

Raven's heart jumped. She felt her face flame. Her eyes were glued to the felt hat and black coat worn by a man walking in the opposite direction. The footpath was crowded and Raven, standing still, was jostled in the seething flow of people rushing for trains or buses and the warmth of their homes.

Someone's bag knocked her leg, snapping her out of her shocked paralysis. She stood on tip-toe, dodging left then right.

A hand grabbed her arm.

Raven flinched.

Sarah's mouth was moving, but Raven couldn't hear what her friend was saying. It was just noise. Raven pulled her arm free and plunged into the crowd, her heart beating hard and painfully.

In just a few seconds, scarcely long enough to gather her thoughts, the man had disappeared. She couldn't see him along the footpath nor on the pedestrian crossing.

Frantically she cut across the stream of people and headed toward the shop entrances nearest to the last spot she had seen him.

*Florist?* she wondered, and looked through the front window.

Inside was only a tired-looking woman scraping thorns from rose stems with wide metal tweezers.

Raven moved to the men's clothing store next door, put her hands to the glass and peered in.

*There he is!*

He was stroking ties on a rack as though the feel of them was more important than the colour or price.

Raven wrenched open the door and a blast of over-warm air from a heater escaped into the cold afternoon. The salesman looked surprised. Raven's back, under her maroon blazer and backpack, was damp with perspiration. She marched past racks of suits and jackets to the man in the familiar hat and coat and tapped his shoulder.

He spun around.

'Oh ... I ... I ...' Raven's stuttering never made it into a complete sentence.

This man's face was all wrong. His moustache was as lush and tended as a prize garden. A protruding forehead sheltered deep-set grey eyes and his chin was rough with stubble. He looked confused.

It broke her heart. Raven felt it splinter into little pieces and fall ever so silently onto the carpeted floor.

The salesman frowned, perturbed that the elegant quietness of his store had been interrupted by an overexcited girl in a school uniform. 'May I help you, miss?'

Raven swallowed the sick taste that came up into her throat. 'I wish you could.'

She turned away, not wanting them to see how much it hurt that the familiar hat had been shielding a face she had never seen. The coat protecting a body she had never hugged.

Disappointed, embarrassed, she hurried to the door. As she pulled it open, cold air slapped her face.

'Wait!' called a voice from behind her. It must be the stranger in the hat. His tone, warm and sincere, was different to that of the salesman's.

'Sorry,' called Raven over her shoulder as she shot through the door. 'I thought you were someone else.'

She blended back into the crowd, hoping people would think it was the cold winter wind that was making her eyes water.

## Chapter Two

Raven looked across the table at Sarah, who gripped her hot mint chocolate with both hands. Her fingerless gloves made her fingers look like pink sausages poking out of white bread.

Sarah's looks were the exact opposite of Raven's; golden blonde compared to Raven's black hair, her eyebrows plucked thin while Raven left hers thick and naturally arched. Sarah's eyes were hazel. Raven's were brown.

In the background, the buzz of conversation and the grind of the coffee machine played with Raven's head. The sounds were so ordinary, comforting; not like the conflicting emotions that were attacking her.

Sarah looked concerned. 'Are you feeling better now? I thought you were going to faint or something.'

Raven nodded. For a moment there, she hadn't been sure herself.

'Drink some more hot chocolate.' Sarah followed her own suggestion. 'You're supposed to have something sweet when you've had a shock.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. My mum thinks chocolate is the answer to everything.' Sarah looked at her hot drink. 'Maybe she's onto something.'

Raven smiled. Her dad often said her smile could light up a room; and with good reason. Her orthodontist had probably bought a yacht with the money he had earned making her teeth look perfect.

'Teeth are the first thing people notice.' Raven heard her mum's familiar words in her head as clearly as if she were sitting beside her. Appearances were important to Mum. But there were other special things to look for when you first met someone, like kindness or a sense of humour. To Mum, qualities like those were small change on the stock exchange of human value.

Guilt nudged Raven. Her mum wasn't *unkind* and she *could* laugh. She used to laugh. Before. Maybe she would again. If Dad came back. Raven corrected herself; *when* Dad came back.

Sarah touched Raven's hand. 'I'm so sorry. I wish it *had* been your dad.'

'That coat and hat, I can't stop thinking about them. They were just like Dad's. I've seen him wear them a *million* times.'

'There are probably stacks of coats like that.'

'It wasn't new. There was a mark on the coat's collar and sheen on the fabric that you only get from wear,' continued Raven, deep in thought. 'And don't you think the chance of someone picking *exactly* the same combination of hat and coat as Dad's is kind of small?'

'Maybe.' Sarah tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. 'I wore the same outfit as Rochelle to Klaudia's party and I had to go home and change.'

'But wouldn't you have been surprised if you'd rocked up with the same dress *and* hat as Rochelle?'

'Totally. I don't wear hats.' Sarah rolled her eyes. 'But I was surprised to start with. Anyone as big as Rochelle should *never* wear that style. Girl obviously doesn't own a mirror.'

Sarah was a loyal friend. But sometimes she drifted off the topic.

Raven leaned forward. 'There was something ... I don't know, an *atmosphere* in that store.'

'Maybe the poor guy isn't used to strange girls attacking him.'

'I didn't *attack* him,' protested Raven. Although it wasn't that much of an exaggeration. No wonder the man had looked confused and surprised.

Her mood sank even lower. If she couldn't convince Sarah, who still liked the idea of a tooth fairy, then it might be impossible to convince *anyone* the coat and hat meant something.

And maybe it didn't.

Four days, and not a word from Dad.

Just a big silence that was rapidly filling up with fears.

Raven looked out through the wide café window. The city was still in peak-hour madness. A bus pulled up with a squeal of brakes. The line of commuters began to snake up the steps and inside. She ran her eye along the queue, then back again, stopping at a man who was about to board. He turned his head and Raven had a clear view of his lush moustache.

'Sarah!' She grabbed her friend's wrist. '*There he is.*'

Sarah jumped. 'Who?'

'The man from the store. In the bus queue. Third from the front.'

'You're not obsessing, are you?'

'Totally.' Raven stood up. 'But that doesn't mean I'm wrong.'

'But he's not wearing a coat *or* a hat.'

'I know, so it's a clue. Don't you see?' Raven willed her to understand. 'It wasn't *his* coat and hat. Where are they?'

The queue shuffled forward and the man was about to board.

Raven snatched up her smartphone from the table and tapped the camera icon. One, two shots of the man, then she took another of the bus. Too quickly, the doors closed and the driver steered the bus from the kerb.

Her only clue had vanished, as surely as her father