hanging down, broken, with rusty nails protruding from some boards near the windows.

Jodie kept on toward the front steps. She stopped there and looked up at the huge door, vines hanging down over the entrance.

'It's scary, isn't it?' I said.

She nodded. We walked side by side, very slowly, up the steps. I counted them: thirteen. They were old and cracked, and creepers grew over everything. The walls had little patches of green moss on them. As we got to the top step, we brushed against some old leaves. A huge wart-covered toad hopped out near my feet startling us; it was vilely ugly. It jumped deeper into the leaves on the porch.

We stood, trembling, in front of the massive doors. My heart, and I suspected Jodie's also, was going very fast.

'Karen,' she asked, 'do you believe in werewolves?'

'Oh for heavens sake don't ask me now!' I thought she was trying to tease me. The next thing she would say was that there was one standing at the bottom of the steps looking up at us. I just wanted to get out of the place as soon as possible. I figured if I rang the bell softly no one would hear. I pulled a rope hanging down. Nothing seemed to happen. I pulled it harder, and this time there was an enormous pealing of bells, like the town hall clock. I jumped back with fright. Then we could hear slow heavy footsteps coming toward the door. 'G-go on Jodie. You've got to ask.' I actually felt rather annoyed. I didn't want anything to do with this at all. What did I care about disproving the people were vampires?

Slowly, the door swung open and an old lady, looking rather like a witch was standing in front of us. She had wrinkles all over her face and held a cigarette in her right hand; in her left arm clutched to her chest, she carried a black cat.

'What the hell do you kids want?'

Uh,' was all Jodie said. I glanced at her and she seemed just as scared as me and tongue-tied.

'We ... her ... b-bike chain--'

'The chain came off ... my bicycle and I wondered if anyone here could help me ... put it back on.'

I stared up at the old woman trying to see if she could be a vampire.

'Don't be daft! You think I'd be waking Mr O'Brien up at midday? You girls oughta be more quiet.

Ringin' the bell like that. Who did it?'

'Um, me ... I didn't mean t--'

'If Mr O'Brien wakes up with all that door bell ringin' he'll give you a right wallopin'.'

'Is he asleep?'

'Yes, of course he's asleep!'

'But it's half past twelve in the afternoon,' Jodie said.

'Aren't you a cheeky one! What business is it of yours? Mr O'Brien is an inventor and he happens to stay up late at night flapping around the house and down in the laboratory.'

'What d-do you mean, flapping about?'

'Girly you've got a big tongue haven't you now? And you know what? I'd say you'd be Jodie Thomas, and you--the quiet one--would be Karen Casey.'

'How could you know that?' I asked. I was amazed. If she knew who we were maybe she was a witch, maybe she knew why we had come. She stood in the doorway, the smoke curling up from the cigarette in her fingers. She brought the cigarette up to her mouth and sucked on it, then blew a long cloud of smoke from her nose, like a dragon. She wore a dark-brown ankle-length dress, and old-fashioned black leather shoes. The cat began struggling to get free. The old woman took a couple of steps forwards, we moved aside and to our surprise she sat down on the front step. The cat, which I could now see had white socks and a white belly, curled up in her lap.

She bent down and said, 'We know everything around these parts don't we Snowball? Snowball want a saucer of milk? Pretty little thing.' The cat stretched a paw out indifferently and began to purr. 'I know who you are because I'm a witch!' And she laughed. 'And you'd better keep away from this house because it's haunted.'

'It is not,' Jodie declared. I wasn't so sure.

'Oh yes it is girly. We got bats.'

'Fruit bats. They're nothing to be afraid of.'

'And old statues broken and fallen over in the bushes like gravestones.'

'So has the museum.'

'You're a cheeky little thing, now aren't you Jodie?'

'No, Mrs Parsons.'

'Ah, so you do remember me?'

Yes. You were the cleaner at my father's office a couple of years ago.'

'Sure I was. And now I'm the housekeeper for Mr O'Brien at Darkson House. And no offence, but it's a better job than working for your father. Trying to clean up after that lot your father works with. Though he was a nice enough man.' She scratched the cat under the chin, and it stretched its head

forward. Mrs Parsons took another drag on her cigarette, then wrinkled her eyes up as she blew out the smoke.

'Do you think Mr O'Brien would fix my bike? If he's an inventor ... '

'No. And I wouldn't be askin' him.'

'Does Mr O'Brien ever go to the beach, or do any gardening?'

'Well now it seems you must be employed by the police department. What's all these questions about? You'll get yourself into trouble girl if you go through life asking questions.'

'Dad always says that if you don't ask questions you'll never find out the answers.'

The old woman laughed. When her mouth opened up I could see she had no teeth, it looked horrible.

'How old are you girls?'

'Twelve,' I said.

'I wish I was fifteen again with all the boys chasin' after me. Oh they did! Course I was a pretty little thing then. But now days I'm seventy-two years old. I wish I could live forever. Mr O'Brien's an inventor and maybe, I keep thinking, he'll invent a magic drink that'll make me young again.'

'L-like a vampire that drinks blood?' I couldn't believe I said that. I shuddered.

Mrs Parsons smiled. 'Exactly! Something that would make me beautiful and young again. Twenty-one years old and I would live forever, never looking a day older. Ahhh.'

I looked closely at her wrinkled face, she looked rather sad. 'Is that what Mr O'Brien's inventing?' She laughed.

'No. He's inventing a laster ... er a laser, oh a laser thing-a-me-jig. He works all night in the cellar, sleeps in the day, then Friday afternoon he goes down to Sydney to look up books in the Mitchell Library.'

'Aren't you scared in this big house by yourself?'

'Oh a bit, it gives me the creeps, the wind whistling under the doors, the dark rooms, the floor and roof creaking day and night. Some nights I swear I hear footsteps in the hall, but when I open the door there's no one there. The floor boards are rotten and I'm afraid one night I'll fall right through into the basement. It's enough to drive a witch mad.' She cackled at her own joke and stubbed the cigarette out on the bricks, then flicked it into the dark overgrown shrubs.

Jodie asked: 'Have you ever seen what Mr O'Brien does in the laboratory?'

'No, he locks the door. What do I care? It's the one room I don't have to clean. For all I know he might keep pet wolves down there.'

'Could we have a look?'

'Girl, you'd be mad! If Mr O'Brien found us looking in his laboratory, he'd kill the lot of us!'

At that moment a loud, deep voice called out from inside Darkson House, echoing down the long hallway. 'Mrs Parsons! Where are you?' She sprang up with surprising speed for such an old, thin looking woman. The cat landed on its feet and ran inside.

'I've got to go! You girls vamoose out of here. If Mr O'Brien catches you here he'll--' And she slammed the door.

I didn't hang around. I walked straight down the steps toward the front gate. We'd been there long enough. When we got back onto the path, I said: 'At least we know she's not a vampire.' But Jodie didn't answer me.

I turned around and to my horror saw that Jodie had vanished.

#### **4. THE CELLAR**

I looked right back up to the door that the housekeeper had slammed shut. Jodie was nowhere to be seen. Slowly I retraced my steps toward the forbidding house. It had obviously been neglected for many years; bushes, shrubs, and trees had grown up everywhere.

'Jodie,' I called out. I listened for an answer. Silence. Perhaps she had fallen into a cellar. I cautiously walked right back to the bottom of the steps again and stopped. Where could she have gone to? I was sure she hadn't been dragged back inside the house. I would have heard the door

open and close. And I didn't believe that she had turned into a bat, so she must be somewhere nearby.

The house had a small path, which I hadn't noticed before, leading off the main one and around the side of the house. It was half overgrown with tree branches that bent low toward the ground. I decided to follow the path, more afraid than ever now at the disaster I imagined had befallen Jodie. How could anyone have dragged her away without her making a sound? And if someone had dragged her away, would they be waiting to attack me? Had Mr O'Brien come up behind her? I walked carefully, looking about me all the time. 'Jodie!' I called out loudly. 'Jodie, where are you?' No answer.

The bushes and trees made it difficult to see more than one or two metres ahead. I walked along, searching the long grass in case she had tripped or something.

To my horror, I looked down and saw a stone body of a girl in the grass lying face upwards. My blood froze. I felt paralysed with fear, and indeed, I stood motionless.

I slowly bent over closer and closer until I touched the statue with my fingertips; it was cold and slimy from rain and moisture. I looked at the face carved into the stone, and it seemed to smile back at me.

In front of me was a "tunnel" beneath a huge bougainvillea bush. I recognized the long razor-sharp thorns hidden beneath the leaves. The tunnel was just tall enough for me to stand up and walk through. I looked behind, checking to see if anyone was following me. There was no one there. If Jodie was anywhere it had to be through the tunnel. I started forward, carefully avoiding the thorns, watching all around me. The tunnel was almost dark, because the leaves overhead were so thick. As I was nearing the end of the tunnel, I called out: 'Jodie! Jodie where are you?'

'Karen! Karen, I'm over here.'

'Coming!' I called back. I hurried to where I heard her voice. But I couldn't see her, and began to wonder if it was a trap. Was someone imitating her voice? After a few more steps I caught a glimpse of her about fifteen metres ahead, past the end of the tunnel. She was coming toward me. I ran to her and clutched her arm. 'What happened? Are you all right?'

She stared at my face. 'You look like you've just seen a ghost.'

'Never mind. What happened to you?' I was clutching her arm with both hands, afraid she'd disappear again.

'When we went down the steps, I saw the side path and I said: "Come on Karen, let's find the basement". I thought you were right behind me. I was talking to you and I just went off down the path, and when I looked back you were gone.'

'I was gone! Jodie, we are supposed to be best friends, so please don't tease me. We were heading out to our bikes, and when I turned around you had disappeared. I didn't hear you say anything about the basement. You shouldn't have gone off like that—we've got to stay together.'

'But I really thought you were right behind me!'

'Never mind now. Let's get out of here. This garden is ghoulish.'

'Wait. We're nearly there now, and I think that one of those windows over there will be the basement where his laboratory is. See how the windows are at ground level, as though they are to let light in downstairs?'

'Yes. It could be—have you looked?'

'No. That's when I heard you calling out.'

'Quickly then, let's look so we can go home.'

'Karen, don't act so scared; it's only an old house, with a silly old housekeeper and a crazy inventor like Doc Brown from Back to the Future.'

'This isn't an ordinary house ... it's—'

'Haunted? Nonsense Karen. There are no vampires and no witches. It's just overgrown with shrubs and trees.'

'Come on then, let's look.'

We approached the windows, which were set level with the ground; small fixed glass windows. Sandstone blocks were laid around the bottom of the house, which had prevented grass and shrubs from growing up alongside the walls.

I went over to the window but the curtain was completely drawn so that I couldn't see anything. Jodie was trying to peek into the next window, but it too was covered over. I went to the third window, the curtains were not drawn completely across. There was a gap of about five centimetres. When I looked inside it was difficult to see anything at all, because outside the sun was bright, inside the room was dark. But I could see it was a room below ground level, so it was the basement. All I could make out in the gloom was a table.

'See anything?' Jodie asked.

'Not much, just a table. What about you?'

'Nothing. The curtain is pulled right across the other windows.' Jodie came over to my window and looked in for a long time.

'You know we're trespassing,' I commented.

'Oh for heaven's sake! We're just looking around an important historical building. Next year the council could be conducting people through here as a heritage museum. I can only see something that looks like a table. Okay, let's go.'

We stood up and began to walk along the path. 'This time stay with me,' I said.

'What a pity we couldn't see anything in the basement.'

'I suppose that is what he called the cellar in the newspaper story—or what Mrs Parsons calls his laboratory.'

'Yes, I'm sure it is. Be careful of the ground it's damp and rather muddy along here. There must be water seepage or something.'

We went into the tunnel of bougainvillea, with its sharp thorns, until we got to the place where I had seen the statue lying in the grass. I stopped suddenly and Jodie bumped into the back of me. The statue was now standing upright! I was sure it was the same statue of the girl.

'What's the matter?'

'The ... the statue was lying on the ground. Now it's upright.'

'Maybe it is a different one.'

'No. It's the same face. And look—here's where I saw the moss on the hem of the dress.'

Jodie was staring at the face. 'It looks real doesn't it?'

'It looks spooky to me, gruesome and mysterious. Like there was a real person trapped inside the stone. How could it have stood up by itself?'

'I don't know. It would be more logical to believe that we are not looking at the same statue, or that you only thought it was lying down, when actually it was standing up.'

'But I'm certain it was lying down, and I'm also certain it was at the entrance to this tunnel of bougainvillea.'

'Hmm, well come on. I have a theory ... keep walking.'

We walked on towards the front of the house.

'Aha!' Jodie said.

'Shhh, what is it?'

And there, lying down in the long grass, was another statue of the same girl.

'You see,' she explained, 'it's the same statue of the girl all right, and it even has some green moss on the hem, but not on the same place. You remembered correctly, that when you went into the tunnel the statue was there. But when we turned around and went back we were actually at the exit of the bougainvillea tunnel.'

'Of course! But why would they have made two statues the same?'

'Maybe they liked them. People often have pairs of statues outside buildings don't they?'

'I suppose so. Come on, we're nearly at the front path.' We kept going till the narrow side pathway rejoined the main path leading out to the safety of the street. 'Be careful in case anyone is about,' I said.

‘Oh why bother?’ Jodie said lightly. ‘If Mr O’Brien really is a vampire he won’t be out in the daylight, and if he’s not a vampire—well it doesn’t matter!’

‘Here’s the front gate. Oh, I’m so relieved to get out of there.’ And as I stepped on the outside footpath I felt a shudder of relief pass through my body. I silently promised myself I would never, ever, go back into Darkson House whether it was haunted or not.

How very wrong I was to be!

Jodie was bending over her bicycle chain, trying to put it back on. ‘Some gentleman, he wouldn’t even help fix my bike.’

‘Well it doesn’t matter.’

‘But it does. How can I prove Mr O’Brien is not a vampire if we haven’t seen him out in the daylight?’

‘I’ll believe you. Besides if he works at night, and sleeps during the day, then it could be months before he ever goes out into sunlight.’

‘What a pity we couldn’t see down into the cellar, because I think that would have proved he wasn’t a vampire. I mean, vampires have to have coffins and stuff don’t they?’

‘Yeah, I guess.’ I leaned against my bike and looked back at that monstrous house. ‘We couldn’t see inside because the outside light reflected on the windows. It was too bright outside and too dark inside.’

Jodie started working on her bicycle chain. ‘But at night it would be dark outside. Can you lift the back wheel while I turn it, please? And of course it would be light inside because as we know, he works in the cellar at night with all the lights on.’

‘The chain’s on,’ I said. ‘Let’s go home. This weather is so hot; I can’t wait till you get the new swimming pool.’ I was hoping to change the subject. To be honest I’d had quite enough of Darkson House and vampires. I suspected she was about to suggest one of those crazy things she sometimes did—like going back to Darkson House at night!

We put on our bike helmets and pushed off down the steep hill. At least we’d have an easy ride back down to Byron Street. But just as we launched ourselves forward, I heard her say: ‘The answer is simple. We come back here tonight about ten o’clock, when it’s dark, and look in the cellar window.’

## **5. RON ROCCO**

That same afternoon we were in Jodie’s bedroom. I was lying on the floor, a pillow behind my head. Jodie was on the bed face down, her head hanging forward near the floor. I asked Jodie when she thought her father would buy the swimming pool. They were getting a large above-ground pool after he sold their Ford Falcon.

‘The minute he sells the car. He advertised it in yesterday’s paper.’

‘And is everything ready for the pool?’

‘Yep. We’ve levelled the sand off. All we’ve got to do is wait for the money when he sells the car.’

‘Oh I hope it will be soon,’ I said. ‘This weather is so hot, day and night. I can’t remember when we ever had such a hot sticky summer. I can just imagine jumping into the pool and sinking down under the cool, delicious water. I’m going to swim around and around under water like a porpoise.’

‘Yes, but Dad said it sometimes takes weeks to sell a car advertised in the paper.’

‘Weeks! Oh no ... we’ll melt by then, or we’ll be back at school. Hey, Jodie let’s go down to the shopping centre, at least it’s air-conditioned there. We can look at new swimming cossies.’

‘Sure. If we pick some out and Dad gets a lot of money for the car then it might be a good time to squeeze a few extra dollars out of him.’

I told her: ‘I’ll go next door, change, and tell Mum. What are you going to wear?’ Jodie was the almost the same height and weight as me, and since we were both blondes sometimes people thought we were twins. We sometimes wore matching clothes which further confused people. Yet for all that we had quite different personalities. Jodie saw things in a logical way, one fact at a time, adding things together to get answers. While I didn’t especially try to, my mind seemed to work in

jumps; where nothing would happen for a long time then I would suddenly have the answer through what Mum called intuition. And we also had different coloured eyes, though hardly anybody noticed that.

‘Um what about pink bicycle pants and my purple T-shirt?’

‘Okay, see you in ten minutes.’ It is so handy having your best friend live next door.

Our house was not as nice as Jodie’s because my mother didn’t have as much money. My Dad and Mum had split up when I was six years old. My father married someone else and lived in Sydney, but sometimes when he was on his way to Brisbane he would stay with us.

‘Mum, do you think you could afford a new swimming cossie for me?’

‘I don’t think so. We’ve got to pay the electricity bill this month. I expect when Jodie gets her pool you’ll want a new pair?’

‘Jodie could be getting the pool in a couple of days. Her father has advertised the car.’

Mum looked rather disappointed. I guess she felt sad that we couldn’t even afford a new pair of cossies, let alone a pool. ‘I wish I could get a better paid job. Besides, I hate working at night.’

‘Or Dad could give us more money,’ I added.

‘He does what he can. He’s got his other family to support.’

‘I wish he’d leave them and come back here.’

‘That’s not likely to happen, Karen. So we will just have to make do.’

‘Make do with being poor?’

‘We are not poor! We are just not as well off as some other people.’

‘Yeah, I guess that’s right. Mum, is it okay if I go with Jodie to Suntown Shopping Centre?’

‘Sure. If you can find a pair on special for ten dollars, I might be able to afford that much.’

‘Okay, thanks Mum.’

I went into my bedroom and dressed in my lycra pink bicycle pants, a black skirt, a T-shirt with MOSTLY MOZART written on the front, and on the back it said BACK TO BEETHOVEN. I wore it because all the boys wore stuff like SAVAGE GARDEN and METTALICA on their T-shirts. I didn’t see why I couldn’t support the sort of music I liked. They thought they knew all about music because they wore a T-shirt with writing on it, yet most of them hadn’t even heard of Mozart. I took piano lessons twice a week and found that not only did I enjoy Smashing Pumpkins and Savage Garden but Mozart and Vivaldi as well.

The shops were crowded with people, including lots of kids from school. We saw Tom Wilsher as we reached the entrance of Sizzling Swimwear.

‘Hi Jodie, Karen. Watcha doin’?’

‘We’re just shopping for swimmers. We’re getting a pool in a few days.’

‘Great. Hey did you hear there’s a couple of vampires living in Darkson House?’

Jodie shook her head. ‘I heard it—I just don’t believe it. Who told you?’

‘George Blare. Everyone’s talking about it. Ron Rocco saw them drinking buckets of blood, it was dripping from their mouths and stuff. And the witch has a black cat that talks to her in German, and she’s two thousand years old, and has wrinkles all over her face, they leave the lights on all night, and never go out into the sunlight, and there’s these spooky statues in the garden of dead people that walk around during the night, and millions of bats live all around the house and inside it and attack people when they’re asleep and suck their blood.’

Jodie looked sceptical. ‘The witch is Mrs Parsons. She used to be the cleaner at my dad’s office. She’s lived in our town for years.’

‘Huh?’

‘She’s not a witch. She’s only seventy-two, not two thousand years old. I met her three years ago, in fact lots of adults in our town have known her for years. And the cat doesn’t talk to her, she talks to the cat. And yes, it is a black cat, but it also has a white stomach and paws. It’s a very ordinary cat, called Snowball, that drinks milk.’

‘So you don’t believe in vampires?’

‘No,’ Jodie said firmly. ‘Especially since it was Ron Rocco who started all this. We’ve been to the Darkson House today. We didn’t meet Mr O’Brien because he’s an inventor who works at night. That’s why the lights are on.’

Tom looked disappointed. ‘Yeah well ... I liked the vampire story better, it’s more interesting than Mrs Parsons just being an old woman. Are you sure the cat didn’t talk?’ ‘Oh it says miaow and stuff like most cats and rubs itself on your feet. Is that what you mean?’

‘Nah. We’ve got a cat that does all that stuff. Well, I’ve got to go. Hey why don’t you tell Ron Rocco all that? He’s in the shopping centre somewhere; I saw him ten minutes ago with George Blare.’

‘Sure, if we see him. Catch you later.’ I called out as he moved off.

We went into Sizzling Swimwear and started sorting through the swimming costumes. Jodie found a nice looking cossie but when she saw the stitching was faulty, she put it back. Then she found the most gorgeous Speedo swimmers. And when we looked they had them in different fluoro colours. ‘Oh yes Karen, this is what I want in the hot orange. Why don’t you get the green one to match? It’s your favourite colour.’

‘I’d love to Jodie, but Mum said she could only afford ten dollars. These are thirty dollars each.’

‘Hmm. Well, you did help with preparing the pool site, weeding and digging up rocks. Maybe if Dad gets a good price for the car he might pay you something.’

‘Twenty dollars? I doubt it.’

‘Well, I’m going to ask the shop to put both swimmers on hold, and then we’ll see how much we can get out of my dad.’

The sales assistant put them under the counter with our names on them. We wandered out to look in other shops. It was nice and cool in the shopping centre, no wonder all the kids were hanging out there.

‘How much is your father selling the car for?’

‘He’s asking for seven thousand two hundred dollars, but he said he’d be happy with seven thousand dollars.’

‘But the pool won’t cost that much,’ I said. We were walking side by side through the shopping centre mall.

‘No, of course not. But he has to spend some money fixing up the house, and paying off the new car. Hey! Over there, see? It’s Ron Rocco and George Blare. Don’t look, just stare in the window.’

‘Why? Don’t you want to speak to Rocco?’

‘Yeah ... I guess I don’t mind. But I want to see if he’ll come over to—yes here he comes.’

‘Hi Jodie, hi Karen. Hey what’s with this Mozart?’ He was wearing an Puff Daddy T-shirt.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You a nerd or something?’

I looked right at his eyes, he seemed serious. I wasn’t sure how to handle this without it turning into one of those silly arguments. ‘Do you think that because I listen to Mozart I must be a nerd?’

‘You betcha. It’s sissy stuff.’

‘Rocco, everyone has their own tastes. Being different to you doesn’t make me a nerd.’ I was controlling my temper very well. Rocco always said things to start a fight. I don’t think he ever thought about what he said.

Jodie looked like she was getting ready to start an argument with Rocco. Her eyes were sort of glaring at him. Finally, staring at him, Jodie said quietly: ‘Nerds are afraid of vampires.’

At the mention of vampires, I could see Ron Rocco change, like a tremor going through his body. He really was scared.

‘What do you mean? Those creatures at Darkson House are vampires! I’ve been inside, I know! I spent a whole day in the grounds mowing. I saw things that would scare you two to death. I’ve seen him drinking blood! I’ve seen thousands of bats under the trees, I’ve seen the graves and the buried statues in the garden. And I’ve seen that witch talking to the black cat.’

‘Oh,’ Jodie smiled, ‘are you trying to say Mrs Parsons is a witch?’

'I-I she must be if she lives with that ... Satan ... that ghoul!'

'Oh Rocco. You've got quite an imagination. We went over to Darkson House a few hours ago and spoke to Mrs Parsons, she used to be the cleaner at Dad's office three years ago. Lots of people know her. She's just an ordinary mortal,' Jodie smiled.

'Cleaner? I don't believe it. And what about her face—all those wrinkles. She must be two hundred years old!'

'Would you believe seventy-two? Besides she smokes and that dries her skin up.'

'But she talks with her cat!'

'Not with her cat; she talks to her cat. That's quite different, isn't it?'

George said: 'Yeah Rocco, you were talking to your dog an hour ago. I heard you. And the dog understood you. You told him to get lost, and he went outside.'

'Perhaps,' I said, 'Rocco is a warlock and turns into a werewolf when there's a full moon and that's why the dog understands him.' Everyone except Rocco laughed.

'Oh you all think it's funny, but I saw Mr O'Brien drinking blood!'

'How? Was it in a bucket or what?'

'You don't believe me! I was in the room. That old witch—'

'Mrs Parsons.'

'—said to Mr O'Brien, here's your blood.'

'You're sure?'

'Certain! My father was with me. Then I saw him pick up the glass, ugh it looked horrible, and he took a mouthful. I swear it. I would never ever go back there by myself. I know he's a vampire!'

'Did you see him drink all of it?'

'No ... just a few mouthfuls. And then he put the glass down, as if he were drinking a cup of coffee. He was grinning and licking his lips.'

'What did your father say?'

'Nothing. I was too scared to even talk about it. I reckon my dad was pretty scared too. Not only that, I saw a guillotine. It was in a box and the writing on the outside said: ALL STEEL GUILLOTINE. I said to Dad, "What is that thing for? I thought they would have been banned." And Dad said Mr O'Brien used it to cut the heads off chooks and turkeys down in the basement.'

'We had a look in the basement window today.'

'Yeah, of course even nerds would be game to look in the window in daylight when vampires are asleep in their coffins. I went to the house at eight o'clock at night!'

'With your father.'

'So what? It was still after sunset.'

'You really believe this vampire stuff don't you Rocco?'

'It's true! I saw him drinking blood! I'll never forget it. He picked the glass up, took a mouthful and swallowed it. He looked satisfied. You girls think you're so tough talking to the housekeeper, well maybe she isn't a witch. But you'd be scared little kids wetting your pants with fear after sunset I can tell you.'

'Oh, I don't think we'll be scared at all,' I said. 'You see, Rocco, we're going back at midnight to look through the basement window.'

'You wouldn't have the guts!' But Rocco had gone white just thinking about it.

Jodie said: 'Rocco, you're scared, so you expect us to be scared like you. But we are not superstitious. We aren't afraid of black cats, and wrinkled old ladies who smoke. Karen is right. We will go back at midnight, when vampires come crawling out of their coffins. And we're going to look through the window and watch Mr O'Brien drink bats' blood and turn into a werewolf. It should be quite amusing.'

'Huh! You wimps would never dare. You're just girls. No one would ever do that, because there are thousands of bats guarding the outside of the house waiting to suck your blood. And the statues and ghosts moved about between the trees looking for trespassers.'

I could see we had Rocco; we were going to do something that he was too scared to do. I said: ‘Oh, Rocco none of that scares us.’

Then I saw Jodie get a tiny smile on her lips and I knew she was about to tease him even more.

‘Karen, we’d better get going. I want to buy some garlic and a sharpened wooden stake before we go home.’

Rocco swallowed the bait. ‘W-what for?’

‘Oh, just in case we have to kill any vampires tonight.’

## **6. THE CURSE OF THE VAMPIRES**

On the walk back to our homes I was feeling rather sorry that I had told Ron Rocco that we would visit Darkson House at midnight.

‘Do you think it’s such a good idea, Jodie?’

‘Well ... it seemed like the right thing to say at the time. That Ron Rocco makes my blood boil the way he thinks girls are just wooses, scared of everything and only the big brave boys can do things.’

‘Yeah, that’s what got me. But I’m sorry I said it now. Our parents would never permit it.’

‘But how would we ever live it down if we had to admit we didn’t go?’

‘Rocco would laugh at us forever, even though he’s scared to death of vampires. You know Jodie, I don’t believe the vampire stuff anymore. It’s all ridiculous.’

‘The way everyone keeps exaggerating. They just like to make up stories to scare everyone.’

‘So what do we do?’

‘I don’t know. I suppose your mum will be working again tonight?’

‘Yes, from nine till two a.m. She hates working at night, but that way she says she’s home for me after school,’ I said.

‘So ... I guess if you didn’t actually ask, you could just sneak out for say half an hour?’

‘Yeah. I hate to do that, but I guess so.’

‘And I expect I could tell my parents I was spending the night with you, which would be perfectly true. But what if your mother, or my parents came over and couldn’t find us?’

‘Oh that would be awful—they’d call the police.’

‘All right, we can leave a note saying exactly where we are going and that we’ll be back by say ... twelve-thirty.’

‘Yeah, that way if anything went wrong, they could still find us.’ I thought it wouldn’t be so bad if we left a note.

‘What could go wrong?’

‘Oh let’s not even think about that.’

When we got home, we went straight into Jodie’s house and asked her mother would it be okay if Jodie spent the night with me.

‘Sure, no problem kids. Guess what?’

‘Um, I can’t. Tell me.’

‘A man phoned about the car!’ Jodie’s mother sounded quite excited.

‘Great.’

‘He’s coming tomorrow afternoon. He said the Falcon sounds like what he’s after. Dad’s going to take a few hours off work to show him the car.’

‘This sounds like we might be getting the pool soon.’ Jodie was smiling and making swimming motions with her arms.

‘Did you find any swimmers you liked?’

‘We sure did but they cost thirty dollars. Is that okay?’

‘If your Dad sells the car, we should be able to afford it.’

‘Mum, Karen has only ten dollars. Do you think Dad might give her some money for helping prepare the pool site, digging and things, and then if she helps to erect it?’

‘Well, you’d have to ask him. Maybe. If the man pays seven thousand two hundred, he will.’

‘Will he get the pool tomorrow if he sells the car?’

‘He wants to, but it will probably depend on whether the man pays with a cheque or cash.’  
‘Yippee! It’s going to be so cool swimming. We can even have a swim at night sometimes, can’t we?’ Jodie was getting ready to plead.

‘Sure.’

‘Mum, do you remember Mrs Parsons?’

‘The cleaning woman?’

‘That’s her. She’s the housekeeper for the man who’s moved into Darkson House. Ron Rocco reckons she’s a witch and Mr O’Brien is a vampire.’

She sighed. ‘That Ron Rocco, he always had too much imagination and not enough sense.’

‘And now all the kids from school are going around saying things about vampires and bats and how Mrs Parsons talks with her cat and it answers back in German.’

‘German? Why German?’

‘Oh Mum, everyone knows cats don’t speak French very well.’

Her mother smiled. We burst into giggles as we went into her bedroom.

In Jodie’s bedroom we gathered her books, pillow, clothes, and some pyjamas. We took them over to my place. The effort of doing this caused sweat to drip from our foreheads and arms. Although the windows were wide open there was no sea breeze and the air was humid and hot. In the hallway the thermometer showed thirty-seven degrees.

‘Mum, is it okay if Jodie spends the night with me?’

‘That’ll be nice for you. Jodie can stay here whenever she likes. Do you girls want some toast and milk?’

‘It’s too hot for toast, just some cold milk. Mrs Thomas thinks they might be selling the car and buying the pool tomorrow.’

‘That’ll be lovely. I bet you girls will never be out of the water.’

‘Sure thing. We can’t wait with this stifling heat.’

At five past eleven that night we were watching TV in my living room. Mum had already gone out and we were both feeling a little apprehensive about going to Darkson House. The closer it got to midnight the worse the idea sounded. The program ended and while we were just sitting there hardly bothering to watch, on came the next program: THE CURSE OF THE VAMPIRES. I sprang up and turned the TV off. ‘We can do without that tonight,’ I said.

‘I feel a bit nervous. It’s five-past eleven. I guess we should go about eleven forty. We don’t want to be late.’ She smiled.

‘Jodie, I don’t believe there will be any vampires or witches there but I still feel scared. We’ll be trespassing won’t we? Also we could fall over in the dark, or walk into a spider or something.’

‘Yeah. There are things to be careful of. Have you got a torch?’

‘Yes, I’ll get it.’

But when we tried it the battery was half flat. I knew we’d have to conserve it till we got to Darkson House.

Twenty minutes before twelve we were both very nervous. We wore dark coloured clothes, so Mr O’Brien wouldn’t see us in the night. Putting on our bike helmets, we decided to keep them on the whole time. It would be safer if we tripped over in the darkness or a spider got on our heads.

We wheeled the bicycles quietly out through the gate. Inside the house we left the lights on. In Jodie’s place all the lights were out, everyone including her big brother Glen, asleep.

The roads were well lit by the street lights, and in fact it felt quite good speeding along in the cool night air.

As we rode past Ron Rocco’s house at the bottom of the hill, I quietly cursed him for getting us into this. Now he was snuggled in his bed sound asleep, while we were out trying to catch vampires in the dark. And just what would happen if by some weird turn of events we did see Mr O’Brien crawl out of a coffin like a vampire.

Oh, I didn’t want to think about that! I’d be out of there like I was going home on the last day of school.

As we came to the steep part of Kruger Street, it began to rain lightly. I could hardly believe it. The last thing we wanted was rain. The only good thing was that it would cool things off a bit for the next day.

We got off our bikes and wheeled them quietly up the hill till we reached Darkson House. Standing out the front of the house, our bikes parked in the gutter, we looked at each other wondering if there was any way we could get out of going inside.

Darkson House was lit up, almost every window in the house had a dim light showing through the joins in the curtains. Wind rustled the tree branches and leaves against each other, making weird rasping noises like an old man dying. I felt scared, but knew we'd come this far and the sooner we got it over with the better.

## 7. MIDNIGHT \*

'Ready?' I asked quietly.

She nodded and turned the torch on. 'Give me your hand and we'll go side by side. That way we can't get separated in the dark.'

It was awkward, but we went up to the heavy gate and with both of us pushing together we opened it. Apart from the weak torch beam we were surrounded by blackness. It was so dark that anyone or anything could be hiding behind the bushes waiting for us.

'Leave it open,' Jodie said. I knew what she meant—just in case we had to get out of there in a hurry. With hands clutched together we crept along the main path toward the front door. As we walked up the path, it got darker and darker, the trees obscuring the light from the street. The rain dripped off the leaves and made loud clicking noises as the drops hit our bike helmets. Just as we reached the front steps I saw a light go off upstairs.

'Quickly, turn off the torch!' I whispered. Was someone watching us from the upstairs window? We turned left and crept along the side path. It was more narrow than the main path and much more scary than in daylight. Jodie turned the weak torch on again. It seemed like there was a hideous creature hiding behind every bush. And even though I knew that was quite ridiculous it was hard to make myself believe it was safe. The torch was growing dim already, flickering off and on a bit. Oh, how I wished I had bought new batteries for it. The leaves dripped all around us. The house itself sat like a menacing monster, cold, dark and bewitching. Wet leaves brushed at our clothes, and branches scrapped our legs in the darkness. I could smell the wet, rotting leaves that had fallen onto the ground. But the worst fear I had all the time was that there was someone hiding in the shadows, someone watching us—waiting to pounce on us . . . some gruesome, zombie-like creature. And then we walked into the spider web—right into our faces! I gave a little squeal and jumped back. So did Jodie. We frantically tried to wipe the spider web from our eyes, and in her fright Jodie dropped the torch and it went out. I was getting close to panic, but fought hard to control myself, for I knew if we panicked everything would get much worse. 'I'll get the torch,' I said in my calmest voice to Jodie. But I was so afraid because I thought the spider was on me, running across my clothes. I found the torch and turned it back on. I shone it on Jodie looking for the spider, then on myself. It wasn't on either of us. There was no sign of the spider. I whispered: 'It must be still there.' And I pointed to the remains of the web. I shone the torch around where the web had been. Yes, the web was damaged and hanging to one side was a large waiting spider, big as a CD.

'Oh, what will we do?' I was very frightened of spiders. I don't know why. It was something that had worried me since I was a little girl.

'It's all right,' Jodie said. 'They don't hurt you. I'll go first.' She shone the torch about looking for a branch. As she snapped off a small branch, it sent a shower of raindrops onto our helmets. She threw the branch forward and it dragged the web down and the spider hung to one side of the tunnel. Keeping the torch on it, we hurried past.

The path was more narrow now and we went in single file. Jodie with the torch was in front.

We came to the bougainvillea "tunnel". 'Stop,' I whispered. 'Shine the torch down—yes. There is the statue of the girl.' It lay on its back in the grass, just off the track, rain dripping onto its face.

We began creeping through the tunnel. We had to be careful of the razor-sharp thorns. ‘Go slowly,’ Jodie said. She swept the torch back and forth around the bush tunnel looking for more spiders. But as she moved forward a thorn caught her on the cheek and scratched her skin. ‘Oww!’ ‘Let me see, Jodie. There’s a scratch, but it’ll be okay.’ A thin line of blood slowly oozed from along the scratch.

We continued along the tunnel until we came out into the open. We passed the upright statue, and then we could see the light from the basement window.

At that moment there was a huge flurry of flapping wings flying above us. We looked up, and against the cloud-obscured moon we saw hundreds of bats returning to their nests at the back of the house. I knew bats were actually quite helpful to people, because they ate mosquitoes and other insects. It was all those silly things that Rocco had said about them that sent shivers down my spine. We sneaked quietly over to the window that had the curtains drawn back a little and crouched down panting and shivering. My teeth were actually chattering from fear; I couldn’t stop them for about a minute.

Jodie turned the torch off whispering to me: ‘I’ve got to save it, so we can see when we go back through the tunnel.’ Just at that moment we heard the most blood-curdling sound possible. It sounded exactly like a vampire rising from the grave, except that I didn’t really believe in vampires. Or did I?

Jodie clutched my arm tightly. ‘What was that?’ I could feel her hand trembling. And the noise repeated, even louder this time. It was coming from close by, above our heads, and echoed all around us.

‘It’s okay, Jodie. I think it’s a possum; that’s the noise they make.’

‘Like a vampire clearing its throat?’

I almost smiled. ‘Yep. I’ve heard them before, they sound horrible.’

‘What time is it?’

‘Pass me the torch.’ I shone it on my watch. ‘Oh, it’s right on mid—what was that noise!’

‘Someone’s creeping down the tunnel! Turn the torch off,’ she whispered. We pressed ourselves close to the ground, alongside Darkson House, absolutely terrified, and waited with our hearts thumping like thunder.

## **8. DRINKING BLOOD \***

As we crouched against the side of the building in the shadows, the rain dripping down onto us, I saw a torch light coming out the end of the bougainvillea tunnel. I knew then we were trapped. If we wanted to get out we really had to go back through the tunnel, because to go all the way around the huge house in the dark would be dangerous. There were trees, fences, long grass, fallen statues, more bougainvillea with their thorns, not to mention the bats. Then I saw a second torch light. The first torch moved quickly to the ground, then went out. The second torch came up closer and shone onto the first person. It was Ron Rocco! Apparently Rocco had dropped his torch.

‘Be careful of the thorns!’ Rocco said in a loud voice. Jodie turned her torch on and shone it on the second person’s face, it was George Blare. She then shone it onto Rocco. It shone into his eyes and he turned, ready to run. But George Blare stopped him.

‘It’s the girls.’

‘Y-yeah.’ And they came over to us and crouched down alongside the window.

‘What are you two doing here?’ Jodie asked.

‘We waited to see if you’d chicken out, but when we saw you ride your bikes past my place we decided to go too. Just to show you we weren’t scared.’ But Rocco sounded very nervous, his voice trembling a little, and it was higher pitched. I had never heard him sound so nervous before.

George said, ‘Have you looked yet?’

‘No. Who wants to be first?’ Jodie asked.

‘I will,’ I whispered. I certainly didn’t want to be first, but I didn’t want the boys to ever claim they got to Darkson House and we were sitting there, too afraid to look in the window.

‘Go on then,’ Rocco whispered. ‘It’s midnight.’

I carefully put my head around the corner and had a tiny peek, pulled my head back nervously, then looked again. I could see into the cellar quite clearly. The room was lit up with fluorescent lights. It was not a vampire’s den, but an office. An ordinary office. There was a long table with two desk lamps, a large magnifying glass, and a big grey machine at the end of the table. There were sheets of paper cut into pieces and there on the table was a glass full of “blood”. I stared at it, but it was the can alongside that explained everything. A large can, with a can-opener and on the side it said: BEST QUALITY TOMATO JUICE Served chilled

That was the “blood”!

‘What do you see?’ they all began whispering.

‘Jodie, you look next. It’s a vampire’s den all right—there’s even a glass of blood on the table.’ I squeezed her hand so she would know I was joking.

Jodie bent forward and looked for a minute. She leant back smiling for the first time that night.

‘That’s hideous!’

‘W-What is it?’ Rocco asked.

‘You’ll have to look yourself,’ I told him. ‘Try not to look at the bodies, they’re gruesome.’

‘Uh, George,’ he said, ‘why don’t you look first?’

‘No. It was your idea Rocco. I’ll ... just wait ... maybe we should go, someone might ambush us if we stay too long. We’re trespassing you know.’

I said, ‘Don’t worry Ron, we’ll protect you.’ He looked embarrassed; then Rocco gingerly lent forward, eyes bulging, expecting to see a vampire crawling from its coffin. After a minute he pulled back, and George looked.

Rocco said: ‘Well it looks like Mr O’Brien isn’t a vampire. Still it’s a pity we couldn’t get a look at him.’

‘Shh,’ George said. ‘He just walked past carrying a box of paper.’

‘What does he look like?’

‘Just an ordinary bloke who wears a shirt and tie and works in an office.’

‘No pointy teeth?’ Jodie said.

‘Okay, so it’s just an office,’ Rocco admitted.

‘And what about the blood that he drinks?’

‘Tomato juice. Yeah, I had a talk to my father about it tonight. He said the housekeeper didn’t say: Here’s your blood, what she said was: Here’s your bloody mary.’

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘Just a drink. You mix tomato juice with vodka, the vodka is clear so it looks like blood. And he told me what he said about using the guillotine to cut the heads of chooks was just a joke, a fowl joke he said. Dad told me a guillotine is just like a huge pair of scissors for cutting paper in a straight line.’

‘Right,’ Jodie said, ‘I think that just about explains everything. Let’s go home.’ We all stood up and moved away from the window. ‘Shhh! Someone’s coming. Turn the torches off.’ And in the darkness we could hear the sound of someone scrabbling about in the leaves.

Out came Snowball; she was wet.

‘Oh thank goodness,’ I said, ‘it’s only a witch!’ The cat came over to me, smooching against my legs. They turned the torches on again.

Rocco said: ‘What’s that on your face, Jodie?’ He shone the torch onto her cheek. I could see the scratch from the bougainvillea thorn, and there was a drop of red blood on her skin.

‘Oh it’s blood.’

‘Blood?’ I moved closer to her and took Jodie by the shoulders and put my lips onto her cheek and sucked at the tiny drop of blood. I made large sucking sounds and growled in my throat, but underneath both Jodie and I were ready to burst into giggles.

‘W-what are you doing?’ Rocco said. ‘Stop it!’

‘Delicious,’ I said. ‘I feel so powerful now.’

‘Let’s go home. Come on. I’ll lead the way.’

‘What’s the hurry Rocco?’

‘I’m getting soaked.’

‘Oh, it’s hardly raining. All right, but don’t make so much noise. We’ll stay at the back just in case anyone tries to grab you by the throat from behind.’

The two boys led the way through the tunnel and out past the front steps, down the large path to the huge front gates as though the devil was right behind them. Jodie and I carefully shut the gate without slamming it. Everything was soaked, including our bikes.

The boys were on their bikes and off down the hill without saying another word, they pedalled like mad till they got to Rocco’s house at the bottom of Kruger Street. I rode side by side with Jodie till we met up with the boys.

They were standing next to the low brick fence. Jodie was smiling that little smile again and I knew she was going to tease Rocco. She got off her bike, and put her kick-stand down and said: ‘Well, that was an interesting night, wasn’t it Ron?’

‘You girls have got guts all right. That was scary, wasn’t it?’ But she didn’t answer, just kept going closer and closer to Rocco who looked very, very nervous. He couldn’t move backwards because he was right up against the little brick fence. Jodie was almost touching him and she said in a deep growling voice, speaking slowly: ‘Ron ... Ronald ... what about a good night kiss from me?’

He was very embarrassed and afraid because of her weird voice. She sounded like a ghoul. ‘Uh, n-not now, Jodie.’ But suddenly she lunged forward, teeth bared like a savage wolf, and brought her lips down onto his neck. Rocco sprang backwards scrambling over the brick wall like she was a vampire about to suck his blood. George Blare hurdled the fence and was at the front door in two seconds. It must have been ajar for it immediately opened and they both disappeared inside and we heard the door click twice as they double locked it.

Jodie and I burst into giggles. I felt that for once we had got the better of both of them. They’d never accuse us of being scared again.

‘Let’s go home and change out of our wet things before Mum gets back.’ And we took off grinning, pedalling home in the dark. Behind me I heard Jodie say: ‘I only asked for a kiss and he ran for his life. I just don’t understand boys!’

## **9. SWIMMING POOL WORLD \***

After we arrived home from Darkson House, we sat up talking for an hour, discussing everything we had seen and done. We talked a lot about how we freaked out Ron Rocco and George Blare by pretending to be vampires. When I laid down to sleep, although I felt tired, my mind was still talking to me. It was like a faulty video, replaying what it had just recorded, going fast forward, then slow, pausing, repeating again and again, jumping from one scene to another, and finally mixing different scenes together.

But eventually I fell asleep and didn’t wake until I heard Mum pattering about in the kitchen. It was only then that I remembered I had not removed the note I had left on the table the night before. The note that said:

**GONE TO DARKSON HOUSE AT MIDNIGHT TO LOOK FOR VAMPIRES**

Karen and Jodie

Without even changing from my nighty I ran quickly into the kitchen. Jodie woke up as I rushed from the room and slowly followed me out. The note lay on the table; it had been moved.

‘You’re up late,’ Mum said. She was dressed in shorts and a loose T-shirt, trying to keep cool in the sticky morning heat.

‘Yeah. I couldn’t get to sleep last night. Did you read that note?’

‘Yes, I read it when I got home. Very funny. I know what you two were doing last night.

Vampires!’

‘I ... Mum I ... ‘

‘I’ll bet you were talking about vampires before you went to bed and then you couldn’t sleep properly, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘That vampire movie on TV! I’ve told you not to watch them. Those sort of things are too creepy. Then you leave silly notes about to scare me. Go and get dressed and I’ll make breakfast.’

‘Okay Mum. Come on Jodie.’

At two-thirty that afternoon, when the heat seemed to be at its fiercest, we returned to Jodie’s house. We had heard Mr Thomas’s Volvo drive up and park in the garage. He took his toolbox out the back and went over to the Falcon parked in the street. ‘Would either of you ladies like to buy a smart looking Ford Falcon?’

Jodie answered: ‘Sure Dad, it’ll be great for when I turn seventeen. Can I pay it off with my pocket money?’ We all laughed. ‘You reckon he’ll buy it?’

‘Oh he should. It’s a good price and in reasonable condition. But you can never tell. Some people say they’ll come and buy it and they never even show up.’

‘If he does buy it, would you be able to get the pool this arvo?’

‘You bet. With this sticky weather and you and Karen on school holidays it’s the perfect time. Hey, I’d better warm the engine up.’ He got into the Falcon and started it. But he wasn’t happy with something and opened the engine bonnet and started tinkering with it.

Jodie said, ‘I’d better get my pyjamas and stuff from your place, then we can wait on the balcony for the man to turn up.’

Ten minutes later as we were going back into Jodie’s house we noticed that her dad and the Falcon had gone.

Jodie asked, ‘Mum, where did Dad go?’

‘The man—Mr Swift—turned up ten minutes ago. He looked at the car for two minutes, then got in and went for a test drive. The poor man couldn’t find our street. He had been looking for Canowindra Street, but he called it Can-o-windra. That’s the long way round, I told him. It looks like he really might buy it.’

‘Karen, why don’t we go down to Swimming Pool World and look at the pools? See how they fit together and everything. Then if Dad comes to pick up the pool we can see him straight away.’

‘Okay, it’s better than hanging around here all arvo. We might even see Rocco and George at the shops. Wouldn’t that be a laugh?’

But we didn’t see any of the kids we knew down at the shops. We looked at all the pools and imagined ourselves swimming in them. Only one was filled with water and it looked so delicious, oh so cool! Then Jodie’s dad drove into the car park in his white Volvo. We rushed over and he was smiling.

‘You sold it!’

‘Too right! And guess what I got—seven thousand one hundred dollars. I’ve got all the money right here.’

‘Tomorrow, could I have thirty dollars for some new togs?’

‘If you help assemble the pool and keep it clean.’

‘And can Karen have twenty dollars if she helps?’

‘Only if she swims in it afterwards.’

‘It’s a deal,’ I said.

‘Show us which one we’re getting again Dad. Is it that one?’

‘Sure is. Hey, why not let me buy it, and you girls go home, get changed into some old clothes so that when I bring it back you can help put it together.’

‘Sure. Come on Karen. See you in twenty minutes Dad.’

We climbed onto our bicycles and rode home. The sun was burning hot on my skin, the heat rose off the roadway in waves like a desert, and the air felt hot and sticky. The first hill we came to made sweat drip off my face and legs. I could feel the hot sun on my back, and the trickles of sweat under my arms. All the way home we dreamed of the pool. I imagined I was swimming underwater and

looking at the dappled patterns the sunlight made on the bottom. Jodie and I would swim around and around along the bottom of the pool, then come up to the surface bursting for a breath, hair and face dripping with beautiful clear, cool water.

I went into my place and excitedly told Mum the good news about Jodie's pool. 'It'll be here in ten minutes, Mum. Are you going to help assemble it?'

'Oh Mr Thomas has got enough helpers I think. Don't forget to come home for dinner.'

'Of course.' I ran back to Jodie's place and we sat on the balcony waiting for the first glimpse of the white Volvo.

Half an hour passed and we became bored and restless. 'Oh why doesn't he hurry? Mum did you give Dad a shopping list or something?'

'No dear. But perhaps he has to buy some tools from the hardware store to help assemble it.'

'I suppose so. I just wish he would hurry.'

One and a half hours of sitting, waiting, and counting each minute trickled past. It was now five o'clock. 'If he doesn't get home soon, we'll have to work till midnight to get it finished.' I could see Jodie was getting exasperated that her father was taking so long.

'It's probably not his fault, Jodie. He's just got to get something else. I'm sure he's being as quick as he can.'

We sat waiting, waiting. Finally at five thirty she got up and said, 'I'm going to phone Swimming Pool World.' She went into the kitchen and dialled the number. After a minute she put the phone down. 'They're not answering.'

'It's too late, Jodie. They're probably closed, so your dad must be on his way home now I reckon.'

Mrs Thomas agreed. 'Both of you sit down and have some dinner. That way at least you'll be ready to help the minute he gets in.'

'Oh Mrs Thomas I've got to go home for dinner. I'll go now, but come back as soon as I've finished.'

Mum had my dinner out when I got home. It was a quarter to six. I told her how we had waited two hours for Mr Thomas.

'Maybe he had to buy more sand or something.'

'Mum, they've got a tonne left over.'

'Well maybe he went ... I don't know. But ... I feel something is wrong, Karen. I really do. You'd better go next door as soon as you're finished dinner. Tell me if there's any trouble.'

At a quarter past six I was sitting in the living room with Jodie watching the news. We watched the sport, the business report, gold prices, the stock market and finally the weather. Jodie stood up, quite angry. 'Where is he! I'm fed up with this waiting.'

Suddenly I felt a twinge of fear strike into my stomach, it had flowed down from my head; I knew there was serious trouble. Jodie sat down and the phone rang. She ran to it, but Mrs Thomas beat her to the receiver.

'Hullo Dear. Where have you been?'

There was a long silence while she listened. Jodie was so excited she kept saying: 'When's he coming? What went wrong? Did he get the pool? Why isn't he here?'

'For goodness sakes Jodie, keep quiet! I can't hear your father.'

And as I watched I saw all the colour drain out of Mrs Thomas's face. 'What? I don't believe it! Yes. As soon as I can.' She hung up.

'What happened?' Jodie asked.

'Your father is at the police station.'

'What! I don't—'

'He's been arrested for trying to pass counterfeit money.'

## **10. COUNTERFEIT MONEY \***

Jodie's mother was explaining to us while we sat on the hard bench in the police station.

'Counterfeit money is money that has not been made by the government mint. It's money that

someone has made themselves. Years ago people used to make it with a printing press, but these days people sometimes try to use a photocopier. The banks can usually see that it's counterfeit straight away. It's very hard to get the same paper as real money, which has a thin metal strip inside the paper. If you hold it up to the light, you can see it. You just can't buy that paper.'

'So it's illegal to make your own money?'

'Of course! It's a serious offence in every country. In the old Soviet Union you could have been executed for making counterfeit money. In Australia you might get ten years imprisonment.' And then she started sniffing.

I didn't know what to say. I was sure Mr Thomas wasn't dishonest.

'Maybe Mr Thomas didn't know it was illegal to make money.'

'Everyone knows, Karen. If everyone started making their own money, all the money would soon become worthless. The whole country would—there's the solicitor!'

She stood up. 'You girls wait right here.' We sat on the hard bench in the police station waiting for the solicitor to get bail for Jodie's dad. Mrs Thomas went across to talk to the solicitor. He was dressed in an elegant double-breasted suit. He talked to her for about five minutes while we watched the other people coming and going at the police station.

We saw, through the glass windows, a police car pull up out the front. Two policemen got out and then tried to get a short, fat man in overalls from the back of the police van. He half fell onto the ground, the police dragged him to his feet and began to lead him into the police station.

Next thing the doors flew open like a truck had smashed through and in came Charlie Graves, staggering drunk. Most people in our town knew Charlie. He wasn't a bad man, but always in trouble with the police for being drunk.

'I know the bloody way! You think I haven't been here before?' And with the two policemen trying to hold him back, he dragged them at a jogging pace down toward "his" cell. 'Hey, someone's in my cell! Get outa there! Open this cell door and let me in, I need a sleep.'

The solicitor was now talking to the desk policeman. Then before long the policeman went off. I heard Charlie Graves yelling out: 'And don't sit in my cell again!'

Next thing Mr Thomas walked around the corner. He looked ten years older than when I had last seen him at Swimming Pool World. His face was grey, his shirt dirty, shoulders hunched over with lines around his eyes. He talked to the solicitor, then the desk policeman. They talked and talked, then they all started writing on pieces of paper.

Mr Thomas came over to us. 'Hi, let's go home.' We all walked outside and got into Mrs Thomas's Commodore.

'Where's the Volvo, Dad?'

'Still down at Swimming Pool World. We're going down now to pick it up.'

'Are you free? Did they realize they made a mistake and you are innocent?'

Mrs Thomas answered for him. 'No, your dad was granted bail of two thousand dollars. That means we have to give them two thousand dollars until he appears in court, then we get the money back.

But if he doesn't appear in court next week, we lose all the money and then they send the police out to arrest him. Oh dear, oh dear—I can't ... David, how did all this happen?'

'I'll explain everything when I get home and you make me a cup of tea.' We all climbed into Mrs Thomas's car, and drove back to the car park where the lonely Volvo sat by itself in the dark.

Through the wire fence I could see all the swimming pools. I felt sad, and wondered if they would ever actually get one now. Jodie said sadly: 'Bye, bye swimming pool.'

Mr Thomas stepped out, went over to his Volvo, got in and drove off. We followed in Mrs Thomas's Commodore.

Sitting in the living room. Mr Thomas looked more normal, but still upset. Mum was there too, but she didn't say much.

'I'll tell you all exactly what happened.' He took a sip of tea. 'Mr Swift decided he wanted to buy the car. He was very nice—a man about my age who needed a car for his wife. We agreed on a

price of seven thousand one hundred dollars. I asked him could he pay me in cash, because I wanted to buy a swimming pool before the shops closed.

‘If he had given me a cheque we would have had to wait a week before it was all cleared. Besides sometimes a person will write a cheque when they don’t have any money in their account. I remember he said: “Certainly, I’ll get you cash. I don’t believe in all these cheques and plastic card nonsense. The only thing that counts is real money.”

‘So I asked him where his bank was. He told me it was the one in Farren Street. We drove down there and went into the bank. I walked over to the counter and stood right alongside of him and watched him fill out a withdrawal form for seven thousand one hundred dollars. I stood at the back while he waited on the queue to be served. He went up to the teller, passed him the form, then the teller gave him a stack of new one hundred dollar notes. Mr Swift walked back to me and handed me the money. He only had it in his hand for about five seconds while he carried it from the teller to me. I watched him all the way. I counted the money and put it into my wallet. We walked to the car, drove back here and I gave him the keys to the Falcon, all the paperwork, and then he got in and drove away.’

Mrs Thomas said: ‘So it was actually the bank that gave out the counterfeit money?’

‘Yes of course! Nothing to do with Mr Swift. I went straight down to Swimming Pool World. I talked to both the girls, and told them to go home and change while I bought the pool. Well I went inside, told them what I wanted and paid the money in new one hundred dollar notes. The salesman went off, when he came back he started umming and ahing and saying it would take thirty minutes to unload the swimming pool from the back room. So I waited. I found out later that they became suspicious of the money because it looked new, so they took the money to a bank to have it checked. The bank checked it under a microscope or something and then called the police. I was still standing in Swimming Pool World when they arrested me.’

Mr Thomas took another sip of tea and continued. ‘I couldn’t believe it. I knew someone had made a dreadful mistake. I told the police that the bank had just given me the money. They phoned the bank, but the bank said that no one had withdrawn seven thousand one hundred dollars that day. I argued about it, but they started getting angry, and eventually they charged me with attempting to pass and being in possession of counterfeit money—or something to that effect.’

‘And you have to go to court next Monday?’

‘Yes. That’s when the police will present their evidence that I broke the law. It’s a preliminary trial. If the magistrate thinks there’s enough evidence against me, I’ll be committed to trial, and if I’m found guilty—’ he swallowed, ‘it’ll be prison for me.’

‘We’ll get a good lawyer,’ Mrs Thomas said. ‘He’ll argue your case—it was obviously the bank’s fault.’

‘Sure, and the lawyer will get me off and then I’ll only have to pay the lawyer ten thousand dollars and I’ve lost all the seven thousand one hundred dollars from selling the car because the police are keeping it since it’s worthless counterfeit money. And so we’ll end up about seventeen thousand dollars out of pocket, and you can all forget about getting a pool for about five years!’

‘Dad, you think someone at the bank deliberately gave you the counterfeit money?’

‘Of course! They have made the money themselves, or with the help of a printer and then swapped the counterfeit money for real money. I just happened to be the one who went in and collected it.’

‘Maybe someone else had just paid the money into the bank.’

‘Could be—but it was up to the bank to discover it then, not wait till they gave it out to the next customer. But I believe someone at the bank was responsible for the counterfeiting. You know why?’

‘Because if a customer brought the money in,’ my Mum said, ‘the teller would have noticed.’

‘Good, but more than that. No one else would have had such a good chance to substitute the money. It had to be someone at the bank. And I intend to find out who that person is!’

## 11. LOGIC AND INTUITION \*

Tuesday morning I didn't get up till five past nine. The only reason I got out of bed was to have a cool shower, for it was already about thirty degrees, and very humid. When I went in for breakfast, Mum was eating.

I talked to her about everything that had happened to Mr Thomas. She was quite worried about him and although she didn't believe he had tried to do anything illegal, it was true that he had tried to pass counterfeit money. 'Anything to do with counterfeit money is serious.'

Jodie turned up about eleven, looking miserable. It was bad enough that her dad was in all this trouble with the police, but on top of that she didn't look like getting a swimming pool now for years. Meanwhile we sweltered through a heatwave during the December holidays with summer hardly started. It looked like being a depressing Christmas.

We sprawled over the floor in my bedroom feeling more and more miserable. At last I said: 'Hey Jodie, we've got to do something. This lying around feeling miserable because of what happened is useless. We need to try and solve this mystery, just like we solved the vampire mystery at Darkson House.'

'Yeah, but that was easy.'

'Oh sure—everything is easy when you know the answer. It wasn't so easy before. It's like a crossword puzzle. You spend hours trying to figure out one word and can't, then someone tells you and it's so easy you wonder why you couldn't think of it.'

'Yes, but solving this could be dangerous. If someone at the bank is making counterfeit money, they're going to be careful about what they say. And if we start to find out the truth, they could get violent.'

'Sure, but we don't have to tell everyone what we are doing. Besides what else are we going to do this holiday now we haven't got a pool? If we found the counterfeiter, we might even have a chance of getting your father's seven thousand one hundred dollars back.'

'Yeah, I expect you're right. Hey, you know we should try and figure out who it was at the bank because then we can tell the police and then Dad wouldn't have to hire a lawyer or go to court. That's worrying me. Dad said that if he goes to court next Monday morning then he will have to sell Mum's car to pay for the lawyer. That means Mum has no car, and that means I have to walk or ride my bike everywhere even if it's forty degrees or raining frogs and toads.'

'All right,' I said, 'we agree to look for the counterfeiter—but how?'

'Let's just sit and think for about ten minutes. You do it your way. And I'll do it my way.'

'You mean you want me to use intuition and you will use logic?'

Jodie was smiling at me. 'It's worked before.'

We sat in silence for about ten minutes. I had my eyes closed. First I thought about the counterfeit money and how I wanted to know who made it, then I tried to clear my mind of all thoughts—and imagine I was looking at a blank sheet of paper. A lot of thoughts drifted through my mind. I knew these ones weren't the answer. I saw pictures of the police station, of the swimming pool, Ron Rocco, Darkson House, and finally the blank sheet of paper in my mind had a white light shining on it, then nothing.

I opened my eyes disappointed. I looked out the window at the pale blue sky; the green tree tops were waving slightly with the gentle breeze. I waited for Jodie to speak. 'Ten minutes are up,' she said. 'Did you get any ideas?'

'Lots of things came to my mind; it was hard to keep it clear. There was the swimming pool, and the police station, and Darkson House, and a white light on a piece of paper. None of that seems to help much. I guess it's just thoughts left over from yesterday.'

Jodie agreed. 'Yeah, it's hard to stop thinking about Darkson House and the vampires, even though it's all over. I came up with a couple of ideas. The most important is that the bank was the source of the counterfeit money, so I think we should go back there to start our investigation.'

'That makes sense,' I agreed. 'But what can we actually do at the bank?'

She got up and walked around the room a few times. ‘Why don’t we go in and enquire about opening new accounts? We can look carefully at all the tellers, and see if anyone looks suspicious.’ ‘How can we tell if someone looks suspicious?’

‘Hmm. Good point. We’ll go and look anyway. It’s a starting point and we may learn something.’ ‘We could ask if they’ve ever had counterfeit money passed there before. Or if they know of any other counterfeit money being found around Dayman Heads.’

‘Good idea, Karen.’

At the bank we took all the free forms we could find about cheque accounts, Bankcard, tax file numbers, and special accounts earning high interest. But all the time we walked about peering at the tellers and the people working at their desks. We were looking for someone suspicious. Sometimes I thought everyone looked suspicious, then I looked again and they looked innocent. There was one man, about twenty-five who Jodie thought looked suspicious. He had an earring and a tie, and kept looking about him nervously as though he was expecting a hold-up at any minute. We read his name plate: Henry Horton.

Eventually we went over to the enquiries counter. A woman teller came over straight away.

‘We’d like to find out about opening savings accounts.’

‘Certainly. I’ll get some brochures.’ She went off a moment and spoke to a man standing at an office doorway. As she spoke, he looked directly at us, as if she was telling him about us. Then when she came back she took the brochures from under the counter where they were all the time. Jodie seized one leaflet and started turning the pages. ‘Hey Wow! Let’s put our money in this one Karen—it pays 21 per cent interest!’

The woman looked puzzled, then said: ‘Oh no—that’s CreditCard, that’s the interest you have to pay.’

‘Oh. Well, how much can I get on my savings account?’

‘This one pays four percent as long as you keep more than five hundred dollars in it. And it has very small charges.’

But Jodie wasn’t really listening, she was thinking up questions. When the woman finished explaining, Jodie looked at her calmly and asked: ‘Do you ever get counterfeit money in here?’

‘What?’

‘Do you ever accidentally give people counterfeit money? Because I heard about this man who got some money out of a bank, probably not this one, and it turned out to be counterfeit and then the police confiscated it.’

‘We have never given out counterfeit money. Never! We would notice it immediately.’

‘But if the teller was in a hurry and didn’t look properly—’

‘It has never happened here I can assure you.’

‘Hmm. Okay, we’ll just take these leaflets home and check them out.’ Jodie picked up all the bits of paper telling her how they could save her money, and we headed for the door. But just as we reached the exit a guard, dressed up like a policeman, appeared in front of us blocking our way.

‘Stop please! Would you girls come with me. The bank manager would like to have a word with you.’

‘Us? But why?’

‘I don’t know—he’ll tell you. Come with me.’ He led us, through a side door, which he unlocked with a key—then past all the desks with people adding up numbers, sitting in front of computers, talking on telephones—and into a very smart looking office.

‘Hullo. I’m Mr Buller, I happened to overhear your conversation at the desk. Could I have your names?’ It was the same man the teller spoke to.

‘Karen Casey.’

‘Jodie Thomas. Is something wrong?’

‘Wrong? Counterfeit money is what’s wrong! Karen would you wait outside the door for a few moments. I think what I have to discuss with Jodie concerns her father and is private.’

But I didn't move. I was wondering what I should do. Then the guard standing behind me touched my arm lightly to lead me away. I shook his hand free. 'No. I'm staying with Jodie. If something concerns her, then it concerns me.' I stared right into his eyes. I had no intention of leaving Jodie if she was in trouble.

The manager looked annoyed, as if I was another troublesome teenager, but then he shrugged. 'As you wish. I heard you asking questions about counterfeit money,' he was looking at Jodie.

'Yes, we were curious if it had ever happened before.'

'So that was the real reason you came here—to snoop?'

'No—just to ... investigate. I have a right to do that my father—'

'Your father has made slanderous accusations against this bank. If he continues to do so, he will find himself in court being sued! Accusing us of passing him counterfeit money is very serious. It could cause everyone in this town to panic and draw all their money out of our bank. Do you understand just how serious that is?'

'But my father is in a lot of trouble because of your bank!'

He stood up suddenly, speaking in a loud voice. 'My bank did not give your father counterfeit money!'

'Well how else did he get it?'

'Your father does not even have an account here, so how could we have given him counterfeit money?'

'Your bank gave it to the other man, Mr Swift, who then handed it to my father.'

'Nonsense. Our bank would never make such a mistake.'

'Could we see if your bank gave seven thousand one hundred dollars to someone at about five past four last Friday?'

He sat down exasperated. 'Of course not! Our bank cannot, and will not divulge information about another customer. That information is absolutely private.'

'How do you know there isn't a counterfeiter working in your bank? Someone who—'

He stood up suddenly knocking pens and papers onto the floor. His face was turning quite red, he pressed a button on the desk. The door behind us opened immediately and the guard stood there.

'Take them outside quickly—before I lose my temper. You girls should let the police force carry out the investigation, and not act like amateur detectives!'

The guard took my arm, but I turned quickly and pushed past him. Jodie did the same. We were both annoyed. The bank manager wouldn't even help us. He just wouldn't believe that anyone in his bank could possibly give out counterfeit money.

We got out onto the street and walked away without saying anything for a whole minute. Then Jodie said: 'Maybe the manager knows who the counterfeiter is and he's protecting him.'

## 12. THE PRINTERS \*

We sat on Jodie's veranda eating ham and tomato sandwiches. There was a slight breeze blowing in from the ocean, which cooled the sweat on our faces and backs. All afternoon the air had been humid, like the bathroom after I've washed my hair with the door shut. Jodie's big brother, Glen, was hanging about watching us, trying to eat our sandwiches, and teasing me. Her mother was out the back hanging out washing. Her dad was back at work, probably worrying his heart out.

'It looks like we're stumped. Can't you try your intuition again?'

'I did—half an hour ago.'

'And?'

'Well the only thoughts that came into my head were of Darkson House and a bright light, like a torch slowly moving.'

'What does that mean?'

'I guess I've still got my mind stuck on vampires and Darkson House. I'm beginning to think intuition is pretty useless.'

'It helped before.'

‘We could try printers,’ I suggested.

‘What do you mean?’ She chewed on another sandwich enjoying the juicy tomato.

‘Well if someone at the bank is getting the counterfeit money printed, maybe one of the local printers is involved. Surely there couldn’t be many printers in Dayman Heads.’

‘What if we looked them up in the yellow pages and then went and visited them?’

‘But what could we say?’ I took a swallow of milk. ‘We are here to enquire if you have been making counterfeit money.’ I ate another sandwich; the tomato was cold and juicy.

She laughed. ‘We do the usual thing, tell them that we are doing a school project on printing. Then we start asking questions.’

‘If they’ve been making the counterfeit money, they would get nervous, or angry. The trouble is it mightn’t be a local printer, it could be one in Ballina, Brisbane, or even Sydney.’

‘True. But if the counterfeit money was passed by the local bank,’ Jodie said, ‘it just might be a local printer. What else can we do? The bank won’t help us.’

‘If the printer made ten thousand dollars worth of counterfeit money he could give it to someone at the bank, then they could swap the counterfeit money and take out ten thousand dollars of real money, and no one would know. They could split it, five thousand dollars each.’ Yet I had some doubts; something didn’t seem right.

‘There are two ends to this problem,’ Jodie started doodling on the plate with her hand while she talked. ‘One end is the bank. The other end is the printer. We tried the bank and I got the feeling the manager was trying to protect someone. Maybe he was even the person who is swapping the counterfeit money for real money.’

I went into the house and picked up the Yellow Pages and took it back to the veranda. There were only three printing firms in town besides the local newspaper. The first one was Howard Printing.

‘Let’s ride over and talk to them. It’s number three Simon Street.’

It was rather a dilapidated building. We went up three steps and came to an office. A middle-aged woman, with glasses hanging by a chain around her neck, looked up from her desk cluttered with papers and envelopes. A large pile of leaflets with something about WEEKLY SPECIALS printed on them, were stacked on the floor.

Further inside the factory we could hear an enormous noise, clattering and thumping. I said to the woman. ‘Hullo, we’re doing a school project on printing and we wondered if we could have a look about your factory?’

She smiled at us. ‘Certainly. But I can’t let you wander around by yourself—you’ll have to stay with me.’

‘That’s great,’ Jodie said. ‘Can we ask you questions?’

‘As long as they’re not too hard!’ And the woman, who I guessed was Mrs Howard, laughed.

‘Come on then.’ We followed her into the factory. She showed us a few printing machines. ‘This one is a Heidelberg letterpress—a platen press. It’s not very modern, I’m afraid.’ She introduced us to Mr Howard who was standing in front of a large noisy machine. He was half-watching it and half reading a book about Spain. He said something or other, but I couldn’t hear him because of all the noise. In fact I was getting quite interested in the machinery, watching the way the blank paper went in and came out with printing all over it.

I had almost forgotten the reason we were there when I heard Jodie say in a loud voice: ‘Could you make counterfeit money on any of these machines?’

The woman smiled. ‘If we could, we’d be making it right now! No, you’d need something a lot more modern than these dinosaurs, girls. I expect you could do it on a photogravure machine, but not these. Now then would you like a cup of tea in the lunchroom? And I can show you all the different things we print here.’

Mrs Howard was so nice I agreed straight away. I knew Jodie was getting bored with the printing now that she knew they couldn’t make counterfeit money. We sat out in this daggy lunchroom where they had a sick looking fern and an aspidistra in flowerpots. We drank tea and ate wheatenmeal biscuits while Mrs Howard talked about printing and how things were changing so

quickly with computers. After about ten minutes she was called to the phone. We stood up quickly and Jodie thanked her as we walked back to the front office and out into the street.

We rode down to the next printer on our list, but were only at Progressive Printing for about two minutes. The man at the office said he was too busy to show us around, but said if we came back next week he'd be glad to help.

'Could you tell us what kind of printing machines you have?' Jodie asked.

'Yep. Just two letterpresses, nothing very fancy. If you want to see the latest machines go over to Artwork Printer in Anderson Street. He's got the latest rotogravure. Come back next week and I'll be glad to show you around. Bye.' And he hurried off into the factory at the back.

Outside we felt defeated. 'Karen, I don't think this is getting us anywhere. We don't know enough about printing—they could tell us anything. And they wouldn't admit they were making counterfeit money, would they? Who can we trust?'

'Well Jodie, there's nothing much else we can do, is there? Besides, your dad's got to be in court on Monday morning, and if he is you'll never get the swimming pool. Let's keep trying. There's just one more printer—and then we can try and think of some other angle.'

Artwork Printing was neater, cleaner and more modern than the other two printers. In the office we spoke to the owner, Mr Picard, and he told us his son would show us around the factory. We all walked down to where the son, who was about thirty years old, was sitting at a table in front of a computer. When the son saw his father coming he pushed a newspaper off the table and pretended to be working with the computer. I think his father, who looked about sixty, must have known what the son was up to for I heard him sigh.

The old man said to his son: 'Eric, did you finish the Timeshare job?'

'Nearly, pop. Just a little more to do.'

I glanced down at the newspaper on the floor, it was the horse racing section and different horses were underlined in blue biro.

'These girls are doing a school project on printing. It's good to see people still care about our work. Eric, would you show them around, and answer their questions?' Mr Picard walked back to the office.

We stood there in front of Eric and he just stared at us angrily as if we were wasting his time.

'School project, huh?'

'Sure,' I said.

'Why don't you just go to a library and look it up in a book instead of barging in here and interrupting me?'

'Well ... we wanted to see what the machinery looked like.'

'They've got photos in the books.'

'I guess.' I didn't like this man at all. He'd only just met us and he was being quite rude.

'How come you're doing a project when school's finished for the year?' He was standing up and looking at Jodie suspiciously. She couldn't seem to find an answer so I said: 'It's for next year.'

'Oh sure,' Eric said disbelievingly. 'It's the first time I've heard of doing a school project for next year. All right, what do you want to know? You ask the questions and make it quick, I'm busy.'

Jodie and I stared at each other. We didn't have a clue what to ask. Finally I said: 'Is this a photogravure press?' I pointed at the nearby machine.

He sort of laughed. 'So you can read, congratulations! That's what's written on the side of it, isn't it?' He nodded to the machinery and now I could see the writing. Jodie was getting quite annoyed with him. I could tell by her expression, but the next thing she said surprised me.

'Do you make counterfeit money on this?'

'What?'

'Do you make counterfeit money on this machine?'

He stared at her for ten seconds. 'Who sent you here? Detective Withers? I knew that stinking cop would try and blame me for that counterfeiting job at the bank. Tell him it won't work. I had nothing to do with counterfeiting that seven thousand one hundred dollars. Who are you—his

daughters? So that's what he's up to now—sending kids to try and catch me! You're not doing any school project. Get outa here—and tell Detective Withers to see my lawyer next time!

'Come on, Karen.' She turned and headed back to the office. Mr Picard came out. 'That was quick. Did he show you around?'

'Not much. He said ... he was too busy.'

'My foot he is! I'll talk to him—'

'No, it's okay,' Jodie said. 'I think we've found out what we need to know.'

'Are you sure? He's only mucking about with horse racing again. Oh girls don't ever marry a gambler—they've never got a cent to their name ... debts, debts and more debts. Oh well. If there's anything you need to know come back another time.'

'Thank you very much Mr Picard.'

Outside in the street Jodie got onto her bike, put her helmet on and while I was still trying to do up my chin strap she raced off without me. It took me a whole block to catch her and that was only because she stopped for the cars. 'Hurry up, Karen,' she called over her shoulder.

'What's the hurry? Where are you going?'

She took off again, and as I tried to keep up with her I heard her yell over her shoulder: 'The police station of course!'

### **13. DETECTIVE WITHERS \***

Breathlessly I parked my bike next to Jodie's and carrying our helmets we went inside. The same policeman we saw on Friday night was behind the enquiry desk. 'Hello,' he said, 'how can I help you?'

'We'd like to talk to the police officer investigating the counterfeit money.'

'Right. You need Detective Withers or Sergeant Snowden. Do you have some information?'

'We sure do!'

'I'll call Detective Withers.' He picked up the phone, pressed some buttons, then spoke softly.

When he finished he said to us: 'He'll be right out.' A moment later Detective Withers came out.

He was tall and wearing ordinary clothes, long dark trousers that were probably part of a suit, a white shirt with thin stripes, and a tie that had been loosened.

'Come through to my office.' Once inside we all introduced ourselves and sat down. The office was just like any other office: a computer on the desk, a printer, a telephone, books along the wall; but no guns, no knives, no murder weapons. 'All right,' he said. 'What have you got to tell me about the counterfeit money?'

Jodie took a deep breath. 'Yesterday we went down to the bank and spoke to the manager about the counterfeiting.'

'Yes, he phoned me.'

'He did?' That surprised me.

'Yes, he told me you were both snooping about asking the staff questions about whether they had ever passed out counterfeit money. Is that right?'

Jodie answered, 'Um yes, except we weren't snooping we were investigating. But the manager wasn't helpful, he acted like he was protecting someone. He said his bank had never given out counterfeit money.'

'Maybe that's true.'

'I don't believe it,' Jodie said. 'They gave counterfeit money to my father!' The detective sighed but said nothing. 'So when the bank people wouldn't talk to us we decided to visit the local printers looking for clues.'

Detective Withers put his hand up to his forehead as though we were giving him a headache. I could see he wasn't pleased. 'I see,' he said.

'First we visited Howard Printers, and finally we went to Artwork Printers where we met Mr Picard.'

Suddenly the detective looked up. 'The son, or the father?'

‘We met both. But when we asked the son, that’s Eric Picard, about the counterfeit money he became furious. He said that he knew you had sent us around to question him about the counterfeit money.’

Slowly Detective Withers stood up. He was getting more and more concerned.

‘And that,’ said Jodie firmly, ‘is when he gave himself away!’

‘What? How did he do that?’ Slowly he sat down again staring at Jodie.

‘Well, we found out that the type of printing machine he’s got can make counterfeit money. The other printers only have old-fashioned machines that can’t even print money.’

He raised his eyes to the roof, as if to say, this girl is crazy.

‘Mr Picard said his son gambles on the horses and . . . needs money.’

‘I need money, but that doesn’t mean I print my own.’

‘But—’

‘I’m sure by the time your father appears in court that he will decide to admit the truth about how he got that money.’

‘But he explained! He sold the car.’

‘Who to?’

‘Mr Swift.’

‘We’ve been searching for this Mr Swift. I’m afraid he doesn’t exist. We have asked the bank to check their records, and they told me that absolutely no one withdrew seven thousand one hundred dollars that day. Look girls we’re taking this counterfeiting very seriously and I have placed my three best men on it. So don’t worry if your father really is innocent, we’ll prove it. Did he send you here with this story about the printer?’

‘No, it was our idea. Because Eric Picard gave himself away, he almost admitted he was guilty!’

‘So how did he give himself away?’ Detective Withers sounded exasperated.

‘He told us that you sent us around to question him about the counterfeit money. He knew the exact amount! Seven thousand one hundred dollars!’

‘I see. And you think because he knew that then he must be guilty?’

‘Exactly! Will you arrest him?’

‘No.’ He unfolded the local newspaper sitting on his desk and turned it so we could both read the headlines.

**COUNTERFEIT MONEY PASSED AT DAYMAN HEADS**

Local man claims bank gave him \$7,100 in counterfeit money.

‘If I arrest Eric Picard, I’d also have to arrest everyone else who has read the paper today!’

Jodie’s face fell. She looked like someone had hit her hard. I felt enormously embarrassed. We hadn’t checked our facts properly at all.

‘Do you have any other evidence?’

Jodie answered in a very small voice. ‘No.’

‘As a matter of fact it was not seven thousand one hundred dollars. It was seven thousand dollars in counterfeit money. One hundred dollars was in real money.’

‘Oh. But Dad said Mr Swift drew out seven thousand one hundred.’

‘Yes, but as I said one hundred dollars was okay. It seems you watch too many Miss Marples movies and want to be amateur detectives. Please leave the investigation to us.’ He sounded irritable.

‘Perhaps we’d better go home,’ I said.

The detective stood up and both of us walked out through the large office.

They had computers everywhere, and I could see two printers going at once, with long sheets of printed paper coming out. In the corner, a fax machine was making a sort of beeping noise, like a video game. And near the aisle was a high speed photocopier. It was sucking sheets of paper in the top and one second later it spat two sheets back out, one at the top, and one down the bottom. It was all fascinating. I liked the photocopier best, and I stood a moment watching the sheets of paper

being drawn in the top, then you'd see a white light flash over the paper and the copy would be done, the pages flipping out the side of the machine.

'Come on Karen, let's go home. I goofed this time.'

The desk policeman waved a warm goodbye. I hoped he didn't know we'd made fools of ourselves. We should have read the newspaper.

When we got out onto the street, it was like walking into a hot steamy bathroom. Suddenly we realized that the police station had been air-conditioned. We put our helmets on feeling embarrassed at our foolishness, and rode off towards home. After a couple of blocks in the sun we were both dripping sweat. The hot air rising from the roadway felt like it was close to fifty degrees. The cars and trucks swished past us blowing fumes in our faces and making us realize just how slow we were.

'You know what?' Jodie said as we rode along the edge of the road. 'I still reckon that Eric Picard is guilty. Why else did he get angry when I asked him about the counterfeit money?'

'Sure,' I said. 'All we've got to do now is prove it.'

#### **14. MR THOMAS INVESTIGATES \***

The next morning after breakfast I went to ask Jodie if she would like to go for a swim at the beach. The weather was still hot and sticky.

In the driveway Mr Thomas was cleaning the windscreen of his Volvo. Jodie was sitting in his car, the engine running, with the air-conditioning blowing cool air onto her face.

'Ah, heaven!'

Mr Thomas looked frazzled. When he finished the windscreen, he started searching through the glove box for the maps. 'Jodie please get out of the car. I've got to find my maps of Port Macquarie.'

'Port Macquarie! Are you going to Port Macquarie?'

'Yes of course I am. I just had a phone call from a used car yard in Port Macquarie and they said that I sold them my Falcon yesterday afternoon. Ridiculous! It wasn't me, so it must have been Mr Swift. I can't understand it. I'll have to talk to the people at the car yard and find out his address. He's the only person who can verify that the bank gave out the counterfeit money.'

'Can't you phone him?'

'No. I've tried that. There's no number.'

'You could write.'

'But the address he gave me is no good—he must have moved recently. The car yard will help me find him. Sometimes you've got to do things in person. Letters and phone calls take too long, don't forget I only have until Monday morning to solve this counterfeit business. That's only three days! I've just got to solve this muddle by then or I'm in all sorts of trouble. There's lawyers and I've got to have time off work to appear in court, and then I could be committed to trial ... oh I'd have to start selling the furniture!'

'So you are going to go to Port Macquarie to get Mr Swift's address from the car yard?'

'That's right! He can tell the police exactly what happened at the bank. He might even remember which teller it was. I've also got to find out why he bought my car and then sold it again the next day. That doesn't make sense. I'd better get going.'

He got into the driver's seat, a frown on his face, and began backing out the driveway. Jodie called out, 'Hey! Can we come with you?'

'What?' He stuck his head out the window.

'Could Karen and I come to Port Macquarie with you?'

'Certainly not—you've got school and—'

'Dad it's Christmas holidays, and the car is air-conditioned, and we could keep you amused and ...'

'No, of course you can't. I've got things to do that—that are private.'

'Oh, all right.'

He drove off, winding the window up as he went.

‘Your dad seems very worried,’ I said.

‘He’s getting really worked up now about all the money a trial would cost.’

We went into Jodie’s bedroom. ‘Hey, see my new poster?’

I looked on the wall next to her Isaac Asimov poster; there was an enlarged laminated poster of a man. ‘Who is it?’

‘Bobby Fischer, perhaps the greatest chess player of all time.’

‘Wow. Is he still alive?’

‘I think so. But he stopped playing in tournaments. I wonder how he would have handled this mystery. It seems difficult to work it out because we don’t have all the facts.’

‘But perhaps we do, Jodie. We just don’t know if we have them all or not. It may be that we are just not using all the facts. It could be that there is something that we know, but we don’t consider it important.’

‘Like what?’

‘Well, what about the fact that although Mr Swift gave your father seven thousand one hundred dollars, one hundred dollars was not counterfeit.’

‘Hmm. I see what you mean. It’s a fact—but is it important? And how does it fit in? Karen, if only we could solve this puzzle before Friday afternoon, then we could tell the police and they would drop the charges. Surely, there’s some simple explanation?’

‘Like maybe the bank had some old money to be destroyed and they got it mixed up and gave it out to the customers.’

‘Yeah, something like that!’

‘Why don’t we go to the beach?’

‘Sure, the trouble is it’s too hard to carry the body-boards on the bikes.’

I made a suggestion. ‘We could take the parcel carrier off my mother’s bike and put it on mine. Then we could sit the body-boards on the carrier and put a rope around them to hold them on.’

‘Sounds good. Now that it looks like we aren’t going to get a pool for years we’d better get used to riding the two kilometres to the beach.’

When we looked at the carrier, I wasn’t at all sure how to take it off or put it on my bike. I fiddled about trying to undo one of the bolts; at first the screwdriver didn’t fit, then it just turned and turned without coming undone. I stood up feeling frustrated. Jodie continued to peer at it, bent over the bike.

‘Maybe,’ I said, ‘we should ask your brother, Glen, to move it for us?’

She stood up straight and looked me in the eyes. ‘You mean because we are simple-minded girls we are not capable of moving the bike-carrier without a boy’s help?’

‘Uh no. I meant ... we don’t know how to.’

‘Then we’ll learn!’

Jodie was right. It was silly to ask a boy after only one minute of trying to undo the bolts. It did make us into helpless girls if we went to a boy every time we had any trouble. Jodie was touchy on that subject because her mother gave up trying to do anything mechanical within five or six seconds! Even changing a light bulb or putting a hub cap on her car was far too much for Mrs Thomas.

We got some more tools out and soon realized that if Jodie turned the bolt with a screwdriver on one side and I held the nut with pliers so that it couldn’t turn, then it would easily undo. It was as simple as that. In ten minutes we had it bolted onto my bike. ‘Boys,’ she said triumphantly, ‘who needs ‘em!’

I tied the two body-boards on, collected poppers, sun screen, hats, and some bread rolls, and wearing our togs we set off for Jason’s Beach.

At the beach, which was quite crowded with school kids, a cool ocean breeze blew in from the east. We went for a dip taking the body-boards with us. We caught wave after wave, skimming in on the

front of the white froth. This always gave me such a sense of exhilaration I would laugh aloud coming into the beach, speeding across the top of the water until my toes dragged in the wet sand. After an hour we sat up on the grass under the shade of a huge Norfolk Island pine. We drank pineapple juice and ate cheese and tomato rolls.

‘What a perfect day!’ Jodie said.

‘Sure is. It’s great living on the coast, even if we don’t have a pool.’

‘Don’t remind me. It’s hard to believe something like this counterfeiting could happen in our town, let alone to my father!’

‘Here comes your boyfriend.’ I saw Ron Rocco with George Blare coming toward us. I knew he wasn’t her boyfriend, she didn’t have one, but although Rocco was always making a nuisance of himself, teasing her and was often quite rude, he did it because he liked her, not knowing how else to act. For her part Jodie usually found him rather a bore. George was a little more sensible, but he just seemed to follow along with whatever silly thing Rocco did.

Rocco sauntered up grinning, he had blue fluoro zinc across his nose.

‘Hello Jodie, Karen.’

‘G’day,’ I said.

‘I see you girls have been out in the sunlight.’

‘Why not? It’s not as if we are vampires, is it?’

‘Uh. You tricked us. Of course I never really believed all that stuff about vampires and Darkson House.’

‘Of course you did,’ said George. ‘You were scared to death the night we went to look through the window.’

Rocco looked annoyed. ‘George, I was just kidding.’

We were all smiling, that is until Rocco said: ‘I hear your father has been making counterfeit money. My dad reckons that’s why he could afford to buy a Volvo. Anyway, I just wanted to ask you if you could get me a couple of those fake one hundred dollar notes.’

‘You idiot, Rocco! Get out of here before I lose my temper.’

‘Hey, I just asked. Surely he could make me a couple? I want to buy a new bike. I see you got yourself a new carrier. You sure are lucky, just going and getting whatever you want from a stack of fake money. Your old man must be worth a mint. Get it? Just imagine, George, going and getting a handful—’

Jodie stood up. She was furious. ‘Get lost Rocco before I . . . ’

‘What? Turn into a bat and fly away?’ He began laughing.

I tried to calm her. ‘Jodie, cool it. He’s trying to rile you up in his usual vulgar manner.’

‘And succeeding quite well!’ George Blare said. ‘Besides, it would be neat to have all that money, and I wondered if you could get me just a tiny—’

I wanted to say something to help Jodie out. But I realized there was nothing to say. Ron Rocco was teasing her in his own insensitive way, not realizing that Jodie was truly worried, and that her father was in serious trouble. All he could see was the funny side of things, since none of it was happening to him. If we argued he’d get a kick out of that, no matter what we said. This seemed to be one of those situations where the best thing was to walk away without arguing. But how could I convince Jodie? She was ready to get into a heated argument with Rocco, which would only amuse him even more. I had to set the example and hope that she followed.

‘Come on Jodie, I’ll race you into the surf!’

I ran off leaving the others standing there. Ten seconds later Jodie was running alongside of me. I looked at her face and I wasn’t sure if she was near to tears or red-faced from sprinting.

## **15. THE POLICE \***

After the beach Jodie and I separated, going to our own homes. I had a sleep for an hour; the ocean and the hot weather had made me drowsy. When I woke, I lay in my bedroom reading about farm animals till about four-thirty.

I helped Mum prepare the dinner; I peeled the potatoes and cut them into chips. Every now and then I looked out the window to see if Mr Thomas's car had come back from Sydney.

When the dinner was ready Mum and I sat and ate while we talked about the counterfeit money.

Mum said she didn't believe Mr Thomas was guilty, but she hoped someone would solve the mystery quickly. If it went to court, it would be very expensive and worrying for the whole family.

'You should understand that if it does go to court, Mr Thomas will probably become ... nervous, sensitive, and worried.'

'Yes. I saw that today when Rocco teased Jodie and she became upset.'

'Karen, I feel sure this whole mystery can be quite easily solved. I think the answer is basically simple.'

'Yes, but until someone discovers the answer, it will remain a mystery.'

'I expect,' she sighed, 'that the police are doing their best. These things take time. And I guess I'd better get off to work.'

'Bye Mum. I'm going to see Jodie for an hour or so. I'll see you in the morning.'

After Mum had gone, I went next door. Jodie let me in but the whole house had a feeling of gloom about it. Even Jodie looked miserable. As I entered her room I caught a glimpse of Mr and Mrs Thomas. They looked like they had just lost a million dollars.

In Jodie's bedroom I asked softly, 'Any news from Port Macquarie?'

'Nothing. Dad won't even talk about it. This whole business is so depressing. Last week we were all so happy about getting the pool. Now it's misery street.'

'Let's sit on the balcony Jodie, we can probably get a cool breeze now the sun has set.'

On the veranda we sat in the long shadows, but the air was still hot and sticky without any breeze. Little trickles of sweat dripped off my arms and back.

'Let's try and think of something to do tomorrow. Maybe we could go to the movies or—'

Just at that moment a police car pulled up in front of our house. The door opened, a policeman got out without his hat, and came up to the front door. Jodie and I sat on the balcony in the semi-darkness, puzzled. We heard the doorbell ring, then her dad's footsteps going downstairs.

'Good evening Mr Thomas. How are you David?'

'Fine. Would ... you like to come inside, Martin? Is this official business or—'

'David, let's just stand here. I've known you for a few years now. I don't know what's going on with this counterfeit money business but I've got to get to the bottom of it quickly.'

'I'll help all I can,' Mr Thomas said. We could hear every word clearly without trying. Neither of us deliberately eavesdropped, we just sat there spellbound as the policeman talked to Jodie's father, about one metre below our feet.

'I want to ask you some questions. This isn't an official interview yet. Let's just say I'm off-duty and talking to you as a friend. When we go to the police station, you'll know that it is official.'

'Right. I appreciate that, now what can I help you with?'

'Where were you today, David?'

'Um ... I went to Port Macquarie. I left here about eight thirty and ...I forget when I got down there.'

'The reason I ask is this: we had a report from Coffs Harbour police that a man, identifying himself as David Thomas, bought a car at Coffs Harbour from a dealer. He had the car re-registered in his name, took it to another car yard and sold it for eight thousand dollars, although he had just paid ten thousand for it.'

'But I—'

'The car was bought using counterfeit money.'

'What! This is madness!'

'Were you in Coffs Harbour today?'

'Y-yes. But only for a little while.'

'You say you went to Port Macquarie?'

'Umm yes. I stopped for a while in Coffs Harbour—it's on zzz the way—and had something to eat. I think I bought petrol.'

‘What did you do in Port Macquarie?’

‘I went to the car yard where my Ford Falcon was. They said that I sold it to them. I didn’t sell it to them; it must have been Mr Swift. But they said they’d never heard of him.’

‘How long were you in Coffs Harbour?’

‘I ... just ... I don’t remember.’

‘What time were you there?’

‘Oh about nine o’clock. No, wait—it was probably about ten o’clock. Hang on! Yes it was half past three ... I think.’

Mr Thomas was beginning to sound very nervous. His voice rising higher in pitch, and sometimes he was almost stuttering. Sitting above his head we sat as though paralysed, listening to every word, and growing more and more afraid for him.

‘What did you do there? Where did you go?’

‘I-I sat on the beach. I was thinking.’

‘Which beach?’

‘The one ... I don’t know the name—near the caravan park.’

‘Then you would have seen the name of the caravan park?’

‘I don’t remember it.’

‘Did you go anywhere else?’

‘Uh, sure I walked around the mall for an hour.’

‘Fine. What time was that?’

‘Oh ... um ... say twelve o’clock. No! No it must have been one o’clock. Or rather, closer to two o’clock, I think.’

‘Can you describe the shops that you saw in the mall—or any activities that could prove you were there?’

‘Uh ... I don’t remember anything to be honest.’

‘You were there for an hour yet you can’t remember anything?’

‘Did I say an hour? Couldn’t have been. I think I left there at three, so maybe it was only five minutes.’

‘David, your story sounds very weak and confused. The man who bought the car said he was David Thomas. He produced identification to prove it. I’ll read you the description that the car dealer gave of the man who passed the counterfeit money. He described the man as: “Tall, about 180 centimetres, balding on the front, about forty years old, wearing a pale blue long-sleeved shirt, with the sleeves rolled up just past the wrists.” Would you say that description fits you?’

‘Yes it does. Exactly. I’m wearing a pale blue shirt now. I often wear one. And you say he ... this person who bought the car said he was David Thomas?’

‘Yes. He told them he was Mr David Thomas from Dayman Heads, living at number 5 Ruth Street. He then produced an I.D. with a photo on it that matched. The car yard drove him to the bank, and watched him withdraw the money from the teller. Later that day, when they went to deposit the money, the second bank said it was counterfeit.’

‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘David, it appears that you are that person. You are the man passing the counterfeit money.’

‘But I-I was at the mall ... or Port Macquarie. Target! I went to the Target shopping Centre at Coffs Harbour.’

‘Fine. What time? What did you see there?’

‘I ... I don’t remember.’

‘Did you buy anything or talk to anyone?’

‘I can’t remember anything. I might have bought an ice cream.’

‘David, there is one more piece of evidence against you.’

‘More! Oh my God, what else?’

‘This is the strongest evidence of all against you. If you choose to you do not have to answer. We have examined the counterfeit money and we know how it was made.’

‘You do? How?’

‘It was made on a colour photocopying machine.’

‘I thought so.’

‘There is only one known colour photocopier in Dayman Heads. The one at your office.’

‘Is that right? But how do you know about our—’

‘We have made enquiries with the manufacturers. They are very expensive and they know where and to whom they are sold.’

‘But surely there could be others?’

‘It doesn’t seem so. Do you know of any? Only a business would have one. And you’ve been working back late at the office recently?’

‘Yes. Work has been piling up. Lots to do.’

‘The cleaner was there the other night. He saw you standing in front of the colour photocopier, it was operating because he saw the light. In your hand he said you held a hundred-dollar note, but when he spoke, you acted like you were in a dream, paying no attention to him. The cleaner thought you were photocopying money. You know that is illegal, don’t you, David?’

‘Yes, I know it is.’

‘Did you photocopy money?’

‘Y-yes. I just wanted to see ... if that’s how ... the counterfeiter was making it. I w-wanted to see if it was p-possible to photocopy m-money that way.’

‘What did you do with the counterfeit money that you made?’

‘I t-tore it up.’

‘You are quite sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well David, tomorrow I’d like you to report to the police station and we’ll go over all this again officially. We will also need to go to your office and conduct some tests on the colour photocopier.’

‘You think I’m guilty?’

‘It hardly matters what I think, David. I’m just doing my job. I have to collect evidence and right now the evidence against you looks pretty heavy. If you are guilty, David, it would be best if you confessed to me right now. Don’t drag it out, because sooner or later we’ll find the culprit. I’ll ask you again. David Thomas, are you the counterfeiter?’

There was a long silence, my mind was paralysed with fear, waiting to hear his answer. Jodie seized my hand tightly as though she had fallen off a bridge and it was her only grip on life.

‘N-no. I’m innocent.’ Jodie relaxed her grasp a little.

‘Then you need the best lawyer you can find David. The best, no matter how much they cost. Sell your house to pay him if you have to. The case against you is substantial, nevertheless we will continue with our enquiries. Goodnight.’

‘G-goodnight ... Martin.’

When the police car drove off her father went upstairs, slowly like an old man who carried a terrible burden. Jodie sat in the chair without speaking. I heard her mother say, ‘Who was that at the front door, David?’

Jodie was hunched over, looking miserable. ‘I’d better go home,’ I said.

‘Yeah, I guess.’

When we passed back into the house and I went down the stairs I glimpsed her white face. She looked like she had just realized her father was the counterfeiter.

## **16. MIGRAINE \***

The next morning, after a breakfast of Weet-Bix, fried egg, orange juice, toast with dark plum jam, followed by a glass of milk, I went next door to see Jodie. The first thing I noticed was her father’s car was still in the driveway although it was eight-thirty. Jodie was miserable. She was starting to fret, and looked like she hadn’t slept much. ‘Dad didn’t go to work today,’ she explained, ‘he has a bad migraine headache. He has to lie down in a dark room all day.’

Mrs Thomas was creeping about the house as quietly as she could. She also looked unwell, with dark semi-circles under her red-looking eyes. When I went into Jodie's bedroom, I found that it was even more junked-up than usual. But this time, there was the local newspaper lying near her bed. Jodie saw me looking and said, 'You may as well read it.'

#### COUNTERFEIT MONEY CAUSES PANIC

"Over the past week, two lots of counterfeit money has been passed in Dayman Heads district. Amounts of eight thousand dollars and seven thousand one hundred dollars were recently passed. The fake money in one hundred dollar notes, has Mrs Narda worried. She said, "You just don't know where this monster counterfeiter will strike again. He doesn't realize that the person who accepts counterfeit money has to give it to the police. So if a person accepts a one hundred-dollar note for a pair of shoes, then discovers it is counterfeit, they are one hundred dollars out of pocket." Mr Narda was furious that more was not being done to stop the counterfeiter. She said, "The police have a suspect, a local man, but they let him out on bail, and now more counterfeit money has been passed. He should be locked up for good! He's a disgrace to our town. I demand that the police arrest him immediately before he destroys any more businesses."

The mayor, Mr Goldie, said the police were doing everything they could. He reminded people to check their money before they accepted it. Once the counterfeit money gets into general circulation it passes from one person to the next until it is realized it is counterfeit. Then it must be handed over to the police, or that person can be prosecuted.

If you are given counterfeit money and you use it as genuine money, then you are also breaking the law.

Mr Goldie said, "This counterfeit money is causing unemployment, people are afraid to handle any money at all. The shop keepers are checking money before accepting it—and tourists no longer stop at Dayman Heads, but drive to Murwillumbah before stopping."

Sergeant Martin Snowden said that a local man, David Thomas, will be in court on Monday morning to face serious charges of producing and passing large amounts of counterfeit money. He said that the police have a very strong case against Mr Thomas."

I sat there on the bed feeling quite stunned. No wonder Jodie and her parents felt miserable.

Everyone was blaming Mr Thomas and even saying he was responsible for the unemployment which has been a problem for three years.

'Karen, do you think my father might really be guilty?' Jodie's voice was almost breaking down into tears.

'There's a lot of evidence against him. He's even confessed to actually making one counterfeit note. But I don't believe he's guilty—not at all!'

'Are you just saying that because he's my dad and you don't want to hurt my feelings? Isn't it possible that he is the counterfeiter?'

'Possible? I guess anything is possible. It's possible that my mother is the counterfeiter. She could be making the money at night. I know your dad, he's an honest person. Remember last year when he bought that pair of socks?'

'Sure. They accidentally gave him two pairs, so he went all the way back to the shop to return the extra pair.'

'I figure the person making the counterfeit money is a lazy person—someone who wants something for nothing, someone dishonest. Your father is always working at the office or at home. The person I suspect would be more like that young printer who gambled all his money away. Remember?'

What was his name?'

'Eric Picard. Then you don't suspect my dad?'

'Of course not!'

'But how do you explain all this evidence against him?'

'I can't, but I still don't think he's guilty. What's that noise?'

'A car. Let's go onto the balcony.'

I could hear a deep sort of constant rumbling sound, not so much like a car—more like a heavy truck.

On the balcony we could see the reason for the noise. There was a queue of cars, crawling along our street one behind the other. ‘There must be an accident somewhere,’ I said. ‘They must have blocked off some of the streets.’ But just as I was about to wander back inside with Jodie I noticed the people in the cars were staring at her house, gawking like it was on fire.

As each car went past, all the heads would turn and stare. The cars were driving up our street on purpose—to look at Jodie’s house! One car, as it drew level with us, stopped. The driver leaned his head out the window and yelled at us: ‘Counterfeiters! Scum! You people are destroying my business! No one stops at my shop now! I’ve got a family to feed!’ Then he drove off. We sat there amazed, not understanding how these people had found out where Mr Thomas lived.

‘How do they know?’ I asked.

‘It’s a small town. The paper gave my dad’s name—I suppose they got the address from the phone book.’

Another car slowed, a burly woman put her head out the window. ‘Hey you counterfeiters! My husband has been out of work for two years because of you lot!’

The car sped up and drove on, but another car came along slowly—then as it drew level we saw kids about five or six years old in the back and the mother yelling to them and pointing out the window. ‘That’s the counterfeiter’s house! Look up there on the veranda—there’s two of them!’ And all the kids gawked at us with open mouths.

‘Come on Jodie, let’s go inside.’

We closed the door and went back toward Jodie’s bedroom. Her father called out: ‘Jodie, is that you?’

She stood outside his bedroom door. ‘Yes Dad.’

‘Come in.’ She opened the door and half went into the room. Mr Thomas was lying on his back with a wet towel across his forehead. The room was three-quarters dark. ‘What is all that noise in the street? I keep thinking I hear trucks.’

‘It’s just cars, Dad.’

‘Cars? What do you mean? Listen. There must be dozens of them. What do they want? And I can hear yelling. What’s going on out there?’ He was trying to sit up, but winced in pain, clutching at his eyes.

‘It’s the road, Mr Thomas,’ I lied. ‘They blocked off the road down at Farren Street to do some sewerage works, and all the cars are diverted up our street.’

‘But the yelling?’

‘Oh, some people are getting lost and asking the neighbours for directions.’

‘Fine. Nothing to worry about. Maybe I can get some sleep. Thanks girls.’ Jodie shut the door.

When I looked into her eyes there were tears in them. Not gushing tears, just little tears.

‘Thanks, Karen,’ she whispered. ‘That was a kind thing to do ... at least he might be able to rest a little now. I might put some soft music on—so it covers the sound of the cars.’

‘Jodie, let’s go for a ride to the shops.’

‘What for?’

‘Oh just something to do. I need to get away from all these weird people in the street.’

‘All right, it would be better if we got out for a couple of hours. I’ll tell Mum.’

At the shopping centre there was not exactly panic, as the paper suggested. The only thing different was that everyone was inspecting their money carefully, turning it over and holding it up to the light as if it was a rare butterfly. But there was little to do at the shops. We had no money—and it was hard to look at clothes, books, or CDs when we had all this trouble rumbling in toward us like an approaching cyclone.

As we left the shopping Centre and put our helmets on we saw a car parked outside the bank. A white Volvo. ‘That looks like your dad’s car.’

‘It couldn’t be, Karen. He’s still got that migraine—they last for two days when he gets them.’

But as we got closer we both saw that it did look exactly like Mr Thomas's car. And then, almost running out of the bank came Mr Thomas wearing dark glasses and a straw hat pulled down hard over his head.

Jodie and I stood staring at him, by this time he was only eight metres away. But he wasn't looking at us. He got into the car and quickly drove off—actually spinning the wheels in the car park as if he were an escaping bank robber. Everyone stared at his car. But before it had got out of the car park two men came running from the bank. One pointed to Mr Thomas in the car. 'There he goes! That's the man who cheated us!'

### **17. A SUSPICIOUS PRINTER \***

We rode our bikes in silence back to Jodie's place. We were trying all the time to believe Mr Thomas was innocent—but every day he did something that made us suspicious, and that's what hurt. We wanted to believe he was innocent, but he always created these doubts. When we arrived home, we found his car had gone. It must have been him at the shopping centre.

'How could he,' Jodie asked her mother, 'go out when he had such a bad migraine? He did have a migraine didn't he?'

'I'm sure he did,' she answered. 'But remember Jodie he had to go to the police station today for the interview.'

We sat in Jodie's room trying to figure out what it all meant. Why had Mr Thomas been at the bank dressed like he was robbing it—wearing dark glasses with a hat pulled down over his head?

As we sat out on the balcony discussing the counterfeit money mystery I could almost sense that something was happening in the back of my mind—intuition—like a faint breeze before a storm.

We sat about trying to read books. It was the hottest part of the day, even sitting in the shade was uncomfortably hot. My back, pressing up against the chair, had soaked sweat right through my T-shirt. Every now and then I could feel trickles of perspiration rolling down my side.

I could see Jodie was restless. She was trying to figure out the answer to the mystery but just couldn't see how the pieces fitted together. She stood up. 'Karen, let's go back to that printer at Artwork.'

'Why?'

'Remember Mr Picard said he'd show us around the factory. I still suspect his son. He acted so suspiciously.'

'But the police said the money was photocopied, not printed.'

'Yes, but maybe if he's a printer, he might know someone who has a colour photocopier.'

'Jodie—maybe he knew your father!'

'I hope not. I just hope whatever Dad has done it's not illegal. Oh children are not supposed to have to worry about their parents. It's supposed to be the other way around.'

We were dripping sweat when we arrived at Artwork Printers. Mr Picard was sitting in the same place behind his desk. 'Come in kids. You want a look around? You didn't bring your note books this time?'

'No—um we just wanted to look about. We didn't see much last time.'

'Of course not. That lazy son of mine wouldn't bother to sit up if he could lie down. Eric's not here today. He's out buying and selling cars and letting me do all the work.'

'Does he ever buy cars at Coffs Harbour?'

'Oh yes! Nearly every fortnight. He often goes down there or to Ballina buys a car and then sells it again the same day if he can get another few hundred dollars for it. He's always trying to make an easy profit—without working.'

Mr Picard took us through the factory and explained about the photogravure machine and offset printers and ... but we were hardly able to concentrate. Our minds were thinking over and over about his son buying and selling cars in Coffs Harbour.

Before we left, he asked us our names again. When Jodie told him she was Jodie Thomas he asked was she David Thomas' daughter from Ruth Street.

‘Yes, that’s my father.’

‘No wonder I recognized you. Your dad works at Pacific Minerals doesn’t he?’

‘Yes, do you know him?’

‘Certainly. My son handles quite a bit of printing for your father. They know each other quite well. It’s been nice talking to you girls, but I really must get back to work.’

We rode our bikes back in a heavy silence. The more we discovered the worse it looked for Mr Thomas. Even if he was truly innocent, it meant it would be hard to prove it.

But when Jodie’s dad came home there was a turning point—that’s when all the little pieces of the jigsaw puzzle began fitting into place.

Mr Thomas ran up the stairs and whirled Mrs Thomas around the room in a waltz. ‘Guess what! Guess what!’ Obviously his migraine had vanished.

Jodie couldn’t wait, she wanted her questions answered first.

‘Dad! Dad, where have you been?’

‘Where? The police station of course.’

‘That’s all?’

‘Yes, why do you ask?’

‘We saw you at the bank.’

‘Oh, yes, yes I went to the bank. I forgot.’

‘Why were you wearing a disguise?’

‘Disguise!’ He laughed. ‘You mean the sunglasses and hat?’

‘Yes, that’s a disguise, and a someone said you were the man who cheated them. What did you do at the bank?’

‘You think I’m guilty? You think I robbed the bank? You think I made counterfeit money?’

‘Not exactly Dad—but all these things—disguises, and the Artwork printer’s son and everything.’

‘What are you talking about?’ He sounded quite puzzled.

‘Everything! The disguise. The bank. Going to Coffs Harbour when the counterfeit money was passed. The printer’s son who buys cars in Coffs Harbour and then sells them the same day. Making a counterfeit note at work with the photocopier. Everything!’

‘I don’t understand you. I had dark glasses and a hat on because of my migraine, remember? I have to keep out of the bright sunlight or it gets worse. The reason I was in the bank was to transfer four thousand dollars from my account to pay for the lawyers.’

It had sounded suss at first, but now things made sense to me.

‘Mr Thomas, why did the man at the bank say you were the man who cheated them?’

Her dad sat down and put his hands up to his eyes. It seemed the migraine was coming back. ‘Ever since the newspaper article people have been blaming me for the counterfeit money. They say I did all sorts of things ... a woman at the bank told me that it was people like me who caused the unemployment. When I heard that I felt very annoyed. I just had to get out of that bank as quickly as possible. I just can’t believe how stupid and suspicious some people are.’

Mrs Thomas said, ‘David, you were going to tell us something, remember?’ She was pouring out cups of hot tea.

‘Was I? Now what was—of course wonderful news—there’s been more counterfeit money passed!’

‘Oh no!’

‘Don’t you see? I was in the police station and they got a phone call from Murwillumbah police. A man called David Thomas, from Dayman Heads, had just purchased a second-hand car for six thousand dollars using counterfeit money. He fitted my description—but at the time he was buying the car I was at the police station! That proves to the police that I am not the counterfeiter!’

‘Dad that’s terrific.’

‘And another thing, I know how it all happened!’

‘Tell us, please!’

‘When I sold the Falcon to Mr Swift, I accidentally left my driver’s licence in the glove box. Mr Swift found it and now uses it to “prove” that he is David Thomas. I remember now that he was the

same height and weight as me. Very similar—and of course he had a good look at me so he would have found it easy to wear the same kind of clothes as I do.’

‘So then Swift must be the counterfeiter!’

‘What did the police say?’

‘Sergeant Snowden said he accepts that someone is impersonating me. That I am not the same person buying the cars with counterfeit money. I asked him would the police go ahead with the preliminary trial, he ummed and ahed a bit then said he’d let me know tonight.’

Mr Thomas seemed to straighten up and began to smile. Jodie looked much happier. I was the only one who felt uneasy. I felt sure there was still a lot to explain. Where did the counterfeit money come from?

We all sat around for about an hour discussing the case and eating homemade scones and drinking cordial, except for Mr and Mrs Thomas who kept drinking hot cups of tea even though they complained about the heat. I was just about to go home when the phone rang. Everyone stopped as if a disaster was about to happen. Then suddenly, Mr Thomas rushed to the phone. He knocked over a pile of magazines and dropped the receiver before getting it to his ear.

‘Mr Thomas speaking.’ We couldn’t hear the voice on the other end, so it sounded strange just listening to Mr Thomas. ‘No trouble. Hello Sergeant. Yes. Yes. I understand. Well ... wouldn’t I--?’ Then there was a long silence and although Mr Thomas said nothing we could all see that the weight, the fear, the worry and the migraine were all returning to him. ‘Um. Yes. I understand. Thanks f-for letting me know.’ And he slowly hung up the phone as if it were made of a very heavy metal.

‘Well?’ Mrs Thomas asked.

‘At this stage they are still going ahead with the trial; a final decision will be made on Friday at five p.m. The Sergeant says he thinks I am still involved. My office has the only known colour photocopier in Dayman Heads. I admitted that I photocopied a one hundred-dollar note, and they also have a witness. And I was caught that first day right here in Dayman Heads trying to pass the counterfeit money at the swimming pool shop. Sergeant Snowden said he thinks I know more about the counterfeit money than I am saying.’

‘What about—’

‘He thinks I am a gang leader. And that I have men who buy cars with counterfeit money, then sell them for cash. He thinks that I am the source, the leader of the counterfeit money gang. He said that normally he wouldn’t go ahead with the trial but the townspeople were in such a panic and so angry about the counterfeit money that he has to proceed, even though he still has some doubts.’

With that Mr Thomas went to the medicine cabinet, took out a packet of Panadol, a towel, and with a glass of water from the kitchen, headed for the bedroom clutching at his forehead.

## **18. INTUITION \***

When I woke on the Friday morning, it was still hot and sticky, but out the window I could see black clouds gathering over the ocean. The clock showed 8:05, but I just lay there staring at the sky through the window. I was not really thinking about anything, just trying to keep my thoughts quiet. Sometimes when I do this I get what Mum says is intuition. It’s like a quick flash of light inside my head and suddenly I know the answer to a problem.

I thought that I’d had a lot of dreams during the night, but couldn’t quite remember what they were about. When I tried to remember them, they melted away; it was like trying to grab a handful of water. When Mum knocked on the door it was nearly nine o’clock. I turned and looked at her as I sat up in bed still wearing my pyjamas.

‘Are you okay?’ she asked.

‘Yes. Fine.’

‘You’re not feeling sick or anything?’

‘No Mum. I’ve just ... been thinking about the counterfeit money.’

‘Hmm. It’s nine o’clock, you’d better help me with breakfast.’

As I was eating my second piece of toast, I experienced a moment of dizziness. I realized the dizziness was because all the answers to the counterfeiting had just flashed into my mind. It was amazing—incredible!

‘Mum! Mum!’

‘What’s the matter?’ She stood up staring at me.

‘The counterfeit money—I know who did it!’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yes. But I don’t know if I can explain it just yet.’

‘Then,’ she said smiling, ‘it’s probably intuition. That’s how intuition works—it tells you the answer in one quick jump. Now that you’ve got the answer you have to use logical thinking to go back and prove that your idea was correct.’

‘I’m certain. Why do I have to prove it?’

‘It’s good that you’re certain. But don’t tell anyone yet.’ She shook her head and poured a cup of tea. ‘If you do, they will argue with you and try to prove you are wrong—you’ll get mixed up and stop believing in intuition, and then it will stop working. You know the answer, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘Now you must work it out step by step so that you can explain it, and prove it. If you tell people, “Oh my intuition worked this out” they’ll laugh at you. You’ve got to give them reasons. You understand?’

‘Yes. But I’m not sure how to work out the reasons.’

‘That can be hard because you’ve got to use a bit more intuition and then think logically to put the jigsaw puzzle together. What has happened is that your intuition showed you in one second the whole of the jigsaw picture, like it is on the cover of the box.’

‘That’s exactly right.’

‘But it didn’t show you which pieces fit where. The people who don’t use intuition are trying to assemble the jigsaw but don’t know what the finished picture looks like. Intuition gives you one quick glimpse of the finished jigsaw, then you have to put all the pieces together.’

‘Okay. I’ll just sit in my bedroom and think for a while.’

About 10:30 a.m. there was a knock on my door.

‘Come in.’

It was Jodie.

‘Karen, what are you doing?’

I wondered what I should answer. Jodie knew about my intuition because we were best friends. It was just that she didn’t always believe in it. Her father had taught her to use logical thinking.

‘Um ... just thinking about the counterfeit money.’

‘Karen, my place is a disaster. Dad’s a mess. He’s been vomiting from the migraine. Mum’s fretting—she thinks the four thousand dollars won’t be enough for the lawyers if Dad has to go to court. And she keeps walking about the house talking to herself and saying they’ll have to sell the Volvo and maybe borrow money and she’s just about in tears, and she’s got the tea in her hand but is looking for it all over the house. And my brother Glen says he’s fed up with all of us because all we can do is whine about the counterfeit money while he has to live without the swimming pool. And he’s so embarrassed because he told all his mates, including some girl he’s trying to impress, that he was getting this huge pool. Now he says he’s lost face and she won’t talk to him and it’s all our fault. Oh, let me sit down.’

‘It’s starting to rain, Jodie. Look out the window.’

‘Oh great, now we can’t go to the beach.’

‘But it’ll be lots cooler.’ I felt good.

We sat in silence for a while, then she stood up impatiently. ‘We’ve got to figure out who it is! Karen, do you realize we only have six hours left to solve this mystery! At five o’clock this afternoon Sergeant Snowden will decide whether to go ahead with Dad’s trial or not.’ Jodie was looking nervous herself.

‘So if the police haven’t got any evidence that proves your dad is innocent by five o’clock Mr Thomas will have to go to court?’

‘Right. And then it starts costing us big money. The longer the trial, the more it costs. Mrs Manning told my mum that her sister went to court once about a fence between their house and next door. They won the case—but in the end they had to sell the house to pay for the lawyers because the bill was fifteen thousand dollars!’

‘Mm.’

‘You’re not talking much, Karen. What’s the matter—are you sick? Don’t tell me—you’ve got a headache?—oh that’s my luck everyone has gone loopy or got a migraine.’

‘Shh. I’m just thinking.’

She kept quiet for about two minutes then got up and walked about nervously. ‘This is getting us nowhere,’ she said. ‘We’ve got to go and see the printer’s son again. He knows something about the counterfeit money he’s not telling. I reckon—’

‘Jodie, I know who the counterfeiter is, and I know how he’s been tricking everyone.’

‘What! You’re kidding aren’t you?’

‘I’m not,’ I said quietly.

Suddenly she was spinning about the room. ‘Let’s go down to the police—quickly! Get your raincoat. Why didn’t you tell me? Are you sure? Who is it? Come on let’s go!’

‘Wait! Sit down Jodie. It’s not that simple.’

‘But who is it? Tell me! Please tell me! It’s the printer’s son, Eric Picard, I’d bet anything on it! His father even said he buys and sells cars at Coffs Harbour. Is that who it is?’

‘I don’t want to say yet.’

‘Karen! We have,’ she looked at her watch, ‘five hours and fifty-five minutes left to convince the police my father is innocent. We’ve got to act!’

‘No, we’ve got to think! Remember what happened last time we went to the police? Just a few days ago we told them it was the printer’s son because he knew the amount was exactly seven thousand one hundred dollars?’

‘Yeah. And it was in the newspaper all along. You’re right I suppose. We’ve got to have all the answers this time or they’ll laugh at us. Well then tell me, I’m listening.’

‘I can’t just yet.’

‘But Karen, you told me you knew!’

‘Just listen a minute. My intuition showed me the whole picture, but it was just one quick flash. I’m not sure yet how all the parts of the puzzle fit together yet. If I start talking about it before I’m ready it will take longer. I’ve got to try and use logical thinking, okay?’

‘Sure. But are you certain you know who it is?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll bet you one hundred Mars bars it’s the printer’s son. Never mind, I’ll prove it. Let’s go down to Artwork and talk with—’

‘Jodie wait! You’re slowing me down. I can’t think when you talk all the time. I expect that there’s no need to see the printer at all. But I do want to look in the street, and down at the bank.’

‘What for?’

‘Sometimes it gives me ideas. Let’s go now. Get your raincoat and I’ll meet you at the front of your house.’

‘Riding or walking?’

‘Let’s walk. That way I can explain things as we go along.’

## **19. THE GUILTY PERSON \***

Out in the street I stood in the rain, cool refreshing rain, and looked at Mr Thomas’s car parked in the garage. I was staring at the empty street trying to remember back to the day Mr Thomas sold the Falcon. Jodie came out wearing a pink raincoat and carrying a white umbrella. The rain was light, drifting to the ground in a heavy mist. But the dark clouds were still over the ocean and we could

see flashes of lightening in them. I'd seen those sort of clouds before, and I knew we could expect a thunderstorm in the afternoon.

'What are you staring at?'

'The empty street.'

'And that's a clue?'

'Well ... I guess it really is. You see Jodie, we had all the information we needed to solve this mystery. We just didn't know how to fit all the information together.'

'Okay, where do we go?'

'The bank. Let's go there and then I'll start explaining. Ah yes. Yes! I've got it. Come on. I'll tell you.'

We walked down Farren Street heading toward the bank. Jodie was pretty quiet. She was probably thinking about the problem herself.

'Damn it!' I said. 'I've been such a dope!'

'What is it? Did you make a mistake?'

'Yes I did. I didn't trust my intuition in the beginning. Everyone has got to trust themselves, but I didn't.'

'What are you talking about, Karen?'

'If you don't believe in intuition, it won't work for you. You've got to have confidence in it. It's like jumping over a high fence—if you start thinking you can't do it then you fail. You've got to trust yourself.'

The light rain was running off our umbrellas. The gutters carried only a centimetre of water, while the cars swished passed with their windscreen wipers flapping slowly. At the bank people were jogging in quickly, without raincoats, trying not to get wet.

We entered the bank and went over to the stand-up counter. 'Jodie, you pretend you are Mr Thomas and I'll be Mr Swift, who has come to the bank to draw out the money to buy the car.' I took a withdrawal form and filled it out.

NAME: Mr Swift

AMOUNT OF WITHDRAWAL: \$7,100

Jodie watched me. I went and stood in the queue of people in front of the teller. There were three people in front of me. I watched the man who was being served. Then I suddenly saw it. He hunched himself forward and rested both arms on the counter. I quickly left the queue and went over to Jodie. 'Can you see what the man at the counter is doing?'

'Huh? He's ... I can't see, his back is in the way.'

'Great! Let's go.'

'But what—'

Outside I said: 'This is what happened: your dad drove Mr Swift to the bank to withdraw the seven thousand one hundred dollars to pay for the car. Right?'

'Yep, no problem.'

'But earlier the same morning Mr Swift had already been to the bank, where he had filled out a withdrawal form for \$100 and taken it away with him.'

'Hey?'

'Listen. Your father saw Mr Swift pick up a withdrawal form, fill it out for seven thousand one hundred dollars and go up to the teller. But when Mr Swift got to the teller instead of giving him the withdrawal form for seven thousand one hundred dollars, he gave him the withdrawal form for one hundred dollars.'

'Just—'

'While he was being served, Mr Swift hunched himself forward onto the counter so your dad couldn't see him, and in those few seconds he took the hundred dollars from the teller and with his other hand took from his pocket seven thousand dollars in counterfeit money. He turned and took

all the money over to your father and gave it to him with the genuine hundred-dollar note on the top!

‘That’s it! Everything fits.’ Jodie was excited now because at last she could understand how the puzzle fitted together. ‘That’s why the bank had no record of anyone withdrawing seven thousand one hundred dollars. And it also explains why one hundred dollars of the money was not counterfeit. Mr Swift must have used his real name on the withdrawal form. That’s why no one could find any record of Mr Swift. Brilliant, Karen. And I bet he does the same thing in every town where he buys a car. When they see him collect the money from the teller they are certain that it is genuine. And even if they look at it, they probably only look at the top note which is genuine.’ She was smiling with happiness.

‘Jodie, what I can’t quite see is why he keeps using counterfeit money to buy cars. Why always cars?’

She stopped walking, and we stood beneath our umbrellas, people walking around us like they do when old grandmas stop to talk in the middle of the footpath. ‘I think I can tell you. Because a car is the most expensive thing a person buys with cash. A house takes weeks ... you can’t just buy it in one day and sell it the next. And if it was a TV then he would only make about four hundred dollars from the counterfeit money. If he buys a car he can give them ten thousand dollars then take it to another car yard and sell it the same day!’

‘And they will pay him with real money! Now we come to the fact that your father was in Coffs Harbour and a man—’

But Jodie had the answer already. ‘Oh I can explain that! Let’s walk down to the big shopping centre. Now see if I’m right. Mr Swift bought the car from my dad and when he opened the glove box he found dad’s drivers licence inside, so he figured he could use that as a false identity. So he told everyone he was Mr David Thomas, he even looked a bit like dad. When the people discovered that the money was counterfeit they blamed my dad.’

‘Exactly what I was going to say.’ I smiled. Jodie was getting it now, and as she explained I began to understand everything that happened more and more clearly. All the pieces of the jigsaw were fitting together.

‘What about Coffs Harbour?’ she asked. ‘How was it that the day Dad stopped at Coffs Harbour Mr Swift was also there?’

‘Probably a coincidence. You see Mr Swift has been going to nearby towns, Coffs Harbour and Murwillumbah. It was just a coincidence that the day your dad went there Mr Swift was also there.’

‘Now tell me his real name!’

‘No, I’m not quite ready.’

‘Oh Karen, we must hurry. Look it’s already past noon, we only have five hours left. Not even that because we have to phone Sergeant Snowden by quarter to five. I feel like running somewhere—yelling, I must do something!’

‘Jodie, none of those things will help. They only waste time. We must use our minds. Now this is what’s next. Yes. I have it. Mr Swift comes from Dayman Heads, but he is not a local—he’s only lived here for a short time.’

‘How can you know that?’

‘Because the very first car bought with counterfeit money was right here in Dayman Heads. Then he started going to the surrounding towns. You notice something else. He buys a car in the morning, then sells it the same afternoon. You know why?’

‘Simple,’ Jodie said excitedly. ‘Because he drives his own car to the town, parks it, then buys the new car. That means he has two cars, but he can’t drive two cars home so he has to sell one right away. Then he can drive his own car home.’

‘Exactly!’ I laughed. Jodie was good at this. ‘But remember when he bought your dad’s Falcon it was already mid-afternoon. He didn’t have to worry about driving two cars home from Dayman Heads because he lives here.’

‘But how do you know he’s not a local?’

‘Remember when your mother told us that your father had taken Mr Swift for a test drive in the Falcon?’

‘Yes.’

‘There was no car parked in our street was there? That’s what I was remembering when you came out with the umbrella. So how did he get to your place? He must have walked.’

‘No, he might have caught a taxi.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘I hadn’t thought of that.’

‘But it’s just the same. If he caught a taxi it means he lived in Dayman Heads because you wouldn’t get a taxi from Ballina or Grafton would you?’

‘Yeah. You’ve got it.’

‘Now Karen, what makes you say he hasn’t been living here very long?’

‘What can you remember that your mum said about him?’

‘Oh not much. Something about asking directions for the street.’

‘Correct. He said he’d had trouble finding Canowindra Street. And that’s how he pronounced it, just like a stranger would: Can-o-windra. No one who lives here calls it that, we all pronounce it Can-nown-dra.’

‘Karen, you are right! It’s the printer’s son isn’t it?’

‘No. He’s lived here all his life I expect. The printer told us he’d been building the business up over twenty years, didn’t he?’

‘Then who is it?’

I was ready to tell her at last. Now that I had all the pieces fitted together and I felt sure. ‘The man who makes the counterfeit money, the man who bought your father’s Falcon, the man we call Mr Swift, is actually Mr O’Brien from Darkson House!’

## **20. DARKSON HOUSE AGAIN \***

‘You’re kidding me. Tell me this is a joke!’

‘It’s not a joke.’

‘But how can you know that? You’ve never even seen Mr O’Brien or been inside Darkson House. You’re guessing! No one will ever believe you. Everyone said he was a vampire, now you’re going to tell the police he’s a counterfeiter. Oh, we’re going to need excellent proof for that! Go on, explain Karen. But this time I find it hard to believe you.’

She already had her sceptical expression on and I was so glad that I took my mother’s advice and waited before telling anyone. ‘What does Mr O’Brien do, Jodie?’

‘He’s an inventor. Something to do with ... um lasers, Mrs Parsons said.’

‘Okay, follow me.’

‘But where are you—’

Inside the shopping centre I headed down to the News Peak Newsagent, went inside, and started flicking through the business magazines.

‘Have you flipped, Karen? Are you looking for his photograph? How long are you going to paw through these magazines? Tell me what you’re looking for. Why don’t you answer me?’

Finally I found it. ‘Here! Look at this advertisement. Now take a careful look at this picture of the photocopier. Got it? Now read what it says.’

She read it out: ‘CANON Colour LASER COPIER.’

‘Okay, that’s enough. Let’s go home.’

It was raining heavier now, but beneath our umbrellas we were quite dry except for splashes in our hair. I enjoyed the cool refreshing rain after all the days of hot sticky weather. ‘Jodie, remember the night we looked in the basement window of Darkson House?’

‘I’ll never forget that.’

‘What did you see?’

‘I forget.’ She was smiling at me. ‘I saw a table, a glass of tomato juice, a plate, pieces of cut up paper, a desk lamp, and a big grey box sort of thing that looked like a—’

‘Colour Laser Copier?’

‘W-wait. Yes. Yes, it did! I remember, just like the one in the magazine.’

‘Mr O’Brien always locks the basement—why? Because—’

‘He’s making counterfeit money and doesn’t want Mrs Parsons to find out. There’s something else I can tell you Karen. Maybe you didn’t notice, but I just remembered. That big grey box thing standing at the end of the table ... ‘

‘Which we now believe is a colour laser copier?’

‘Yes. It had writing on it.’

Now it was my turn to be surprised. ‘Did it? I don’t remember that.’

‘Yes. I’ll tell you how I remember. I could only read one word: CANON, and I though isn’t that odd? The spelling should be CANNON with two Ns.’

‘You actually saw the word CANON?’

‘Yep, I reckon it really is a photocopier. A Colour photocopier that the police don’t know about.

Hey, we’ve only got about four hours left. What are we going to do? Go to the police?’

‘Oh no! Jodie, we still don’t have proof. Especially since we already told them it was the printer’s son. And then there’s been all that nonsense about vampires.’

‘Yeah, guess you’re right.’

‘Let’s go home and eat some lunch, and then discuss how we can get some proof.’

At Jodie’s house Mr Thomas was still in bed, the curtains drawn, the house in a dark silence. Mrs Thomas insisted that we whisper. She was in a state herself. Jodie suggested that we tell her we knew who the counterfeiter was, but I said it was best not to say just yet. Mrs Thomas would only insist that we tell the police immediately. And then we wouldn’t have proof. That’s what we needed: proof.

Mrs Thomas started to make us a salad lunch, but soon she was weeping and had to go off and lie down herself. The whole business was a big strain on her, and since Mr Thomas got sick with the migraine it made everything worse for her. Jodie finished making the meal while I took Mrs Thomas a cup of tea.

Outside the rain was getting heavier, the clouds were almost black. In the distance we could hear the rumbling of thunder, like the gods moving their furniture about upstairs, Mum always said.

‘Jodie, to get evidence we’ve got to get inside Darkson House. But how?’

‘Easy. Mrs Parsons will let us in.’

‘But ... how?’

Give me a minute. We both sat thinking. ‘The cat,’ I said. ‘Something to do with the cat.’

‘Got it! Snowball needs food, she’s a growing cat. We happened to have a tin of sardines left over and so we brought it around for Snowball.’

‘Brilliant. But do you have any sardines? And secondly, when we get inside what do we do? How can we get proof?’

‘Probably no sardines. We could check at your place or else buy them at Mollie’s shop on the way. Mr O’Brien will never—’

‘Hey! It’s Friday! Remember that’s the day he always goes to the library in Sydney. Or so he says.’

‘Oh sure. You mean buying cars with counterfeit money. I’ll bet he’s in Lismore today. I don’t know how we can get proof. If we could find something—’

‘What about if we talk very nicely to Mrs Parsons, and tell her how your father is sick, and they are going to take him to court and he’s innocent, and ask her to dob Mr O’Brien in. She must know what he’s up to in the laboratory.’

‘Well ... we can try anyway. Maybe she does know. Let’s go and see if your mum’s got any sardines.’

Just as we were about to go out the front door, we saw Mr Thomas come out of the bedroom in his dressing gown. He was wearing dark glasses.

‘Dad, what are you doing up?’

'I feel a little better this afternoon. I might sit in the lounge room for a while; I think the migraine is starting to pass. Where are you going?'

'To ... Karen's place, Dad. I think we ... we know who—'

Alarmed, I quickly interrupted: 'Where we left the ... umbrellas—don't we Jodie?'

'Uh. Yeah, see you later Dad.'

Outside I told Jodie it would do no good to tell Mr Thomas about Darkson House when he was still sick.

'But we've got to tell someone in case we ... we are kidnapped or something.'

'Okay,' I said, 'we'll tell my mum.'

At my place we didn't have any sardines either. I told Mum I had worked out the reasons to explain who the counterfeiter was. 'Do you want to know?' I asked.

'If you're ready to tell me.'

'The counterfeiter is Mr O'Brien, from Darkson House.'

'As I suspected.'

'What? How could you—'

'Karen, don't you remember, you told me you were trying to use your intuition right at the beginning. You said all you could think of was Darkson House and a moving white light. And that white light was the—'

'PHOTOCOPIER!' We all said it at once and laughed.

'But can you prove it?' Mum asked. 'If we tell the police now—'

'No. We are going around there to talk to Mrs Parsons. We'll get some sardines for her cat. Maybe we can find some evidence, or get her to give the police evidence. If we tell her how Mr Thomas is about to be put on trial and everyone thinks he's guilty, and he's sick—maybe she'll go to the police with us and tell them the truth.'

'Fine. Are you going now?'

'In a minute. We only have two-and-a-half hours till Sergeant Snowden makes his decision—we have to try and get proof before then.'

'Would you like me to go with you?'

'Thanks Mum but it might be better if you were here in case something goes wrong. Mrs Parsons knows us and,' I joked, 'although she's a bit of a witch, she's quite nice. I think if we explain how Mr Thomas might have to go to jail or sell his house to pay thousands in legal fees she'll understand and help us.'

'Oh I hope so girls. Good luck.'

Dressed in our raincoats with umbrellas over our heads we walked toward Darkson House. In Jasmine Street we went into the shop and bought a tin of sardines. 'For our cat,' I told Mollie. Jodie was in the corner going through the magazines. She called me over. 'Look—here's another photo of the Canon Colour Laser Copier. Yep, I'm sure that's what I saw in the basement.'

Outside the rain was getting heavier, thunder had come closer and closer, and although it was only three-thirty the sky was dark grey-blue. Cars crawled past with their headlights on. The wind was blowing strongly, whipping the rain below the umbrellas and into our faces.

When we went past Ron Rocco's house, we could see all the lights were on inside and people were moving about. Just like him, I thought. He's inside, safe and warm, watching TV while we were wet, cold and heading for Darkson House.

## **21. MRS PARSONS \***

We stood outside the front gates of Darkson House. The sky was almost black with rain clouds, and the wind was pushing hard against our umbrellas until mine snapped inside out, then with the very next gust of wind, Jodie's.

I wanted to go home. Why did we have to go into Darkson House? I felt quite afraid, not of vampires, but of Mr O'Brien. I didn't want anything to do with this—all I wanted was to get dry and relax in front of the TV watching Seinfeld. Jodie stood with me and I felt sure the same ideas

were running through her mind. Then she looked at her watch: four o'clock! If we gave up now it meant her dad would be going to court, it meant all that worry, all that money for lawyers. We really had to go through with it, unpleasant though it was. 'Here goes,' she said. And we stepped forward together, pushing on the heavy gate. It felt cold and wet under our fingers. Slowly it swung open while more rain lashed down around us. We scurried up the path, ran up the front steps and stopped on the porch. I tried to shake some of the water from my hair. Jodie looked like a wet dog, water dripping from her face. She pulled the bell rope and I kept wondering just what we were going to say. A brilliant zap of lightening flashed like a searchlight followed by a loud crack of thunder. The rain was now pelting down, the storm directly overhead. It took a full two minutes before Mrs Parsons came to the door. She opened it with the safety chain on.

'What do you want?' She didn't recognize us. 'Selling rubbish? Go away!' She slammed the door. 'Mrs Parsons!' We called out frantically, and I banged on the door with my hand. She had to let us in.

'Mrs Parsons!'

The door opened again.

'Who are you?'

'It's Karen and Jodie. Don't you remember us?'

'What? My goodness, you're like drowned rats. Now what are you two rascals doing out in this dangerous thunderstorm?' And to prove her point there was a huge flash of lightening overhead, and almost at the same time the sound of an explosion—so loud it shook the whole house, rattling everything around us. I felt the vibration in my chest, and when I turned I saw the tree at the front gate, a large ghost gum, was shattered and burning. The lightening had struck it. The pale grey had turned charcoal black.

'Quickly, come inside.' We scampered in.

Jodie said: 'We were worried about poor little Snowball, and so we brought her a tin of sardines.'

'You did? She loves sardines. Come into the kitchen. Oh I hate these storms. Oh dear, look the mirror has become uncovered. No wonder the lightening struck the tree!'

I looked at Jodie and frowned. What did she mean?

'Do your mothers cover all the mirrors up in thunderstorms?'

'No. Why should they?'

'Modern folks. Don't you know anything? The mirrors attract the lightening!'

Jodie smiled, then I guess she remembered why we were there and how little time we had left.

In the kitchen Mrs Parsons said: 'I hate this job. Mr O'Brien's been gone every day this week leaving me alone in this spooky old house. I hear noises all the time. And you know what? Have a biscuit? He hates her. Yesterday he threw a plate at her because she was inside the house. A great big mansion and he won't allow a nice little cat like Snowball inside. It cut her back, I had to take her to—come here Snowy—the vet. Look at the stitches—that pig of a man!'

'Have you got a tin opener?'

'Oh, you can't take cutlery out of the drawers when lightening is about.'

'Is a tin opener cutlery, Jodie?'

'Nope. Only knives, forks, and spoons.'

'Is that right?' Mrs Parsons was confused. 'Maybe that's true. Oh well I can quickly open the tin with a tea-towel over it.'

As she was doing this Jodie and I were patting Snowball who was purring loudly; the cat then climbed onto my lap. I could see the large cut on her back where it had been stitched up by the vet. When Mrs Parsons brought the sardines Snowball sprang from my lap and started eating and purring at the same time.

Jodie looked at her watch. Thirty minutes left!

'Mrs Parsons, where is Mr O'Brien?'

'The Devil only knows. He says he's going to Sydney. But I don't believe him. You can't drive to Sydney do some study at the library and then drive back in ten hours. Besides a couple of days ago

he told me he was going to Sydney, but I found a bag from a cake shop in his pocket. You know what it said. Delicious Cakes, Murwillumbah.'

'Mrs Parsons, we need your help.'

'You do? What for? I can't drive you home, haven't got a car and I can't drive!'

'No it's more important. It's about the counterfeit money. You know about that don't you?'

'Counterfeit money? What are you talking about?'

'Don't you read the papers, or watch TV?'

'No. Lot of rubbish. Just stories about people getting killed in wars and nonsense. I'd rather read a nice mystery book. What's all this about?'

I looked at Jodie. This was going to be awful. If Mrs Parsons didn't even know about the counterfeit money, how were we going to explain it all and then on top of that how could she dob Mr O'Brien in for counterfeiting when she didn't know anything about it?'

Jodie said, 'Mrs Parsons, someone in Dayman Heads has been making counterfeit money. The police think it ... might be my father.'

'Oh you poor girl. No wonder you look so miserable. Your father is a crook!'

'But he's innocent! We think the real counterfeiter is Mr O'Brien.'

'What? He's an inventor not a counterfeiter.'

'What does he invent?'

'I don't know. Lasers, whatever they are.'

'Does he have a Colour photocopier in his lab?'

'How would I know? I'm not allowed in there. It's top secret, he tells me. He probably sits in there and drinks vodka and tomato juice. Did I ever tell you the story about my father—there was a crook if ever there was one. Now let me see. It was back in 1948, just after the war—now this is The Second—'

'Mrs Parsons, we are in a desperate hurry!' Jodie butted in.

'What? You want me to tell the story faster?'

'No, not now! Next time. We have to talk about the counterfeit money.'

'But I don't know anything about it.'

'Have you ever seen Mr O'Brien with any?'

'No. He never brings anything out of his laboratory.'

'We think he's got a laser Colour copier in there.'

'What's that when it's at home?'

'It photocopies money—makes an exact copy, then he turns it over and copies it on the back so that it looks just like real money.'

'Strewth! I could do with that. I wouldn't have to work here then. I hate this old dump. It's cold and damp and parts of it are falling down and now we've got those Aboriginals protesting.'

'What Aboriginals?'

'They came here last week. They say this house was built on their sacred bora ring. One of them was a lawyer fellow arguing with Mr O'Brien. He said the original Mr Darkson had forced the Aboriginals off this land by telling the police they stole his cattle. The police arrested them and took them all to Queensland, but the Darkson's never had any cattle. Then he built the house here.'

'I didn't know that.'

'They reckon it's sacred, no one should be here—they want the house pulled down. The council own it now, and they are renting it to Mr O'Brien. The Aboriginals went away to see Mayor Goldie. I don't mind if the council pull it down—some of it is falling down. No one has repaired it for yonks.'

'Mrs Parsons, what about the counterfeit money?'

'What about it?'

'We need proof that Mr O'Brien is the counterfeiter.'

'Well what can I do? I don't know anything about it. Talk to Mr O'Brien. He said he'd be home at four o'clock. I expect the rain has delayed him.'

‘Four! Oh it’s already four-thirty.’

‘Mrs Parsons, could you let us look in the laboratory? Not even go inside—just look from the door?’

‘What! That man would break my legs if he knew. Besides he hides the key. He doesn’t trust me, says I’m a silly old gossip. Well, I suppose I am a bit silly—silly as a two-bob watch my mum used to say, and I can’t deny that I’m old, but really what right has he got to call me a gossip? I hardly get to talk to anyone. Follow me girls. He thinks I’m a stupid old woman, well the old’s fair enough, seventy-two has got to be mutton, and I’m not all that—gossip indeed!--he hides the key in this cupboard, behind his vodka. I’ll tell you he’s a rude man. I don’t care if he does give me the sack. Not like your Mr Thomas, now he was a real gent. I remember the time—’

‘Please hurry Mrs Parsons. Mr O’Brien might come home at any second!’

## **22. MR O’BRIEN \***

Mrs Parsons led the way down to the basement. I don’t think she stopped talking for more than a few seconds. Jodie and I were so worried, knowing that Mr O’Brien could come home at any moment. I wanted to ask her if he had his own key, or would she have to let him in, but I thought if I asked she would talk and talk.

Finally she was just about to unlock the door to the laboratory, which was padlocked with a large brass padlock, when she remembered Snowball. ‘Oh Snowy! I must get her outside and hide the sardines before he comes home. If Mr O’Brien finds her inside again, he’ll kill her.’

She rushed off with the key before we could protest. Jodie was dancing about nervously from foot to foot. ‘Please hurry, please, please hurry. It’s four-forty three!’

‘Here she comes!’

‘Now you know I shouldn’t be doing this and I could get into a lot of trouble?’

‘Yes, yes. Please just open the door before Mr O’Brien gets back.’

She fiddled about with the heavy brass padlock and all the time I heard noises coming from upstairs; creaking timber, rain blowing against the windows, and the wind whistling about the house. Then, just as she swung the door open, there was a huge crash of thunder. The room was in blackness. ‘The lights, Mrs Parsons, can we turn on the lights?’

‘Oh ... do whatever you like. That man has never been nice to me or Snowball. I don’t know why I bother to work for him.’

She turned a switch and at first I braced myself thinking there was more lightening, but it was the fluorescent lights flickering on. They lit the room up with white light. The first one into the room was Mrs Parsons. ‘Aha!’ she trumpeted. ‘Just like I expected from that wretch. An empty bottle of vodka. My father said a man should never drink alone. Though, God knows, my father drank with everyone in town and it did him precious little good!’

Jodie walked tentatively into the laboratory—which was nothing more than an office. The first thing we saw was the large grey machine:

CANON COLOUR LASER COPIER

‘There it is!’

There was another bright flash of lightening, we glimpsed it through the partly drawn curtain on the window, the same one we had looked through from the outside. This time the sound of the thunder followed a second later. Mrs Parsons trembled and seized my arm in fear. Then the lights flicked to half strength before going out completely. We all stood, afraid, in the basement in complete darkness. Mrs Parsons was squeezing my arm with great force. ‘Oh my poor Snowball,’ she said. ‘I’m not going to work for that monster another day! Forcing me to put a tiny cat out in a thunderstorm!’

The lights flickered on and off a few times, then came on properly. Jodie was moving about looking on the benches, looking on the floor, searching for some evidence. Then I saw it. But Mrs Parsons held my arm so tightly I couldn’t move. There at my feet in the bin was a screwed up one hundred-dollar note, and it was obviously photocopied because I could see one side of the note was white

paper. I wanted to bend over and pick the counterfeit note up but with Mrs Parsons still clutching my arm so tightly I could barely move. Snowball wandered into the laboratory looking for company, licking her wet fur. 'Jodie, look in the bin!' She moved over toward the waste paper basket and just as she looked down the lights went out with another crash of thunder.

When they came back on four seconds later, Mr O'Brien was standing in the room with us. Mrs Parsons gave a shriek of fear, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. It was as though he had entered the room like a ghost. He stood there glaring at all of us looking furious. He was as tall as Jodie's father and about the same age, with receding hair—but it was his eyes where you noticed the difference. They were furious, bitter, nasty eyes. We all stopped breathing out of fear, waiting for him to speak.

The first thing the cruel man did was to bend down and pick up Snowball by the scruff of the neck and fling her out into the hallway. She squawked as she flew through the air, actually somersaulting in flight, and using up one of her nine lives she landed on her feet. She didn't stop, but continued running up the stairs and I suspect out into the thunderstorm. Mrs Parsons immediately ran off after her crying and wailing.

Mr O'Brien turned to face me and Jodie. At my feet in the waste paper basket lay a vital piece of evidence. If we could show Sergeant Snowden that, then I felt sure we could convince him. But now I dare not even glance into the bin. The lights flickered off and on.

'What are you two brats doing in here?' He shouted louder than the rumbling thunder. Lightning flashed outside the window followed by a huge clap of thunder. The house shook, the windows rattled and I could feel the force in my whole body. Then the lights gave up the ghost and went out completely. 'Don't move!' he shouted. And a couple of seconds later he held up a tiny cigarette lighter, the flame burning like a candle.

'What are you doing in here?'

'We ... came to feed the cat.'

'In a thunderstorm? You're lying to me! If you little wretches think you can lie to me, then you're mistaken. I'll take you to the police and have you arrested for breaking in and attempting to steal money. Your parents will know that you broke into my house to steal things. How did you get into this room?'

'Mrs Parsons let us in with the key.'

'That witch is finished. Mrs Parsons!' he screamed. 'Get candles and come here.'

'Y-yes Mr O'Brien.' Mrs Parsons was afraid of the dark and the lightening. She was scrambling about at the top of the stairs. Then slowly we saw a flickering light coming toward us.

He turned to me. 'Why did you ask to come into my laboratory?' Mr O'Brien had seized my arm with his left hand. As the flickering candle came closer, he clicked off his cigarette lighter and put it in his pocket. The shadows from the flickering candlelight made his face look hideous. I began to wonder if he might really be a vampire.

'We wanted ... 'I didn't know what to answer. I wanted to lie, but couldn't even think of one. All I could think of was the counterfeit one hundred dollar note in the bin near my feet.

'Well? Now tell me the truth before I get angry!'

I felt quite afraid. Surely he couldn't get more angry than this? Jodie spoke up: 'It's no good, Karen, we'll have to tell him the truth.' I gulped. If we did, he might kill us.

'We heard a story,' Jodie said, 'that you were a vampire.' I looked at his face and a tiny smile appeared for just a second in the corner of his mouth. 'And we wanted to look in the basement to see the coffins and things. We heard vampires only come out at midnight or in thunderstorms so that's why we came here. And it's all silly. This is just a dumb office.'

'Right.' I could see him relax just a little and he let out a long slow breath. 'I'm going to let you go this time. Next time I'm telling the police. Mrs Parsons!' he shouted. 'Get these stupid brats out of my house right now. And you get out with them, now! Got it? Right now with your damn cat as well.'

‘But there’s a thunderstorm.’

‘Good! Get out you miserable witch! I told you no one was to ever—get out of my sight you stupid old gossip. You let these kids in here while I was away. Now you’re sacked. Go! Never, ever come back!’

And as he said that he pushed her out of the laboratory, she staggered a little and almost fell at the foot of the stairs. Jodie scurried after us. The heavy laboratory door slammed shut.

I said, ‘Come on let’s get out of here quickly.’

‘Snowball! I must get her.’

‘Go to the front door and call her,’ Jodie suggested. Slowly we went up the creaking stairs with only the flickering light of the candle to show the way. There was another burst of thunder so loud I shivered with fright. A window must have swung open somewhere because there was a cold wind on our faces, the candle flame shuddered and bent almost horizontal before it disappeared into the blackness; total darkness pressed in around us.

Mrs Parsons wailed, ‘We’ll all die!’

‘Keep calm,’ I said. Her screaming sent waves of panic through my body. I knew we had to get out of there quickly, before five p.m. and before Mr O’Brien came out of that basement and flung us onto the street.

‘Hold hands and keep moving,’ I said. Mrs Parsons started up the stairs, followed by me, then Jodie. Slowly, we felt our way to the top. ‘Which way Mrs Parsons—left or right?’

‘Uh ... oh left, no. No it’s right—this way. It’s raining outside, where will I go?’

‘Come with us. You can stay at our place,’ I said. ‘But we must hurry, before Mr O’Brien comes out.’

We moved slowly down the hallway, like three blind people. Mrs Parsons kept talking about holes in the floor and the rotting floor boards. I worried that we might all disappear into an abyss at any moment, clutching hands like mountaineers falling into a crevice.

Eventually we reached the front door. ‘Snowball! Snowball!’ Mrs Parsons called. There was no answer. ‘I’m not leaving this house without her. I’ll have to go back and look for her.’

‘Oh no!’ Jodie wailed, ‘We haven’t time.’

‘What time is it? I can’t read my watch in the dark.’

‘Open the door Mrs Parsons, so we can see.’ She fiddled in the dark with chains and catches, finally the front door, creaking like a coffin lid, swung open.

Snowball was sitting on the front porch licking the rain from her coat.

‘Oh no! Oh no!’ Jodie shrieked. ‘It’s ten past five! After all that, we’re too late!’

### **23. THE POLICE \***

We walked down the path to the front gate. Mrs Parsons carried the cat which made miserable sounds and kept shaking the rain from its head. At least we were still in our raincoats, but our inside-out umbrellas were in the kitchen of Darkson House. The rain was easing as the storm passed over. But flashes of lightening could still be seen and heard a few kilometres away.

When we opened the gate, we saw a strange sight. I gawked as though I had gone mad. My eyes seemed to be playing tricks—for in the dim light, standing on the footpath I saw two white skeletons dancing in the rain!

We all froze with terror. Then we saw the others. Aboriginal men, their dark-skinned bodies painted with white corroboree paint, looking like bones. Four of them danced in the rain, chanting and moving about.

‘What is this?’

‘It’s the Aboriginals back again.’ Mrs Parsons said.

I turned and looked behind at Darkson House. And near the entrance the white ghost gum had been split down the centre by the bolt of lightening—the fire had gone out but the blackened tree still smouldered. Apparently the Aboriginals took this as a sign that the powers that helped them were working a great change.

‘They want their land back,’ Mrs Parsons said. ‘They should get it too. Nothing but misery has come to all the people who lived in Darkson House. The man who stole the land from them died almost as soon as Darkson House was finished. All the children had bad luck. And now this miserable monster—throwing an old lady and her cat out into the rain at night. Besides he owes me three days wages.’

‘Come on Mrs Parsons, we’ve got to get home quickly.’ We walked down the steep hill, the rain soaked our heads and dripped into our collars. It was amazing how cold the wind was, like winter—yet only yesterday we had sweltered in the summer heat. When we got to the bottom of the hill, a police car came around the corner and stopped. A door swung open and Sergeant Snowden called out: ‘Get in, kids.’

He pushed the two back doors open and we all scrambled onto the seat. To my surprise Mum was sitting in the front of the police car. ‘Are you all okay?’ she asked. The interior light was on.

‘Yes, Mum. What’s happening?’

‘I phoned Sergeant Snowden,’ she was using her sweet voice and I knew she had done a lot of persuading to get the sergeant to do what she wanted. ‘I told him, at five minutes to five, that you and Jodie had gone to Darkson House and collected some evidence that proved the counterfeiter was Mr O’Brien.’

‘Right,’ Sergeant Snowden growled. ‘I was ready to go ahead with sending Mr Thomas to the court. And now this. But believe me, people—if this is a wild goose chase, if you don’t have any real evidence it’ll be all the worse for Mr Thomas. And just remember, you can’t go around accusing people, like you did the printer’s son, without evidence. And not just stories about what you think someone said or did. I need real hold-in-the-hand-evidence.’

It was then I remembered the real evidence was back in the wastepaper basket in Mr O’Brien’s laboratory. He was probably burning it at that very moment.

‘Mrs Parsons,’ he continued, ‘you’ve been living there ever since Mr O’Brien came to town—is he the counterfeiter?’

‘I thought he was an inventor, that’s what he told me. He’s not a nice man I can tell you.’

‘I didn’t ask if he was a nice man. Have you any evidence of him being a counterfeiter?’

‘No. Nothing at all. But I have evidence that he’s a cruel, nasty, spiteful, malicious—’

‘Karen, have you got something definite?’

‘He has a Colour Laser Copier in his office.’

‘There’s no crime in owning a colour photocopier.’

‘But Sergeant Snowden, you said that Mr Thomas had the only one in Dayman Heads!’

‘No, I didn’t. I said it was the only known one in Dayman Heads. A big difference. I can’t arrest a man for owning a photocopier, can I? Have you got any evidence Jodie? If you’ve got no evidence, we may as well go back to the police station.’

Jodie said nothing, but was scrabbling about in her raincoat pocket and making little whimpers.

‘Oh. Oh, no! This one? No! Oh.’

Sergeant Snowden started the engine.

‘Here it is!’ she cried out like she had found the winning gold lotto ticket.

‘What?’

She handed across a piece of white paper the size of a hundred-dollar note. ‘I got this from Mr O’Brien’s waste paper basket when the lights went out.’

When Sergeant Snowden turned it over we could see on the other side it was a hundred-dollar note. The sergeant sat in the car turning it over from the white side, to the photocopied side not saying a word. Then he picked up his microphone and started talking over his police radio. I couldn’t understand a lot of it until the end: ‘All available personnel to Darkson House.’

## **24. THE SEARCH FOR MR O’BRIEN**

Sergeant Snowden drove up the hill and stopped the police car outside Darkson House. The Aboriginals were still out the front chanting softly as if they were calling more misery down onto

that brooding mansion. Now I saw Mr O'Brien's red Celica parked inside the garage. The garage door had not been closed.

'When you left the premises where was Mr O'Brien?' Sergeant Snowden asked.

'In his basement office,' Jodie answered. 'But the electricity had gone off and it was dark inside because all the windows have thick curtains.'

'Do you know if he has a gun?'

'A gun? We didn't see one.'

A few minutes later two more police cars pulled up. Sergeant Snowden got out and asked two men to go around the back of the house. Mrs Parsons said she'd show them where there was a side gate. There were six policemen now, three with torches. When two had gone around the back Sergeant Snowden went up to the front door and pulled the bell rope. I was standing at the front gate watching them. Slowly Jodie walked up the path and I followed with Mum.

'Don't bother with the bell,' my mother said. 'Look under one of those flower pots. Mrs Parsons always puts keys there, that's why Mr Thomas had to sack her.'

Sergeant Snowden did, and he quickly came up with a key. 'I can't believe people still hide keys under flower pots.' The Sergeant and two constables opened the door, turned on their torches and went inside cautiously. Sergeant Snowden turned to us and said, 'Stay here. If you see O'Brien scream your lungs out.'

'Oh we will,' I said.

They disappeared down the hallway while we waited in fear. What if O'Brien came sneaking out? We couldn't tell who was who in the dark. The time dragged by and I began to wonder if Mr O'Brien was giving them some long explanation—how we had broken into his house and hidden the counterfeit money. The rain continued in a fine light drizzle. The time was after six and it was quite dark because of the thick black clouds overhead. The Aborigines had gone around the back to help look for O'Brien. After a very long twenty minutes Sergeant Snowden came out followed by the constables, their torches now showing yellowish beams.

'We couldn't find him inside. He must have fled on foot before we got here.'

'Did he go out the back way?'

'No, there's a man watching. Four of us searched every room. He's gone, but his car is still in the garage. We're going to go down to the bus station. He's probably trying to leave town. If we are quick, we should be able to catch him.'

My mother said, 'He hasn't gone; he's hiding nearby, very close.'

'How do you know?' Sergeant Snowden turned to face her, looking closely at her.

'I have a feel—it's logical,' she said. 'If he were gone, he'd take the car with him. We should talk to Mrs Parsons and see if she knows anywhere he could hide.'

I said, 'Jodie and I will go and get her. Is she still—oh here she comes up the side path.'

'Mrs Parsons,' called out Sergeant Snowden, 'do you know anywhere that Mr O'Brien could be hiding?' Just at that moment all the lights in the house came on simultaneously. The hallway was festooned with lights along the passageway.

Mrs Parsons, looked annoyed. 'You boys couldn't find a spoon in a kitchen. Follow me, I'll soon smoke him out.' We all went inside the house, following Mrs Parsons. She was searching under the stairs, in cupboards, even down in the laboratory where Sergeant Snowden stared at the colour photocopier. But there was no sign of Mr O'Brien.

'Mum, how do you know he's still around the house? How was it logical?' She just smiled at me, giving me a wink, not answering my question. 'I don't think he's inside,' she said. 'He's outside somewhere like ... the garage.'

We all scampered around to the huge garage. The car engine still felt warm. But the garage was deserted; we even checked the nearby cupboards.

‘Maybe,’ I said, ‘we could ask Ron Rocco if he knows of any hiding places. He worked all around the back and front mowing and cleaning up. Perhaps he knows some place—a greenhouse or somewhere hidden in the backyard beneath the trees.’

‘Good idea. You and Jodie go down to his house and bring him back here, while I wait at the front gate.’

At the front door of Rocco’s house Ron’s big brother answered the bell. ‘Yeah? What’s your problem?’

‘Could I see Ron Rocco please?’ The brother just walked off without saying anything, then we heard him yell out: ‘Ronny, two of your little girlfriends are here!’

I felt like going off without waiting for him. I certainly wasn’t his girlfriend. A minute later Rocco came sauntering along, a big smirk on his face. ‘Rocco,’ Jodie said, ‘the police are searching Darkson House trying to find Mr O’Brien. He’s hiding somewhere. Do you know anywhere he could hide outside?’

‘Huh? What are they after him for? Is this another trick?’

‘No, he’s the counterfeiter. And they—’

‘What! Mr O’Brien! He’s the counterfeiter?’

‘Yes, now come on do you know any greenhouse or ... hiding place?’

‘No. Except in all the bushes.’

‘They’ve searched all the bushes.’

‘Yeah, but he could creep around in there and—’

‘The Aboriginals would soon see him.’

‘Are they back again? Hey what about the crypt? Did you look in that? It’s an old coal cellar.’

‘No, I don’t think anyone looked there. Come on you can show us, but you’ve got to hurry.’

When we reached Darkson House, we were all puffing heavily. Mum and Sergeant Snowden were standing on the porch. Sergeant Snowden said, ‘Don’t worry about it, we’ve searched this house thoroughly. He must have gone to the bus depot. We’ll soon pick him up there.’

‘Ron Rocco says there is an old coal cellar around the back.’

‘All right, we’ll have a look before we go.’

‘It’s just out the back door and around the corner.’

Mrs Parsons led everyone through the house and out the back door. As we passed the kitchen, I saw Snowball curled up asleep on a chair.

Mum told me: ‘The Mayor was just talking to Sergeant Snowden on the mobile phone. The council have agreed to return the land to the Aboriginal people. And they intend to pull down Darkson House.’

‘Good idea!’ Mrs Parsons said. ‘Let me know if they need any help.’

Out the back Rocco showed us a trapdoor at ground level. ‘Here. See this door opens up? I went down to see if there was any gold in there. All I found were a few bits of coal.’

Sergeant Snowden pushed us all back, then called another policeman over. He lifted the trapdoor wide open, and shone his torch inside. Slowly, very slowly, his face smiled.

‘Come out Mr O’Brien. We’ve been looking for you.’

We heard a shuffling sound and a sigh, then like a snail coming out from under a cabbage Mr O’Brien climbed the steep steps, looking utterly miserable. He carried a briefcase in one hand. ‘Put that down and turn around. I’m placing you under arrest.’ The constable handcuffed him and took Mr O’Brien, who looked angry and bewildered, out to the police car.

Sergeant Snowden opened up the briefcase on the ground and shone his torch inside. It was loaded up with money: about a thousand hundred-dollar notes. ‘I’d say these are counterfeit, wouldn’t you girls?’

‘I reckon!’

Ron Rocco stood dumbfounded. ‘Sergeant how did you figure out Mr O’Brien was the counterfeiter? Everyone said he was an ... inventor.’

Sergeant Snowden coughed with embarrassment. ‘Son, it was by information received from the public. Right Karen, right Jodie?’

‘Sure. My dad won’t have to go to court now will he?’

‘Certainly not. Would anyone like a lift home?’

Mrs Parsons said, ‘I’m going back to live with my daughter. I’m not staying in that Darkson House one more minute—it’s too spooky. Where’s my Snowball? Snowy! Here she comes, poor dear’s hungry. Sergeant Snowden can you give me a lift back to my daughter’s house in Smith Street?’

‘Yes, all right, as long as you promise not to gossip on the way.’

‘Me! Me gossip? Why I’ll be as silent as Snowball.’

Snowball looked up at Mrs Parsons like she understood perfectly, then deliberately gave a wide-mouthed yawn—as if to say she’d heard it all before.

END