

Black Dog

By Alien Son

Michael is a typical teenager living in an Australian country town. He has a loving family and cool friends, and is doing well at school. Then he suffers a major trauma.

Black Dog is the story of his journey inwards in the aftermath of this life-changing event.

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Black Dog may be read online at www.alienson.com
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(including technical terms) used in the story is also available

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NOTES

"Black dog" is the name Sir Winston Churchill, Britain's prime minister during World War II, gave to his depression. Although this is probably the best-known use of the term, there is evidence that it didn't originate with Churchill. In *'Black dog' as a metaphor for depression: a brief history*, available from www.blackdoginstitute.org.au, Paul Foley examines the origins of the expression.

This is a work of fiction. The people portrayed do not exist, and the events described did not take place. Any similarities between my characters and people you know are pure coincidence. The places and localities I've used are real, and pretty much as described.

FROM THE AUTHOR

Black Dog, my first story, was inspired by the knowledge that many young people are so deep in despair that they consider suicide. I've been there myself, and in writing the novel I have drawn on my own experience of depression to try to give these people hope. As a friend of mine puts it, "suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem." I've been so low that the problems seem overwhelming—and suicide seems like an attractive answer. It's not. It's devastating for those left behind and it leaves many questions unanswered. To put it bluntly, suicide creates more problems than it solves.

Often, a sympathetic ear and an understanding heart are all that's needed to reassure a depressed person that they are special and loved. It's my hope that *Black Dog* might provide that ear and heart for someone who needs it.

Alien Son

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CHAPTER 1: CAPTIVE!

I'd never felt so frustrated in my life. I was learning to ride my first bike, a Christmas gift the year I turned six. I'd been on tenterhooks for days. We had spent Christmas and New Year with my grandparents. It was bad enough that I had to wait until we came home before I could properly try out my new transport; it was even worse that I couldn't get the hang of riding the thing. Why was it so hard to stay on it? I picked myself up off the lawn after yet another fall and stood the bike up again, looking around to see if Dad was coming back yet. He had been coaching me when he'd been called to the phone, and left me to keep trying. I got back on and tried again. I was concentrating hard on keeping upright and didn't notice the young boy watching me from the footpath. I lost my balance; my foot caught in the chain and I yelled in pain as I hit the ground and the bike landed on top of me. Blinking back tears I tried to get my foot out, but in my haste I wasn't thinking straight and only made the pain worse. Then a voice behind me said, 'Here, lie still and I'll help you.'

A few moments later the bike and I were separated, and I was rubbing my foot where the chain had left a deep imprint. 'Thanks,' I said, as I looked up at the other boy. 'Who are you?'

'I'm Travis McKenzie,' he said proudly, rising up to his full height. His brown eyes under an unruly mop of brown hair looked right into mine, as if he expected me to dispute it.

'Oh. I'm Michael Parker. Are you new here?'

'Yes, my mum and me just moved here from Melbourne. I'm seven, and I'm going to be in Year 2 at 545 this year.'

'Me too.' I didn't tell him it would be a few months before I turned seven; I figured he didn't need to know that I was younger than he was.

Our neighbourhood boasted the oldest school in the town, housed in a picturesque 1880s building next to Victoria Park. Its official name was Sale Primary School, but it was known everywhere by its number, 545. Somehow, I was pleased that this new kid would be in my class. He helped me up and I took him inside to meet my family.

Travis lived just around the corner, and from then on we were inseparable. We were a study in contrasts. He was tall and lanky and a bit awkward, while I was shorter, stockier and better coordinated. He was boisterous and full of fun, and always looking for new things to do. I was quiet and read a lot. He was outgoing and made friends easily; I was reserved, but a fiercely loyal ally. Travis always reckoned I was better looking than him, but he had the kind of face that made you want to trust him—even though it just shouted at you that he was about to get up to something. He was quick-witted and was always making me laugh.

We had known each other for a year when a new friend came into our lives.

'Who's that?' Travis asked. It was the first day of school, and he was pointing towards a boy I'd never seen before.

'I don't know. He must be new.'

Travis thought everyone should be his friend, even if they didn't want to be. He went over to the new boy and within five minutes they were best mates; within a few minutes more he was my mate, too (with Travis around I never had any problem making new friends—his friends naturally became my friends; he didn't allow them a choice). The new boy turned out to be Brett Thompson, whose father had taken a job on the Bass Strait oil rigs and moved his family to Sale. Brett was tall and fair, with penetrating blue eyes. He was quiet and serious, and it soon became apparent that he was the class brain. He was a steadying influence on Travis, who listened to Brett whereas he usually ignored everyone else's opinion.

Now that there were three of us, my parents gave me more freedom. Perhaps they reasoned that there was safety in numbers, but I think it was more likely that they simply believed that Brett was more responsible than Travis. Their trust in us was generally well placed, but there were times when they must have been worried sick—and others when they surely felt like strangling us. With Travis around we just seemed to get into scrapes. At least they could never claim that life with Travis McKenzie was dull!

We rode our bikes all around our neighbourhood, roaming further as we grew older and gained confidence. Sale is flat—perfect for bicycles—and there were all sorts of places to explore within easy reach of our homes. We came to love the wetlands and the low-lying flat areas around the town.

In its early days Sale had been an important port, the stepping-off point for passengers and goods destined for the Gippsland goldfields. Although it was inland, a canal had been dug to connect the town with the Thomson River, which flowed into the Latrobe, and then into the extensive Gippsland Lakes system. A cut through the narrow sand dunes at Lakes Entrance opened the lakes to the ocean. Although no one we knew had done so, it was still possible to travel by boat from Sale out into Bass Strait and then to Melbourne. We got to know every metre of the port and the canal, and explored along both rivers as far as we could.

We explored the cattle yards and the showgrounds, the bores that fed Sale's water supply, and the tower that provided the pressure to distribute the water. We made hours of fun out of trying to find the oldest grave in the cemetery (we were thrilled when we found the resting-place of Angus McMillan, a famous explorer). We knew every back road and could find our way anywhere. With Travis egging us on we even swam out to the tiny island in Lake Guthridge one summer day. That got us into trouble because we disturbed the black swans that had built their nests among the pampas grass and bushes.

The three of us were like brothers and considered ourselves part of each other's families. Travis's mum really appreciated this. She had fallen pregnant with Travis in her first year out of high school; her fiancé refused to accept any responsibility for the baby (even denying that he was the father) and left her to fend for herself. She had sworn off men after that and had never had a lasting relationship. Travis had never known a father, and so, to some extent, my dad and Brett's dad filled that role in his life.

My family was fairly typical—two parents and three children. Mum and Dad had been married for nearly twenty years, and still loved each other as much as they had when they first met. Well, that's how it seemed, anyway, because we kids often had to tell them, 'Gross! Knock it off, you two—or at least find somewhere private!' They'd just laugh, knowing we weren't serious, and that we loved how they were still so devoted to each other. Like Travis, some of our other friends had only one parent, or two parents who weren't on speaking terms unless they were yelling at each other. We knew we were blessed, and tried to show Dad and Mum how much we appreciated them.

My older sister, Kellie, and younger brother, Simon, were cool and we got along well. We were a close-knit family; we showed our love for each other in the way we spoke and acted, and our friends often told us how much they wished they had a family like ours. Well, they did, really, because our place was just as much home to all our friends as their own homes were. The warm and comfortable family atmosphere my parents created made our friends feel welcome and wanted, and there always seemed to be a couple of extra kids around.

I was never happier than when I was with my family and friends.

When I was thirteen my parents bought a rambling house that had originally been a private hospital. It was a beautiful Federation-style building on a large block of land, but it had fallen on hard times. It had been converted into flats at some stage; additions had been tacked on, rooms had been converted to kitchens and bathrooms, and doors had been closed off. Only an enthusiastic renovator could have seen any potential in the old building. I'm sure that most people would have torn it down and rebuilt, but Dad and Mum saw something in it that no one else saw. They bought it very cheaply because the owner was desperate to sell. They decided that making it into a home would be a great family project, so we kids were roped in to help. We were dubious about the whole idea, and more than a bit reluctant to comply.

Dad contracted out major repairs and alterations, but we were able to do a lot of the work ourselves. Much to my surprise our parents were right, and Kellie, Simon and I got really involved in the project. All of us enjoyed seeing our efforts rewarded as we contributed to the making of our home. It took nearly two years, but gradually we transformed an old wreck into a really nice family place that we all enjoyed and valued. I found that I really liked the old house, and I thoroughly enjoyed the work involved. I learned new skills and appreciated home more because I had helped to create it.

My parents weren't big on owning possessions. We had what we needed and not much more. Mum and Dad's most prized assets were their children and they put everything they had into making sure that we grew up valuing and respecting ourselves and others, as well as instilling in us high ideals and values. They were constantly encouraging and affirming us—praising us when we did something well, but sympathising and helping us to see where we'd gone wrong when we messed up. They rarely punished us because we always wanted to do our best for them—but we knew very well that they wouldn't hesitate to ground us for life if it became necessary.

I remember vividly the last time I was grounded. Looking back, I can't believe I was so stupid. My fifteenth birthday was coming up and Travis and Brett, both a few months older than me, decided that I needed to celebrate—in their words—"becoming a man." Travis talked an older friend into getting him a bottle of Woodstock, and that Saturday night we rode to the Latrobe River near the old swing bridge to party. Although Travis had bought cola to mix with the whisky, none of us had any idea how much of each to use, so we guessed. Wrongly. After a few drinks all three of us were very tipsy. Instead of staying there and sleeping it off we decided—for reasons best known to our fuddled minds—to ride home to Brett's place. His family was away for the weekend, so I think we probably assumed we could just crash there and Travis and I could go home sober the next day. We often slept over at each other's homes, so we could just phone our parents to tell them we wouldn't be home that night.

However, we didn't realise how badly the whisky had affected us. Drivers tooted as they passed us; we thought they were being friendly, so we waved. We were riding along the white line at the edge of the road (well, we thought we were following the line; later we were told that we were zigzagging dangerously into the traffic lane) when I realised there was a light flashing behind us. 'Hey, what's that light that's flashing?' I asked the others.

Travis glanced back and said 'Oh, it's a cop car, they must be after someone.' They were. Us.

If we had been riding on a back road the police might have just taken us home and handed us over to our parents, but we were on the South Gippsland Highway, one of the main roads out of Sale, and on a Saturday night it was busy. They made a big show of taking us to the station. They lectured us on the dangers of being drunk in charge of a bicycle and riding carelessly on such a busy road. Then they put us in a cell for a couple of hours before they came and told us our parents were there. Well, actually only Travis's mum and my dad. Susan said 'Travis Alexander McKenzie, we need to talk,' gave him a look that would have penetrated body armour, grabbed his arm, and propelled him out to the street and into her car. I knew he was in serious trouble; his mum only ever used his full name like that when he had done something so bad that it would take a parish priest six months to hear his confession.

I watched them get in the car. I was worried; I'd never seen Susan so mad. I turned to Dad, but before I could open my mouth he said, 'Don't worry, she's not going to kill him; he'll be okay.' He looked at me, and then Brett, with an expression that only a parent can conjure up. He was saddened, disappointed and hurt. He didn't say another word; he just grabbed us and helped us out to the car. We drove home to my place in silence. Brett was supposed to stay home to care for the family pets while his parents were away, but I guess my parents didn't think it was safe to let him stay there in his drunken state. I knew his dad and mum would hear all about our escapade when they returned, and I knew their reaction would be pretty much the same as Dad's. At home Mum and Dad hugged us both, said we'd talk in the morning, and helped us into bed.

Our parents must have collaborated, because all three of us received the same punishment. We were grounded for a month and had to go to the police station, report to the two officers who had picked us up, and apologise for taking up their time. They were very gracious and told us they were pleased that they had found us

before we caused an accident. I thought they looked like they were trying not to smile; Dad revealed several months later that they had told him they laughed for ages after they "threw" us in the cell. They said we looked so funny weaving our way along the highway that it was all they could do to keep a straight face when they "arrested" us. He said they were very serious, though, when they told him it would have been only a matter of time before we weaved out in front of the traffic. The possibilities, had we done that, didn't bear thinking about. Our parents also called a meeting and lectured us on the folly of drinking too much. From that time on we were all allowed to have a drink at dinner time. With our parents' guidance we learned to use alcohol responsibly.

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Travis, Brett and I were all in Year 10 at Wellington Secondary College. We were good students and were doing well. We knew just about everyone in our year level. I had always been shy but with Travis and Brett's encouragement I was starting to come out of my shell, and beginning to mix and widen my circle of friends. Brett was the brainy one, and a talented guitarist. Travis played basketball. He was charming and popular, and the class joker. He was saved from many a detention only because he was so loveable, and no one took his pranks very seriously. He was a good student, too, although Brett and I stirred him mercilessly: we reckoned he only did well because we helped him a lot. I loved history and politics and was a member of the school photography club. I enjoyed most types of humour, and introduced Travis and Brett to *Red Dwarf* and *Absolutely Fabulous*, two quirky television programs that only the British could have created. It took my friends a while to get the hang of the jokes, but once they did they were as hooked as I was. All three of us played indoor cricket in the local league; our mixed team, the Wildcats, was made up of members of our year level.

School was good. Home was good. Life was good. The future looked good...but I didn't know what lay ahead.

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It was mid-July. Mum had begun to prepare dinner when she found we'd run out of milk. 'Kids!' she exclaimed, shaking her head. 'Never look beyond the present moment.' Apparently we had overdone it when we made ourselves drinks when we arrived home from school. Mum asked me to go to the shop near Victoria Park to get a couple of litres so we would have milk for breakfast.

I grabbed my bike and headed for the shop. On the way I saw a friend from school so we stopped and chatted for a couple of minutes. I got the milk and started back home, retracing my route through the park. It was now pitch dark and getting cold. I was hungry and looking forward to dinner. Mum was cooking her special lasagne, one of my favourite meals, and we were having fruit salad and ice cream for dessert.

I was riding through a dark area of the park, deep in thought—preoccupied with a history assignment we had been given that day. Suddenly there was a "shhhht" sound

and a split-second later something wet sprayed on my face. It stung and I couldn't breathe, and my eyes closed reflexively. I started coughing, and lost control of the bike. I was falling. It must have taken only a second, but I remember it as if it happened in slow motion. I landed heavily on my left shoulder and my head hit the pathway. I felt pain as the gravel bit into my clothes and my face and hands. I stopped sliding, and then everything went black.

I have no idea how long I was unconscious, but I remember having a bad dream. I was hurt badly. I was being carried in someone's strong arms to the hospital. Only I wasn't taken to hospital; I was thrown into the back of a van and driven on a long journey. When the van finally stopped I was pulled out of the vehicle and dragged into a building. I heard a door open and I was pushed roughly. I stumbled into a room and fell on the floor. I blacked out.

The next thing I remember is hurting all over. That, and feeling hungry. And cold. My eyes were sore, my face felt like it was on fire, and I couldn't stop coughing. I must have faded out again because I seemed to be reliving the dream I'd had earlier.

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Someone was shaking me. It hurt. In fact, I seemed to hurt everywhere, and I was still hungry and cold. At least my eyes were no longer hurting and I wasn't coughing. I opened my eyes and gasped. There was a man standing over me, staring at me with eyes that seemed to look right through me; an evil grin was playing on his lips.

'Who are you? Where am I? Why am I here?' The questions tumbled out of my mouth, but I may as well have been talking to a stone. He didn't say a word. In fact he didn't even acknowledge that I'd spoken. That, and the grin, unnerved me and I fell silent—which is exactly what he wanted, I guess. In fact, he scared me witless. He was ugly, with a scar under his left eye. His hair was closely shaven and he had a thick, drooping moustache. He was tall and solidly built and looked really mean.

The man left the room. I tried to sit up, but that caused pain all over my body. I raised my head as much as I could and looked around. There was no window, but a skylight in the ceiling flooded the room with light. I was lying on a double bed, the only furniture in the room. It was an old house, judging by the high ceiling and ornate trims, and not well cared for if the peeling paint on the walls was any indication.

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The man—I came to think of him as The Monster—held me captive for another five days before I managed to find a way to escape. I became his sex slave. He had stripped me naked, and that was how I stayed for the whole time I was there. I had to be available and ready whenever he felt like using me. I tried to resist the first few times, but that only got me beaten. It was humiliating, but less painful, to do what he demanded. He forced me to perform oral sex on him, and he raped me repeatedly. I was in constant pain from his penetrating me. I guessed that he had torn something, because I bled every time he entered me, and the sheet on the bed became filthy. Sitting on the toilet was an exquisite form of torture; I had to go, but when I did it

hurt like blazes and resulted in more bleeding. My injuries from falling off my bike went untreated; he gave me a little food and water, but I was constantly hungry and could feel myself growing weaker. I had to wrap myself in blankets to keep warm.

I needed to get out of this place, but how? The Monster kept me in the locked bedroom and he would come to me only when he wanted sex. I never saw the rest of the house, and he never spoke one word in all the time I was there. During the day he would disappear for hours at a time; I assumed he went out to work. I decided that I had my best chance of escaping during one of his absences; all I had to do was find a way out.

My prison was small. There was just enough room for the bed, with a narrow space on three sides. As I had first thought, there was no other furniture. There was a tiny windowless bathroom off one side of the room, and that was where I started to search for a way out. There was an exhaust fan high in one wall and I thought if I could remove it there might be a hole big enough for me to squeeze through. First, I'd have to climb up to it, though, and it looked like that would be impossible for a fit person, let alone me in my weakened and injured state. It caused a fair amount of pain, but I managed to clamber on to the handbasin attached to the wall and that brought me within about a metre of the fan. Now that I was closer I could see that it was only about 20 centimetres in diameter—far too small a hole for me to fit through even if I could get up there.

I was deeply disappointed. I sat down on the bed to rest, and to think about my predicament. Could I rush my captor when he came into the room? Could I overpower him while he was having sex with me? The second question was easily answered—no, because he handcuffed me to the bed each time and only released me when he was finished. Rushing him wouldn't achieve much, either, because he was so much bigger and stronger than I was. Even fit and well I would be no match for him. Could I break the door down? I tried putting my good shoulder to it, but it didn't even bend, let alone break. Of course, it opened inward, so that made it hard to do anything from the inside. I tried to remember if I'd read a book or seen a movie that might give me an idea, but nothing came to me.

I was worried. The Monster wasn't feeding me properly, he didn't care about my injuries, and I began to believe he was simply going to use me until I died. He would dispose of my body secretly and no one would ever know what had happened to me. I'd given up trying to talk to him because he never spoke a word. During his absences I talked and sang to myself. There was nothing else to do; a few times I had asked for a book or magazine to read, or a radio to listen to, but I gave up when he just wouldn't respond. At least talking and singing kept my mind active. In time it also gave me inspiration.

Lying on the bed passively as I was violated wasn't good for my sanity, so during those times I thought about life before my kidnapping. That helped take me away to another place and eased the pain. During one particularly rough session of sex my captor had the bed rocking, and I suddenly realised that it seemed to be tilting. *Man, this old house is a wreck*, I thought. For some reason that thought came back to me later, after The Monster had left for the night. *Hey, that's a song, isn't it?* In primary school my class had learned "This Ole House" and now some of the words came to mind. I started to sing the chorus quietly:

*Ain't a-gonna need this house no longer
 Ain't a-gonna need this house no more
 Ain't got time to fix the shingles
 Ain't got time to fix the floor
 Ain't got time to oil the hinges
 Nor to mend the window-pane
 Ain't a-gonna need this house no longer
 He's a-gettin' ready to meet the saints¹*

The second or third time it hit me—*Ain't got time to fix the floor...*! The bed had felt like it tilted; maybe the floor had a hole in it or had a weak spot. I might be able to get out through the floor! I got really excited until I realised that, even if I could make a hole big enough for me to fit through, there might not be enough room under the house for me to crawl out.

The next morning after The Monster had gone to work I went around the room carefully, searching for holes or weak spots in the floor. The bed was an old-fashioned type that had a wire spring base attached to a timber head and foot, with an innerspring mattress. I found that the legs at the head of the bed were resting on a board that had been nailed on top of the floor. When I stood on the end of this board it sank. 'Yes!' I almost shouted. 'There's a weak spot in the floor!' I might be able to make a hole, but would there be enough crawl space underneath?

The bed was heavy, but I managed to move it away from the wall. Pressing down on the rotten floor, I got my hands under the nailed-on board and lifted. It came away easily, and I was elated to find that it had been covering a hole. I lay down and looked through it. I could feel air coming in and there was light underneath. I could see the ground; it was only about 30 centimetres below, but I was right at the side of the house and there was nothing between me and freedom! All I had to do was make the hole bigger.

That proved to be more difficult than I expected, but I was able to use the board I'd pulled up to lever off pieces of the floor until there was enough room for me to fit through. I'd started to crawl out when I remembered I was naked. I pulled a blanket off the bed. That would have to do; at least I'd be decent and its dark colour would give me a bit of camouflage if I needed it.

Once outside the house I discovered I was on a farm and about a hundred metres from a road.

I took stock. I wanted desperately to get away from that place, but I was wary of dashing out on to the road or going to another farmhouse in case The Monster had friends in the area and I got caught again. There was a clump of trees in the paddock a little way from the house, so I headed for it, thinking it would hide me from the house as well as the road. From there I could see that the road ended at a T-intersection a few hundred metres away and I could see traffic on the other road. I decided to make my way to that road and try to flag down a car to get help.

¹“This Ole House” was written by Stuart Hamblen and published by Duchess Music Ltd. It was recorded by Rosemary Clooney on May 22 1954, and released as a single. It reached #1 on *Billboard* magazine's charts, and was in the charts for 23 weeks. Source: www.rosemaryclooney.com, accessed February 6, 2008

Pain and the lack of shoes made it difficult to walk, so I had to take my time, but eventually I was crouched behind some bushes beside the road. *It might be best to try to find a woman driver on her own, I thought, then I'll have a better chance of fighting back if I run into trouble.* I let the first few cars pass, and then I spotted a small car being driven by a young woman, alone. I ran out on to the road, waving to her to stop. She swerved around me, but skidded to a halt a few metres away. She got out of the car and, as fast as my injuries would allow, I moved towards her. She looked angry. I thought she was about to yell at me for nearly causing her to have an accident, but as I limped closer her expression changed.

'Good grief! What happened to you?'

'I was kidnapped,' I said, hoping that would be sufficient explanation.

The young woman's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. 'You're Michael, aren't you? Your picture's been on TV and in all the papers. They're looking everywhere for you!' She seemed frozen, rooted to the spot where she stood. I guess my sudden appearance was a bit of a shock.

I had already decided that the first thing I would do would be to tell the police everything I knew so that they had a chance to catch The Monster. 'Can you take me to a police station?' I asked.

That broke the spell, and she helped me into her car and tried to make me comfortable. I said, 'I'll need to tell the police where we are, and the name of that road.' I pointed to the road that stopped at the T.

'Okay, gotcha,' she said. She told me her name was Maree, and that it was Wednesday. I'd been attacked the previous Wednesday night, so I'd been held captive for a week.

Fifteen minutes later we were pulling up outside Sale police station. She'd wanted to take me to the hospital, but I insisted on talking to the police first. She had let me use her mobile phone to call home, and when we walked in Mum and Dad were there—along with a couple of detectives who had been working on my case. They all wanted to get me to the hospital, too, and I lost it.

'I'm not going anywhere until I tell you all I know so that you can catch the bastard who did this to me!' I yelled. 'I want to make a statement!' Perhaps I'd watched too many TV crime shows, but that seemed to do the trick and the detectives took us all into an interview room. Maree told the police where she had picked me up, and I described the farmhouse and its direction from the intersection. I gave them a description of my attacker and told them I thought he worked during the day. I was pretty sure they would find my clothes in the house, and there was the bed sheet with my blood on it. That would prove that I had been in the house. I said I could describe the room in which I had been held, but they said that could wait.

I guess the adrenaline stopped flowing then. I broke down, sobbing and shaking uncontrollably, and collapsed on the floor.

CHAPTER 2: SAFE!

I was having a bad dream. I was hurt badly. I was being carried in someone's strong arms to the hospital. Only I wasn't taken to hospital; I was thrown into the back of a van and driven on a long journey. When the van finally stopped I was pulled out of the vehicle and dragged into a building. I heard a door open and I was pushed roughly. I stumbled into a room and fell on the floor. I blacked out.

A soft voice was calling my name. It was soothing, and I wanted to answer—to tell the speaker that I could hear them—but when I opened my mouth no sound came out.

I was hurting all over, hungry and cold. There was a man standing over me, staring at me with eyes that seemed to look right through me; an evil grin was playing on his lips. He had a round face with a huge scar on his cheek. I tried to pull my arm over my eyes to shut out the horrible sight, but I couldn't move. I blacked out again.

There was the voice again, talking to me softly. It sounded familiar, but I couldn't seem to place it. I tried to speak, but it was as if I was gagged.

The man reappeared. This time he was naked, and aroused. Roughly, he threw me on to a bed and handcuffed me to it. I screamed as he forced himself into me. Then I was singing, *Ain't a-gonna need this house—*

Someone was holding my hand. Another hand was caressing my hair. I thought I could hear a voice, but I couldn't understand what it was saying. With an almighty effort I managed to focus. It was my mother. '...get through this together, Michael, it's going to be all right.'

Mum! Get me out of here. Get me away from this monster! I blacked out, again.

I was creeping away from a building, trying to be inconspicuous and worried that someone would see me. I was wrapped in thick, warm material but I was still shivering from the cold. Now I was limping, stumbling across a paddock. I saw my family and friends beckoning me, urging me on. *Why won't they help me? Why is it so hard to walk?* After what seemed an eternity I came to a road. *Have to stop a car and get away from here.* There was a barbed wire fence. To me, weak and in pain, it was an impenetrable barrier. I was devastated. *How am I going to get through?* Then the picture changed. It was later, and the fence was behind me now. I was stepping on to the road. There was a screech of brakes. Everything went black.

'Michael, wake up, mate. We all miss you. We all love you...*I love you—*' The voice cracked, but I recognised it as Brett's. I had to talk to him, but somehow there was a barrier between us; it was as if we were in different dimensions. I was still hurting all over, and hungry, but...I was warm now; something had changed. Everything drifted out of focus again.

There was a jumble of voices. My parents, my sister and brother, Travis and Brett, and others that I didn't recognise. Someone was yelling at me, 'You're in big trouble this time!'

What have I done? Why am I in trouble?

'Come on little bro. If you don't wake up I'll kill you myself!'

Then, disembodied voices, laughing hysterically, echoing around me, as if to say, 'We've got you now; we'll never let you go!' I curled into a ball and covered my ears, and silence replaced the raucous laughter.

I was in a car, being driven somewhere. Then, as if I was in a movie, the scene changed abruptly, and I was shouting at people—frustrated because they wouldn't listen. Who was I shouting at, and what was I trying to tell them? My parents were there, and a young woman I didn't recognise, and a couple of men in suits. *Where am I? What's happening?* I stood up to make a speech. I was eloquent and forceful, and everyone listened intently. Just as I finished speaking everything went black and I felt myself falling.

The Monster was on top of me again. I was lying on my back with my legs doubled back; he was holding my ankles down beside my head and his face was centimetres from mine. The pain was terrible, and his weight was crushing me. I was having trouble drawing breath. *Get off me you bastard! I'm suffocating!* My head was thrashing back and forth as I tried to gulp in air. He lifted his hand to hit me. 'No! No!' I screamed.

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'Michael! Michael, it's all right, you're safe here!' A hand was caressing my forehead; another was holding my hand. The voice was comforting and I began to calm down. I grasped the hand that was holding mine. I heard someone yelp in surprise. 'He's waking up! He squeezed my hand!' *Brett?* I heard another voice, calling someone. *Travis!* The familiar voices were comforting. I felt relief wash over me. *I'm safe—safe at last!*

I hardly dared to hope that the voices were real. I opened my eyes, half expecting to see The Monster looking down at me with his evil grin. But he wasn't there. The room was different and I was no longer naked on that dirty bed in my tatty prison. I was wearing a white gown and the bed and the room looked spotless. There was a tube in my arm, and wires hanging off me. Where was I? *Hospital? Am I in hospital?* I turned my head, and looked right into the anxious face of my best friend. 'Brett,' I managed to croak.

'Michael! Thank God!' A couple of tears made their way out of his eyes and ran slowly down his cheeks. Brett gave a loud sigh and slumped down on to the bed. After a few moments he looked up, blinking away more tears. 'You just disappeared. We thought we'd never see you again. And then you turned up, but you've been unconscious for nearly a week and we thought you weren't going to wake up.' He reached over and hugged me. When he let me go we were both crying. We looked at each other and hugged again. I lay back and closed my eyes. I was weak, and even though I'd just woken up, I felt tired. I felt a hand on my shoulder and opened my eyes. It was my other best friend, his cheeky grin lighting up his face. I was too choked up to speak, but I did manage a weak smile.

Brett moved his chair back and stood to give Travis room to move closer. Travis leaned over and hugged me. When he straightened up again there were tears running

down his cheeks, too. 'Hey, it's good to have you back.' He just stood there, looking down at me.

After that there was a flurry of activity. Karen, one of the nurses, came in to tell me my family was on its way to the hospital. Apparently they had been visiting earlier but had gone home not long before I woke up.

A man wearing a white coat and a stethoscope followed close on Karen's heels. 'Hello, Michael. I'm Doctor Emery,' he said, and after a moment's thought added with a smile, 'And that doesn't mean I have an abrasive personality!'

Karen was busy checking my temperature and blood pressure, but she still managed to groan and shake her head at the doctor's joke.

The doctor examined my eyes and throat, and asked questions at the same time. 'Are you feeling any pain anywhere? Have a headache? Sore throat? Can you see? Is your vision blurred?' I didn't get a chance to do much other than nod or shake my head. He seemed to be satisfied, and explained that he would leave me hooked up to the machines until he came back in the morning to give me a thorough examination. By the time he was ready to leave Dad, Mum, Kellie and Simon were at the door. The doctor allowed them a twenty-minute visit. I was very weak, he told them, and wouldn't feel up to talking.

He was right. I don't remember much of that night. I was pretty wakeful for the first few minutes, but after that I kept dozing off. I recall saying goodbye to my family and Brett, and I remember Travis talking to me after everyone else had left, but it's all very hazy.

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I woke in the morning feeling stronger and much more alert. Karen came and had a chat before she went off duty, and introduced Judy, who would be my nurse during the day. Travis had gone home earlier while I was still sleeping, they told me, and was planning to visit me after school. Doctor Emery had been delayed by an emergency and would not be able to see me until after lunch. That was good in a way because I got to spend the morning with my mum.

She poked her head in the door just after I had eaten my breakfast (corn flakes and orange juice had never tasted so good) and the tray had been cleared away. 'How are you feeling this morning?'

'Much better, thank you.'

She came over and gave me a hug and a kiss. She stood beside the bed, gazing at me. A tiny smile playing on her lips made me think she knew something I didn't.

'What?'

'Nothing...I was just thinking how good it is to have you alive and well. You gave us a terrible fright, you know.'

'I suppose I did. It wasn't too crash-hot for me either.' I managed a weak smile, trying to put on a brave face, but memories of my imprisonment and rape came flooding back and I started to cry. 'Mum, it...it was...awful!'

Mum sat on the bed and put her arm around me. I cuddled up to her like I had as a child when something was bothering me. 'Michael, I can't imagine what you've been through. When the doctor told us about your injuries and what that man had done to you I sat down and cried—and your dad wasn't much better.' She paused to take a deep breath.

'The important thing is you're safe now. And they caught the man; he's been in custody since the day you escaped.'

'Really?'

Mum nodded.

I sighed, 'Well, that's a relief; I hope they will be able to prove what he did.'

Mum chuckled, 'I don't think there's going to be any problem getting a conviction.' She started marking off points on her fingers, 'They found his DNA on you, your blood in his house, your DNA in his van, your clothes in his house—with his DNA on them—and they have a witness who saw him in his van at the park that night. Oh, and they found a can of capsicum spray near where your bike was found. It had his fingerprints on it. He must have dropped it; I doubt he would have intended to leave it lying around to be found.'

A light went on in my head. 'Capsicum spray! Aha!'

'What?'

'That's why I fell off my bike. I heard a 'shhhht...' noise, then this stuff hit me in the face. It made me close my eyes, and my face stung like heck. And I couldn't breathe and it made me cough. But where would he have got it? I thought it was illegal.'

'It is, but he was a prison officer so he might have got it from work.'

'How did they catch him?' I asked, trying to keep up with a multitude of thoughts.

'Well, you can thank yourself for that! The police used the information you gave them. They found out quickly who owned the farmhouse. From the owner they found out the name of the tenant and where he worked, and they arrested him at the end of his shift that same day—before he had a chance to go home and find that you'd escaped.'

'It turned out that he had abused other kids, but hadn't been caught before. Apparently he was very good at covering his tracks, but his luck ran out this time.'

'He's a monster, Mum. I'm really glad they caught him,' I said sadly.

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I was keen to hear what had happened the night I was kidnapped—when I didn't make it home from the shop—so Mum gave me the whole story.

'You hadn't arrived back by the time dinner was ready, and that's when we started to worry. At first we thought you must have got talking to someone and forgotten what the time was.'

'As if I'd do that, Mum,' I said, wryly.

Mum chuckled. I was renowned for losing track of time.

'Dad and Simon drove to the shop, and found that you had been there and bought the milk. Simon grabbed the torch out of the car and walked through the park while Dad drove around to the other side. Simon found your bike under a bush with the front wheel a bit buckled. The milk carton was lying on the ground and all the milk had leaked out. Thinking you had run into something and damaged the wheel, they thought you must have walked home. Then they realised the damage wasn't enough to prevent you from walking home with the bike, but they drove home slowly, anyway, keeping an eye out for you. When there was no sign of you anywhere on the way home Dad phoned the hospital, thinking you might have been hurt and someone had taken you there. But you weren't there and that's when we really began to worry. Dad called the police.

'They turned up very quickly because they'd had a couple of reports of a man lurking in the park a few nights before.

'We convinced them that you wouldn't have disappeared voluntarily, and after they found the can of capsicum spray they began to think you had been kidnapped. When there was no ransom demand or any other contact from a kidnapper the police put your photo in all the newspapers and on TV, and broadcast appeals for information on the radio as well.'

Mum's eyes teared up, and I took her hand to comfort her. My disappearance must have affected my family and friends deeply, and I couldn't begin to imagine how they had coped with the situation and got through that first week. Mum took a deep breath and continued.

'The only information the police uncovered in the next few days was that someone who lived near the park had seen an old van parked in the street the night you disappeared, and mentioned that they had seen it a few nights earlier, too. That turned out to be the night the police received the report about the man lurking in the park. In an effort to throw light on your disappearance the detectives looked backed through old kidnappings. They turned up three unsolved crimes—going back about ten years—where teenage boys had disappeared. These cases had been in other towns in other parts of the state, but there were similarities with yours. Everyone was worried because only one of those boys had been found. He had been abused terribly, and allowed to die, and the kidnapper had never been caught.

'We were all kind of numb. Dad and I tried to keep our cool so we could be strong for Kellie and Simon, but at times they had to comfort and encourage us. Simon was amazing. He was really upset that you were gone, but he also never gave up hope that you would be okay. He kept saying, "Michael's all right!" Every time someone asked him how he knew, he said "I just know!" At first I thought he was simply being

positive, but then it became obvious that he really was convinced that you would be coming home.

'Your dad's birthday came and went and we hardly noticed it. None of us could find much to celebrate with you missing like that.' She managed a smile. 'Getting three pairs of socks didn't help his disposition much either.'

'Brett and Travis and their families were really great. The boys spent half the time at our place just helping to keep our spirits up. They never seemed to lose hope either, and just accepted Simon's word that you were "all right".'

'I can't describe the relief when the phone rang that day and I heard your voice! Your dad couldn't understand what I was saying when I phoned him to tell him. He had to tell me to stop talking and take a few deep breaths and start again. When I finally managed to tell him that you were on your way to the police station, there was a great "Woohooo" and he hung up the phone without even saying goodbye. He told me later that everyone in the office nearly jumped through the roof when he yelled—and then they all cheered when he told them that you were safe.'

Mum and I were laughing and crying at the same time. I could just imagine Dad yelling at the top of his voice and the surprise of his staff (although they shouldn't have been surprised; I'd heard them say often enough—with a grin and a wink—that they reckoned he was crazy; no prizes for guessing where my weird sense of humour came from). That was making me laugh, but the memories of my ordeal and thoughts of the pain that my family had endured were making me very emotional. Mum and I just hugged each other for a long time as our tears gradually dried up. It had been upsetting, but I was really grateful that Mum had been willing to fill me in on what had happened at home while I was gone.

Then it was my turn to talk. Mum made me tell her a little about what The Monster had done to me, and how he had "cared" for me while I was captive. I didn't feel like talking too much about those days, but I understood Mum's need to know. I was much more comfortable when it came to telling her how I'd escaped and how I'd given Maree a fright when I ran out in front of her car.

Mum chuckled. She and Dad had contacted the young driver to thank her for her help. She told them that when I appeared in front of her, wrapped in a blanket and looking desperate, her first thought was that I was an escapee from a psychiatric ward—or someone playing a practical joke on her, put up to it by one of her friends. I'd frightened the life out of her and she had only calmed when she recognised me from news reports.

Mum and I filled the rest of the morning talking about family and friends and local events. I caught up with a lot of things that had happened in the family and at school while I had been "away."

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After lunch Doctor Emery appeared in the doorway with Judy. 'How are you feeling today, Michael?'

'Pretty good, thanks. I had a really good sleep last night.'

'Excellent, just what the doctor ordered.' He chuckled at his own joke.

'I don't believe you just said that,' said Judy. 'Haven't you run out of those bad jokes yet, Doctor?'

Mum laughed. 'You should hear Michael's jokes. Sick pun after sick pun.' She shook her head. 'It's really sad.'

'You know you love them, Mum,' I said.

'Oh, no!' Judy groaned. 'Not *more* puns?'

The doctor chuckled. 'I can see we're going to get along fine, Michael.' He shot Judy a defiant look. 'If we stick together we'll wear them down. By the time you leave here we'll have them rolling in the aisles—well, the corridors, anyway.'

Mum laughed again. 'You might as well surrender, Judy. Punsters never give up, no matter how much you groan. In fact, I have a theory that groaning only encourages them.'

Judy rolled her eyes.

'Now...' Doctor Emery continued, 'Let's get all these tubes and wires off, and then we'll have a good look at you.' He unhooked the electrodes connecting me to the heart rate monitor and Judy moved the machine out of the way. Then Judy took the drip line from my elbow while the doctor removed the catheter.

'There, now you'll just have to live independently,' he chuckled.

I grinned. *Man, this guy's a barrel of laughs!*

'Michael, you had some pretty nasty injuries when they brought you in. There was bruising to your torso and face, a couple of bumps to the skull, skin scraped off your face and shoulder and hands, the soles of your feet were cut and scraped, and your backside was torn badly. As well as all that you were dehydrated and malnourished.

'You were also unconscious. I think what happened was that you concentrated all of your strength on surviving while you were captive, and then the adrenaline rush kept you going until you got away safely and talked to the police. When you didn't need to fight any more your body kind of shut down. I think there was probably a bit of delayed shock in there as well.

'We decided to keep you sedated so that your body could put all of its resources into healing, and not have to worry about day-to-day living. We fed you through the drip, the catheter took care of your bladder, and a ventilator took care of breathing. We took you off the ventilator when you started to breathe on your own, but if your throat is a bit sore, it's because you had a tube in there for a few days.

'We did CAT and MRI scans, and took X-rays as well. We couldn't find any fractures or any sign of brain or other organ damage, so it was really just a matter of allowing time to heal the injuries.'

He poked and prodded all over my body; it seemed like he left no spot untouched. He even examined my backside. Eventually he seemed to be satisfied. 'Well, you're looking pretty good,' he said, 'I think we can move you out of intensive care now.'

'A couple of my colleagues will be in to see you later today or tomorrow. One is a neurologist who will do some tests to check your brain function, and the other is a psychologist who will talk to you to see how you're feeling emotionally. If they are happy with you, nothing unexpected crops up, and you are getting your strength back, you should be able to go home in a few days' time.' He smiled, 'You have some very special people around you, Michael. We did everything we could, but without your family and friends I doubt you would have made it.'

I smiled faintly, 'Yeah, they're the best.'

He gave Judy some instructions for my care, then turned back to me. 'Okay, Michael, I'll drop in again tomorrow.' He surprised me by putting his hand on my shoulder and giving it a squeeze.

'Thanks, Doc.'

He was almost out the door when I remembered I had a question. 'Oh, Doctor?'

He stopped and returned to me, his raised eyebrows giving me the go-ahead.

'I think I was attacked with capsicum spray. Would it have done any damage?'

'One hit is unlikely to have any permanent effects. It disables a person quite dramatically and it's pretty uncomfortable while it lasts, but the severe effects usually only last for about 45 minutes. You would have had sore eyes and burning skin and coughing fits, that gradually eased?'

I nodded.

'We'll be checking your eyes anyway because of the knocks to your head, so if there's anything wrong we'll find it. I think you'll be fine, though.'

'Thanks, Doc.' This time I let him leave.

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Mum left when Travis arrived after school. Brett and Simon would come in later, he said. They didn't want to wear me out by having too many visitors around at the same time.

I had been moved out of intensive care during the afternoon, and Travis sat on my bed and looked around my new room, and then gazed into the courtyard outside the window. Neither of us spoke; for quite a while we just sat there in silence. We'd been best friends for so long that we could communicate without words, and Trav's eyes showed a mixture of love, compassion, and anguish. I guessed he was thinking about what *might* have happened.

Finally, I couldn't help it; I started crying again. The sense of relief that I was safe and back with my family and friends was overwhelming. I managed a weak grin, and said 'It's good to be back!'

Travis burst out laughing, even though there were tears in his eyes, too.

'What? What's so funny?'

Still laughing, he managed to say, 'Sorry, but that just sounded so lame!'

I was a bit miffed. 'Well, it is good to be back,' I said, defensively.

Travis grinned. 'I know it is, and it's really, really, good to have you back. I was just expecting something a bit more articulate from the class poet.'

'Class poet? Ohhhh!' I rolled my eyes. A couple of months earlier I had handed in an English assignment that included some free-form poetry, and, to my embarrassment, our teacher had raved over it. My friends had teased me mercilessly ever since.

Suddenly, I remembered something Doctor Emery had said. 'Trav, the doctor said I wouldn't have made it without you guys. What did you do?'

Travis grinned. 'Oh, man, you wouldn't believe the drama we had. You collapsed at the police station and everyone panicked. You were still unconscious when they brought you here, and then they decided to keep you sedated because you were so badly hurt. The doctors thought that would give your body a chance to recover and save you from a lot of the pain. But when they tried to bring you out of it you wouldn't wake up.'

'Kellie, Brett and I decided we'd stay here in shifts, so that one of us was always with you. Kellie would come early in the morning, Brett would take over in the afternoon, and I'd come in late at night. Simon wanted to help, too, but your mum and dad thought he'd get too upset if he was here on his own, so he'd come in and spend time with one of us. Your dad and mum were here a lot of the time, too. We kept booting them out because they were stressed out, and we reckoned they were needed more at home, but they wouldn't listen to us. I don't know how your dad managed to go to work and still spend so much time here; he couldn't have been getting much sleep. Your mum was here all day the days she didn't have to work.'

'We talked to you, we hugged you, we held your hand, we even told you we loved you.' He grimaced, as if it pained him to admit that. I chuckled. He didn't have to tell me he loved me; I already knew—but I could imagine how hard it was for him to actually tell me.

'Every now and then,' Travis continued, 'We'd tell you off—especially Brett and Kellie. They were getting really cheesed off with you. They thought you didn't want to wake up; they reckoned you'd given up.'

'That thought only made us fight harder, and the doctors kept telling us to keep going. They said we were making a difference—that we were all that stood between life and death for you. Man, that was scary. Kellie got so fired up one day that I thought she was going to slap you around.'

I had to laugh. Kellie must have been really annoyed. She's normally quiet and measured; nothing fazes her. The thought of her hitting me just seemed ludicrous.

'Anyway, a couple of days ago, the doctors began to notice an improvement. You weren't moving, and you didn't give any sign that you knew we were here, but your body started to function normally. Then, yesterday something seemed to be happening, and just as I got here last night you started thrashing around on the bed. Your head was twisting back and forth, and you were yelling 'No! No!' That was the first time you had said anything. Brett was holding your hand and talking to you, and

you calmed down. He nearly jumped through the roof when you squeezed his hand, and I went running to tell Karen. When I got back you were awake.'

'Wow! I thought I was dreaming! It was all kind of mixed up together—I would hear people talking to me, but I couldn't respond. It was like being in some sort of halfway house. I wasn't properly awake, but I wasn't really unconscious, either. I kept drifting backwards and forwards. It was weird. I didn't know whether I was really hearing you guys, or whether it was my mind playing tricks. Just before I woke up I was dreaming that I was back...back there, and he was...hurting me again. I was thrashing my head around because I couldn't breathe, and he was going to hit me. I remember shouting 'No!' in the dream, but I must have shouted out loud.'

Travis looked at me. 'You're safe now, Mikey,' he said.

That made me giggle. 'Heh, I haven't heard that name for years!'

'Yeah, I used to call you that all the time, remember? I must have stopped when we were about eleven,' he said. 'Oh, I know—you decided it was "babyish" and it wouldn't do for a "big eleven-year-old."' He made quotation marks in the air as he emphasised the words I had used. He chuckled, 'I think I'll start using it again,' then cried, 'Ow!' when I bopped him on the arm.

We had a good laugh together.

Travis looked at me thoughtfully. 'I can only guess what you've been through, Mikey,' he said, ducking as I tried to hit him again, 'But it's over now, and he's not going to hurt anyone else, ever again.'

CHAPTER 3: EMERGENCE

The next few days passed quickly as I began to emerge from the fog that had shrouded my life for two weeks. My family and close friends were frequent visitors, and just as their presence had helped keep me alive when I was unconscious, now their visits pepped me up and helped me to recover quickly. As the days passed and I grew stronger the circle widened to take in students and teachers from school, as well as other friends.

There were other visitors, too.

The neurologist, Mr Perkins, came in the first morning I was in my new room and carried out his tests. He was kind of formal, but friendly enough. His examination took about half an hour. He was thorough and efficient, checking my vision, hearing and reflexes, and asking all sorts of questions which, he explained, would show up any problems with my memory, concentration, speech and my use of language. He said he would like to see me again—after I'd been up and walking for a couple of days and had more strength—and check my balance and co-ordination. 'But, for the moment there's nothing to worry about that I can see. Your injuries don't seem to have had any permanent effect.'

Later that day Mum and I were sharing a joke when the door opened and Groucho Marx walked in. Well, it turned out to be the psychologist, Dr Cazelaar, but for a moment I believed in reincarnation. Peter, as he told us to call him, was a real character, and he had Mum and me laughing within a couple of minutes. Mum excused herself and took a book out into the courtyard. She sat out there, reading, while the doctor and I talked.

We chatted about all sorts of things, and it was a fun and relaxed conversation. I was impressed, later, when I realised that he had managed to slip in plenty of questions about my kidnapping and my captor and what I thought about him.

Finally, the doctor knocked on the window and called Mum back, waiting until she was settled in a chair before he continued speaking. 'Michael...' He turned serious all of a sudden, and looked to Mum to make it clear that he was talking to her as well as me. 'You've had a shocking experience that no one should ever have to go through. You seem to be coping remarkably well, and I know you have a very supportive family and friends who have jumped through hoops to help you. However, it's possible that you will have trouble further down the track. A lot of the time the body and mind recover well from trauma and the victim goes on with life with no further problems. In some cases, though, everything seems fine for weeks or months—even years sometimes—and then something triggers a response and the patient falls to pieces.

'I don't want to turn this into a self-fulfilling prophecy, but I do want you to be aware that you might have this kind of reaction some time in the future, and that if it does happen you will most likely need help. It's early days yet, and you will need time to absorb everything that's happened, as well as sort out how you feel about everything. I'd like to talk to your family so that they can be aware of signs to look out for, in case you do suffer a reaction. Meanwhile, I'd like to see you every week for a few weeks so I can keep an eye on your progress. How does that sound?'

'That's cool. Um, is there anything I can do to prevent a reaction, or anything I can watch out for?'

'Well, there's not much you can do to prevent it, but there is something you can look out for. Having talked to you, I'm pretty sure that you don't have any history of depression...' he looked to Mum, who shook her head. He continued '...so if you start feeling down for more than a day or two—you know, longer than a normal kind of "feeling blue" thing—then that could be a sign that all's not well. The important thing, if that does happen, is that you don't internalise it and try to deal with it yourself. Talk to your parents or friends, and come and see me. There's an old saying "a burden shared is a burden halved" and that's very true when we're dealing with depression and reactions to the sort of trauma you've experienced. And these things *can* be dealt with—so there's no need to feel like there's no hope and that you can't get through it.'

Doctor Cazelaar left, and Mum and I chatted until Kellie, Simon, Travis and Brett arrived after school. We heard them coming long before they came into my room, mainly because Travis was excited about something—and when he is excited his voice lifts an octave and gets louder and louder.

I looked at Mum. 'Why is he so hyper?'

Mum spread her hands. 'I have no idea.'

We didn't have to wait long to find out. I'm sure Travis came through the door without slowing down to open it. 'Mikey! We made the finals!' He practically shouted. 'Oh, g'day, Sally,' he said, in a comparative whisper, when he realised Mum was with me.

'Yeah, and my eight is in the regatta!' said Simon, following Travis into the room at full speed.

Hot on Simon's heels came Kellie, and, although she stopped to say, 'Hi, Mum...hi, Michael,' it was obvious that she was dying to tell us something, too.

Brett came in shaking his head. 'Man, I've got a headache! I had to listen to them all the way here!'

Mum and I laughed.

'Okay, don't all talk at once,' I said, 'and Trav, turn off the amplifier, willya? We could hear you coming from a mile off!'

I paused, and Brett started laughing. 'I've been trying to quieten him down since we left school, but nothing worked. I was starting to look for a plug to pull.'

Travis managed to look hurt, and, in an exaggerated show, leaned over and stage-whispered into my ear, 'The senior footy team won their match today—and that puts them in the finals!'

'Wow!' It wasn't articulate, but I was a bit overwhelmed. The senior team had played well all season in the inter-school league, and they deserved a finals berth. The team hadn't made the finals for about ten years; most people at the school had forgotten what it was like for them to win a home and away match, let alone a final. Although Travis didn't play football he loved the game, and he had been enthusiastic about our team's successes all through the season. He was a one-eyed supporter of Collingwood,

a team in the Australian Football League. The 'Woods had endured an even longer drought than the school team, so it was a measure of Travis's love for his team that he still supported them; many Collingwood supporters had long since become disillusioned.

Simon was about to bust his boiler, so I looked to him next. 'My eight won the heats today, so we get to row in the regatta!' He beamed at everyone.

'That's great, Simon,' I said, 'Congratulations little bro!'

Mum hugged him. She couldn't stop smiling. I wasn't any good at sport (I only agreed to play indoor cricket when Travis threatened to break my leg if I didn't—because the team was desperate for another player to make up the numbers) and it didn't hold much interest for me. Kellie wasn't into sport, either, so Dad and Mum's great hope was that Simon would turn out to be the sportsman of the family. He rowed in the Year 9 second eight. The whole family would be expected to watch the regatta and barrack for our boy's crew.

I looked at Kellie. 'Okay, Sis, spit it out.'

She grinned happily, looking from Mum to me and back again. She was almost dancing; this must be really, *really* good news. 'I'm going to Japan next year!'

Mum let out a shriek that should have shattered the windows.

I covered my ears and looked at the windows, just in case. 'Whoa! Way to go, Kellie!' My sister had applied to join a student exchange program. She would spend three months in Japan, attending school and travelling. 'Hey!' I said, 'That means we'll have a Japanese girl at our place!'

'Woohooo!' said Travis. 'I'll be spending a lot of time at your place.'

'So, what's new?' asked Simon. 'You already spend half your life at our place.' He grinned as he moved quickly to dodge a cuff to the head from Travis.

Mum was so pleased with Simon and Kellie's news that she almost floated out the door when she left to go home and prepare dinner.

Brett had taken his MP3 player to school and recorded messages from, it seemed, the whole school population, from the Principal down. Kellie and Simon brought a pile of greeting cards that students had given them to deliver. We got a lot of enjoyment out of reading the cards and listening to the messages. Some of the kids didn't identify themselves, so I had to play "pick the voice." Travis had made a note of everyone's name and took great delight in "gonging" me when I put the wrong name to a voice.

The gang filled me in on events at school. It was fun catching up on all the news, but I was dismayed when they told me that my teachers had got together and decided that I would have to stay for a couple of hours after school every day for a few weeks so that I could catch up on all the work I'd missed. Unfortunately they lost the effect of their announcement completely when Simon couldn't keep a straight face and gave the game away. The others threatened to strangle him and we ended up laughing so much that my bruises began to hurt. They admitted that my teachers *had* met, but that they were all happy with my work. They would give me some assignments that I could

complete while I was away from school and those would be sufficient for me to be able to maintain my good grades.

Kellie and the boys left when Dad arrived after work.

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'Man, I'm tired. It's been a long day, Dad.'

Dad chuckled. 'That reminds me of a girl who used to work in the office. We'd get to morning tea time, and she'd say "Gosh, it's been a long day." I still laugh every time I think of it. She was one of those people who are always cheerful—really good to work with.

'So, how has your "long day" been?'

I lay back on the pillows and took a leisurely twenty minutes to tell Dad about my day.

'It kind of seems like a new life, Dad,' I said as I finished. 'I feel like I've been given a second chance.'

'It feels like that to me, too,' Dad said, 'We thought we'd lost you. It is like a new beginning after the events of the last couple of weeks. I wouldn't want to live through those again.'

For the next hour Dad and I chatted quietly. We had always been close, and found plenty to talk about. We shared a hearty laugh occasionally—and shed a few tears, too—but more than anything else we simply enjoyed the time together.

Travis came back with his mother after dinner, and Brett returned with his whole family soon after them. Dad chatted with both families for a few minutes and then went home to have dinner.

There were animated conversations as the two families greeted each other and me. I kind of expected the hugs and kisses from Travis's mum, Susan, and from Angie, Brett's mum, and I wasn't too surprised when Brett's sisters, Jessica and Naomi, also each gave me a hug and a kiss. I wondered whether the girls, aged eleven and ten, had secret crushes on me and my present condition was a handy excuse. They both blushed, so perhaps I wasn't too far wrong.

I was astonished, however, when Brett's dad and brother both grabbed me and hugged me. Andrew, Brett's dad, was a real "man's man" and I'd never seen him show much emotion; Peter was an awkward thirteen-year-old who must have thought hugging was a really "sissy" thing. The fact that they both put aside their own inhibitions to give me a hug brought home to me how much my family and friends had agonised over my disappearance. This realisation made my eyes damp again—and I noticed that I wasn't the only one blinking back tears.

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I had a great surprise one afternoon when my entire homeroom came to visit, accompanied by our homeroom teacher, Mrs Aitken. The boys, being typical fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds, whistled and stirred as one girl after another hugged and kissed me, until all of the girls, including Mrs Aitken, had had a turn. I decided I could get to enjoy all this female attention, and wondered whether it might be a good idea to stay sick for a while. The boys gave me high fives and a variety of handshakes, and of course the girls stirred back when a few brave but rather self-conscious boys gave me hugs. I hate to think what the girls would have done had any of the boys kissed me!

Their visit made my day, and I think they all enjoyed it too—for the couple of school periods they missed, if not for the pleasure of seeing me.

Actually, I think their enjoyment did come from my return to life. Most of them went out of their way to tell me how much they had missed me (and I'd always thought they only laughed at my jokes to be polite). I found out, too, that every single one of them—as well as a lot of other students at the school—had spent time after I disappeared searching abandoned buildings and other possible hiding places in an effort to find either me or clues to my whereabouts. They had all been utterly convinced that I had not gone missing voluntarily.

This information almost overwhelmed me and I thought I was going to cry again, until one of the boys declared, 'We only missed you because there was no one to blame for the bad jokes.'

'There *were* no bad jokes, you mean,' said another guy.

Everyone laughed, but Travis and Brett told me later that no one had felt like making jokes until they knew I was safe. They really had missed me.

After they had all left, I lay back with my eyes closed, deep in thought. *Who am I? I thought. I'm no one special. I'm not one of the school's sporting heroes; I'm not a community or social leader within the school. Why would all of these kids come to visit me, let alone go to all the trouble of searching for me when I was missing?*

Then I thought of Andrew and Peter, and how they had both put aside their "machoness" and hugged me. And that reminded me that Brett and Travis, along with my sister and brother, had spent days in my hospital room willing me to wake up.

Am I missing something here? Why are people doing all these things for me?

I looked at the questions from every angle I could think of, and in the end I could come to only one conclusion: all of these people cared about me; they liked me and had missed me; they did what they did because I am me.

That realisation made me feel really special, and my day ended on a high note.

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Doctor Emery was pleased with my progress, and when Mr Perkins returned to complete his tests he was satisfied that I had not suffered brain damage. Karen and Judy both popped in from time to time to say hello, and Doctor Cazelaar even came in

for a chat one day. He claimed he was "just passing" but I had the feeling he was checking up on me. He had his meeting with my family—including Travis and Brett—and gave them a thorough briefing on my ordeal and various ways it might affect me in the future.

The detectives I had talked to at the police station the day I escaped wanted an appointment to interview me. We arranged it for a time when both my parents could be present. I thought it would be difficult talking about everything with Mum and Dad there because it involved such intimate acts, but it actually felt good to talk about it to the men who would prepare the case against The Monster. Talking about it seemed to be a concrete step towards making him pay for his crimes.

They taped the interview and promised to have it transcribed and ready for me to read and sign the following day. Now that they had my formal statement they could get everything moving towards a date in court. Since I was a minor they suggested that we apply for approval for me to give my testimony by closed circuit TV so that I wouldn't have to face my tormentor, and to remove me from what would likely be a highly-charged atmosphere in the courtroom. We said we would consider the idea, but I felt it would be better for me to be present. There was no way I was going to miss testifying against The Monster; it was just a matter of how that would be done.

Before they left I thanked them for their prompt action in arresting The Monster, and for the thorough case they had built against him. We said our goodbyes; apart from bringing the statement for me to sign they probably wouldn't need to see me again.

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I was surprised when the hospital's Public Affairs Manager (I almost cracked up when she introduced herself as Pam) came to see me. The hospital had been turning away journalists from newspapers, radio and TV—both local and metropolitan—who all wanted to interview me. Pam wanted to know if I was willing to be interviewed. 'It's up to you and your parents, Michael. If you want to talk to them the hospital will allow them in according to your instructions; if you don't I'll just tell them all to shoot through.'

Everyone had told me I was in the news, but I hadn't realised that my story was so big. I guessed that doing nothing wasn't a realistic option. 'If I don't say something they'll just hound me and my family and friends, won't they?' I asked Pam.

'Probably. You know, you don't actually have to talk to them. You could release a prepared statement for me to hand out. That might satisfy them.'

'Yes, that might be a good idea. How about I get Dad and Mum to help me write something tonight when they come in, and they could drop it into your office?'

'Done!' Pam said. 'But don't worry about my office. I'll come and collect it from you in the morning.'

We prepared a statement, and after consulting Pam the next morning, Dad and Mum agreed to be present for a press conference at the hospital. We decided that I could talk to the media at a later date if they were still interested.

I was caught off guard the following afternoon when a stranger, maybe 30 years old, badly dressed and a bit scruffy-looking, walked into my room and introduced himself as, 'John Doan. I need to ask you a few questions.'

I took an immediate dislike to this man. His manner and appearance made me uneasy. I was suspicious, too, because he hadn't said why he was there. 'About what?'

'About your kidnapping and rape,' he replied.

My heart sank. Obviously, I knew that I had been kidnapped and raped, but hearing the experience described so bluntly and starkly brought the bad memories rushing back. I felt like crying, but with a supreme effort I managed to hold back the tears. I really needed my mum's or my dad's reassuring presence to strengthen me, but there was no one with me when this intruder arrived, so I would have to handle him myself.

'Who *are* you?'

'As I said, I need to ask you some questions.'

The penny dropped, and I pressed the call button to summon a nurse. 'You're a reporter, aren't you?' I said as coldly as I could manage. He didn't respond so I continued, my love of TV crime shows giving me inspiration. 'The hospital bans reporters from interviewing patients without permission from both the hospital and the patient. I've released a statement through the hospital's public affairs manager, and that's all I have to say at the moment. I especially don't have anything to say to someone who barges in without warning or permission and doesn't identify himself as a reporter.'

The nurse came in as I finished speaking, and, realising quickly what was happening, pointed to the door. 'You. Out. Now!'

He wasn't about to give up that easily. 'The public has a right to know—and you owe us for our help in finding you!' His voice was nasal and whining, and grated in my ears. His attitude was arrogant and self-righteous, and that made me even less likely to talk to him.

'Oh, and how exactly did you help?' I asked bitterly. 'No one had any idea where I was—and still wouldn't if I hadn't managed to escape. I don't owe you anything!' The tears were starting to fall now, and my emotions were at breaking point.

He'd been fiddling with a mobile phone, and now held it up in front of his face. The nurse reacted quickly, putting her hand over the phone. 'No photos either, mate. Out!' He still resisted. 'OUT!' she shouted, and managed to steer him out the door.

'I'll be back, Michael!' I heard him shout, as the nurse called for someone to phone my parents.

I had been sitting on my bed reading when Doan came in, and now I slumped down into the pillows, my book forgotten. The tears came in a flood now, and I started to sob. I started to shake uncontrollably as a nervous reaction set in. The nurse came back and sat on the bed, talking soothingly, trying to calm me. A few minutes later Mum came rushing in and I practically flew into her arms. I took quite a while to calm down, and Doan's "bull-in-a-china-shop" approach affected my nerves for several days. Why did I react that way? Doctor Cazelaar said I needed time to get used to

thinking of my ordeal as a kidnapping and rape. Certainly, I understood that that's what it was, but at the moment it was simply an horrific experience that had caused me untold suffering. In time I would learn to detach myself from the experience—from the humiliation, pain and violation—so that I could view it objectively and dispassionately. Right now, the emotional wounds were still too raw to allow me to do that.

That evening, my parents and I received a visit from the hospital's general manager. He brought an official apology for the breakdown of the hospital's security procedures that had allowed Doan's intrusion.

We found out later that John Doan was a freelancer, trying to get his "big break," and he was known as an obnoxious and sly character. I didn't think he was likely to get any breaks at all unless he changed his attitude and behaviour. *No wonder people hate the media*, I thought. Unfortunately that wasn't the last I saw or heard of Mr Doan. He turned up at The Monster's trial several months later and harassed people around the town, trying to dig up dirt on me and my family. He seemed convinced that there was more to the story than had been made public, and that there was some sort of sex scandal waiting to be uncovered.

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The weekend came, and—with lots of visitors to keep me occupied and routine checks by the nursing staff—passed quickly. I was growing stronger every day and the bruises were fading and the soreness diminishing. I was allowed to get dressed and spend time outdoors now, so I was able to entertain my visitors in the courtyard when the weather was good. I was feeling well and beginning to look forward to going home.

Doctor Emery, cheerful as ever, and cracking sad jokes as usual (thanks to him I had a whole new repertoire to use on my victims at school, which made me wonder if they would actually be happy to see me return; but then, half the fun in telling bad jokes is the reactions you get from your listeners), gave me a thorough examination on Monday morning.

'Want to get out of here, Michael?'

'Yeah, I guess so. I'm feeling good, and the aches and pains are pretty much gone now. I'm kind of enjoying all the female attention here, though.'

He laughed. 'Well, I can't guarantee you'll get that at home but what would you prefer—hospital meals and the unique hospital ambience, or Mum's cooking, peace and quiet, and familiar surroundings?'

'Okay,' I chuckled, 'Since you put it that way, as much as I've enjoyed it here, I'll take home cooking and my own bed. When do I get out?'

'How does this afternoon sound?'

'Excellent!'

'Right, then. I'll phone your mum and start the paperwork so that it will be ready for her to sign when she arrives. I won't need to see you again unless you have problems, but I know Doctor Cazelaar wants to talk to you, so we'll make an appointment for you to see him as an outpatient. Take care, young feller—and drop in and say hello, won't you?'

He gave me a hug, and headed for the door. I couldn't help myself; I just had to repay him for all the sad jokes. 'Hey, Doctor Emery!' He stopped and turned to face me, an expectant look on his face. 'Did you hear about the Asian doctor who opened a new clinic and then wondered why he wasn't getting any patients?'

'No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me!' he grinned.

'Well, his name was Mal, and his understanding of English wasn't very good. He named the clinic "MalPractice"!'

Doctor Emery groaned and rolled his eyes. 'I asked for that, didn't I?' Then, shaking his head, he was gone—but I could hear him chuckling as he walked along the corridor.

One of the nurses thanked me later; the doctor had told all the staff my joke. She laughed as she said, 'We told him it was a vast improvement on his usual jokes. He looked so hurt we all thought he was going to cry!'

Dad and Mum both came to pick me up late in the afternoon. I thought they were never going to get there; by the time they arrived I was pacing up and down impatiently. When I asked why they took so long they just said they had things to do and couldn't get there any earlier. It took a while to get out of the hospital; it seemed like the entire staff needed to say goodbye and wish me well.

Home was only a couple of minutes away in the car, and as we pulled into the driveway there was a lump in my throat and a tear in my eye. As I got out of the car and looked over the house, though, they were replaced with a feeling of joy. There had been days when I wondered whether I'd ever see this place again. *Am I really here?* I wondered.

I didn't have a chance to think any further, because the front door of the house burst open and Simon came running out, grinning from ear to ear. He gave me a hug, and said, 'Come inside! I've got something to show you!' He grabbed my arm and steered me to the door, and stood back to allow me to go through first. Mum and Dad were bringing up the rear, taking their time for some reason.

I stepped through the door and my mouth dropped open, and suddenly I realised why my parents had been so late picking me up.

There was a shout, 'WELCOME HOME, MICHAEL!' and I was showered with confetti and hugs and kisses. There was a horde of people crowded into our living room. It looked as if all of my friends—maybe even the whole school, if the amount of noise was any indication—were there. I was taken aback, but what a homecoming! *It's really over*, I thought, as I looked around at everyone and beamed.

It felt good. It was good—good to be home.

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At the end of the first week of August I was well enough to return to school. I'd been away for nearly four weeks. I hated missing school because it always felt strange when I went back—as if I was the new kid all over again. Weird.

It didn't take long to get back into the routine, though, and it helped that both the staff and students went out of their way to welcome me back. I'd been able to get some assignments completed while I was away, but I was kept busy catching up with the rest of my work.

It was a busy time, too, because the end of term three was coming up. There were a lot of sports events in the last few weeks—finals in our inter-house winter sports as well as the inter-school football finals and the rowing regatta. There were jubilant celebrations when the seniors won the football grand final for the first time ever, and Simon's crew won the Year Nine Eights title. Needless to say, there was much celebrating in the Parker household when Simon proudly brought home his medal—the first-ever sporting award in our family.

Preparations for the year ten trip to Central Australia, to take place during the two-week break at the end of term, also kept us busy. It was tradition at our school that every year ten student, regardless of whether or not their family could afford it, went on the trip. The students thought of it as a reward for their hard work through four years of high school. The school intended it as a respite from work before we began the intensive final two years of our schooling, and the school council and staff were as keen as the students that everyone should have the opportunity to let down their hair and enjoy themselves. Each year the school sought sponsorship from local businesses, and the students themselves were expected to hold fundraising activities. In this way, the cost to students was kept as low as possible, and we all felt that we had contributed.

The sense of anticipation as we organised the final fundraisers, and travel and accommodation arrangements fell into place, was amazing. Only a couple of the students had been to Central Australia, and some had never been out of Victoria before. We were all anxious to be on our way.

Oh, and we threw Dad another birthday party. You could see the relief on his face when he opened the presents this time around—no socks!

CHAPTER 4: INTERLUDE

A buzz of anticipation spread through the train when we began to see signs of development once more. For hours, all we had seen was red earth, low trees, and scrub. Now there were roads and fences, and buildings. On our right the airport came into view. To the left the white domes of the joint Australian-United States communications facility at Pine Gap looked out of place in the reds and greens of the landscape. Ahead, and stretching far to each side, were the rugged red-brown MacDonnell Ranges. The peak of Mount Gillen, its communications towers silhouetted against the bright blue sky, rose slightly above the rest of the range.

A few minutes later the train passed through Heavitree Gap, a break in the hills just wide enough to fit the railway, the highway, and the river. The blare of the train's horn echoed off the hills as we approached a level crossing. We had arrived in Alice Springs.

Buses collected us from the station, and once we were settled in our hostel rooms we had the rest of the day free.

'Hey, let's go for a ride around the town!' Travis was reading a brochure he had picked up from the front desk. 'The hostel has bikes for hire.'

'Yeah, why not?' Brett replied.

'I'm game,' I said. Since we rode so much at home, it seemed the natural thing to do.

A couple of the girls tagged along, and we spent an enjoyable afternoon exploring. We bought ice-creams, and rode the causeway across the dry Todd River—just so we could say we had crossed it—and then took in the 360-degree views from Anzac Hill, a rocky outcrop right in the middle of town.

We were surprised that the town looked so green. In the dry heart of Australia the dominant colour is red. The soil is red, the rocks and hills are red-brown, and some trees even have reddish patches in their bark. The straggly trees and bushes grow wide apart, and spinifex—the most common grass—grows in clumps so that you can always see the soil colour underneath it. Alice Springs, though, has an abundant supply of water and, with lots of trees and lawns, it looks green. It felt like an oasis in the desert.

One of the girls and I came in for heaps of stirring from my friends, especially Travis, who never misses an opportunity to make fun of a situation. The boy is irrepressible. In fact, he sees it as his mission to remind everyone around him that life is too short to take seriously. The cause of his stirring that day was that one of the girls, Zoë, found the road up Anzac Hill too steep to ride. She hopped off her bike and started to walk. I happened to be closest to her, so I got off and walked too so she wouldn't feel left out. Travis and Brett both would have done exactly the same thing, but that didn't stop them teasing Zoë and me relentlessly when we arrived at the top quite a while after they did.

'What kept you? We've been waiting for twenty minutes!'

'Didja get lost?'

Even Clare, Zoë's friend, got into it. 'Stopped for a make-out session, *I reckon!*' She gave us a searching look, as if she knew something we didn't.

Zoë and I laughed it off, but I had to admit to myself that I had really enjoyed talking with her as we'd pushed our bikes up the road.

After dinner we had a briefing session so our teachers could run through the program for our stay, and hand out rosters for kitchen and cleaning duty. Later we were free to chill out, go swimming in the pool or spend time in the games room. Most of us were tired after the long trip and opted to relax for an hour or two before heading for bed. Somehow Zoë and I drifted together and found a quiet corner where we could sit and talk. After a few minutes Clare joined us.

Travis was disgusted when he found us later. 'You could be playing table tennis with us,' he complained, 'not that you'd win, of course.' He huffed on his knuckles and polished them on his chest. 'What do you guys find to talk about for hours, anyway? It must be a very one-sided convo.'

'Girls can talk, too, you know,' said Clare. She bristled, thinking he was criticising her and Zoë.

Travis smirked. 'Yeah, but Michael can't. He has trouble stringing two syllables together, let alone whole sentences!'

'Hmmm, I see,' said Zoë. 'What's a syllable, Travis?'

'Oh, it's, um, it's a...,' his voice trailed off as he pretended he didn't know. Well, I thought he was pretending. Zoë and Clare started to laugh. Travis grabbed Brett's arm and hauled him off, muttering to himself and shaking his head. 'Man, he's got it bad, Brett,' we heard him say as they left the room. 'One conversation with a pretty girl and he's dumped us.' That made the girls laugh harder.

'Is he *always* like that?' Clare asked. 'I thought he only clowning around at school to keep us amused.'

'That's the way he is,' I said. 'Trav and I have been friends since we were in grade two. He's never been any different—he's always been a real dag.' I spent the next hour telling them stories about some of Travis's many exploits.

I climbed up to my top bunk and, after a round of goodnights, put in earbuds and switched on my MP3 player. I lay down to listen to the music, but I found my mind wandering back over the trip to that point.

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We had left Sale early on Saturday morning. A three-hour bus trip took us to Melbourne where we boarded The Overland train, bound for Adelaide. The journey was completed in daylight, so we were able to enjoy the changing landscape as the hours and kilometres flew by.

In Adelaide, by the time we got to our hostel, found our rooms and had dinner, most of us were ready for bed. It had been a long, tiring day. Tiredness didn't prevent Travis from playing practical jokes, though. When I tried to get into bed I found it had

been short-sheeted. A few seconds later a couple of the other guys in our room found theirs had been, too.

'What the...?' one of them cried.

I knew the answer immediately. 'Travis!'

That caused a stampede to his bed, where he was trying to look innocent. He ended up on the floor under a pile of bodies, begging for mercy. We let him up eventually, but not until we had plotted revenge. We pushed him out of our room and locked the door. He was forced to wander the corridor in his underwear for half an hour before we took pity on him and let him return. Our teachers, familiar with Travis and his escapades, ignored all his pleas for help and retribution. Eventually things calmed down, and I fell asleep thinking about the next leg of our trip—on the legendary train, The Ghan!

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Early the following afternoon I stood on the station platform and gazed along the length of the train. Although The Ghan holds the record for the longest passenger train in Australia—sometimes more than one kilometre—"our" train wasn't a record-breaking one. It was still the longest train I had ever seen, though. There were two red locomotives with their silver camel logo, about thirty silver passenger cars with the logo in red and silver, dining cars, lounge cars, luggage vans, a power van, and a couple of double-deck vehicle carriers. I was full of anticipation. I had been waiting for that moment for a long time, ever since my grandparents had told me amazing tales about their honeymoon trip on the original Ghan in the 1960s. The train has changed and it follows a different route now, but the mystique of the old Ghan has somehow shifted to the new one, and the trip from Adelaide to Alice Springs is still one of the world's great train journeys.

The train's name is a legacy of the Afghan cameleers who transported goods and supplies by camel in the days before the railway was built.

There was a lot of excited chatter as we found our cars and made our way to our seats. Brett and I sat together and Travis was in the row in front of us. Right on time, The Ghan pulled out of Adelaide. In about 24 hours we would arrive in Alice Springs, almost 1600 kilometres away right in the heart of Australia.

We wound our way through suburban Adelaide, past industrial areas, and finally into farmland. We passed through Port Pirie, home to the world's largest lead smelter, and then skirted the northern reaches of Spencer Gulf before arriving at Port Augusta at the head of the gulf.

Port Augusta marks the change from productive land to desert, from closely settled areas to scattered homesteads. When we pulled out after a thirty-minute stop we headed into the never-never; a few kilometres out of town the country turned flat, with low scrubby vegetation and dry salt pans.

That evening we were treated to a spectacular sunset, and later a brilliant display of stars. With the light pollution of cities and towns far away, I discovered what the Milky Way really looks like. It was amazing, and awesome.

It was kind of surreal, speeding smoothly through the baked land in our air-conditioned cocoon, especially after dark. There was a full moon that night and everything around us was bathed in bright silver light, giving the landscape a ghostly look. I drifted off to sleep thinking about re-runs of *The Munsters*. Or was it *The Addams Family*? I reckon either would have felt right at home in the eerie atmosphere.

When we woke in the morning the desolate flatness of the evening had given way to rocky hills and jagged gullies covered with low trees and bushes. We sped past the "Iron Man," a sculpture marking the location of the railway's one-millionth sleeper, and across the 450-metre-long bridge over the Finke River. Shortly after that we spotted Chambers Pillar, a tall sandstone column, in the distance off to the east. An hour and a half later we were in Alice Springs.

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Tuesday's program included visits to two outback institutions—the flying doctor and the school of the air. We also toured the historic Old Telegraph Station, one of a number of repeaters along the line that provided Australia's first link to the outside world.

The Royal Flying Doctor Service sends medical staff by air to deal with emergencies in remote areas. It provides a "mantle of safety" for the scattered people of the outback who are often days away from medical help. Many people died, or suffered from inadequate treatment, before the service began.

We were able to see the communications centre at work and we heard about the history of the service, as well as its present-day operations. In the museum I was fascinated to see an original pedal wireless. Isolated people needed a reliable way to call for the doctor. The answer was a Morse code transceiver powered by a generator operated by pedals like those on a bike. It not only made contacting the doctor easy, it also allowed the people to talk to each other, relieving their isolation and loneliness.

The Alice Springs School of the Air was another service created to meet an outback need. Children living in remote areas had a difficult choice—leave home to attend boarding school or stay at home and enrol in correspondence school. Either way, they were disadvantaged—separated from their families on one hand or deprived of interaction with teachers and other students on the other.

These children were all taught to use the flying doctor service's radio network, so the school took advantage of this and made it possible for teachers to communicate with their students. The radio also provided social "visits" for children who lacked contact with others their age.

Today the Alice Springs school is one of sixteen in Australia. It has about 120 students living in an area of one million square kilometres, and the most distant student is more than 1000 kilometres out of town. Two-way satellite communication and computers have replaced radios, so students are able to see and hear their teachers as well as speak and listen to their classmates. During our tour we were able to watch a session in progress.

It was all fascinating stuff, but I was a bit overwhelmed. I went outside and leaned against a wall, deep in thought. I was born and lived in a place where all the things I needed—friends, school, shops, sports facilities, restaurants, cinema and even the beach—were close at hand. I could reach most places quickly on my bike. I didn't need a two-way radio to call for a flying doctor; I lived just around the corner from the hospital, for goodness' sake. People in the outback could be hundreds of kilometres from *everything*. One story we heard was of a family who lived on a cattle station along the Tanami Track, over 700km from Alice Springs. In the 1960s a "good" trip to town took one and a half days; a "bad" one could take six days, and during The Wet they might be completely cut off for weeks. Even today, with phones, TV, satellite communication, and air travel, they are still isolated. I just couldn't comprehend how kids of fifty and a hundred years ago coped. I guess you don't miss what you never had, but it must have been really hard for them. They just didn't have a lot of the things I considered normal. What must it have been like for a twelve-year-old to go off to Adelaide or Melbourne to attend boarding school? They must have suffered culture shock!

'Michael! Earth to Michael!'

I jumped. Zoë had startled me.

She laughed. 'Where were you? Mars? I've been talking to you for, like, ten minutes.'

'Really? That long?'

She laughed again. 'No, but it felt like it. I thought you'd gone into hibernation or something.'

It was my turn to laugh. 'Oh, I'm sorry, Zoë. I tend to wander off in a world of my own, and not notice anything around me. The guys are used to it. Travis stirs me about it all the time.'

'What were you thinking about?'

'Oh, I just can't get over the distances out here—the vastness, and the emptiness. I was thinking about how I take for granted a lot of things kids out here don't have at all. One of those kids lives a thousand kilometres from the school...a *thousand kilometres!* That's halfway back home to Sale! It just seems incredible. What must it have been like before the flying doctor and the school of the air...and the train? It's only—what—77 years since the flying doctor began, and the railway was a year later. And the school didn't start until the 1950s!'

I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. I'm really intense when I get excited about something. 'Sorry, Zoë,' I sighed. 'I'm getting wound up here.'

She smiled, stood in front of me, and put her hands on my waist. 'Hey, I don't mind. I like deep thinkers; they're so much more interesting than...than...'

She paused, searching for the right word.

'Shallow thinkers?' I asked, with a grin.

She giggled. 'Yeah, that'll work.'

We both laughed at that.

'Well, I don't know about deep, but guess I am a thinker.'

'Yeah...and I like it!'

She was looking at me intently as she spoke. The look in her eyes—and her words—melted my heart. I wanted to kiss her. I think she wanted to kiss me, too. It was like someone had waved a magic wand and Zoë and I were alone in the world.

Then the door burst open. 'Hey, Zoë, have you seen— oh, no! They're at it again!' Travis, in his inimitable style, reminded us that we weren't alone at all.

Brett followed him out the door. 'Ah, *there* you are. Come on, you two. We're supposed to be walking to the telegraph station. Everyone's been looking for you.'

They shooed us out into the street. Zoë and I looked at each other and laughed as Travis muttered to Brett, 'We're gonna need to keep an eye on them tonight. We have to leave for Uluru early in the morning.'

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'Man, I'm tired!'

'Me too...'

We straggled off the buses at our hostel after a three-day excursion to Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and Kings Canyon. It had been an amazing three days.

There was a chorus of wows and whoas when we first saw the enormous bulk of Uluru rising out of the plain. It was probably 20 kilometres ahead and loomed larger and larger as we approached along the highway. But if that was awesome, we were completely blown away later when we stood at the foot of the great rock. It's hard to describe just how huge it is; it towers nearly 350 metres above its surroundings, and it's more than nine kilometres around at the base.

Uluru is a sacred place for the local Aboriginal people, with many culturally significant sites on and around the rock. We were all fascinated as our tour guide told us about Uluru's history and its traditional owners and their culture. We visited their caves and waterholes, and tried to imagine how they lived. We saw their paintings and heard some of their Dreamtime stories. We learned about bush tucker, how to light a fire the Aboriginal way, and how to throw a spear using a woomera.

We capped off our day watching the colour of Uluru changing in the light of the setting sun. The different colours are caused by the filtering effect of the earth's atmosphere changing as the sun dips towards the horizon. We watched, in awe of nature, as the colour changed from brown to orange to dark red to bright red, until, just before the light faded completely, the whole huge rock seemed to glow like hot steel. The most beautiful creation of an artist or an architect couldn't hold a candle to that! It was magical, and the whispered conversations and dozens of pairs of eyes all trained in the one direction showed that it was a special experience for everyone there. This half-hour alone was worth the long trip from Alice Springs.

I'd had a great day. Seeing The Rock was a truly awesome experience, but the day was special for another reason—the growing friendship between Zoë and me. She had

hardly left my side all afternoon, and as we stood together watching the sun set on Uluru, she took my hand and laced her fingers through mine. My heart jumped, and a nice shiver ran down my spine. Her hand felt soft and warm, and I found myself hoping that it could stay there for the rest of my life. I'd never had a girlfriend—in fact I'd never really had any friends who were girls—and this was a new, but very pleasurable, experience.

I went to sleep that night thinking of Zoë.

The following day we visited Kata Tjuta, a group of monoliths further to the west. These rocks have great significance for Aboriginal people, too, and the engravings there were interesting. Somehow, though, I was more impressed by Uluru; perhaps because it is just one big lump of rock, while Kata Tjuta is many smaller ones. Or perhaps because it was while we were watching the sun set on Uluru that I discovered that Zoë really liked me.

In the afternoon we said goodbye to the national park and headed for Kings Canyon. That was full of surprises. It is surrounded by desert, but its steep walls hide pockets of tropical palms, ferns and cycads, sheltering them from the harsh conditions outside.

There was a walking trail around the top of the canyon. The five of us—Brett, Travis, Clare, Zoë and me—set off to take in the sights. At one point, standing on a shelf of rock jutting out from the canyon rim, with the red rock of the opposite wall in front of us, we looked down into lush green vegetation and permanent waterholes.

'Wow! Those old Aboriginals knew how to pick a home site, eh?' Travis quipped.

He was standing right at the edge of the shelf—but that was Travis; he was game as Ned Kelly and liked to live life on the edge. I didn't. Going close and looking over once in a while was fine with me. I wasn't really afraid of heights, but getting too close to any edge always reminded me that there was a nasty sudden stop at the bottom if I fell. In this case the drop was one hundred metres. Straight down, with nothing to break the fall.

'Trav! For goodness' sake get away from the edge. I don't want to have to scrape you off those rocks down there!'

Brett took him by the arm. 'Come on, mate, before Michael freaks out.' He gently pulled Travis back.

'Ah, Mikey, you're a wuss sometimes. But I still love ya!' He gave me a typical Travis grin, daring me to react.

I did. I punched him on the arm. 'Don't scare me like that! You had Zoë worried too.'

It was true. She had such a tight grip on my arm my fingers were beginning to tingle from lack of blood. She suddenly realised how hard she had been holding me.

'Oh, Michael, I'm so sorry. I hate heights...and this is definitely a height!' She let go, and I shook my hand to get the blood flowing again.

Brett and Travis cracked up, pointing to the red marks Zoë's fingers had left on my arm. Clare joined in after she had a closer look.

'Zoë,' she managed to gasp between laughs, 'If Michael ever gets bitten by a snake he won't need a compression bandage!'

The idea of Zoë as a human snakebite treatment was so funny I couldn't help laughing along with them, and then Zoë started, too. Knowing she could see the funny side of it and laugh at herself calmed me. I hadn't finished with Travis, though. I tried to glare at him. 'You did that on purpose, didn't you? You *knew* I'd freak out.' I hit him again.

He yelped, and pretended to be hurt, but his grin gave the game away, and I was laughing too. 'Bummer!' he said, 'That's the trouble with smart people. They always catch on too quickly.' Almost in the same breath he added, 'I'm hungry. It must be dinner time.'

It was quite cool after the sun went down, and we sat around a campfire telling yarns. The moon was still bright, so there was just enough light for us all to see each other; it was like each person who got up to speak was in the spotlight. It was a very entertaining evening, but for me the highlight was sitting with Zoë snuggled up to my side with my arm around her.

The next morning we had a couple of hours to explore the canyon, then we had to leave so that we would arrive back in Alice in time for dinner. It takes a lot to wear down a lively pack of teenagers—each seemingly feeding off the others' adrenaline—but all the walking combined with more than twelve hours' driving had done it. After tea most of us were too tired to do more than sit around talking quietly. Some of the kids phoned home or caught up on emails and a few found enough energy to play table tennis. The rest of us were ready for bed. Even Travis was quiet for a change. I went to sleep deliriously happy; I'd just had my first kiss.

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Saturday dawned bright and sunny, like every other day since we had arrived in Alice Springs.

That day I felt different, though. I'd received a goodnight kiss from a beautiful girl. My girlfriend. *My girlfriend!* Wow, that sounded good, even if I hadn't spoken it aloud. I had to tell someone!

I didn't need to tell Brett and Travis. They could tell that *something* had happened, and they guessed what it was—and then started stirring. Gee, they could be tiresome! The Most Important Event in my life and all they could do was tease me. I retaliated the only way I could. 'You're just jealous!'

Finally they let up, and I escaped and found a phone and called home.

'Hello...'

'MUMI'VEGOTAGIRLFRIEND!' I was shouting in a whisper, if that's possible. I was shouting because I was excited, but whispering because I didn't want to make a fool of myself in front of the other kids—like every other teenager, I had an image to preserve!

Mum didn't reply. Instead, I heard her call for Dad. 'There's some loony on the phone shouting at me quietly, and I can't understand a word he's saying.'

'Mu-um!'

'Oh, is that you, Michael?'

I sighed. 'Yes, Mum.'

'Okay, I've put the speakerphone on. Can you say that again so Dad can hear it?'

'Say what?'

She must have leaned right down to the microphone. She whispered, but it was as if she was right inside my ear. 'That you have a girlfriend!'

'MUM!' I realised she had been winding me up. 'Man, I've had enough grief from Trav and Brett, without you starting too!'

She laughed. 'Go on—tell him!'

I spent the next half an hour feeding coins into the payphone. Mum and Dad wanted to know all about Zoë and how we'd got together. Oh, and I had to tell them where we had been and what we'd seen, too.

After breakfast we all headed out to join the crowds at the Henley-on-Todd regatta.

The Todd River "runs" right alongside the business centre of Alice Springs. It's normally dry, like the sense of humour of the Centralians who began the annual event. The fact that the river hardly ever holds water didn't deter them—in fact the regatta had to be cancelled one year because it rained and the river actually had water in it.

The "boats" in the races were bottomless frames, powered by crews running inside. There were heaps of events but the funniest was the one in which teams of men carried ladies in bathtubs. For me, the highlight was the last event of the day. Three four-wheel-drive vehicles, disguised as "battle boats," churned along the course firing flour mortars and water cannons at anything and everything—including spectators. Our whole group fell about laughing when Travis ended up soaking wet and covered in flour. He wore it as a badge of honour, even though he had to walk through town to get back to the hostel to change. I was never able to confirm it, but I suspected that someone had a quiet word with the captains of the battle boats, and marked Travis as a special target. No one else I saw was so thoroughly wet or so completely covered in flour.

We spent ages reliving that day. It had been a blast. It was also Clare's birthday, so we had a special dinner, complete with cake and sixteen candles, in her honour.

Sunday was a free day, which everyone appreciated. Most of us spent the day just relaxing and hanging out in small groups. Zoë and I managed to find time to be together away from the others. We spent that time talking, getting to know each other better. We were amazed at how much we had in common. The rest of the day we spent with Clare, Travis and Brett and had a thoroughly enjoyable time. It was obvious that the others were thinking of Zoë and me as a couple, and that was really

neat. I was pleased that Travis and Brett weren't put out because Zoë's presence had suddenly altered the dynamics of our friendship. In fact they both told me quietly that they "approved" of my choice of girlfriend. I wasn't too sure about the choosing part—it was more like Zoë had chosen me—but it was reassuring to know they were happy.

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On Monday we had an early breakfast and took a bike tour to Simpsons Gap. The hills surrounding the town looked softer in the early morning light and the quiet of the bush was broken only by the chattering of the many birds. We rode along through river red gums, bushes and wildflowers. We even saw a couple of wallabies and a few lizards. We had all morning, and there was plenty to stop and look at, so no one was in a hurry. We had lunch at Simpsons Gap and spent time exploring before buses took us back to the hostel.

In the evening we attended a performance of Sounds of Starlight, a musical "journey" through the outback. It featured the didgeridoo but included modern instruments, as well as jokes and stories and spectacular images of Central Australia. It was incredible, even taking my attention away from Zoë, which prompted more teasing from the others.

We were allowed to sleep a bit later on Tuesday. We all cheered when that was announced. After all, we were teens and we needed our sleep! The teachers just rolled their eyes and muttered to each other. They told us they would prepare breakfast, and it would be ready at eight-thirty. If we weren't on time we'd go hungry because we needed to be at Alice Springs Desert Park by mid-morning.

The park was amazing. I had always thought deserts were barren and nothing lived in them. Boy was I wrong! I couldn't believe the number and variety of plants and animals that make their home in such a dry environment. Each is perfectly suited to the conditions and has its own role to play in the ecosystem. Guides gave a running commentary as they showed us around. We learned about Aboriginal culture, food and crafts. We saw rare nocturnal animals and we watched wedge-tailed eagles and other birds of prey in action. I think we all left with a new appreciation for the desert and a new admiration for the Aboriginal people and the way they love and care for their land.

That evening we had a camel ride, and what an experience that was! Getting on wasn't too hard, since the camels folded their legs and sank to the ground. The lurching as they stood up was a bit like being on a roller-coaster, and the ride was something else. I made a new discovery—camels don't move like other four-legged animals. Horses and cows, for instance, move their diagonally opposite feet together, which produces a smooth forward motion. Camels, on the other hand, move the two feet on the same side together, which results in a rolling, pitching ride. It was weird, but fun. I don't think I'd ever want a camel for a pet though; I really didn't like the way my camel looked at me out of the corner of its eye. It gnashed its teeth, too, and that sent a shiver down my spine.

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The end of our trip was fast approaching. On Wednesday we split into two groups for the remaining three days. One group stayed in town and made day trips to national parks and historic sites, while the other took a three-day excursion into the desert to study some of Central Australia's unique plant and animal life and visit historic sites and conservation areas.

We had been allowed to choose a group and Travis, Brett and I had put our names down for the desert. We had loved exploring the area around home, so this seemed right up our alley. I was relieved to find that Zoë and Clare were also on that trip; I'd feared that we were going to be separated. Three days without Zoë...I couldn't bear the thought!

The desert trip was a load of fun, leaving us with awesome experiences and a host of memories to take home. Tom, our Aboriginal tour leader, was amazing. He somehow kept us interested and entertained, and at the same time managed to educate us.

Our first stop was the art centre at Santa Teresa Aboriginal community. It was fascinating. As well as the usual "dot" paintings there were all kinds of other art and crafts. We met a couple of the artists and were able to watch them at work.

It was nearly 240 kilometres by rough four-wheel-drive track from there to Old Andado station, our overnight stop. It felt like we had really plunged into the never-never; there was nothing but the desert's amazing colours, vegetation—mostly spinifex and gidgee, and terrain—mountains, gibber plains, sand dunes and floodplains. The expression "back of beyond" took on a new meaning. We managed to spot several indigenous bird species, including the letter-winged kite, a variety of raptor, and detoured to a conservation reserve to see a stand of waddy trees, a rare species of acacia found in only three spots in Australia. We arrived at our camp late in the afternoon.

Old Andado homestead is located between two high red sand ridges and the land around it looks barren and dry. The heritage-listed buildings are interesting for both their design and the materials used. The house is part mud brick and part timber and corrugated iron. The saddle room, which leans every which way and seems to defy gravity, is built of logs and has a thatched grass roof. Its veranda dips so low we had to stoop to walk under it. The meat house is built of timber slabs with a wide, low veranda all the way around. It also has a thatched grass roof. The homestead has some original 1950s furniture, and the girls were fascinated by the black wood-burning stove and old-style dressers in the kitchen.

After dinner we went spotlighting, hoping to see some of the local nocturnal animals. The plains rats must have received advance notice of our arrival, for they were nowhere to be found. We were disappointed. These small, rather cute rodents, are a threatened species; seeing one would have been a special treat. I was amused by their scientific name, *pseudomys australis*. Were they lurking somewhere using an assumed name? We did find a colony of mulgara. These tiny mammals are anything but cute. They live in burrows in the sand dunes to escape the heat, and usually only come out at night. We nearly missed "our" family because they were almost the same colour as the dunes. An interesting attribute of the mulgara is that it is believed to obtain all the water it needs from its prey—small rodents (perhaps *that's* where the plains rats went), reptiles and spiders.

We returned to camp and finished the evening sitting around a campfire talking and singing. Brett had his guitar and talked us into holding an impromptu talent quest, which was won by Tom, our tour leader. Zoë sat between my legs and leaned back against my chest, and I wrapped my arms around her. She was warm and cuddly and I leaned around and kissed her. She returned the kiss and we drifted off into our own world until a loud 'Ahem!' from one of the teachers caught our attention. I was glad the firelight was providing the only light because I felt myself blushing furiously when all the other kids started whistling and making kissy noises.

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Night falls quickly in Central Australia, but dawn breaks early. And bright. And cold. There were groans all around when we were woken at 7:00 am to get the tents down and packed, but we cheered up when we found hot tea and damper waiting for us.

We headed south into the sand ridges of the Simpson Desert, searching for more local wildlife. We managed to see a couple of canegrass dragons and some eyrean grasswrens. The dragons, with their light-coloured stripes and long legs, were pretty good-looking for lizards. It seemed really special to see the grasswrens because they had been thought extinct until 1976, although Tom said they were fairly common in a good season. These pretty brown-and-white birds shelter in the clumps of bluish-green canegrass common in the area. One of them ran off when we disturbed it—at such a high speed that its feet hardly seemed to touch the ground. We caught sight of a gibberbird, too. Tom told us we were privileged to see one of these because they are shy and reclusive.

We crossed into South Australia and set up camp at Mount Dare homestead. Dinner included kangaroo-tail soup and witchetty grubs as well as kangaroo steaks with roast veggies, and damper for dessert. That night was cooler than usual and most of us headed for the warmth of our sleeping bags after a chat around the campfire.

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Our final day in the desert dawned bright, clear and frosty. We were grateful to have the work of breaking camp because it helped us get warm. By mid-morning the chill had gone and it was a very pleasant 25°C.

After visiting a couple of historic sites and a conservation project, our final stop was at the Lambert Centre, the geographical centre of Australia. Then it was 'go west, young man' to the highway and a "short" three-hour drive back to Alice.

That evening was spent catching up with the other group and swapping stories. We all chipped in and bought thank-you gifts for our teachers. Some of us went for a final wander around the town centre. In the time we had been in Alice Springs I'd heard several people say that it reminded them of Sale. It did me, too. I don't know what it was—perhaps the flatness, or the layout. It was bigger than Sale, but somehow it seemed familiar.

Saturday morning we packed and headed for the airport. We were in Melbourne by lunchtime. Our buses were waiting, and by late afternoon we were back in Sale. It was good to be home, but I think most of us had the feeling we'd left another home in Central Australia.

CHAPTER 5: CRASH!

The months after we returned from Central Australia passed quickly. They were filled with activities and events that kept us busy until Christmas. It was cold, wet and windy when we arrived back. That was hard to take after the glorious days we had enjoyed during the trip, but then spring suddenly arrived and the weather cleared.

Our part of Australia is famous for its "four-seasons-in-one-day" climate. Our springtime weather is usually unpredictable, but I love that time of the year. There is an amazing sense of renewal as trees regain their foliage and gardens wake from their winter slumber. That spring was warm and sunny. The drone of mowers filled the air and the smell of clipped grass wafted in the breeze. Everyone in our neighbourhood was trying to keep up with lawns growing at the speed of an express train.

Zoë and I grew closer as time went by. My family loved her and she spent a lot of time at our place. Zoë was an only child, and I was very relieved to find that her parents, Peter and Jill Denton, approved of me. Our parents allowed us the freedom to make our own decisions in our relationship, but at the same time made it clear how they expected us to behave. We respected that, and I don't think we ever disappointed them. The teasing from Travis and Brett eventually tapered off, especially after Brett and Clare started seeing a lot of each other.

Simon's fourteenth birthday was in early October, and Travis' sixteenth was the following day, so, as we did every year, we organised a joint party for them. However, Susan, Travis' mum, was about to turn 35. Since her birthday was only four days after his, we decided to make the party a surprise for her. It worked perfectly. Susan even prepared food for the occasion without having an inkling that it was actually her party.

When we sprang the surprise, she threatened Travis with all sorts of dire consequences for fooling her.

'You just wait until all the witnesses have left!'

Travis tried to smooth-talk her. 'How about I make it up to you by becoming your chauffeur? I need someone with me so I get some hours up on my learner's permit.'

That was greeted with a shocked silence...until everyone cracked up when Brett remarked drily, 'Well, Susan, you've always said Travis was trying to drive you up the wall. Now he's got a *real chance!*'

We had exams in the second half of November. Brett—as usual—aced his, and Zoë did nearly as well. Clare, Travis and I all passed comfortably, so we were all relieved and happy. Brett's sister Naomi turned ten early in December, and Brett's sixteenth birthday was exactly a week later, so that meant another party. It also meant another learner's permit, but Brett never got into the scrapes that Travis did, so we didn't hold the same fears for him. I couldn't believe there were so many birthdays so close together. I seemed to be spending all my money buying presents.

School finished for the year a few days before Christmas. The Year 10s got together to have a kind of "final fling", because the next year we would be starting our Victorian

Certificate of Education studies and we expected to be working too hard to have much time for social activities.

Christmas came and went, and Zoë's parents invited me to spend the New Year weekend with them at Seaspray, on the Ninety Mile Beach. We had a great time. The weather was fine and hot, so we spent most of the time in the ocean.

Zoë and I watched the New Year's Eve celebrations from a vantage point on the sand dunes. At midnight there was a spectacular fireworks display. I entertained Zoë with stories my grandparents had told me of cracker night and bonfires—tales that featured skyrockets, pinwheels, Tom Thumbs, jumping jacks and threepenny bungers. It must have been fun; even the names sounded exciting. Unfortunately, too many people lost fingers or their eyesight, so since the 1970s only licensed pyrotechnicians had been able to buy and use most fireworks. The rest of us had to be content with public displays like the one we saw at Seaspray.

Offshore, the lights of several of the Bass Strait oil rigs were visible in the distance. Above us, the stars were bright and we were able to pick out the distinctive Southern Cross and several other constellations. I don't think it matched the magic of the evening at Uluru, but it was special nevertheless.

Travis, Brett and I had always spent January together. The long summer days were perfect for swimming and riding, and we usually did lots of both. It was different that year, since Brett had Clare and I had Zoë to spend time with. I wondered how it would work out, but we ended up doing stuff together as a group. Travis didn't have a girlfriend—I don't think he stopped clowning around long enough for a girl to get to know him—so we always included him in whatever we were doing.

We decided to celebrate Zoë's sixteenth birthday by having a banquet at one of the Chinese restaurants. We pooled our resources and found we had enough to invite all of our parents. I don't remember who thought of it, but the idea was to let our mums and dads know how much we appreciated them. Clare's dad reckoned we must be the only teens in existence who actually liked their parents. He made fun of us, but the grin on his face all evening betrayed his pride.

The new school year started, and so did the pressure of work. Right from the start we had heaps of homework and we were expected to work more independently than in previous years. The first term ended early, so that the school holidays would coincide with the Commonwealth Games, which were held in Melbourne. We mostly ignored the Games, relieved to have a break after a heavy start to the year. We had expected to work harder in our first VCE year, but the reality was still rather a shock.

The Monster's trial took place during the week leading up to the holidays, and I was the main witness. I was nervous before my day in court. I couldn't get it out of my mind. I kept wondering how I would react to seeing *him again*.

It was hard to remain calm under the defence barrister's questioning. There was too much evidence for him to deny that The Monster had had sex with me, so he tried to prove that it was consensual. He suggested that I hadn't been kidnapped but had gone willingly to the farmhouse. The prosecution, however, was able to prove that my blood had been found on the floor of The Monster's van, and that residue of capsicum spray had been found on my clothes. Doctor Emery gave evidence regarding my

weakened physical condition at the time I was hospitalised, and testified that my injuries—documented in graphic photographs—could not have been self-inflicted.

The forensic evidence and sworn testimony sealed The Monster's fate and the jury took only a couple of hours to find him guilty. His past had caught up with him at last. He was sentenced to twenty years' jail and his name was placed on the Victorian sex offender register. As an ex-prison officer and child rapist he had to be housed in a special facility. Child molesters are not generally welcomed by other prisoners, and the authorities feared that he wouldn't live to serve his sentence if he was placed in an ordinary prison.

Although the trial went well, and the outcome was good, it nevertheless troubled me. Reliving the ordeal—even if only verbally—was stressful. Seeing The Monster sitting in court was unsettling. He sat impassively, not showing any emotion. He didn't even react when the judge sentenced him. He stared at me the whole time I was giving my evidence. I knew he was no longer a physical threat, but that rattled me. Every time I looked towards him I expected him to break out in his evil smile. Had he done so I think I would have broken down. That ugly face, the face that I had seen at such close quarters so many times, was still intimidating—even at several metres' distance.

I was relieved when it was over. I was looking forward to getting on with the rest of my life. As it turned out, however, that wouldn't be easy.

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My troubles began the first weekend of the holidays, right after the trial. The Monday was a public holiday—Labour Day—and my family decided to spend the long weekend with my grandparents. Zoë and I had previously made plans to go to Buchan with her parents to tour the caves.

We left Sale on the Saturday morning. Zoë had obtained her learner's permit after her birthday, and her dad let her drive part of the way. Her mother and I climbed into the back seat of the car and made a big show out of fastening our seat belts.

'We should have brought crash helmets,' Jill said.

'Mmm, that might have been a good idea. Do you think we should cover our eyes?'

'Oh, belt up, you two!' came from the front as Zoë adjusted the driver's seat and the rear-view mirrors.

'We have,' her mother said innocently.

'MUM! Stop it! I'm trying to concentrate.'

Jill looked at me with a wry grin. 'I think I've been told,' she mouthed to me.

I sank down in the seat and covered my face with my hands. I didn't want Zoë to see that I was trying not to laugh. Her mother was as big a stirrer as Travis.

Zoë drove to Bairnsdale and then her father took over. We left the Princes Highway there, and Zoë felt a little uncomfortable on the narrower country road. Her mum moved to the front seat and Zoë hopped in the back with me for the rest of the trip.

We took a break at Bruthen for a few minutes after someone remembered we hadn't removed Zoë's "L" plates from the front and back of the car. Since it's illegal to display them unless a learner is actually driving, we were relieved that we hadn't been pulled over by the police.

We arrived in Buchan by lunchtime. Peter had booked a three-bedroom cabin near the Caves Reserve. We found it easily, and I helped him unload the car while Jill and Zoë prepared sandwiches and put the kettle on. We took our time to settle in and have lunch since the next tour of Royal Cave wasn't until three o'clock. We planned to see Fairy Cave the following day.

I had found out in Central Australia that Zoë was afraid of heights. She discovered at Buchan that I was claustrophobic. I was a little apprehensive about going into the caves. I didn't like confined spaces, and I had seen documentaries about caving that left me believing that all caves had low ceilings and narrow passages. I'd not told Zoë or her parents, but as we waited in line to pay our admission fee my nerves began to get the better of me. Zoë quickly picked up my fear, and that reminded me why I found her so special. I don't know how she did it, but she seemed to know me better than I knew myself. She hugged me and whispered reassurances in my ear. She had been to the caves a couple of years earlier and was sure I would live through the experience. I need not have worried; Royal Cave was a little damp, but it wasn't anything like those I had seen in the documentaries. Its large caverns were high and spacious and its passages were wide and well lit. The stalagmites and stalactites had taken on all sorts of weird and wonderful shapes, and the rock formations were fascinating. Spotlights and backlighting showed off everything beautifully.

After dinner we had a game of Scrabble which, much to Peter's disgust, Jill won. He claimed to have never beaten her at anything, which caused Zoë and her mum to laugh their heads off. Peter managed to look affronted, but he couldn't help chuckling as he got up to put the kettle on. He gave me a wink, as if we were in a conspiracy together.

Over a cup of tea and lamingtons we talked about the trial. The Dentons had been there, but they wanted my personal take on it. They were interested to know how it had affected me, and whether I felt I would finally be able to put the kidnapping to rest. We got right down to specifics—including what I thought of The Monster. I discovered that my feelings had changed in the months since my kidnapping. At that time I had been angry; I had hated the man and what he'd done to me. At the trial he had scared me. Yet, that night, under Peter and Jill's gentle guidance, I found that all I could feel was pity. He was sick, and he needed help.

It was a really good conversation. Peter and Jill had always put me at ease, and they were easy to talk to. Their sympathetic questioning helped me to understand my feelings, and to put the whole episode in perspective. When I went to sleep that night

I was confident that I had beaten The Monster and that the kidnapping and abuse were history. I was wrong.

I was having a bad dream. I was hurt badly. I was being carried in someone's strong arms to the hospital. Only I wasn't taken to hospital; I was thrown into the back of an old van and driven on a long journey. When the van finally stopped I was pulled out of the vehicle and dragged into a building. I heard a door open and I was pushed roughly. I stumbled into a room and fell on the floor. I blacked out.

I was hurting all over, hungry and cold. There was a man standing over me, regarding me with eyes that seemed to look right through me; his lips formed into an evil grin. He had a round face with a huge scar on his cheek. I tried to pull my arm over my eyes to shut out the horrible sight, but I couldn't move. I blacked out again.

The next time I saw the man he was naked, and aroused. Roughly, he turned me onto my stomach and handcuffed me to the bed. I screamed...

'Michael...' In the distance someone was speaking my name, softly and lovingly.

'Michael!' There it was again, but more urgent.

Someone was on my bed, shaking me. A pair of arms snaked around me, trying to hold me. I struggled to get free. *I have to get out of here!*

Then...the voice again. 'Michael!' It was beginning to sound anxious. 'Michael! Michael, wake up! You're safe here.'

I shook my head, trying to collect my thoughts. *Where am I? In my mind I was back in that farmhouse and The Monster was abusing me again. I have to get out!*

No! Wait! The voice...it sounded familiar. Zoë!

I opened my eyes and, still half asleep, struggled to sit up. 'Zoë?'

She pushed me back down. 'Yep, it's me. You were screaming. You must have been having a nightmare.'

'Oh, blimey!' I remembered we were at Buchan with her parents. 'Did I wake everyone?'

'Yes, but don't worry about that,' a voice said from the door. Zoë's mum came into the room. 'Are you okay now?'

'I think so. Sorry to wake you.'

'No problem,' she said, placing her hand on my forehead. 'No fever, so it probably was a nightmare. You sounded really distressed. Think you'll be all right?'

I nodded.

She took my hand. 'Oh, Michael, you're shaking like a leaf.'

She was right. Zoë was caressing my arm. Her presence was reassuring, but I was still feeling agitated. My heart was thumping in my chest, and my hands were sweaty.

Jill looked from me to her daughter and back. She looked thoughtful, as if she was trying to decide something. Finally, she spoke again. 'Zoë, I think you'd better stay with Michael till morning. He could do with some loving right now—and don't take that the wrong way, okay?' She raised her eyebrows at both of us.

'Mum, I know what you mean,' Zoë said gently. 'Thank you,' she added, then grinned. 'And don't worry, we'll behave.'

'Thank you.' Jill kissed us both. 'Goodnight again.' The light in the living area clicked off as she returned to her room.

Zoë lifted the doona and slipped into bed beside me. Her soft body lying against mine and her gentle arms wrapping me in a warm hug were comforting. Neither of us spoke; words weren't necessary. It was enough that she was there.

The nightmare had brought unwelcome visitors—memories that I thought I had put behind me. *What does it mean? Is this what Doctor Cazelaar warned me about? We had such a great talk before everyone went to bed...why did I end up having a nightmare? Will it happen again? What do I do now? Questions and random thoughts raced through my mind.*

Somehow, Zoë knew. 'Try to go to sleep, Michael. We can deal with it in the morning.' She kissed my cheek. 'Goodnight.'

She hugged me again and I kissed her goodnight. She was right. I didn't need to try to understand right then and there. Being in her arms helped me to calm down. Gradually the stress lessened. I relaxed and drifted off to sleep.

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When I next opened my eyes it was daylight and Zoë was lying on her side watching me, a smile playing on her lips.

'What?' I asked.

'I was enjoying watching you sleep. You looked so peaceful.'

'Well, that's a change from last night!'

She leaned over and kissed me, then laid her head on my chest. She wrapped her free arm around me, wordlessly showing her concern. My arms automatically encircled and hugged her. Her body felt soft and warm against mine, and that was more than a little erotic. I couldn't allow my thoughts to wander in that direction, though. Although our parents gave us a lot of freedom, they didn't normally allow us to be in the same bed. We both knew that if we let our hormones take over we would deeply disappoint our elders. Not only that, it would also mean that we'd failed to meet the standards we had set for ourselves. I knew neither of us wanted that.

I decided to start again. 'Good morning, Beautiful!'

Zoë giggled. 'Flattery will get you everywhere, but good morning to you, too.' She lifted her head and kissed me again.

'Mmm, it's really nice to have you here and to get a wake-up kiss, but it's kind of tempting. I think we'd better get out of bed before I do something we'll both regret.'

Reluctantly, after several more kisses—just to make sure I was awake, Zoë claimed—we parted to shower and get dressed.

'Morning, Jill,' I said as I stepped into the kitchen a little later.

'Hey, Michael! How are you feeling now?' She gave me a hug and a peck on the cheek. She stood with her hands on my shoulders, waiting for my answer.

'I'm not sure.' I was confused. 'I thought everything was fine, especially after we talked last night. But that nightmare really scared me. It was the same one I had when I was in hospital, waking from the coma.' I burst into tears, and Jill held me tight. She rubbed my back, comforting me just like my own mother would have.

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Over the next three months I descended into my own personal hell. It was devastating for me and for everyone around me. Somehow, I made it through the remainder of that weekend at Buchan, but once I was back home things went from bad to worse. I felt restless and troubled, but I couldn't figure out what was wrong. I was listless and always tired, but my sleep patterns were completely disrupted. I'd sleep for a few hours and then I'd wake up and spend the rest of the night tossing and turning. The nightmares—always the same—became more frequent and I'd wake up screaming. Mum sat with me dozens of times, comforting me as I tried to get back to sleep. The family must have thought I'd decided that if I couldn't sleep, no one else in the house would either.

Doctor Cazelaar believed I had developed post traumatic stress disorder and major depression. He thought that the stress of the trial, followed soon after by the fear I had experienced at the cave, had triggered their onset. He set up weekly counselling sessions that included cognitive-behaviour therapy. The idea was to change my thought patterns and beliefs, and thus my behaviour. Success would depend on my commitment and participation, and I would have to be open and honest. I wanted to get out of the disaster that my life had become, so I tried hard. The doctor's humour and his gentle, caring manner put me at ease. I felt secure while I was with him—not threatened like I did around some people. I'd go home after each session feeling much more optimistic. Over the next few days, however, the doubts and fears would return. By the time of my next appointment I'd be feeling terrible again. The doctor prescribed a medication that was supposed to help the PTSD as well as the depression. It helped a bit but I still found it hard to get through each day.

After a few sessions with little improvement, Doctor Cazelaar was concerned. My family was frantic. I had become sullen and withdrawn, and it was nearly impossible to hold a conversation with me. My friends had trouble coming to grips with the change in me. Most of them were unable to understand what had happened and didn't know what to do with me.

I just wasn't able to climb out of the hole I'd fallen into. I became more and more despondent. One negative emotion seemed to feed off another. My inability to cope with the depression—let alone do anything about it—made me even more depressed. I was confused and angry. My sense of humour deserted me, and things that previously would have made me howl with laughter evoked no emotion at all. I took refuge in the little, day-to-day, routine things. Taking one thing and one day at a time, I managed. Just. Anything unexpected or out of the ordinary threw me into a spin.

My life had been turned upside down, and it felt like the whole world was out of control. Sometimes I thought I was caught up in a tornado that refused to die out—battering and buffeting and tossing me all over the place. At other times it was a hurricane. The wind would blow hard in one direction, and then all would be calm in the eye of the storm. For a while I would hope that it was all over...until the storm moved on and the wind began to blow the opposite way. My hopes would be dashed to pieces and I would fall down again. Most of the time I felt like I was surrounded by a dense fog, with a very limited field of vision. It was like walking around with my eyes focused on my feet, so that I could see myself walking, yet didn't have any idea where I was going. Sometimes I couldn't even see my feet. At other times I felt weighed down by an enormous load on my back. I heard that someone had described depression as a black dog. I knew what he meant. I reckoned I had a whole pack of black dogs hunting me.

Almost imperceptibly I spiralled down into an ever-blacker state.

I shut myself in my bedroom for hours on end. I would sit at my desk and stare out the window at the old oak tree in the middle of our back yard. I watched its leaves fall as autumn passed. It gave me a perverse kind of satisfaction the day I realised that it was an apt metaphor for the way my life was falling apart. When I didn't feel like looking out, I would look inward. I'd lie on my bed staring at the ceiling, my mind blank. Sometimes I'd curl into a ball under the doona, wishing the world would just go away.

Zoë sat with me for many of those hours. Having her there was a comfort, but my emotional roller coaster must have made it really hard for her. One day I would be happy to have her there and we'd talk and even share a laugh or two. The next day I'd be brooding and angry, and she would leave in tears. When Zoë wasn't with me, often Travis would be, or Brett and Clare. They learned to visit singly or in pairs. Any more made me feel that they were crowding me. Somehow they managed to put up with my ups and downs, my to-ing and fro-ing.

At school I kept to myself and nearly everyone avoided me. That deepened the depression, because I knew I was turning them away but I couldn't do anything about it. Brett and Travis tried to include me in whatever they were up to, but my heart just wasn't in it most of the time. I don't know how she did it, but Zoë stuck with me, even though it must have seemed that I was trying hard to make her hate me.

The spiral plunged ever lower. It was odd, but at some point I began to actually enjoy my depression, and no longer tried to get out of it. I think I began to wear it like one wears an old raincoat—you don't like it much because it's bulky and makes movement awkward, but it's familiar and gives you the impression that you're wrapped up in a safe cocoon.

Mum's birthday was early in May. Mother's Day came about ten days later and my birthday the day after that. I managed to join in the family celebrations for Mum, and even bought gifts for her. It was a different matter on my own birthday. It was my sixteenth. Normally that would have called for a celebration because it meant I was old enough to get *my learner's permit*. *Travis, Brett and Clare, Zoë and my family tried hard to make it a special day. For me all it meant was that I was another notch closer to oblivion.*

As winter approached and the days grew shorter, my sense of hopelessness grew deeper. My self-esteem was shot to pieces and I had no self-respect. In fact, I think I actually hated myself by that stage. Certainly I had convinced myself that no one cared about me. I was positive that I wouldn't be missed if I wasn't around. The black dog had almost won.

The final straw came with our mid-year exams early in June. I'd been struggling to keep up with my work because of the tiredness and lack of motivation, and it was hard to study because I had trouble concentrating. I began to feel more and more helpless, and school and study began to seem pointless. By the time the exams were complete I was certain that I had failed them all.

The last exam was on Thursday 8 June. The following Monday the nation would celebrate Queen Elizabeth II's official birthday with a public holiday. Dad, Mum and Simon decided to spend the long weekend visiting my grandparents again. They asked me to go with them, but I couldn't. My grandparents knew about my depression but they hadn't experienced it first-hand. I don't know why, but I wanted to spare them that. Perhaps, deep down, I wanted to believe that there was someone who still loved me. I felt that if they saw me in my depressed and sullen state they would hate me like everyone else did.

There was an additional reason for my wanting to stay home—I had a plan forming in my mind. A plan that would solve all of my problems in one fell swoop.

Kellie didn't go with Dad and Mum, either. She went to Melbourne for the weekend. She was preparing for her trip to Japan, and her boyfriend had promised to take her shopping for stuff she couldn't buy locally.

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I sat at my desk and sobbed. I had reached the end of my tether. The black dog was stalking me and I was sick of trying to fight it. I no longer had the will to live. I felt worthless, helpless and hopeless.

I looked out at the old oak tree. It had lost all of its leaves in the autumn, and was completely bare—like my soul.

Memories came flooding back of all the happy times that tree represented. Travis, Brett and I had spent hours climbing in its solid, spreading boughs. One summer we'd built a secret fort high in its branches. From there we spied on our neighbourhood, secure in the knowledge that the tree's thick foliage hid us. Every autumn there would be a carpet of acorns on the ground. We fired them from our shanghais, using empty soft drink cans as targets. Dad made a swing from a couple of ropes and a wooden seat and we boys held competitions to see who could swing the highest. Everyone else gave up after Travis reached a point where he was able to let go of the swing and grab hold of a higher branch. There was a gasp from all of us watching when the swing returned without Travis. That soon turned to laughter and stirring when we had to fetch a ladder to get him down.

I thought of all the time Zoë and I had spent under that tree over the summer. Its shade was inviting on a hot day and it became our favourite spot. Sitting on the

ground, with our backs against the huge trunk, we talked for hours on end. Sometimes we sat there in silence, simply enjoying each other's company.

I sighed. She was gone. All of them were gone. I had pushed them away. The deeper I'd fallen into depression, the further I'd retreated from everyone around me. Even Monty, our family's loveable and affectionate black cocker spaniel, could no longer get through to me.

The memories brought a renewed flood of tears, and I sat there and howled. I was glad everyone was away. I needed to be alone. By the time they got back it would be over.

Eventually I pulled myself together enough to finish the note I was writing. I signed it, "Love, Michael," and put the pen down.

I picked up the rope I had ready and left my room. I felt numb. It was like I was on autopilot; without needing to think, I followed the plan I had worked out earlier. I walked out to the oak tree, on the way collecting an old bar stool from the garage. I climbed onto the stool and threw the rope over a branch. The tears were falling again, nearly blinding me, but it would be over soon and the pain would be gone. I'd made a noose at one end of the rope. I adjusted it to the right height and tied the other end of the rope to a nearby branch. I opened the noose and pushed my head through it. I checked for the hundredth time that the slipknot would work properly. I paused. *Do I really want to do this? The fog in my brain was so dense that I couldn't think clearly enough to answer myself. All I knew was that the pain had become unbearable and there was only one way to stop it. I kicked the stool away and felt the knot tighten around my neck as the weight of my body pulled on it.*

I heard a scream, 'Michael! NO! Noooooo!' There was more shouting. Someone was running. Then the world faded into blackness.

CHAPTER 6: RETREAT

Gradually, I became aware of activity around me. There was a background buzz of people talking, and I could hear footsteps. The high-pitched beep of a pager sounded. Machines were humming and blipping. Not too far away someone was crying.

I heard someone walking towards me. A voice called, 'He's coming round.'

Shit! SHIT! I'm still here! Man, I'm hopeless...I can't even get that right!

My heart sank as I realised that my plan hadn't worked. Then I began to feel angry. I opened my eyes and tried to sit up. I had to get back and finish what I had started. There was a nurse standing right beside the bed, however. She put her hands on my shoulders and firmly pushed me back down.

'Doctor!' she yelled, as I struggled to get up again.

'Whoa! Where are you off to, young Michael?'

The voice sounded familiar. It was on my other side. I jerked my head around, causing a sharp pain in my neck. *Doctor Emery!* I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I wanted to tell him I had to get out of there.

'Don't try to speak, son. It's possible you've hurt your larynx, and talking will aggravate it. Let's examine you and see how much damage you've done.'

I slumped back on the bed. My neck was hurting, but so was my heart. Tears came to my eyes and I started to sob. *Where do I go from here? Where can I go? What do I do now? There's nothing left.*

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At first, the realisation that I'd failed to kill myself hurt more than the pain in my neck and throat. It even seemed to hurt more than the depression that had led me out to the tree with that rope in my hand. I'd already been feeling worthless, and I couldn't see any future. In my depression I convinced myself that death was the only way out. I thought my plan was foolproof. The knowledge that it wasn't made me feel even worse. I also felt frustrated that someone had stopped me from carrying out my plan.

Doctor Emery finished his examination and had me transferred to a private room. He came in and told me there was someone waiting to see me. 'It's important that you see them, okay?'

I didn't want to see anybody, but the tone in his voice and the look he gave me left no room for argument. I tried to stare him down, but it didn't work. Reluctantly, I nodded.

He left, and for a few minutes it was just me and the nurse who was guarding me.

I was expecting my parents, so I was surprised when the door opened and Brett and Clare walked in. Brett was sombre, and Clare's tear-streaked face showed that she had

been crying. For a few moments we just looked at each other. I was wondering why they were there, and they were probably wondering the same thing. I felt uncomfortable and, judging from their silence, I was sure they did, too.

Suddenly, Clare burst into tears. 'Why?' she whispered. 'WHY?' she almost shouted.

That set me off. I started crying, too. I held my arms open and Clare almost launched herself at me. We hugged each other tightly until our tears stopped. Brett stood watching, showing no emotion. Clare went over and gave him a gentle nudge in my direction. He resisted, so she pushed a little harder. He stumbled and almost fell into my arms. I tried to hug him, but he was holding himself stiff and wouldn't allow me to. I started crying again. I felt Brett yield. His arms grabbed me and I heard him sobbing. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Clare leave the room. She came back a few moments later with Zoë. They waited quietly. Brett gave me a final squeeze before he stood and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. He looked at me for a moment before Clare grabbed him and led him out the door. Brett hadn't said a word.

I must have looked confused. 'He's really upset and angry,' Zoë said. 'He can't understand why you didn't talk to him...why you didn't tell him how bad you were feeling.'

I just looked at her and nodded. Even if I'd been able to speak, it didn't seem like there was anything sensible that I could say at that point. *Why didn't I talk to Brett? For that matter, why didn't I talk to anyone?*

'He would have helped,' Zoë said quietly. 'We all would have.'

I nodded again. I closed my eyes, trying to prevent the tears from starting again. It didn't work, and Zoë lovingly wiped my face dry. She laid her head on my chest, put her arms around me and hugged me. It seemed like ages since she'd done that. In the depths of my depression I'd wanted to be left alone, and I had kept her at a distance. Suddenly I realised I'd missed her hugs, and I wrapped my arms around her gratefully. It felt good, and I held her tight. I never wanted to let her go, ever again.

'Oh, Michael,' she said through her tears. 'I thought I'd lost you. For so long you've shut yourself away, and I couldn't tell what was going on in that head of yours.'

She started to shake, and I realised she was laughing. I thought she'd lost it, until she sat up and looked at me with a crooked smile. '*You didn't know what was going on in there, did you?*'

I shook my head.

Zoë took my head in both hands and looked me straight in the eye. 'Don't ever—EVER—do that again! Do you hear me, Michael David Parker?'

I nodded. She gave me a long, searching look, then leaned in and kissed me. It was wonderful. I returned the kiss.

Zoë gently filled me in on what had happened at home after I kicked the stool away. I had heard that shout and the running feet, but then everything had gone black and the next thing I knew I was waking up in Accident and Emergency. It turned out that the two were related.

Brett and Clare, knowing that I was alone at home that day, decided to check on me. After getting no response when they knocked on the front door, they headed around to the back. Clare happened to look over towards the oak tree, and she saw me kick the stool away. The shout I heard was Clare's reflex response. The running feet were Brett's. My best friend righted the stool, clambered up on it, and lifted me to take the weight off my neck. He held me for several minutes until Clare found something to cut me down. Brett then performed CPR on me while Clare phoned for an ambulance. Brett Thompson had saved my life. I must have caused him unbelievable shock and stress. No wonder he showed mixed emotions when he and Clare visited me.

My parents and Simon were on their way home when they heard, so they rushed straight to the hospital. Kellie and her boyfriend were close behind them. There were more hugs and more tears. The doctors limited the number of visitors and the time they could stay, so after a while it was just Zoë and me again.

Travis turned up after the family left. His reaction was much the same as Brett's, but at least he spoke to me. Zoë cracked up when he told me he would have come and kicked the stool away for me if I'd asked him to. I just shook my head in wonder. Even at a time like that he couldn't resist teasing me. I had to admit it helped relieve the tension I was feeling after facing up to everyone, and I couldn't help grinning. By then my voice was returning, and I managed to talk a little.

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Doctor Cazelaar visited me the following morning. He told me I was very fortunate that Brett and Clare had turned up when they did. 'Otherwise you probably wouldn't have lived.'

'But I *wanted* to die!'

'I know you did, but that was only because of exceptional circumstances. You didn't *choose* suicide; it was forced on you.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, you got to a point where you were hurting so much that it seemed like the only way to end the pain was to die.'

I nodded. That was exactly how I had felt.

'The pain became so powerful that you couldn't see beyond it. You had to end the pain—and the only way to do that was to end life itself.'

I nodded again. The doctor was making a lot of sense.

'You couldn't see any other way to stop the pain because the resources you had for coping with it weren't adequate. In other words, the pain you were feeling was more than you could handle. It doesn't mean that you really wanted to die—only that you had more pain than you were able to cope with.'²

²Ainsworth, Martha. *Suicide: Read This First*. <http://www.metanoia.org/suicide>. Accessed 17 August 2008

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Suddenly, the doctor's words hit me and I recognised the truth in them.

'Wow!' I managed to croak.

'You could have lived through the suicidal feelings if you had been able to find a way to reduce your pain, or find a way to increase your coping resources. Either would have worked.'

'Wow.'

The doctor chuckled. 'You're very articulate today.'

'Well...I...'

'Hey, just promise me you will have a think about what I just said, okay?'

Thoughts were running through my mind at a blinding pace. I did need to think it through. But I needed to talk about it, too.

I was still thinking as I started to respond to Doctor Cazelaar. 'Doc— Peter...I...' *Now. I need to talk about it now!* 'Can we talk about it now? Please?'

'Sure. Where would you like to start?'

'Ha!' I snorted. 'About a year ago? Before any of this stuff happened?'

He chuckled again. 'Hmm, we all wish that we could turn the clock back at times, but it's not possible—and you know, I think it's better that way.'

'Yeah, I guess. It would create a whole new set of problems, wouldn't it?'

'Yep. So...we can't prevent bad things from happening, but we can use them to our advantage.'

'How do we do that?'

'Well, we can learn from them. We can learn about ourselves—our reaction to the situation, our tolerance for pain, and how we coped or didn't cope. We can learn about other people—the things people are capable of, and things we need to be aware of. Are you with me so far?'

I nodded.

'Then—and I think this is even more important—we can use these things to make ourselves stronger. Once we understand what happened and how we coped with it, then we can work out strategies for living so that we can better deal with the bad things that happen in the future.'

'Okay. So, what went wrong in my case? Why...' I struggled to get it out. 'Why...why did I try to kill myself?'

'Because your pain overwhelmed your coping mechanisms.'

'Yeah, but...'

'But you're wondering what else you could have done, right?'

'Well, yeah. If the pain was too much for me to cope with, what chance did I have? I mean, it seems kind of like filling a bucket or something with water till it overflows—it can only hold so much.'

'Yep, that's true, but there's another way to look at it.'

I frowned. 'What other way is there?'

'Did you consider finding another bucket?'

'Wha—' I began. Then the light went on. 'Oh, I think I see. I tried to cope on my own. I should have—' My heart sank as I remembered how things had been. 'But...but no one understood. No one would have been able to help. And I didn't think they wanted to, anyway.'

'That was the depression speaking. I reckon you'll find that everyone wanted to help, but you wouldn't let them.'

'Oh.' I suddenly felt like I'd been digging my own grave.

'They might not have known exactly what to do or say, but they could have helped you just by being there and listening. Do you remember me telling you that a burden shared is a burden halved?'

My heart sank further. I nodded. 'I do remember...now.' I gave a guilty smile. 'Man, why did I forget when I needed it most?'

The doctor smiled. 'Well, you were under stress, and depressed. Either one could have been enough to throw you, but together they made a formidable team. I think they caused you to forget...but you not only forgot, you pushed everybody out the door, closed it in their faces and locked it.'

'Oh.' I realised he was right. I *had* pushed everyone away—and then blamed them because they weren't helping me. 'I stuffed up, didn't I?'

Doctor Cazelaar nodded, allowing me to sift through my thoughts.

'Big time,' I added.

He nodded again, and with a wry smile said, 'I think that's a pretty good assessment.'

When I thought about it, I realised that my family and friends had reason to be angry with me. Even though I hadn't realised it at the time, I had been terribly selfish. I hadn't intended to be that way, but my depression had made me anti-social; it made me just want to curl up in a corner somewhere and be alone. I had bottled up my feelings instead of sharing them and giving those who loved me a chance to help me through the blackness. True, *I* hadn't understood what I was feeling or why, but if I had opened up there would have been a good chance that *someone* would have had the right word to say or the right insight to share. Doctor Cazelaar explained that clamming up and shutting down—and the desire to enjoy the self-pity alone—was fairly common in people suffering depression.

My frustration at being foiled in my attempt to die soon dissolved, as I began to understand that my perceptions had been quite different from the reality. The guest at my solitary pity party had convinced me that no one cared, that no one would miss

me if I wasn't around. The reactions to my attempted suicide showed me how wrong that idea was.

The people around me *did* care. As we talked over the next few days, I came to realise that, without exception, my family and friends had agonised over my descent into depression. Unknown to me, they had talked to one another, trying to find ways to help me. They had all tried to show me that they cared. I just hadn't wanted to see it at the time.

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Thanks to Brett and Clare's timely arrival and their quick action, my injuries were minimal. It was only a matter of seconds after I'd kicked the stool away that Brett lifted me to take the tension off the rope and my neck.

The rope hadn't done much damage; apart from a sore neck and throat—and pretty spiral bruising around my neck—I was fine, and my voice returned completely almost immediately. The doctors were more worried about my emotional state, so for the first day or so I wasn't left alone.

I made up my mind to never again shy away from talking to someone if I became depressed. I was fortunate. I had my life back—for the third time, it seemed—and I would do my best to get on with it.

My suicide attempt was a turning point for me. My family and friends rallied around me to give me the support I needed. There was nothing new about that—they had always been there—but there was one thing different...I had a new attitude.

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After a couple of nights in the hospital I was sent home. The doctors were satisfied that I was physically healed, and that emotionally I was well on the way to recovery. My new attitude, together with the support my family and friends provided, was enough to convince Doctor Cazelaar that there was no need to keep me under surveillance. He told me to rest for a couple of days before I returned to school, though. That meant I didn't have to go back until July, because the end of that week marked the start of the fortnight-long school holidays.

I was amazed and relieved to find that I had scraped through my exams; fortunately my grades throughout the semester had been good. Nevertheless, my exam results spoiled my good record, so I went back to study with a vengeance. I was determined to make up for the lapse caused by my depression.

At the beginning of July, Kellie left for her three-month-long exchange visit to Japan. Departure day was Sunday, and the whole family—including Zoë—travelled to Melbourne so she could catch a domestic flight to Sydney. There she would join her travel group, which was scheduled to leave for Tokyo the following morning. Kellie couldn't keep still as we waited for her flight to board. It was great to see her so excited, but there were lots of tearful hugs as we said our goodbyes.

'I'll be on the first plane back to knock some sense into that thick skull of yours if I hear anything bad!' she whispered in my ear as she hugged me. 'Got that?'

All I could do was nod my head. I didn't trust myself to say anything. I knew she meant it, and I felt bad that she even had to say it. I had nearly ruined it all for her. Had I succeeded in killing myself just a couple of weeks before her departure date, I doubt that she would have gone. To have her interrupt her trip would be even worse. I just couldn't do that to her. I think she knew what was going through my mind, because she didn't wait for me to say anything. She gave me a warm sisterly smile and a peck on the cheek and she was gone, saying goodbye to someone else.

Although it meant that we would miss a couple of days of school, our parents had decided that we would all stay in Melbourne until the Wednesday so that we could meet and collect our Japanese student, Noriko Kasahara. She would be staying with my family for most of her time in Australia, and Zoë was to be her "buddy." Noriko would attend year 11 classes with us.

We filled in one whole day visiting Melbourne Museum and the Arts Centre, and another half day at Melbourne Aquarium. The rest of the time we spent wandering around the central city, exploring the laneways and shopping arcades. We went to a film at IMAX. The huge screen, together with the 3D effect, made us feel like we were in the middle of the action. It was so realistic that at one point I was certain the fish swimming towards me were inside my headset.

Early on Wednesday afternoon we joined several other host families at the airport to wait for the flight from Sydney that was bringing Noriko and a group of exchange students. We had been told that the students had all learned English, but that they didn't get many opportunities to use it, so we weren't sure what to expect. As it turned out, Noriko's father was a businessman who travelled a lot, and he had been determined that his children would never experience the difficulties he had faced communicating with people who didn't speak Japanese. He had employed a private language tutor, and consequently Noriko's English was almost flawless. At seventeen she was a little older than us, but she and Zoë hit it off immediately and I breathed a sigh of relief. It looked kind of funny to see them together. Zoë had long blonde hair that framed her oval face, blue eyes and a fairly pale complexion. In contrast, Noriko had a roundish face, a beautifully smooth complexion with her skin colour a couple of shades darker than Zoë's, dark eyes and short jet black hair. She was slightly built and a head shorter than Zoë. She was very pretty, and I had the feeling that Travis was going to fall in love.

By the time we arrived in Sale late that afternoon, we knew all about Shinjuku, the Tokyo suburb where Noriko lived, her family and friends, and her school—which Kellie would be attending. Noriko had never been out of Japan before, and all the way to Sale she kept remarking on the open spaces. She told us that Tokyo squeezes about thirteen million people into an area a quarter of the size of greater Melbourne, which has a population of less than four million. We found it hard to imagine how crowded it must feel—but we were sure Kellie would tell us. If Melbourne's metropolitan area seemed spacious to Noriko, she almost freaked out when we got out into the country.

Having Noriko at home and at school seemed to help me come out of my funk. She was fun to have around, and the days were too busy for me to dwell on what had happened. On top of that, my suicide attempt had broken something that had been holding me back; the depression was manageable and, with medication, I was able to function normally again. Some of my friends seemed a bit wary of me, as if they didn't want to come too close in case I went off the rails again. Mostly, however, they were pleased to have the "real" me back, and treated me just like they always had.

As I had anticipated, Travis fell head over heels in love with Noriko, and for a while we all took every opportunity to remind him how much of his life he had spent teasing the rest of us. Fortunately, Noriko seemed just as enamoured of Travis and didn't mind the teasing. They made a kind of odd couple—Travis was loud, boisterous and spontaneous whereas Noriko was demure, thoughtful and much quieter—but everyone agreed that they were made for each other.

The first anniversary of my kidnapping came the week following Noriko's arrival. I couldn't decide whether it seemed like it had just happened the day before—it was still so near in my memory—or several years earlier. So much had happened since then, it seemed impossible that all of it could have fitted into twelve months. Since Dad's birthday was only two days later, the dinner we had for him became a celebration of my survival as well as of his special day. Things were looking up at last!

Something was still bothering me, though. The black dog had been run off and I could see more clearly, but I still had a weight bearing down on my shoulders.

I could keep up with my work and take part in discussions at school. I could hang out with Zoë, Noriko and my friends, and join in the fun—especially the incessant stirring of Travis. I was able to join in family outings, and enjoyed catching up with Kellie's news when she phoned. I was glad I wasn't paying her phone bill, though! In a first for our family, we sang Happy Birthday to Kellie on the speakerphone. Her Japanese host family gave her a party.

All in all I was doing fine at home as well as at school...until I was alone at night.

The nightmares hadn't returned, and I slept well most of the time, but I'd lie awake late at night or early in the morning trying to think everything through, trying to work out what the problem was. I always had the feeling that someone or something was trying to drag me back down into the pit. Try as I might, I could never pin it down to anything specific; it always seemed just out of reach. It would begin to float into focus in my mind, but just as I'd reach out to grab it there would be nothing there.

Man, it's gone again! I'd sigh and turn over to go to sleep.

After several weeks, with everything else seemingly back to where it had been before the nightmares and my descent into depression, the vague feeling of unease was still tangible enough to bother me, but at least I talked about it. I wasn't going to make *that* mistake again! No matter how much I talked, however, I couldn't solve the mystery, and the feeling remained: a gnawing nuisance at the back of my mind. The closest I could get to the cause was that it had something to do with The Monster.

By the middle of August I was getting really frustrated. In about a month we would have another two weeks' school holidays, and that gave me an idea. The more I thought about it, the more attractive it seemed: I would go away on a lone retreat and

try to sort out everything once and for all. Our family owns a holiday cabin on the Wellington River, near the little village of Licola, which is in the middle of the Great Dividing Range. I reckoned I could talk Dad and Mum into letting me go up there for a week or two. I hoped that, without the distractions of life at school and at home, in the peace and quiet of the bush, I might just be able to think clearly and logically enough to work out what was wrong.

It took a lot of talking, but I finally got everyone to agree to my going. The holidays fell only three months from my suicide attempt, and Mum was worried that being alone might not be good for me. Simon, Travis and Brett all offered to go with me to keep me company (and to keep an eye on me, I suspected), and Zoë wanted me to stay home so we could spend time together. In the end we compromised, and agreed that she, Clare and Noriko—along with Brett and Travis—would join me for a few days in the middle of the holidays. If I was ready, I would return home with them. An adult would also have to go, to provide transport and supervision, but we left that to the parents to sort out.

We set my departure date for the first Saturday of the holidays, and Mum won the privilege of driving me up to the cabin.

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I stared out of the window as the car travelled through the green, gently rolling hills of the Macalister River valley.

Hills? Man, are we at Glenmaggie already? Where have I been? We only just left Sale! I looked over at Mum. She glanced at me and smiled. I hoped she hadn't been trying to talk to me; if she had, I hadn't heard anything. I might as well have been on another planet.

I drifted off again, and the next thing I noticed was the car slowing as Mum pulled into the store at Licola. I stayed in the car while Mum went into the shop. A few minutes later she came out with bread and milk.

'Mr. and Mrs. Charlton know you're going to be at the cabin on your own, and they offered to come up and check on you in a couple of days. I told them I thought you'd like them to do that. They even said to phone them if you need anything and they'll bring it up for you.'

'Thanks Mum, that would be good. As long as they won't think I'm being rude if I just want to be alone.'

'No, they understand. Their son went through a really rough patch a couple of years ago. They said they learned to respect the times he needed them to give him a bit of space, so I think they'll just come up and say hello and make sure you're managing all right. But they might be good to have around if you feel like talking to someone.'

'Yes, they're nice people. I've always liked them. I'll see how I go.'

I watched the bush slip by as we headed out of Licola to the cabin. In a few minutes we would be there. Usually I would be feeling excited as we drove the last ten kilometres, but that day I was preoccupied. I desperately needed to get the niggling

thoughts of The Monster out of my head so that I could get back to living. *Man, I hope this works!*

We drove up to the front of the cabin and Mum helped me unload my bags and supplies. She put everything away while I got the fire going, and by the time the room was warm she had the kettle boiling. We sat down at the kitchen table with our tea and biscuits and enjoyed a companionable silence.

We didn't have long before Mum would have to leave so she would be home in time to prepare dinner for the rest of the family. Suddenly I had second thoughts; I didn't want her to go.

The same thoughts must have been going through my mother's mind. I felt a couple of tears run down my cheeks, and when I looked up there were tears in Mum's eyes, too. She reached across the table and took my hand in hers. When I looked into her eyes all I could see was love.

'Michael, we'll get through this together. We all understand that you need to get this sorted out, and that you need this time alone—but we'll all still be there when you're ready to come home. Take as long as you need, okay?'

I got up and gave Mum a hug, burying my face in her shoulder. We were both crying.

'We'll miss you, Michael.' I knew she was saying much more; she was worried that I would try to harm myself again.

'I know. I'm going to miss you guys, too. But don't worry about me, please? I'll be okay here, and I won't do anything stupid. I'm past that stage now. I just need to work out what's bothering me so that I can move on.'

We went out to the car together. We gave each other a kiss and hugged again. I promised to phone home every couple of days, then Mum was gone and I was alone in the bush.

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It was warm in the cabin, and I felt safe and comfortable. I was sitting on the floor looking into the fire, with my knees pulled up and my arms wrapped around them. The constantly changing shapes of the orange flames had me mesmerised. The logs provided food for the flames, and the embers seemed to change form as the flames moved over them. The smoke curled up, adding its own fluid shapes and forms.

My thoughts ran wild, and I imagined I could see people, places and events unfolding before my eyes. I watched as flame fought flame; one would attack and be repulsed, and the "victor" would then be overtaken by another, larger flame. It seemed like that had been the story of my life over the previous year or so. I'd get through one crisis and then be overtaken by another. I shuddered as I remembered the man responsible—The Monster. I saw his evil grin and felt the blows as he hit me. I felt the pain as he forced himself on me.

The Monster was like a cloud hovering over me, constantly keeping me in its shadow. I needed to get on with the rest of my life, but I couldn't until I figured out what was

wrong—and what The Monster had to do with it. I had doubts about my lone retreat, though.

'Am I doing the right thing?' I asked myself aloud. 'Am I running instead of fighting? Is this just a way to avoid facing up to it? Should I have stayed at home?'

No, I've talked things through with everyone, and they all agreed that I need to figure this out for myself...and there won't be any distractions here; I'll be able to think more clearly.

'What happens if I can't work it out, though?'

That was an outcome I couldn't bear to think about.

I have to do it. I have to! I can't let him win. If I do, I'll never have a life.

Then the tears came again. I dropped my head to my knees and silently let the tears fall. I had cried so much those past few months that it seemed like I had no emotions left. Gradually, the crackling of the fire filled my mind, calming me as it took over from my erratic thoughts.

CHAPTER 7: SAVIOUR

'Oh no...' I groaned. 'I must have dozed off. It's freezing!'

I stood and stretched. My muscles felt stiff and sore because I'd fallen asleep on the floor. I looked at the fireplace; the fire had gone out.

'Oh, man, now I'll have to light it again.'

Still drowsy, I went to get kindling from the wood store off the veranda. I opened the door and put one foot on the doormat. Suddenly, I was wide awake.

'Ow!' The doormat rolled over, taking my foot with it, and I almost lost my balance.

What I'd thought was the doormat sat up, and I realised that it was a guy about my age.

'Sorry, man, I needed to rest and get out of the cold,' he said. 'I knocked, but I didn't get any response.'

'Whoa! You must be freezing. You'd better come inside, but it won't be very warm until I get the fire going again. I went to sleep and let it go out.'

'Do you think you could help me up, please? I've hurt my ankle, and it was all I could do to get here. I managed to get up the steps, and just kind of collapsed on the veranda. I don't know whether I've got enough strength left to do anything more.'

I helped him to his feet and then, with one arm behind his shoulders and the other behind his knees, I picked him up and carried him inside to the couch. 'Don't move,' I instructed as I set him down. 'I'll get the fire going first and then we'll have a look at your ankle. I just need to get kindling.'

Working quickly, I rebuilt the fire; there was just enough residual heat to get the small wood smouldering under the bigger logs. Within a few minutes it was burning nicely and the room began to warm up again.

I turned my attention to my visitor. Perhaps I should have felt resentful of his intrusion into my solitude, but he needed help. I couldn't just turn him away, so I put aside my desire to be alone.

Reaching out my hand, I introduced myself. 'I'm Michael Parker. This is my family's holiday cabin.'

'Cameron Macdonald,' he responded, giving my hand a firm shake.

Hmm, good handshake. I smiled inwardly as I recalled my grandfather teaching me that a firm handshake showed you were a man of character. I found myself warming to Cameron.

Soon, he had taken off his left boot and sock, and was examining his ankle. He looked up at me and said, 'I don't think anything's broken, but it's really swollen, and very tender. I can wriggle my toes and move my whole foot without any stabbing pain, so I reckon I only twisted it.'

'Yeah, you'll probably have some bad bruising, though. I think we should put ice around it to get the swelling down, and you should keep your foot up.'

I remembered that we kept a couple of cold packs at the cabin, and breathed a sigh of relief when I looked in the fridge and found them in the freezer compartment. *These will be better than ice*, I thought.

I made Cameron's foot comfortable on a cushion on the arm of the couch and draped the cold packs around his ankle. He complained a little about the cold, but understood that it would help.

'Thanks for taking me in and helping me, Michael.'

'No problem,' I said. 'How did you do the damage?'

'Yesterday I set up camp and went looking for dry wood to cook tea and make a hot drink. It had rained just enough to make the ground greasy, and I slipped on a really wet spot. I went over the edge, and rolled down a steep slope. I came up against a small bush about a hundred metres down, which was very fortunate, because it was all that stopped me from going over a cliff and straight down for another ten or fifteen metres. I must have hit rocks or something on the way down, because I was hurting all over. It was a real effort to climb back up to the track, and it was starting to get dark. I was nearly at the top when I turned my foot on a rock and fell heavily. When I tried to stand, my ankle hurt something fierce, and it was all I could do to get back up to my tent. I couldn't be bothered trying to find wood in the dark when I couldn't walk properly, so I just ate some dried fruit and energy bars, took a couple of painkillers, and crawled into my sleeping bag.

'This morning I felt like I'd been run over by one of those sheepsfoot road rollers—you know, the ones with the spikey things. Everything hurt, and I could hardly walk. I decided to pack up my stuff and try to get to Licola. Then I spotted your place from up on the ridge. I figured I'd rest here for a while and then keep going. By the time I got here, though, I was stuffed. I was using a stick to help keep the weight off my foot, but it still hurt like blazes. I couldn't have walked any further.'

'You're really lucky, you know? It's ten kilometres to Licola, and there are no houses until you hit the village. I only arrived here today; normally no one would be here at this time of the year.'

The fire was starting to burn down, so I threw in another log to keep it going. I was thinking about what I'd get us for dinner when I had a sudden thought.

'Um, if you started out with your pack, where is it now?'

'Oh yeah, I forgot. I left it up on the ridge. It was a real struggle, trying to walk with that extra weight, but I expected that I'd probably have to camp a night or two before I got to Licola, so I soldiered on with it.'

Cameron grinned when he saw me playing an imaginary violin, and threw a cushion at me.

'Then, when I saw this place, I hid the pack and just brought a little food with me. I don't know how far back it is. I was pretty well out of it by the time I got down from the ridge, and I don't have any idea how long I took to get here.'

'Hmm, this spot where you spotted the cabin, was it where the track runs along the edge of a cliff for about thirty metres and then turns sharply and crosses to the other side of the ridge? I think that's the only place where you can see down this way.'

'Yeah, that's it! I stuffed my pack behind some thick bushes near a gnarly old gum tree. The tree has been burnt and there's a hollow at the bottom.'

'Okay, I know the spot, and I think I remember that old tree. It's about three kilometres away by the track—not too far, but it's a bit of a climb. I'll go and get your pack in the morning.'

'Oh, man, I'm going to owe you big time,' Cameron said.

'Oh, don't worry about it. The exercise will do me good. What were you doing up there, anyway? This isn't the best time of year to be hiking in these mountains, let alone solo.'

'Yeah, I know. I was trying to prove something to myself, and I needed some time alone.'

'You and me, both.'

Cameron looked like he expected me to say more. When I didn't add anything, he looked puzzled, but he didn't question me. I was beginning to like the guy.

'I don't know whether I can explain; I'll have to think about it,' I said after a long pause. 'Now, will I get dinner for both of us, or do you want to eat what you brought with you? I'm happy to cook for two.'

'Oh, real food! If you don't mind cooking for me too, that would be great.'

'No problem, chef's premium spaghetti bolognese coming up! And it's on special—half price for today only.'

'Cool! I'll have a double serving.'

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When dinner was ready, I helped Cameron to the table. We took a long time over our meal, because we were talking almost non-stop. After we had finished eating, Cameron asked if I would mind helping him have a shower.

'I feel really grotty,' he said. 'I was keeping pretty clean until I fell down that slope and had to drag myself up again...and I feel so sore I'm not sure that I'd be able to wash myself.'

'Well, there's a bath as well as a shower. You might be better to soak in a hot tub for a while, and then I can help if you still want me to.'

'Excellent! You'll probably have to help me into the bath, though.'

'Okay, no worries.' I went into the bathroom and started running the bath water. While waiting for the tub to fill, I found some track pants, a tee shirt and a top for

Cameron to wear. When the water was ready, I helped him up and into the bathroom, then left him to get undressed while I went to find a towel for him.

When I returned, Cameron was sitting on the bathroom stool, still dressed, and looking very apologetic. 'I'm sorry, Michael, but you'll have to help me undress, too. It hurts too much to do it myself.'

'Okay.' I reached to help him, but he stopped me.

'Um, there's something that you might want to know, first.'

I looked at him and he blushed.

'Michael...I'm...gay.'

'Okay,' I shrugged, and tried to start removing his clothes.

""Okay"? That's it?'

I looked at him again. 'I guess so. It's cool.'

He breathed a sigh of relief, and then grinned. 'Wow!'

'Well, it's no big deal.' I laughed. 'Don't get any ideas, though. I'm straight—and taken.'

'Deal,' he said emphatically, raising his hand for a high five.

We both laughed as I slapped his hand, and I helped him undress. Cameron was right. His muscles were sore and stiff, and too much movement caused him pain. It took a while, but he was finally naked.

'Crikey!' I exclaimed when I saw his body. 'You really did some damage, didn't you?' He seemed to be covered in bruises, and had several cuts and scratches, as well. 'We'd best put some antiseptic on those before you get dressed again.'

I helped him into the bath and lowered him until he was able to lean back and relax, then left him to enjoy his bath in peace while I washed the dishes and tidied the kitchen.

When I looked in on him after I'd finished in the kitchen and stoked the fire, Cameron looked up at me. 'Michael, would you mind washing my back, feet and hair, please? I've done everywhere else, but they were just too difficult.'

I grabbed the soap and started to lather his back gently, being careful to avoid his cuts. 'Are you okay with this?' I asked. 'I'd be really embarrassed if I had to get another guy to wash me.'

Cameron chuckled. 'Don't worry, I am embarrassed...and you're a really good sport for doing this.'

I leaned around so I could see his face properly and was surprised to see him blushing again. 'Ha! You *are* embarrassed!'

He sighed. 'Yeah, I'm sorry, Michael.'

'Sorry for what?' I asked.

'For making you do this.'

'Hey, no need to be sorry. It's cool.'

'Oh, man, you're a good sport! Thanks, Michael.'

'Cameron, it's okay...look, if I'd been the one needing help, I probably would have been too embarrassed to even ask. So, don't worry about it. Somehow, I feel comfortable with you, which is unusual for me. I'm kind of shy, and it usually takes me a while to get to know people.'

'Well, you're getting to know me really well. You may as well call me Cam, by the way,' he said through his laughter. Suddenly he winced. 'Ohhh, I shouldn't have laughed, that hurt.'

I finished his back and started on his feet. That created a problem for Cameron, because his soles were really ticklish. As I washed them he jerked reflexively which, in turn, caused him pain. It was only for a few moments, though, and then his feet were clean. His hair was kind of long and curly, so it took me quite a while to get it washed, shampooed and rinsed. Finally, we were done. I helped him stand up to get out of the bath, and he sat on the stool while I dried him. His cuts and scratches didn't look so bad when he was cleaned up, but I applied antiseptic, anyway. I helped him to dress and then carried him back to the couch in the living area.

'Cam, I'm going to have a shower. I'll only be a few minutes; but do you need anything first?'

'Nah, I'm right, thanks. Take as long as you like. I'm not going anywhere...I'll still be here when you come back!'

'Very funny!' I said as I put a couple of pieces of wood on the fire. He was still chuckling quietly as I went into the bathroom. *Obviously his injuries haven't damaged his sense of humour*, I thought, grinning.

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When I returned, Cameron was lying on the couch with his eyes closed. I thought he was asleep, so I grabbed a cushion off one of the chairs and got down on the floor in front of the fire. I'd always loved being close to the fire—something that annoyed my family no end, because they reckoned I hogged the heat. As I lay there, watching the flames, I reflected on the day's events. It seemed incredible how much things had changed since that afternoon, when I'd sat in that same spot, all cried out and lost in my turmoil.

I was surprised when Cameron spoke up. 'Hey, whatcha doin'?'

'Just thinking. I thought you were asleep.'

'Nah, just relaxing and waiting for you to come back. Come and sit up here, Michael.'

'Not enough room for both of us,' I said, 'and you need to keep your foot up.'

Cameron sat up and shuffled back so that he was leaning against the arm of the couch. He let his good foot drop to the floor, with his knees spread and his injured leg

lying along the couch. He patted the seat between his legs. 'Sit in here,' he commanded, 'and lean back against me. There's plenty of room.'

I got up off the floor, and then hesitated. *Is he hitting on me?*

'Come on,' he said. 'I have a feeling you could do with a hug, and this is the easiest way to manage it with my crook foot.'

Somewhat reassured, I sat down. I lifted my feet and set them on the arm of the couch, then settled back against Cameron. He closed his arms around me and rested his chin on my shoulder. I sighed. 'Mmm, not bad,' I said, although I still felt a little awkward. 'Are you comfortable?'

'Yep, I'm fine,' he replied.

'Why did you think I needed a hug?'

'Well, I've been thinking, and I've been watching you. You didn't come up here just for a holiday, did you? When I talked about needing time alone, you said, "You and me, both," and then said you didn't know whether you could explain what you meant—and I think you'd been crying before I arrived. There's something bothering you, and I don't think it's just that I turned up out of the blue. You're fine around me, but there's something I can't quite pin down. It's as if you're worried about something that has happened or is about to happen, and you don't know what to do about it...or like there's something you have to do, but you're not sure what it is or how to do it. Am I making sense?'

I nodded. I didn't trust myself to speak. Cameron had hit the nail right on the head.

How did he do that? I wondered.

'Want to tell me about it? I'm a good listener.'

He squeezed me a little more tightly as he leaned his head around and gave me a questioning look. That was all it took. I burst into tears.

Cameron waited patiently for my tears to dry up. He simply sat there holding me, his chin again resting on my shoulder. I had to think hard. *Does he really want to hear my story? Does he want to help me or is he just being nosy? Do I want to tell him?*

We sat in silence for quite a while, Cameron waiting, me collecting my thoughts. I realised I did want to tell him my story. Somehow I felt comfortable with him, and it just felt right to share it all with him.

'Are you sure you want to hear this?' I asked, finally.

'No, but if it will help you, then yes, I want to hear it. I really am a good listener, and I know from experience that sometimes it helps to get stuff off your chest...and sometimes it's easier to talk to a stranger.'

I sighed. 'It's heavy stuff, Cam.'

'That's okay, I've handled heavy before.'

I sighed again. 'I...I...,' I started, then it all came out in a rush. 'I was kidnapped and imprisoned. Then I was raped...every day for a week.'

I started crying again. 'It was disgusting! I hate him, Cam! He wrecked my life! I just want my life back...' My words dissolved into sobs, and I couldn't say any more. I sat there, trying to calm down. *Man, where did that come from? I thought I was over that stuff.*

At first Cameron didn't say anything; he just kept holding me. After another period of silence, he gave me another squeeze. 'Keep going,' he whispered. 'There's more, isn't there?'

I nodded. 'I managed to escape, then I was in hospital for nearly two weeks. For the first few days I was sedated, and then they got worried because I wouldn't wake up. My sister, my brother and my two best friends stayed with me all that time. They took shifts so that there was always one of them there. They stayed with me and talked to me until I woke up. My parents were there a lot of the time, too, when they weren't at work.

'Everything seemed okay for months. I didn't have any permanent injuries, and I was fine physically. I had to see a psychologist for a few weeks, but he was satisfied that I was recovering. I was back at school, and doing all the usual things with my friends and family. I went on a school trip and ended up with a girlfriend.

'Then, a few months ago, everything fell to bits.

'During the last week of first term, I had to attend the trial of the guy who raped me. I was dreading it, but with everyone's help and support I got through that. It was pretty scary seeing him again, but when it was over I was relieved that it was finished and no longer something kind of hanging over me that I had to deal with in the future. Plus, it was a relief to know that the guy was in jail where he couldn't hurt any more kids.

'People told me that the trial would help, that seeing the bloke convicted and jailed would bring an end to the whole series of events, and that I'd feel better when it was over. It would give me "closure," everyone said. Man, I got sick of hearing that word! It did help, though.

'Over the Labour Day weekend, Zoë—that's my girlfriend—and I went with her parents to Buchan, to tour the caves. I didn't tell them I'm claustrophobic. I thought I'd be okay, but while we were waiting in the queue for our tickets, I started to get worried. It turned out all right, thanks to Zoë, but that night I had a nightmare about the kidnapping and the rapes. I woke up during the night, screaming. That was the first of many nightmares. The doctors said I had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, brought on by the trial and the fear I felt at the caves.

'I got really depressed, and barely made it through each day. In the end I just wanted to curl up in a corner and die. I pushed everyone away—my family, Zoë, even my two best friends I've known since primary school.

'Eventually, on the Queen's Birthday holiday weekend, I tried to hang myself. I'd fallen into such a deep depression that I just didn't want to live. We'd just finished exams and I was sure I'd failed everything, because—as with everything else—I just wasn't very interested. Most people seemed to have given up on me by then, and I felt alone and lost. I thought no one cared; no one understood how the rapes had affected me. No one understood my depression, and no one knew how to help me. And, you know, somehow I didn't want help. I wanted to stay depressed. In some perverse way

I actually enjoyed it. I shut myself away. I spent a lot of time sleeping. I felt so worthless and useless and hopeless, that I decided no one would miss me if I wasn't around; so I tried to hang myself.

'I ended up in hospital, still alive, and feeling very sore and sorry for myself. At first I was sorry that I hadn't succeeded—I was so useless I couldn't even kill myself properly—but the doctor got me to see that I hadn't chosen suicide, that it had been forced on me because I couldn't cope with the pain I was feeling. He helped me to see that my family and friends did care, and I found that they had all tried to help me. Hey, my best friend and his girlfriend saved me—how much more helpful can you get?

'I came to realise that I'd caused everyone a lot of pain, but they were all still there, and I resolved to never again bottle up my feelings.

'After that, things were pretty well back to normal, but I still had a niggling feeling that there was something wrong. It just wouldn't go away. It seemed to have something to do with the guy who raped me, but I couldn't work it out. I talked my parents and friends into letting me come up here for a week or two, hoping that being alone in the peace and quiet of the bush would help me to think things through.

'And then, the very day I arrive here, you turn up! So much for peace and quiet!'

Cameron started laughing—the first indication I'd had that he was still listening. All through my monologue he'd not said a word, but his arms around me and his chin on my shoulder had given me the confidence to keep going.

Cam's laughter shook his whole body, and that led to him complaining, "Ohhh, don't make me laugh. It hurts too much."

That made *me* laugh. When we were quiet again, I realised with a shock how low I'd felt that afternoon after Mum left. 'Whoa!' I muttered quietly.

I must have spoken louder than I thought, because Cam suddenly got serious. 'Hey, what happened?' he asked.

I sighed. 'I just got a bit of a shock when it hit me that I nearly fell back into depression this afternoon. Thanks, Cam. That laugh felt really good!'

'You're welcome,' he said, and gave me another quick squeeze.

'Cameron?'

'Yes, Michael?'

'Thanks for listening.' I wanted to say more, to tell him how much I appreciated his willingness to put up with hearing about my problems. I wanted to tell him that I felt better since he'd turned up at the door. I didn't say any more, though; I figured he probably understood what I was trying to say.

'No problem! That's enough for tonight, though. We need to get some sleep.'

Cameron let me go and I stood up and stretched. I helped him up and into the bathroom. While he was in there, I stoked the fire and put the spark screen around it. By the time I'd done that, Cam was ready for bed.

With his arm across my shoulders, and my arm around his waist, I started to help him to the bedroom.

'Where are you going?'

'Into the bedroom.'

'But I can sleep on the couch,' he protested.

'No, you can't. You need rest, and you won't get it on that couch. Believe me, it's very uncomfortable to sleep on. You're sleeping in the bed.'

'And where will you sleep?'

'On the couch.'

'Oh no, you won't. You need rest, too, and if it's as bad as you say, you won't get it on the couch! You're sleeping in the bed.' He glanced into the room at the bed. 'It looks like there will be enough room for both of us.'

I laughed. 'Okay, if you're sure. I don't mind if you don't.'

I helped Cameron to the bed and pulled back the doona. His bruises were still painful, which meant he didn't have much movement in his arms, so I had to help him undress again.

I left him to settle into bed while I went to the bathroom.

When I returned, Cam's eyes were closed and I thought he'd gone to sleep, so I undressed quickly, slipped into bed, and switched off the bedside light. It had begun to rain, and I lay on my back listening to the sound of the raindrops on the tin roof. It was a soothing sound, one I'd always loved, and as I listened I contemplated again the changes I'd felt in the previous few hours.

What is it about Cameron? I've been struggling with all this stuff for months—not getting anywhere—then this stranger appears and suddenly things don't seem so bad. Why is he having this effect on me?

I was startled when Cameron spoke my name, tentatively, as if he wasn't sure I was there.

'Yeah?' I replied.

He breathed a sigh of relief. 'I thought you'd drifted off into another world. You got into bed, then never moved, and I couldn't even hear you breathing.'

'Sorry, Cam. I was enjoying the sound of the rain on the roof, and then I got thinking about how everything's changed today.'

'Hey, you've done enough thinking for one day.' He paused, then added, 'In fact, I reckon you think too much. Sometimes you need to relax and just let things happen. Go to sleep!'

'Yes, Dad. 'Night, Dad.'

"Night, Honey.'

That got my attention. I sat up and looked down at Cameron. Since the only light was the glow from the fire in the other room, I couldn't see much, but I was certain he was giving me an evil grin in the darkness. I knew he was stirring me, but I couldn't resist trying to go one better.

'Honey?' I said, incredulously. 'Honey? I'll give you "Honey".'

I started tickling him, mercilessly, up and down his sides and under his arms. It was mean, because I knew he was still sore, but I didn't feel inclined to let him get away with being such a tease.

He wriggled and squirmed, laughing his head off, but trying to tell me to stop. 'No. Hehe. Ahhh! It hurts! No! Stop! Hehe. Ohhh...'

'Take it back?' I asked, without letting up.

'Yes, all right...I surrender...'

I stopped the tickling, and flopped down on my back.

Cameron lay still, groaning about his bruises. 'Oh, man, that was evil,' he said, finally.

'You started it. I was simply responding to a threatening situation,' I said in my best holier-than-thou voice. Unfortunately, I can't do dignified and aloof well, so I ended up laughing my head off.

'If I wasn't so bruised and sore, you'd be on the floor begging for mercy right now!'

'Yeah, right,' I said, and started laughing again. Cameron was silent, but I could tell that he was trying hard to hold in his laughter. Eventually it escaped—and then all he could do was complain that his bruises were hurting.

'How am I supposed to sleep next to you when you're shaking like jelly in an earthquake?'

That only made him laugh more and I couldn't help joining in. After a while we settled down again, but Cameron was still chuckling quietly as I fell asleep.

CHAPTER 8: HOPE...

I trudged along Tamboritha Road in the early morning sunlight, on my way to retrieve Cameron's backpack. The day had dawned clear and sunny after the rain of the night before. *I'm going to have to be careful, I thought, the track will be wet and I don't want to have a fall like Cameron did.*

We'd had an early breakfast, and I'd left as soon as I could because the weather forecast was for more rain. I'd been relieved to find that Cameron was feeling a lot better after a good night's sleep; his ankle was much less swollen, and the aches and pains were troubling him less. Nevertheless, before I set out, I made sure that he had enough firewood within reach, and that he could get drinks and snacks without needing to move from the couch. He had a supply of DVDs handy, as well as the remote controls for the TV and the DVD player. I was satisfied that he would be fine on his own until I returned.

I figured I would take a couple of hours to get to the spot where Cameron had hidden his pack. It was only about three kilometres, but it involved a hard climb up a steep ridge. I anticipated that—with the track wet and overhanging trees dripping water—it would be a messy hike. I thought the trip back would be quicker, but I'd be carrying Cameron's pack downhill, so I knew I would need to be very careful.

I was actually glad to be out of the cabin for a while. It wasn't that I wanted to get away from Cameron; it was that I was more puzzled than ever, and I needed space to think. The time on the track would give me plenty of scope for that. We'd had a lot of laughs the night before, and I'd enjoyed Cameron's company, but the feeling that something was wrong was still smouldering away in the background.

I reached the turn-off and the track immediately began its gradual climb up the valley—at the head of which it would follow a steep and tortuous route up the ridge. *Here we go*, I thought, as I looked at the trees and the wet grass. I pulled up the hood on my parka, just as a large drop of water fell from a tree and hit my shoulder. The first kilometre was fairly easy hiking. The track meandered up the valley, rising and falling with the land and weaving its way around obstacles. It wasn't as wet as I had expected, so I made good time.

As I walked, I tried to sort things out in my mind. *Where did Cameron come from? Why did he suddenly pop up out of nowhere? Why has he had such an impact on me?* It was a source of wonder to me that I felt so comfortable with Cameron. As I had told him, I usually took ages to make new friends. *What's different about him?*

'You think too much...just let it happen!' I could hear Cameron saying. *That's all very well*, I thought. *I can't do that. I have to understand things. I like to know where I've been, and where I'm heading.*

I found an old tree stump and sat down to rest for a few minutes before I began the climb up the ridge. I took a few sips from my water bottle and tried once more to think things through. I just couldn't get a handle on whatever was still bugging me. The imprisonment and rapes had been bad, but I'd survived. The physical injuries had healed long ago. I'd lived through my suicide attempt, and—with help from everyone—my mental state had improved immensely. *The depression is under*

control now. I'm not affected by physical pain any longer So, what is this other thing that won't go away? What is it? Why? Why? Why? I just don't understand. I threw my hands up in the air and groaned, my frustration getting the better of me.

'Man, this sucks,' I said aloud. 'I have to figure this out. Whatever it is about The Monster that's still affecting me, I have to beat it.'

I took another sip of water, then sat bolt upright.

'Stuff it,' I decided. 'Too many blasted questions! I'll talk to Cam again when I get back. He might be able to help me make sense of it all. Right now, I need to get his pack before it rains.' Surprising myself with my resolve, I stood and continued the trek.

I had little opportunity for thought after that. The track was steep and rocky, and I had to watch my step every metre of the way. It was a strenuous climb and I had to pause to catch my breath every few minutes. *Man, I'm glad I'm not carrying Cam's pack up here! I hate to think what it's going to be like coming back down.*

I had hiked the track before, with my family, but we'd been carrying only small, light day packs. When I returned, I would be carrying about 25 kilograms on my back. *Cam's gonna owe me for this,* I thought, smiling inwardly. *I hope he's enjoying lounging around by the fire watching DVDs while I'm out here in the...* I stopped and looked around. I was almost at the top; the trees had thinned, the sun was warm, and the sky above me was a beautiful deep blue. Suddenly, I realised that I was enjoying the hike. The exercise was doing me good. I laughed. 'Hmm, I think I might have got the better part of the deal. It's nice out here!'

A short time later, I reached the summit. The track levelled out, and within ten minutes I was forcing my way through the undergrowth around the big tree that Cameron had mentioned. I found his pack and hauled it out onto the track. He had covered it with a sheet of plastic, so I shook the raindrops off that, folded it, and stowed it under the straps holding the top of the pack closed; if it rained, I was going to need it. I hung my water bottle on the side of the pack, and I was ready to go.

'Whoa!' I said as I straightened up and looked around. The sky to the southwest was full of black, threatening clouds, and a stiff breeze had blown up. I hastened with care. I wanted to get back to the safety and shelter of the cabin as quickly as I could, but the conditions and the steep descent demanded that I concentrate to avoid slipping or tripping. One injured person was enough to worry about, and Cameron wasn't fit enough to care for me if I ended up hurt. At first, the weight of the backpack slowed me and I had to learn to balance it properly, but after a while I got used to it and was able to speed up. I stumbled once, right beside a vertical drop off the edge of the track, giving myself a bad scare. Fortunately, I fell against the bank rather than over the edge. Later, on a steep section almost back at the head of the valley, I tripped on a tree root exposed by erosion. A handy tree stopped me from tumbling down the track face-first.

With a sigh of relief, I emerged into the valley and faced the easier two kilometres to home and shelter. The wind had grown stronger, and it was making quite a roar in the treetops. I could hear thunder in the distance. It had become very overcast as the cloud cover increased, but I was hopeful that the rain would hold off until after I reached the cabin. It didn't.

I was still about fifteen minutes away when the first scattered drops fell. I hurriedly grabbed Cameron's plastic sheet and draped it over the pack and myself, just in the nick of time. Huge, heavy drops of rain felt like they were stabbing me, and beat a deafening tattoo on the plastic. The wind picked up as I emerged from the valley's shelter, and the thunder was closer and louder. By the time I walked out onto the road, the rain was pouring down, and I had to lean into the wind to make any headway.

I grinned when I saw Cameron waiting outside the cabin door in a pool of light from the lamp on the veranda.

'Beautiful day!' I called out, with a lilt in my voice, as I emerged from behind the trees lining the road.

His face relaxed and he broke into a smile. 'Oh, man, thank goodness you're okay. I was getting worried.'

I'd barely reached the top of the steps when he grabbed me in a bear hug, wet plastic and all. We stepped back and looked at each other. Cameron looked like he was about to cry, and I must have looked like a drowned rat; the wind had made sure that the plastic didn't keep much of the rain off. I just hoped Cameron's stuff inside the pack wasn't soaked, too.

'Hey, Cam, it's all right. I'm back safely...and I've got your pack. It might be a bit wet, though.'

'Stuff the pack! I'm just relieved you're safe.' He hugged me again.

'Whoa, take a chill pill, Cam!' I couldn't help laughing. He was a guy who had taken on a solo five-day hike in the mountains, and there he was, falling to bits over me getting caught in a storm. My laughter was probably due more to nervous energy than finding Cameron's distress funny. I was a bit on edge, too...a few times in the past half hour I had wondered which was going to happen first—a tree falling on me or the wind blowing me back the way I'd come. 'Can I take this pack off now? I need to get out of these wet clothes.'

Cameron let me go and stepped back to look at me. He had tears in his eyes. 'Sorry, Michael. The storm came up so suddenly, and it was so violent I got really worried about you. I had visions of you lying under a tree up the track somewhere—especially since you seemed to be taking a long time.'

'Well, with the steep track and the weight of the pack, I had to be careful, so I took it fairly slowly. I don't know how you managed it with your crook ankle. The rain started when I was nearly out to the road, and then the wind was so strong it nearly blew me backwards. The last k was really slow going.' I paused to take a breath. 'But, hey, it's nice to know you missed me,' I added with a grin, and bopped him on the shoulder. 'What's for lunch? I'm starving!'

Cameron chuckled and I saw the tension drain out of him. He put his arm over my shoulders and I helped him inside.

'Ah, that's better,' I sighed as the door closed on the storm and I slipped the backpack off. 'I've had it. I reckon I could sleep for two days straight.'

The cabin was cosy and Cameron had the lights on. I couldn't believe it was so dark outside. It was just after midday, but it felt like evening.

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'Whoa! It's cold out there,' I said as I carried in an armful of firewood after lunch. I backed against the door to close it against the wind that was still howling outside. I stoked the fire and flopped down beside Cameron. He'd found that it was easier to see the TV—and more comfortable—to sit normally on the couch with his foot resting on a pillow on the coffee table, and that made room for both of us. 'What did you watch while I was gone?'

'I started with *The Big Steal*.'

'Oh, yeah, that's a funny one. I haven't watched it for a while, though. I didn't know it was here. Mum must have slipped it in when I wasn't looking...probably hoping it would cheer me up. She knows I love it.'

'I hadn't even heard of it, but I nearly laughed myself sick—literally, because my bruises were hurting so much. Then I decided to watch *The Party*—and that only made it worse!'

'Oh, yeah, that's a good one, too. I really like it because a lot of the humour is in what you see, not what you hear.'

We had a good laugh...Cameron reliving the pleasure he'd felt as he watched the movies that morning; me remembering times when I'd enjoyed them with my mates. Then my mind started to wander, and I marvelled again at the effect Cameron had on me, and how it seemed to be impossible to feel down with him around. That reminded me of the questions I had tossed around during my hike. They still seemed unanswerable. *Will Cam be able to help me? What is it about this guy? I feel so comfortable with him...like I've known him for years. And I have a feeling that he will be able to help.*

'Cam, I was thinking as I was walking this morning...' I began.

He rolled his eyes. 'You think too much. It's not good for your health.'

'Heh! Why did I just *know* you would say that?' I laughed.

'Uh, because you know I'm right?'

It was my turn to roll my eyes. 'Well, I had all these questions, and I couldn't find answers to them...' I started.

'And you're asking *me*?'

'Well, you seem to have helped already...' I began. 'And...you're always right,' I added, with a grin.

He threw me a disbelieving look, but waited for me to continue.

I sat there, silently contemplating the questions I had been trying to answer that morning. I had a gut feeling that Cameron would be able to help me, but I didn't have

a clue where to start. Suddenly, I blurted out, 'Do you know anything about depression?' I wondered how Cam would respond; he seemed so carefree that I doubted he would be able to answer *that* question.

I sat still, watching him. I could see him weighing options in his mind. It seemed to take an age, and I began to think he couldn't help after all. When he finally replied, I was completely taken aback.

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'Michael, can I tell you a story?'

'Uh, sure, go for it,' I said.

He paused, thinking again. 'I might ramble a bit, because I've never told this to anyone.'

'Okay.'

He took a deep breath and began talking.

'When I was twelve, my dad died. He had a heart attack at work.

'At that time we lived in Montrose, a suburb of Melbourne. I was one of a group of friends who were really close. I'd known most of them since primary school, and one even longer.

'We were a bit of a motley crew. A couple of the guys, Dominic and Chris, were brainy. They were amazing when it came to maths and science, although they weren't much good at practical things and thought sport was for the birds. Dean and Trent were the opposite. They were way into sport and not interested in much else. They struggled a bit with academic stuff, but the rest of us helped them out. The other two, Jesse and I, were all-rounders. We did well at school, but we were also good at practical stuff and liked a bit of sport as well. We all had other friends, but the six of us always hung out together. It seems weird that we were so different and yet such great friends—but that's how it was.

'Jesse and Dominic, in particular, helped me a lot after Dad's death. It took me a long time to get over it, because Dad and I were really close, and I missed him terribly. In a way, I was angry with him for leaving me. Dom and Jesse were great. They were there when I needed someone, but they gave me space to be alone when I needed it. In the months after Dad died, the three of us bonded really well and I came to depend on them. The other guys were there, too, but it was those two who helped me the most.

'By the time we were thirteen, we were getting interested in sex and we talked a lot about the girls at school. After a while, I began to believe I was different from the other guys. I didn't really enjoy all the talk about girls, and I didn't get all worked up about them like the other guys did. I was worried, thinking there was something wrong with me.

'Then, one day, Chris sent me a link to a website where he'd found some "really hot girls.'" I grinned as Cameron made punctuation marks in the air when he quoted Chris. 'When I went there, it was like a light turning on. Chris's hot girls were with

really hot guys, and I found myself looking at them rather than at the girls. The more I looked, the more excited I became.

'I was really relieved—I was getting turned on, which meant there wasn't anything wrong with me—but I had a new worry, because it was guys and not girls who were doing it for me. I wondered whether that was normal. Was I weird because I got as excited about guys as my friends did about girls? Where could I go from there? To make things worse, I felt isolated and alone as well as different. Even though I was surrounded by friends, I wasn't game to talk to any of them about it—first, because they were so into girls that I thought they would be disgusted with me and not want me as their friend, and second, because I feared they would think I was attracted to them.

'I stewed over it for months. I got more and more curious about guys, and less and less interested in girls.

'Year 9 started, and we all turned fourteen within a few months of one another. Trent and Dean found their first girlfriends. It was funny; after all the talk about what they would do with girls, they went to water and the girls had them wrapped around their little fingers. The rest of us gave them heaps. But, while they had their girlfriends, and the others were talking about girls, I was becoming obsessed with guys. Eventually, my feelings got too much for me to cope with, and I became afraid I'd do something really stupid. So...I took the bull by the horns, if you'll excuse the tired old phrase, and talked to my mum.'

Cameron paused when I cracked up, and laughed with me. 'I can laugh now,' he said, 'but it was deadly serious at the time. You've got no idea how bad I was feeling inside.'

'I can imagine,' I said. 'And you were pretty brave to talk to your mum.' I shook my head in wonder.

'Yeah,' he answered, 'I was really afraid. We'd always talked about stuff, but I was weirded out by my feelings about guys, and I didn't know how Mum would react. As it turned out, she was really cool about it. We sat down and talked and I just poured everything out. I cried, she cried, we hugged, we laughed, and I felt like a tonne of weight was lifted off my shoulders.

'Mum helped me to see that my feelings for guys might mean several things; one, I might be gay; two, I might be bisexual; three, I might be going through a stage and might find myself attracted to girls later; or...or... oh, what was the last one? Oh, I remember—I might be just curious, wanting to experience different forms of sexuality.

'She assured me that she would still love me in any case, and she insisted that I tell my sister, who was fine after her initial surprise wore off. I was so relieved, because I'd come out to two people and they were both supportive. That made me feel a lot better about myself, and it no longer seemed like I had a terrible, dark secret.

'Mum also suggested that I think about telling my friends. She thought they would be big enough to understand—and that, if they didn't, then they weren't true friends. That last part was hard for me to accept. Because we had all been such good mates for so long, I just couldn't believe that they weren't close and loyal friends. But, then, why

was I afraid to tell them? If Mum was right, they would be fine with the possibility that I was gay. If they weren't, then she was still right!

'I never did get that sorted out. A few weeks later, I was at Jesse's place when, without thinking, I made a comment about another guy. Jesse put two and two together and asked me if I was gay.'

Cameron pretended to wipe his brow. 'Man, that put me on the spot. I was afraid to admit to it, but I didn't want to fob him off, either. And I couldn't lie; that's just not me. My hesitation confirmed it for him; I didn't need to say a thing.'

'How did he take it?'

Cameron laughed. 'I couldn't believe it...after all my anguish over telling my friends, all he said was, "Cool!" I said, "Cool?" and he was like, "Yeah, you're the first gay guy I've known. Tell me about it.'"

I laughed. 'Cool friend, huh?'

'You can say that again.'

I opened my mouth to speak, but Cam beat me to it. 'Don't even think about it!'

He chuckled before continuing. 'Well, after I got over my surprise, we talked about it for ages. He wanted to know how and when I realised I was gay, and I told him about all the doubts and how I'd been worried that I was weird. He reckoned I'd done a good job of hiding everything, because he'd never noticed there was anything wrong. I told him I thought I had been extra careful to not show anything, because I was so scared that someone would find out that I was different. In fact, I think just the idea of being gay was terrifying enough, without worrying about what others would think or do. I didn't know anything about being gay, and I didn't know any gay guys. I didn't know whether they enjoyed the same things my mates and I did or whether they had the same ambitions, fears, and emotions. I really didn't know anything except that I was attracted to guys.'

'When I told Jesse that he was the first person to know—apart from Mum and my sister—that I was probably gay, he gave me his word that he wouldn't tell anyone. As he said, "That's your call." By the time I went home that day, I was sure that Jesse and I had formed an even closer bond. I was so relieved that he wasn't homophobic that I just about floated home.'

'Did you tell the others?'

'I didn't have to. By the time I arrived at school on Monday, it seemed the whole world knew.'

'The—' I exclaimed, cutting myself off before I swore. 'He gave his word!'

'Yeah. I was so angry with Jesse. I thought he'd betrayed me and outed me.'

'A few kids called me "fag," "queer," "homo" and other names I'd never even heard before. Some kids seemed to be avoiding me.'

'It was a very lonely day. It looked like even my closest friends had deserted me. Trent and Dean told me they weren't going to hang around with a fag. Dominic seemed

angry with me and took off whenever I came near. Jesse tried to talk to me, but he gave up after I made it clear that I wasn't interested. I couldn't work him out; he seemed troubled, and every now and then I'd catch him looking at me with a strange expression on his face.'

'What about Chris?' I asked. 'You haven't mentioned how he reacted.'

'Oh, Chris was overseas with his family. They'd gone to Greece to visit his grandparents, so he didn't know anything about all this until later. He was kind of uncomfortable around me when he did find out, and we drifted apart. He was still friendly enough, but our friendship was never the same after that.'

'Ah, sorry to interrupt. Please continue.'

Cameron threw me one of those "I'll deal with you later" looks, shook his head, and took up the story again.

'It was hard on my sister, too. She had accepted me, and it really hurt her to hear the stuff being said at school. She ditched her friends that day and walked home with me, to show her support.'

He chuckled. 'She got really annoyed with a couple of her friends when they said something about her hanging around with a fag, and she told them to "shut up and grow up!" I hadn't changed, and they'd always liked me before, so she couldn't see why they had a problem. I was really proud of her and grateful for her support when so many others seemed to have abandoned me.'

We took a break. Cameron relaxed while I went out to get more wood. It was still raining heavily and the wind was rattling the whole cabin. I rushed to get back in out of the cold. I stoked the fire and got us drinks and munchies before I rejoined Cam and he continued his story.

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'I tried to get out of going to school the next day, but Mum wasn't having that, so I resigned myself to going through it all again. It wasn't as bad as I'd feared. I got called names a few times, but mostly the other kids seemed to ignore me. That almost seemed worse than the name-calling, because kids I'd known for years wouldn't talk to me.

'After a couple of days of avoiding me, Dominic came up to me and said, "We need to talk!" It was an order; I didn't have a choice. At lunchtime, he led me to a quiet spot away from the crowds, and we sat down together.

'It was a bit awkward at first, but eventually he started to talk. He wasn't angry with me for being gay; he was upset because I hadn't told him. Because we'd been so close for years—especially after Dad died—he was really hurt that I'd never said anything. He felt I didn't trust him enough to tell him. I'd known Dominic since we were at pre-school, which made him my oldest friend. He was right...I should have known that he would accept me as I was, not as he or anyone else thought I should be.

'I can still remember exactly what he said next: "What it all boils down to is that you're still the same guy I've known and liked for most of my life. The only thing that's changed is that I know something about you now that I didn't know before. That doesn't change who you've been all along."

'I told him how afraid I'd been...' Cameron began marking off the reasons on his fingers. 'Because I felt different from all my friends and didn't really know how to deal with that; because—as far as I knew—none of us had even met anyone who was gay, and therefore I didn't have any way to know how straight people usually reacted when they found out that a guy was gay; and because I didn't know how my own friends would react in that specific situation. Taken together, those things made me want to keep my "gayness" secret.'

'Dom accepted my explanation, and then wanted to know what was up between Jesse and me. He told me Jesse was really upset because I wouldn't talk to him, and couldn't work out what he'd done: "He doesn't care about you being gay—and he says he told you that."

'I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I said, "You're kidding? He doesn't know why I'm angry with him?"

'Dom shook his head, and said "No." He sounded really puzzled.

'It was my turn to shake my head. I was getting agitated. Not only had Jesse betrayed me—he didn't even see that he'd done anything wrong. "He outed me!" I practically shouted at Dom.

"What?" Dom was almost shouting, too. "What are you talking about? Jesse didn't tell anyone."

'That stopped me in my tracks. The whole school had found out somehow, and Jesse was the only person I'd told. "Are you sure he didn't say something to someone?" I asked Dominic.

'Dom was certain. He said Jesse had been as surprised as I was when everyone was talking about me that Monday.

'I hung my head. I felt like I'd been kicked in the stomach. I'd made an assumption and hurt one of my best friends. "Man, I've stuffed up big-time," I said.

"Yep!" He wasn't going to give me any leeway.

'I jumped up. "I've got to find him!"

"No need to," Dom said, gesturing towards the school. "He's over there. He's been watching us, waiting to see if you would come to your senses."

'I looked, and there was Jesse, leaning against a corner of the building. I started towards him, looking back at Dominic at the same time. He was grinning, and waved Jesse over. We met halfway. Not knowing what else to do, I held out my arms and we hugged. "I'm so sorry," I managed to blurt out, and then burst into tears.

'Man, it was good to have them back. We sat and had a good talk. We seemed to be three, rather than six, but at least I still had my two closest friends. We all went back to class happier than we'd been for days. Later, we even figured out how I'd been

outed. Jesse had called me on his mobile phone the day after I'd been at his place, and he'd told me about some gay-support websites he'd found. He'd been sitting at a table in the food court of one of the big shopping centres. A couple of girls from school had come up to him after he'd got off the phone and had chatted with him for a few minutes. As we talked he remembered that they'd wanted to know who he'd been talking to, and we realised that they must have heard his side of the conversation. Those girls were renowned for knowing everyone else's business, so it was obvious who had spread the word.

'From then on, things began to improve. Other friends—though not Trent and Dean—came back, too. Most of them had never really gone away...they just needed time to adjust to the new knowledge they had about me. I was pretty sure most of the kids had never come across a real, live gay guy before and they just didn't know what to do with me. When they realised, like Dom had, that I was still the same person they'd always known, they were okay with my being gay.

'One of those was a guy called Aaron. He was a Christian, and he really struggled with being my friend. He explained that he was torn between two teachings. On one hand, his church taught that homosexuality was wrong. They didn't take it to extremes like some churches did, but they were certain that the Bible was clear on the issue. On the other hand, Aaron's church also taught that he was supposed to love everyone, because that's what Jesus preached—and also what Jesus did.

'He told me he had a lot of trouble trying to reconcile two teachings which seemed to be incompatible. What was he to do—love me or try to change me? In the end, he decided that he would love me, and leave God to worry about changing me. I really appreciated his honesty.

'There was another Christian kid who had a different approach. He told me God hated gays, and started quoting Bible verses and preaching at me. He wasn't consistent, though. One day, he told me I'd made a bad choice when I "decided to follow the homosexual lifestyle." Another day, he reckoned I'd "learned" my "homosexual behaviour." That really got up my nose. For one thing, I didn't believe I'd chosen to be gay or that I'd learned to be gay. For another thing, I didn't have any idea what "homosexual lifestyle" or "homosexual behaviour" meant. As far as I could see, I just was gay, and always had been. I'd had enough trouble accepting that I was probably gay, without worrying about lifestyles and behaviour. I felt bad enough as it was, but every time that kid spoke to me, I ended up feeling as if I wasn't really human. I would have heard him out if he'd been willing to sit down and talk with me, but he either couldn't or wouldn't do that. I tried to get a discussion going, but he seemed to have a closed mind. Whatever I said, he just kept repeating the same arguments.

'In the end, I gave up. I was thankful I had Aaron. His way was much more helpful for me.

'Aaron became the fourth member of our group. There was a girl from Aaron's church who was friendly with him, and she started hanging around with us as well. Then a friend of hers joined us.'

Cameron chuckled. 'We were back to six, and I grew to love those girls and Aaron as I had Trent and Dean, who remained hostile to me. Since we moved in different circles, their attitude wasn't too hard to cope with, but it was a real shame because we'd been

close for so long. They just didn't seem able to believe that I hadn't suddenly changed. In the end, I had to accept that it wasn't likely that we would ever be friends again. I felt sorry for Dom and Jesse, though; they were rejected, too, because they chose to hang out with "the fag." Chris was back from Greece by then, but he spent his time with other friends.

'Over time, things got back to normal, and most people accepted me. Jesse and Aaron ended up falling for the two girls, so we had two couples in our group. The six of us did a lot together, and I was really grateful for their support. As far as any of us knew, I was the only gay guy in the whole school, but that changed at the beginning of Year 10.'

CHAPTER 9: FORGIVENESS?

Outside, the storm was still raging. The rain was pelting down, and the wind was howling around the building. Cameron put more wood on the fire while I made us a snack and a cup of hot Milo each. As soon as we were settled again Cameron picked up where he had left off.

'On the first day of term, I walked in the front gate at school and saw the guy of my dreams. He was blond and suntanned, and...beautiful.' Cameron's eyes misted over, and I thought he was going to cry. He blinked and took a deep breath.

'He walked up to me and asked me how to get to the office. He was new and had an appointment with the principal.

'I had to go in that direction anyway, so I took him there.

'His name was Daniel Turpin, and he had only arrived in Melbourne the previous day. His father had been transferred from Queensland at short notice, and they hadn't found time to get Daniel enrolled; hence, the appointment. I left him at the office and headed off to my homeroom.

'Daniel was placed in my year, and in my homeroom. When we compared timetables, we found we had several classes together. He also had classes with the rest of our gang, and by lunch time he had met everyone. We invited him to sit with us, and found a table out in the courtyard.

'Becky, Aaron's girlfriend, is a real sweetie, but she's one of those people who just comes right out and says what she's thinking. We'd hardly sat down when she gave Daniel one of her killer smiles and said, "So, Daniel, are you available? Cameron needs a boyfriend."

'Daniel looked a bit surprised. I was horrified. My jaw dropped, and I felt myself going a vivid shade of red. The others all looked at me and cracked up.

'I was flabbergasted, but I managed to splutter, "Becky! What are you doing?"

'I felt so embarrassed for Daniel. I turned to him to apologise, and realised he'd started laughing with the others.

'It turned out that there had been an incident in one of the classes I hadn't shared with Daniel. My ex-friend, Trent, happened to walk past Daniel on his way into the classroom. Thinking he was doing him a favour, Trent suggested that Daniel might want to think twice about hanging around with me. "He's a fag." Jesse was about to thump Trent when Daniel calmly said, "Cool. Some of my best friends are gay."

'My friends, and most of the rest of the class, broke up laughing at the look of disgust on Trent's face as he went to his seat, muttering something about queers taking over the school.

'Daniel was, indeed, available. He made no secret of the fact that he was gay, and Becky and Rachael, Jesse's girlfriend, were forever trying to get Daniel and me together. We did become firm friends, and he fitted into our group well. I think

Daniel and I both wanted a relationship, but we were kind of cautious, and at first we resisted the girls' attempts to get us together.

'Over time, though, we grew closer and closer.

'About six months after we met, I stayed at Daniel's place one weekend. We had a serious talk, and we found that we did both want a relationship. We had deep feelings for each other that went beyond what we felt for any of our other friends. That Saturday, we decided to go into Melbourne for dinner and a movie. We had a wonderful time. There was something special about that night that I still remember now, even though it was more than two years ago.

'The following day, we told Allan—Daniel's dad—and my mum and sister that we were a couple. Allan had known for a year or so that Daniel was gay, so there was no drama with either parent. In fact, they were both happy for us, and both of them approved. My sister was really excited; she liked Daniel, and I think she was just happy that I had someone special after the problems of the previous year.

'At school on the following Monday, Becky and Rachael took one look at Daniel and me, yelled "Yes!" and high fived each other. Then they made us kiss, right in the corridor with heaps of other kids around. It was embarrassing, and we would have been in big trouble if a teacher had caught us, but we were so happy I don't think we would have cared if they'd made an announcement over the school's public address system.

'After what had happened the year before, I was amazed when people at school started to accept us as a couple; I guess they'd had time to get used to having a couple of gay guys around.

'In fact, it turned out that there were others. Most of them had seen how I had been treated and, fearful of being harassed too, had remained firmly in the closet. When they saw how readily Daniel and I were accepted, though, they were encouraged, and a few guys and several girls came out. With help and encouragement from a new teacher who had been involved with a similar group at her previous school, we all got together and formed a Gay-Straight Alliance. That provided support for the gay kids, but it was also good for the straight kids, because it helped them to understand and accept that we were kids just like them. The school even revised its policies so that harassment like I had experienced would be dealt with properly.

'That was an awesome time. Our love for each other grew deeper and we spent as much time together as we could.'

Cameron paused to have a sip of his drink and I got up to put a couple of logs on the fire. When I was settled again, he continued.

'Then, I, I...' Cameron stopped and took a deep breath. I could see that he was fighting back tears. 'Then, I lost Daniel.'

He looked like he was going to break down, so I moved closer and put my arms around him. When he had recovered, I handed him a handful of tissues and he dried his eyes and face.

'Sorry,' he said, 'it's still painful to remember.'

'It's okay. You want to stop? Don't go on if it's too much.'

'No, it's fine. If I don't go on, you won't get to hear what I wanted to tell you.'

'All right. As long as you're sure,' I replied. I guessed that Cameron and Daniel had broken up and that it had been messy, which would explain why it could still upset Cameron, so I was completely unprepared for what he told me next.

'We had about fifteen months together. We were so happy. A few weeks before Christmas last year, the company Daniel's dad worked for held a conference at Mount Hotham. It was scheduled to run for several days, but he only needed to be there for one day to run some workshops, so the company chartered a light plane to fly him up. The company CEO was supposed to go as well, but at the last minute he was called to another meeting. That left an empty seat on the plane. Daniel had finished his exams, so he went along to keep his dad company. There wasn't any snow at that time of the year, so he couldn't go skiing or tobogganing, but Daniel figured he'd find something to do while his dad was at the conference.' Cameron paused, then took a deep breath.

'Allan's workshops went well, and he and Cameron left the resort as soon as they could to fly back home. It was about four o'clock. They were supposed to land at Lilydale, which is not far from Montrose, so they should have been home well in time for dinner. They never arrived. Not long after they took off, they got caught up in a severe thunderstorm, and crashed. Daniel, his dad and the pilot all died.' Cameron was fighting back tears again.

'Oh, man.' I had tears in my eyes, too. I hugged Cameron.

'The pilot had been warned there was a storm approaching Mount Hotham, and had been advised to wait until it blew over. For reasons no one was able to fathom, he ignored the warning. I don't reckon Daniel's dad would have got on the plane—let alone allowed Daniel to—if he'd known about the storm. I don't have any proof, but I don't think the pilot told them about the warning. Certainly, none of the resort staff knew about the approaching storm, nor did anyone at the conference. In fact, a group of people went for a hike after the workshops, and they got caught in the storm as well.

'I was devastated. I'd lost my dream guy. I'd also lost his dad, who had been like a dad to me, too. I couldn't get over the grief I felt, and I was so angry. Boy, was I angry. I was so mad at that pilot! I went through a period when I wanted to strangle him. I couldn't, of course, because he was dead.

'I think losing Daniel and his dad affected me as badly as it did because it happened only a few years after Dad died. It felt like I was losing everyone who was important to me, and I couldn't help wondering if Mum and my sister would be next. I ended up depressed, and had to start taking medication for that.

'The anger started to eat away at me like a cancer. Fortunately, my friends stuck with me—like yours did, I guess—and it was Aaron who ended up helping me deal with it.'

Cameron stopped and picked up his glass. 'Man, I need a break. My voice is starting to conk out.'

I looked at the clock. 'Whoa! It's nearly time for tea. We can finish after that—or leave it till tomorrow, if you'd like.'

Cameron nodded. 'Let's try for after tea.'

While I prepared our meal, Cameron took a nap on the couch. He looked worn out; I guess reliving Daniel's death had drained him. After we had eaten and cleaned up, Cameron took a bath. The wounds from his fall were healing nicely and his muscles were much less painful, so he only needed a little help. His ankle was still tender to the touch, but the swelling was almost gone and the pain was no longer severe.

While he was busy, I phoned home to let everyone know I was okay. Mum was pleased that I had company, and she found it highly amusing that my lone retreat had turned into something else. Zoë was at my place, which saved me making another call, and we talked until Cameron called to me from the bathroom. Zoë was looking forward to joining me the following weekend. She tried to tell me she was bored without me, but Noriko grabbed the phone and told me everything they'd been doing. I laughed. Zoë couldn't possibly have had time to be bored, but I knew how she was feeling, because I was missing her, too.

The bath revived Cameron, and after I showered, replenished our wood supply, and rebuilt the fire, he was ready to continue his story.

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'A few weeks after Daniel...died...Aaron and I had to work on an assignment together, so I went around to his place. I was feeling really sorry for myself that day. I was missing Daniel and his dad, and I was still angry about their deaths. Anyway, he was playing a CD of his mum's, and this song came on. It was 1980s-style stuff that I don't usually like, but it got my attention and I started listening to the lyrics. I was like, *Whoa! This guy understands! Someone knows how I feel.* The song had a really weird name, "Seventy Times Seven", so I asked Aaron what it meant.

He said it was a quote from the Bible. When someone asked Jesus how many times we should forgive a person when they hurt us—"Seven times?" Jesus answered, "No, not seven times, but seventy times seven." The point was that we should go on forgiving people over and over, no matter what they did to us. I thought it sounded crazy, but Aaron reckoned it worked.

'Anyway, it made me think, so I borrowed the CD.' Cameron laughed. 'I listened to the song so many times that my sister was ready to kill me; she hated it. It started like this:

*This prison has no walls
This bondage has no chains
My memories have no mercy
There's no one left to blame
Wish I could force back
The hands of time
And right every wrong³*

³"Seventy Times Seven", Lyrics by David Meece, Gino Vannelli and Roy Freeland. Copyright 1986, Meece Music (admin by) Word Music, Black Keys Music/Screen Gems-EMI Music

'Those words really got to me. Boy, did I ever feel like I was in a prison, and I would have given anything to go back in time and have Daniel back. Somehow, the song gave me a glimmer of hope that I might—just might—be able to get through the grief and anger and get used to life without Daniel. There was another song on the CD, "Forgiven", that had a line that kept running around in my head; it just wouldn't go away:

Forgive them no matter what they've done⁴

'I went to bed in a turmoil. I was excited that the first song described so well how I was feeling, but the forgiveness stuff had me puzzled—I couldn't understand that at all. I was too keyed up to sleep much, and I could hardly wait till morning. I was anxious to try and find out more.

'The next day I went back to talk to Aaron.'

'Wow!' I interrupted. 'You were keen.'

'Heh,' Cameron snorted, 'it was more like desperate than keen. I just had to get some answers...I needed to understand what was eating away at me, and how to stop it. Anyway, when I got there, Aaron had an older guy with him. Well, he was probably twenty-five.'

'Old,' I agreed.

Cameron chuckled, then continued, 'He turned out to be one of the pastors at Aaron's church. We got talking, and Aaron asked if the CD had helped me. I explained that it had, but that it raised more questions than it answered, and that I'd returned to see if he could help me find answers. He thought Ben, the pastor guy, would be better able to do that, so I explained how hearing the song had got my attention and started me thinking. Ben was really easy to talk to, and I ended up telling him the whole story of losing Daniel, and how I'd become depressed and angry. I guess I was still feeling some resentment over losing friends when they found out I'm gay, because I even told him about that.

'The three of us talked for a long while. I described how much the two songs had affected me, but explained that I couldn't understand why, or what I was supposed to do about it.

'You know what Ben did? He sat down with me at Aaron's kitchen table, and explained what he thought my feelings were, and why. I must have ruined whatever plans he had that day, but he didn't seem to care. He was so patient, answering all my questions and going over something again when I didn't get it. Aaron was with us all the time, too. He didn't say much, but did add a bit here and there.

'What it all boiled down to was that forgiveness was the key. You know the old saying about treating others as you would have them treat you?'

I nodded.

'Well, Ben explained how that worked in all sorts of ways. It was like a boomerang—if you treated a person badly, they (or someone else) would treat you badly. It was kind of like a law in physics, where an action results in a reaction.

⁴"Forgiven", Words by David Meece. Copyright 1985 Meece Music (admin by) WORD Music

'I was depressed because of the emotions that were affecting my thinking. First, I was feeling cheated—because I was unfairly outed at school and people I'd known for years were no longer friends because of that, and also because Daniel and Allan had been taken from me just when everything was going so well. Second, I was angry—with the two girls who had outed me, with my friends for deserting me, and with the pilot of the plane for killing my boyfriend. The end result was that I was feeling like crap.

'Ben showed me that I needed to get all that stuff out of my system. He reckoned the way to do that was to forgive the two girls, forgive my friends, and forgive the pilot.

"But they were wrong!" I protested to Ben.

"Yes, they were," he said.

"And they hurt me!"

'He just nodded. "Why should I forgive them?" I asked. "And they need to apologise first, anyway."

'I was ready to argue. I was getting mad with Ben, but he just sat there and waited till I calmed down. Then he began to explain that I was feeling bad because I was holding on to the hurt and anger, and the only way to get rid of them was to forgive the people who had caused them. I could simply *decide* to forgive the people, and my forgiveness wasn't dependent on anything they did or said.

'The idea of forgiving—without expecting the other person to do anything—just seemed too hard, not to mention stupid. That's not the way the world works. We look out for number one; we give because it makes us feel good, and because we think we'll get something in return. People like to bear grudges, and I was no different from anyone else. The idea of there being a kind of equation, where my well-being depended on my forgiving first, just seemed crazy. How could I forgive these people who had hurt me so much and caused so much upheaval for me and my family? I couldn't get my mind around it; I just didn't get it.

'I was nearly ready to get up and walk out, but Aaron kind of threw a circuit-breaker. He saw I was getting upset, so he went out to the kitchen and came back with chocolate cake and cans of soft drink.' Cameron laughed. 'He knew I loved his mother's chocolate cake! And Pub Squash! We talked about other stuff while we ate, and that was enough to calm me down. When we started on forgiveness again, Ben very patiently showed me how all these ideas were related.

'I began to understand. If I waited for those who had hurt me to come and apologise, I might be waiting forever, and the hurt and pain would still be there. They might not even realise that they had hurt me—or they might know, but not care. Either way, they weren't about to come and get down on their knees and ask for my forgiveness. In the case of the pilot, he obviously couldn't do that, anyway, because he was dead. Instead, what I had to do was show mercy and forgive them; not because they asked me to, but because I wanted and needed to. The benefit to me was that in the act of forgiving, I would let go of the hatred and anger, and the pain and hurt, and I would be free again. I just had to *decide to forgive*. It didn't matter how I felt about it; first I had to make the commitment to do it, and then I had to make it happen.

'Ben explained that by holding onto the anger and hurt I was judging those people—in effect, I was acting as their judge and jury. If I forgave them I would release them from my judgement. That didn't mean that I agreed with what they had said or done; it simply meant that I would not pronounce them guilty.⁵

'It was a bit scary, but then I realised he was right. I *was* judging that pilot—and the others—and because I was still angry, I was still feeling the effects of the anger.'

'So, what happened next?' I asked.

Cameron chuckled. 'Somebody was trying to tell me something. I kept reading or hearing things that talked about forgiveness. Man! If I had a dollar for every time that word came up in the following weeks, I'd be rich. I found quotes on forgiveness in books and newspapers, online, on the desk calendar in my mum's study and in various other odd places. One quote made me laugh. It impressed me so much I can still remember it: "Holding on to anger, resentment and hurt only gives you tense muscles, a headache and a sore jaw from clenching your teeth. Forgiveness gives you back the laughter and the lightness in your life."

'I watched a documentary on TV about a Jewish lady who, as a child, had been in Auschwitz concentration camp. She and her sister had been forced to take part in "research" on twins. Many years later, she went back to Auschwitz, and forgave the Nazis for what they did to her there. She copped a lot of flak for that, but she said she had to; the hatred was killing her.⁶

'A DVD that someone loaned me also helped a lot. It looked at forgiveness from a scientific point of view. It talked about scientific research that proves that forgiving people is good for our health, and it covered religious and secular teachings about forgiveness, as well. It was fascinating stuff.⁷

'Okay, so what did you do?' I asked.

'Oh, then came the hard part. I knew I had to forgive the two girls, my ex-friends and the pilot, but forgiving them was the last thing in the world I felt like doing. I argued with myself about it. I talked to Ben to see if there was a way out of it, and I told God he was wrong.' He chuckled. 'Fat lot of good that did me! I was still depressed, the anger was still eating away at me, I still wanted revenge—and on top of all that, I began to feel guilty because I knew what I had to do but I couldn't do it.

'Then one day I got so angry with someone at school that I got detention. I had to stay back and "volunteer" to help cover a heap of new library books. And—wouldn't you know it—as I walked into the library, my old friend Dean followed me in. He had detention, too!

'I looked at him and scowled; he looked at me and kind of cringed. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but then must have thought better of it. He actually looked upset, and he just turned and started to walk away. I surprised both of us by

⁵Catherine Marshall: *Something More*. Quoted in Jerry Cook with Stanley C Baldwin, 1979: *Love, acceptance and forgiveness*. Regal Books, Ventura, CA., pages 20-21

⁶*Forgiving Dr. Mengele*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Cheri Pugh. First Run Features, 2005. www.firstrunfeatures.com

⁷*The Power of Forgiveness*. Directed by Martin Doblmeier. Journey Films, 2007. www.journeyfilms.com

calling him back. It hurt to even look at him, and I was wondering why I'd stopped him leaving. I didn't have any idea what to say, and he just stood there. After imitating a goldfish for a few seconds, I finally blurted out, "You really hurt me, you know?"

'He said, "I know," and he burst into tears. Man, I wasn't expecting that! Then he started apologising, and that made *me* cry. Dean said, "Can we talk before we go home? There's so much I need to tell you." I didn't answer straight away and he must have thought I didn't want to talk to him, because he added a very plaintive, "Please?"

'I agreed, and he gave a smile of relief.

'We finished covering the books before the hour was up, and the librarian let us have the remainder of the time to ourselves. Dean was really grateful that we were able to talk. Our bust-up had been eating away at him, too, and he'd really wanted to fix things between us, but he hadn't known how. He had really missed me and the friendship we'd enjoyed since primary school, and as we talked I realised I had missed him, too. I'd been too angry to notice before. He said, "I can't speak for Trent, but I've had enough of this 'fag' crap. I realise now that you haven't changed, and I want to be friends again." He asked me to forgive him. Much to my surprise I found I was able to, and we sealed the deal with a hug.

'I remember feeling excited as I walked home that day, because I finally understood what forgiveness was all about. I felt like I'd discovered a continent that had never been seen before. That night, because Dean's apology and request had broken the ice, I was able to extend my forgiveness to the girls who had outed me, and to the other friends who had left me. It took a long while, but I also managed to forgive the pilot whose negligence had killed Daniel and his dad. For the first time in months I went to bed and didn't cry myself to sleep.

'I couldn't wait to tell Ben and Aaron what had happened, because they were the ones who had set me on the right track. They were almost as excited as I was. I'll never forget how Aaron stuck with me when other friends had gone. He saw through my anger to the hurt and pain underneath and he understood what I needed to do. Ben has become a good friend, too, and I'll always remember how he took the time to explain everything to me.

'Getting rid of the garbage between Dean and me kind of started an avalanche. After forgiving him, the other kids and the pilot, everything else was pretty easy. The anger evaporated, and then I realised I'd never properly dealt with my grief over losing Daniel. Ben was a big help with that, and with the anger and grief gone, the depression cleared up as well. I was able to stop taking the anti-depressants, and I've been fine ever since. It was like getting to start life all over again.

'Dean became a firm friend again, and he actually joined the GSA. Because he's a jock, he helped to spread understanding and tolerance among the sporty crowd. Trent has never changed his attitude to me. That was the one issue I couldn't resolve, but eventually I decided it was his problem, not mine, and I've been able to let him go.'

'Wow! What a story,' I said.

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After Cameron finished his narrative, we both wanted to talk. We stayed up until the early hours of the morning, and we must have told each other our entire life histories. We talked about our families and our childhoods, our schools and our friends. We shared our interests and passions. We discussed the future—our ambitions and what we hoped to achieve—our hopes and our fears...and we solved the world's problems.

Cameron told me all about Daniel, and I told him all about Zoë. We talked about our relationships with them, and how they had enriched our lives.

For Cameron, the conversation seemed therapeutic. Although it had been ten months since Daniel had died, and he'd dealt with his grief and anger, his love for his boyfriend was still very strong, and he still missed him. 'I know I'll have to move on eventually,' he said, 'but I can't just close a door and forget Daniel. It's too soon, I think.'

I agreed. 'I don't think you should even think about forgetting him. He was a big part of your life. You'll always have a special place in your heart for him. It might be different if your relationship had ended because you split up...people do that all the time, and they get over it and move on. That didn't happen, though. You lost Daniel when you were still very much in love with each other, so you'll always remember him as he was at that moment. I hope you *will* find someone else in time, but Daniel will still be there, too, and I don't think you should try to change that. Your heart's big enough to have room for both of them.'

Cameron looked at me intently for a few moments, before he broke into a grin. 'You know, I think you're right...you're not just a pretty face, are you?'

I threw a cushion at him, and then had to apologise because, in ducking suddenly to miss the cushion, he hurt his ankle. I hastily got out the cold packs and placed them around his foot. 'Oh, man, I'm sorry, Cam. I shouldn't have done that.'

'Nah, it's all right. It's my own fault for giving you cheek, and it's only an ankle. It'll heal.'

I laughed and sat back down. I leaned back and closed my eyes, thinking back over our long conversation. It had helped me a lot, too, especially when Cameron explained how forgiving Dean, the kids at school, and then the pilot, had given him a new beginning.

I knew what he meant when he had said it was like starting life all over again. I'd already had that experience—twice. As I pondered Cameron's story, I wondered if it was about to happen again. *Is forgiveness the key to my own problem?*

CHAPTER 10: RECOVERY

Sunday's violent storm continued overnight and into Monday. Cameron and I were both tired from staying up late talking, but the worry of the storm made for an uneasy sleep. I was continually expecting a tree to fall on the cabin. Cameron told me later that he kept thinking he'd made it down from the mountain safely only to be crushed by the roof falling in on him. We were tired and grumpy when we finally crawled out of bed. Around lunch time, the storm cleared up as suddenly as it had started. The cabin had escaped damage and we were safe. Cameron brightened with the change in the weather and the passing of the danger. I moped around, trying to make sense of my problem and trying to work out how to resolve it. Fortunately, Cameron realised that I was off in my own world and he left me to sulk in peace.

Late in the afternoon, I went for a long walk. Even as a young child I had liked to have time alone; I loved my family and the time we spent together, but I needed space around me, too. The walk that day gave me the time to myself that I hadn't had since the afternoon I arrived at the cabin. It didn't magically provide answers to my questions, but it was soothing after the stress of the previous day. I enjoyed the sights and sounds of the bush, which smelled clean and fresh after the rain. The brisk mountain air cleared my head and the exercise gave me a healthy appetite. By the time I returned I was feeling much happier, especially when I found dinner waiting for me.

Cameron was supposed to have completed his hike that day. He would have called his mother when he arrived at his pick-up point, and then she would have driven up from Melbourne to collect him. We decided that it would be easier for him to stay with my family until his ankle healed, and then catch a train to Melbourne. He phoned home, and it was all arranged—except that his mum decided she would make the trip to Sale to pick him up.

Tuesday dawned clear and sunny. The only signs there had been a storm were the numerous fallen branches and a carpet of wind-blown leaves. A local council crew cleared branches from the road, and I kept busy cleaning up around the cabin while Cameron rested his ankle.

Spring is delightful in our part of Australia, and Wednesday was another beautiful day. We ate lunch out on the veranda, enjoying the warmth and listening to the birds chattering in the surrounding trees. In the distance, a kookaburra was laughing, and a couple of rabbits were grazing near the road. The Wellington River behind us was louder than usual—roaring rather than burbling—so I guessed a lot of rain had fallen up in the headwaters. Concerned that a flood might be on the way, I had checked the river level earlier in the morning. It was higher than usual, but the level wasn't rising, so there didn't seem to be any danger.

We were sitting at the table after our meal, enjoying a comfortable silence. It was three days since Cameron had told me his story. I'd spent a lot of time thinking about it, but I still couldn't decide whether it was relevant to my own problem.

Eventually, I broke the silence. 'So, where do we go from here, Cam?' He had been deep in thought, too, and my question startled him. I couldn't help laughing at his reaction.

'How do you mean?' he asked when he had recovered.

'Well, I came here to be alone and sort myself out—and ended up finding a waif on my doorstep. I haven't had much time alone, and I sure haven't got myself sorted out. In fact, the waif told me a story that's only made me feel more confused.'

Cam chuckled. 'I know that feeling,' he said.

Ignoring him, I continued, 'And you went on a solo hike to be alone and to prove something to yourself, and ended up begging for shelter from an anti-social nervous wreck and getting stuck here. So, what have we achieved? Was your hike worth it? You've never said what it was you were trying to prove.'

'Oh,' he said, 'I just wanted to prove people wrong. And I did! I had to push myself to the limit, but I did it.'

'Man!' I exclaimed. 'You picked your place well. What would you have done if it hadn't turned out okay? You would have been stranded in the middle of nowhere without any help. In these mountains, at this time of the year, you could have frozen to death.'

Cameron sighed. 'I know.' He paused, as if he wasn't sure what to say next. 'But I had to do it, and...and, there was another reason.'

He paused, and when I looked up his eyes were moist.

'It was in these mountains that Daniel and his dad died. I wanted to come up here to say goodbye,' he said quietly.

'Oh.'

'I found the crash site. It was pretty remote, but I did it. I just sat and cried my heart out, but when it was over I felt like a burden had been lifted from my mind. I stayed there for ages, just talking to Daniel and his dad. By the time I left, I felt better than I had in months. I was on my way out when I hurt my ankle. You know the rest of the story.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I do. Man, you were game. But I can understand that you needed to do that.'

He looked at me and grinned. 'Okay. Your turn.'

'Whaddya mean "my turn"?''

'Your turn to answer questions,' he said. Then, before I had time to wonder what questions he was talking about, he asked, 'Who is The Monster?'

I looked at him incredulously. I'd told him all about The Monster. *Why's he asking me that?* I thought. *He knows exactly who The Monster is.* Rather indignantly, I answered, 'He's the bloke who kidnapped me, and raped me, and...and ruined my life! You know that.'

'Yes, I know what you've told me *about* him, but who *is* he?'

By then I was really puzzled, and more than a little frustrated. 'What else is there to know?'

'Well, I've been thinking about your problems with him, and that got me wondering about your relationship with him.'

'I don't have a relationship with him!' I snapped.

'Yes, you do. On some level you have a relationship with everyone you meet. In everything you've told me about this guy, you've never called him anything but The Monster. Does he have a name?'

'Of course he does, but he doesn't deserve to be called by his name—he *is* a monster!'

'Okay, yes, he is, but do you know why? Do you know his history, and what happened in his life to make him that way? I'm guessing he wasn't like that when he was a little kid.'

'Are you defending him now?' I was getting worked up.

'No.' Cameron drew out the word. 'No, I'm not. What he did was wrong, but it occurred to me that trying to understand him might make it easier to come to terms with what he did to you.'

That stopped me in my tracks, and the anger drained out of me. 'Whoa!' I stopped to think, while Cameron waited patiently. 'Um...how do you think that will help?'

'Well, I'm wondering if you've—how can I put it—"de-humanised" him? In thinking of him as a monster, I reckon you've pushed him into the back of your mind as some impersonal "thing" that you can ignore. That way you haven't had to own up to your resentment and anger over what he did to you, and those feelings can keep smouldering away in the background. I don't think you would be able to do that if you thought of him as a real person with a name and a history that made him what he is. It's easier to ignore an impersonal "it" than to ignore another human being.'

'Whoa! Again,' I added when I realised I was repeating myself. I mulled over what Cameron had said, wondering if he was right. I did know some of the man's background, because the defence barrister had brought it up in court in an effort to get a shorter sentence for his client. I had listened, but I'd seen it as a ploy to explain away what The Monster had done, so I had promptly forgotten it. As I thought back to that day in the courtroom, I began to remember what the barrister had said.

'He had a terrible childhood,' I said, finally breaking my silence. 'He was an only child, and never knew who his real father was. His mother was a heroin addict, and had a succession of junkie boyfriends. Most of them abused him in one way or another. His mother pretty much ignored him, and he grew up thinking no one wanted or liked him. A lot of the time he had to scrounge for food. When he was fourteen, his mother's boyfriend beat him so badly he ran away and lived on the street for a few months. He had a horrible scar under one eye. He got that when an older, homeless guy attacked him for sleeping in his spot—the guy smashed a bottle in his face. Eventually, he was taken in by foster parents when he was sixteen. They were the first people who ever showed him love, and they helped him get on his feet and get a decent job.'

I paused to reflect. 'You know, I thought he was really ugly and mean, and he was very rough with me, but his barrister had character references from the managers of the prisons he worked in, as well as from several of his workmates, and even a few ex-prisoners. They all spoke highly of him, and several of them called him a gentle giant. A couple of the ex-prisoners described how he'd helped them get back on the right track and make something of their lives.' I took a deep breath. 'I don't know, Cam. That seems so different from my experience of him. You'd reckon they were talking about a different person.'

'Yeah, it doesn't sound like they were describing a sex offender.'

'I know—but that reminds me of something else. During the trial, the prosecutor said something about sexual abuse being invisible. I wondered at the time what he was talking about, but now I think I can see what he meant. It's invisible because the offenders are so ordinary, so "normal", and because most sex offences are never even reported. He also said that, although abuse is a compulsive and repetitive behaviour, there's no such thing as a "typical sex offender" and that there's no "magic test" to identify them. The only thing they have in common is that they are abusers.'⁸

'So...you're willing to allow that he might be human?'

'Yeah...I guess,' I said, reluctantly. 'I can see that he's a person, and that there are reasons for him to be the way he is, but he still hurt me—and I still feel cheated. He left me confused. He stole my virginity, and left me feeling violated. I'm damaged goods, Cam. I'm shop-soiled. If I was a fridge or a washing machine, I'd be in a scratch and dent sale.' I threw up my arms and sighed deeply. 'How can Zoë, or anyone else, love me now that I've been used?'

Cameron was silent for a few moments, thinking. 'Try looking at it this way: the choice was taken from you, but that's in the past. You had no control over what happened then. Now, when you're ready to love—whether it's Zoë or someone else—it will be the first time you've *given* yourself to anyone, so only then will you be giving up your virginity.'

'O...kay, that makes sense. I think. So, where do I go from here?'

Cameron gave me a cheeky grin. 'What's his name?'

I groaned. 'Persistent, aren't you? It's...Vincent John Giambruno.'

'Ah, a Vinnie. I'll bet he was a cute little kid.'

'All little kids are cute!' I snapped, bitterness and resentment returning. 'Until they turn into monsters.'

'Michael,' Cameron said gently, 'kids don't turn into monsters all by themselves. Monsters are made.'

I looked at him. I knew he was right, but I wasn't ready to go where he was heading.

'Michael, think of him as a little kid, little Vinnie, innocent and trusting. He only had his mother, and instead of loving him and protecting him, she was doing drugs. She

⁸Salter, Anna C. 1995. *Transforming trauma: a guide to understanding and treating adult survivors of child sexual abuse*. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA. pp. 5-33.

ignored him and allowed her boyfriends to belt him around. Imagine that the only times she spoke to him were when she was yelling at him. He didn't have a father to look up to or to give him hugs when he was upset. He grew up thinking drug abuse was okay and that it was normal to have men coming and going all the time. It must have been a chaotic life. How could he learn to love? He had to fend for himself when he was only fourteen. It's not surprising he turned out damaged.'

I nodded. I didn't trust myself to say anything. Again, I knew Cameron was right, but I wasn't ready to do what I knew he was suggesting—to forgive The Monster.

I stood abruptly. 'I'm going for a walk,' I said as I headed down the steps, not waiting for a reply.

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I walked and walked. I lost track of time, oblivious to my surroundings. It was as if I was trying to beat my body into submission by wearing it out. It was my mind that needed to submit, not my body, but I had so many thoughts running around in my head that I couldn't make sense of any of them. Perhaps it was just that I didn't want to face up to them, or perhaps I thought that if I wore out my body, my mind would tire as well. Eventually, physically tired and emotionally drained, I flopped down on a grassy patch beside the road and drifted off to sleep.

When I woke, the sky was still blue, but the sun had disappeared behind the mountains. There were a few fluffy clouds, and I lay on my back watching them changing shape as I tried to collect my thoughts. I went back over the conversation with Cameron. *He was pretty clever*, I thought. He hadn't exactly told me what to do, but he had asked his questions in such a way that I couldn't dismiss them. Although he hadn't said it in so many words, it was clear that Cameron thought I needed to forgive The Monster.

He only thinks that because that was right for him, I thought. *But it makes sense*, came a counter-thought. I lay there in silence for a few minutes. 'Vincent John Giambruno, I hate you!' I shouted. 'Why—' I stopped abruptly as I realised what I'd done.

'Whoa!' For the first time ever, I had given the guy his name. 'Maybe Cameron is right,' I said quietly. 'Perhaps thinking of him as a real person instead of The Monster *will* make it easier.' I let my mind drift back to the courtroom. I listened again to each barrister's arguments. Surprisingly, the prosecutor was quite compassionate. He didn't demonise my attacker, but portrayed him as a sick man who needed help. He didn't excuse him, either—he didn't pull any punches when he described Vincent Giambruno as a cunning predator who had lain in wait for his victims and then used them for his own pleasure. The defence barrister described Giambruno's childhood in graphic detail. As I remembered the long tale of the mother's neglect, the stepfathers' abuses and the teenager's life on the streets, I couldn't help contrasting Vincent's childhood, and his mother, with mine. Soon I was crying, as I tried to comprehend how anyone—especially a mother—could treat a child that way.

By the time I was cried out, I had made up my mind. Cameron was right: I had to forgive Vincent Giambruno.

It was getting late. I stood up. 'Uh oh,' I said, as I realised my clothes were damp from lying on the ground. 'Why didn't I notice that before? Now I've probably given myself a cold.' It wasn't enough to dampen my spirit, though, and I headed back to the cabin in a much better frame of mind.

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The following day I was calmer, but still a little tense. I was grappling with the idea of forgiving the man who attacked and raped me. It was a big step to take. Although I had decided intellectually to forgive Vincent Giambruno, getting the message through to my heart took a conscious effort. I was harbouring resentment towards him, and I feared that being "damaged goods" would affect my future relationships. Gradually, however, I came to realise that I could do it, and as the reality sank in, my disquiet lessened. Cameron was very understanding, taking my occasional "snappy Tom" moods in his stride, and patiently answering all my questions.

That evening, Mum phoned to say that she had been chosen to transport the gang up for the weekend, and that everything had fallen into place so that they could leave on Friday instead of Saturday. She expected that they would arrive at the cabin in time for lunch, and implied that she was letting us know so that we would have a chance to clean and tidy the cabin before they arrived.

'Parents!' I muttered when I got off the phone. Cameron roared with laughter when I told him what Mum had said; he reckoned his mother would have done exactly the same thing.

The prospect of the gang arriving a day early lifted my mood. I was really missing Zoë and I was looking forward to introducing Cameron to everyone.

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I almost refused to do any cleaning, on principle; my argument was that we didn't need to, because we had kept the place clean and tidy. Cameron persuaded me that it would be sensible to allow Mum to believe that she had been right, figuring that she would be impressed that we had made an effort. So, we attacked the job after breakfast, and soon had everything looking shipshape. I had to do most of the work because Cameron couldn't get around easily, but he did what he could. We were relaxing on the couch when there was a toot outside.

'They're here!' I said, and rushed out. It seemed that Zoë was as anxious to see me as I was to see her. She was the first one out of the van, and I grabbed her in a bear hug. Travis and Noriko were next, followed by Brett and Clare. Finally, Mum and Simon hopped down from the front seats.

'Man, it's good to see you guys!' After hugging each one in turn, I took them in to meet Cameron, but realised as I was making the introductions that Travis was missing.

'He just had to get something out of the van,' Mum said.

No sooner had she spoken than Travis burst through the door, in his inimitable style, carrying a pair of crutches. *What on earth?* I wondered, but he made straight for Cameron, who was standing with the others gathered around him.

'Hey, dude,' Travis said. 'We brought you a present. Mikey's mum thought you needed a bit of support!'

We all groaned, and Travis looked really pleased with himself. Cameron's face lit up. 'Wow! Thank you, Mrs. Parker.'

Travis cracked up laughing. "'Mrs. Parker'? Ha! I've never heard anyone call her that before. You'd better call her "Mum" like the rest of us do.'

Simon couldn't resist having a dig at Travis. 'Well, in your case, it's because you spend so much time at our place you forget which is your real mum!' He ducked as Travis took a swipe at him.

I stood back, smiling happily. It was good to have my friends around.

We quickly adjusted the crutches to Cameron's height and he took a test run around the room. 'Oh, man, this is cool,' he said, grinning happily.

'I'm hungry,' said Travis. 'What's for lunch, Mikey?'

'I don't know. I thought you guys were bringing it.'

'We did,' Mum said. 'It'll be ready in a few minutes.' Then, in typical Australian fashion, she and the girls moved into the kitchen to prepare lunch while the guys sat around catching up on each other's news.

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After lunch, and after making sure that Cameron was comfortable being left with the other guys, Zoë and I went for a walk. I had a lot I wanted to talk over with her. It was a while before we got around to that, however, because we kept stopping to kiss and cuddle. I don't think we'd realised just how much we had missed each other.

Eventually, we found a grassy spot beside the river and sat down. Remembering my wet clothes from the day before, I had a picnic rug that I spread on the ground first. Happy to be together again, we just sat and chatted.

Naturally, Zoë wanted to know all about Cameron and how he came to be at the cabin. I had asked Cameron earlier how I should respond if my friends asked why he was in the mountains, because I figured that would lead to questions about Daniel—and Cameron's relationship with him. He had given me permission to tell the full story if I thought it was appropriate, so I was able to tell Zoë without feeling that I was betraying a confidence. She listened attentively as I ran through Cameron's story. That led to her asking what my "retreat" had achieved. She put air quotes around the word, knowing that Cameron had gatecrashed my time alone.

I told her how I had come to believe that I needed to forgive Vincent Giambruno, and of my struggles in getting to the point where I could actually do it. I laughed at the way her eyebrows shot up when I used his name, and then had to explain how

Cameron had suggested that giving him his real name, instead of the more anonymous The Monster, might make it easier for me to forgive. She nodded. 'That makes sense.' Then she gave me one of her searching looks. Sometimes I had the feeling she could see right through me. 'So...have you done it?'

'I, um, well...'

Zoë took my face in her hands and looked me straight in the eye. She could tell I was holding back, still not quite willing to make the transition from decision to action. 'Michael David Parker!'

I steeled myself for a dressing-down, but then her expression softened.

'Michael, I can only guess how hard it must be, but I think Cameron's right—you have to do it.'

'I know. It's just...well, there's still something that makes it really, really hard. And, uh, I...need to talk to you about it.'

She let go of my face. 'Okay...'

'Oh, man, this is hard. I feel really embarrassed that I even need to mention it.'

Zoë took my hand. She spoke tenderly, 'Michael, I love you. Whatever it is, I'm not going to think any less of you.' Then, her face twisted into an evil grin and she started to tickle me. 'So, spit it out, mate!' she growled as I doubled up laughing, trying to grab her hands to stop the torment.

That broke the tension, and I was able to tell her of my fears that the rapes, and my memories of them, would ruin any future sexual relationship I might have. Not only that, in the back of my mind was another fear: that I wouldn't even be able to have a normal, loving, non-sexual relationship. 'Zoë, I feel used and spoiled. I feel like I couldn't give myself to you—or anyone else—because the fact that I've been with a man would always come between us.' *There, I've said it!*

'Oh, Michael.' Zoë's voice was full of compassion. 'That wasn't something you chose to do, and you didn't have any control over it. That guy *stole* your choice, and he *stole* your...innocence, but that doesn't mean you can't choose to give yourself to someone else. If that person loves you then she'll accept you as you are.'

I wasn't quite convinced. 'Do you accept me as I am?'

'Yes! Michael, look: if we ever get around to having sex, what happened to you won't bother me. We would be making love. What Vincent whatever-his-name-is did wasn't love. He was just satisfying his own selfish needs, and you were the person who happened to be handy. What he did will only affect you if you allow it to. A sexual relationship with someone you love and who loves you will be an entirely different thing.'

She paused and leaned her head on my shoulder. 'Michael, I love you because you're you. The...rapes...happened in the past, and they won't affect how I feel about you, okay?'

I nodded, but I must have looked a bit unsure, because Zoë gave me a passionate kiss that took my breath away. When I broke the kiss, gasping for breath, she asked,

'Convinced?' Between gasps I managed another nod. She pulled me down onto the rug and kissed me again, tenderly this time.

We lay on our backs looking up at the cotton-ball clouds above us, talking quietly. Now that the barrier had been broken, I was able to talk freely about my feelings about Vincent Giambruno and the turmoil he had caused in my life. I shared with Zoë stuff that I'd never told anyone—not even Doctor Cazelaar or Cameron. Zoë proved to be a patient and empathic listener, and whenever I came to a hurdle, she gently helped me over it. I already loved her deeply, but that afternoon I came to appreciate her all over again. In a way, she was playing the role that Cameron had a few days earlier. The big difference, however, was that Cameron had been a virtual stranger, and when I opened my heart to him I expected that he'd be gone in a couple of days and I probably would never see him again. I had an existing relationship with Zoë and I hoped that she would be around for a long time. It was embarrassing telling her about my deepest fears, but at the same time I understood that we would never survive as a couple if I wasn't completely honest and open with her. Later, I would look back on that afternoon and realise that the long talk with Zoë had been cleansing. As we made our way back to the cabin late in the afternoon, I finally knew that I had forgiven Vincent Giambruno. It was wonderfully uplifting, and for the first time in over a year I felt clean and fresh.

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When we arrived back at the cabin, we burst out laughing. Mum and the girls had turned the tables on the boys, who were busy in the kitchen cooking tea while the girls were relaxing in the living room. Cameron and Simon were peeling and slicing vegetables, Brett was making dessert, and Travis was keeping an eye on a roast in the oven while generally supervising and egging on the other three. He put me to work preparing a fruit punch, and generously allowed Zoë to join the other ladies.

Now that I was feeling happier, I was able to join in the fun. It was great to have all my closest friends and family around me; only Dad and Kellie were missing. As I listened to the banter between Travis and Cameron, I was happy that Cam was fitting in so well, and I realised that he was quickly becoming as close a friend as Travis and Brett were. Thinking about that, it dawned on me that it would have been impossible to share on as deep a level as Cameron and I had without forming a bond.

After we had eaten and the dishes were washed and put away, Mum put a disc in the DVD player and told us, 'Sit!' Puzzled, we did as we were told. My confusion turned to joy when Kellie's face appeared on the screen, introducing a thirty-minute documentary about her life in Japan. It was fascinating seeing the masses of dark-haired people in the streets and the bumper-to-bumper traffic. Kellie introduced us to her host family and showed us around their home. She took us to school where we met her friends and teachers, and on a trip into the country where it seemed that every square metre of land was under crops. She took us up one of the high-rise buildings in Shinjuku—riding in a glass lift on the outside of the building. It was amazing watching the view change as the lift travelled higher. She took us to Yoyogi Park, crowded with people on a public holiday, and showed us the Sunday street market and entertainment in the closed-off road alongside the park. We were

intrigued by the innovative ways the Japanese people had found to save space. Kellie had filmed a service station where the fuel hoses dangled from the roof, a car hire outlet where the cars were stacked in racks, a multi-storey carpark where cars were transported to the upper floors by lift, and a tiny park, complete with trees and lawn, on the roof of a department store.

Noriko became really excited. We had to keep pausing the movie while she pointed out a place she knew, or explained something that was happening. She burst into tears when Kellie surprised her by filming a visit to Noriko's family, complete with messages in Japanese from her parents and younger brothers.

After the documentary, there was a short message Kellie had recorded especially for me. She knew I had been struggling and wanted to encourage me to keep hanging on. That made me cry.

Later, Brett got out his guitar and we sang a few songs. Clare talked him into singing a couple of his own compositions. Brett had been playing the guitar for years, and he had a great voice, but I'd never known that he wrote his own songs. We sat, rapt, as he played and sang for us. The first song was a ballad about three boys and their adventures. Because he had changed the names, it was a little while before I caught on that it was about Travis, Brett and me. It caused a lot of laughs as it brought back memories of days past. There were a couple of songs with beautiful melodies and awesome words, but the one that he kept for last brought tears to everyone's eyes, because it was a haunting and moving account of my kidnapping.

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The next two days were a lot of fun. We took a drive up to Bennison Lookout, further up Tamboritha Road, and enjoyed the view down the valley and across the ranges. Noriko was overawed at the huge expanse of mountains and bush, almost completely empty of signs of human activity. We took walks, exploring the area around the cabin. Cameron, newly-mobile on his crutches, really enjoyed getting out and about. I felt guilty, because it hadn't occurred to me that he might have been feeling a bit cooped up. When I apologised for leaving him inside so much, he said, 'What were you going to do? Carry me?' He had a point, and I didn't feel so bad after that. Travis kept us laughing with his antics, with Noriko adding to the fun by playing the straight guy to his comic routine. We were going to miss her when she returned to Japan, but, as Clare pointed out, we would have the Internet and webcams to keep us in touch. I would miss Cameron, too, but he would only be a couple of hours' drive away.

Eventually, late on Sunday afternoon, we packed the van, cleaned and closed up the cabin, and climbed into our seats for the trip home to Sale.

Mum started the engine, put the van into gear and started down the road. I gazed out the window, watching the trees drift by. I was lost in thought, marvelling at how much had changed in a little over a week. The day Mum had driven me up to the cabin, I'd been anxious and fearful, desperate to get the demon off my back. Since then I'd met a new friend, heard an amazing story of pain and forgiveness, and discovered that my demon was actually a real person with a real name, and with demons of his own. Inspired and encouraged by Cameron, I'd managed to forgive

Vincent John Giambruno. With Zoë's understanding and help, I'd even managed to let go of the remaining hurt and the sense of violation I had been feeling.

Zoë rested her head on my shoulder and slipped her hand into mine. I turned and kissed her. I was whole again, and my world was back to normal. I sighed happily and settled back, smiling, to enjoy the journey home.