

1 ON SUNDAY NIGHT somebody broke into Flinders Secondary School. Because it rained that night, most of the neighbours were inside their houses. So nobody saw the vandal strike.

Besides the smashed glass on the back door, the only damage was to the art room. But there the vandal had attacked with fury.

The news of the destruction spread quickly the next morning. By the time the first art class met at midmorning, most of the students had already heard.

Michelle Dennis was one of those students in the class. As she stepped through the art room door, she gasped. She had been prepared for a mess. But this riot of smashed glass, spilt paint and spattered floors shocked her.

And the artwork! She bent down and picked up her painting. 'My seascape is ruined,' she moaned. 'Look at that red paint smeared all over it. And I worked for hours to get just the right shade of blue for the water!'

Richard Collier, a tall, handsome boy with warm brown eyes, came over to look at her painting. He and Michelle had gone out many times.

Richard held up his own painting of a clown. Someone had driven a knife right into it, ripping a great gash in the middle. 'I really liked this picture,' Richard said sadly.

'You'll paint another one just as good,' Michelle said to cheer Richard up.

Michelle thought that a new boy like Damon must really feel lost. Maybe that's why he'd acted so weird in art class. He was probably just trying to get people to notice him.

Michelle forced a smile on her face. 'I suppose we are kind of snobby here.'

'It was the same at my last school. Nobody would be friends with me there either,' Damon complained.

'Well, maybe it'll be different at Flinders. Why don't you join some clubs?'

'They wouldn't want me,' Damon said. 'I hate this school already. The kids are stuck-up and the teachers are lousy. Like this guy, Sevier.'

'Mr Sevier's probably the best teacher at Flinders. Just give him a chance. You'll get to like him, too.'

Damon sneered. 'Yeah, yeah. Well, I know why you like him.'

Michelle stared back at him, puzzled. 'Why's that?'

'Because you think he's handsome. All you girls are the same. You only like the pretty boys. That's why girls never look at me twice. They think I'm ugly.' He seemed really bitter.

Michelle carefully studied him. Damon wasn't a male model or anything like that. But he could be pleasant looking.

'Lighten up on yourself, Damon,' she said. 'You look nice.'

'Yeah?' He almost smiled. 'Hey, know what? You called me Damon. In the last school the girls called me Eastman or Rat-Face. When they called me anything at all. None of them ever thought I was good enough to be called by my first name. But you do.'

Michelle returned a weak smile. She was beginning to be uneasy about talking to Damon. Was she making a mistake trying to be nice to this troubled boy? Damon seemed to have a weird attitude, thinking everyone was against him.

Yet Michelle felt sorry for Damon. While one part of her was wary, another part wanted to reach out to Damon because he was so sad and lonely.

'You know, I like the way you say my name. I like it a lot,' he said.

Then she heard it again. It sounded like a pebble hitting her window.

Michelle got out of bed and went to the window. It was raining outside. Glistening sheets of rain swayed in the wet darkness like a veil.

And then on the footpath, beyond the hedge, Michelle saw a figure. She caught her breath and stared at the blurred shape. All she could make out was the outline of a slight person in a raincoat. As she looked more intently, the figure seemed to merge with the hedge.

Had there been anybody there at all?

A car passed, sweeping the footpath with its headlights. No one. If there had been somebody there, he had gone now. Michelle breathed deeply.

It had looked like Damon—even stood like him. Was he out there in the rain at midnight, throwing pebbles at her window?

No, Michelle told herself. It was just her imagination.

She forced herself to go back to bed. But she couldn't relax. She lay there and stared at the window.

Five minutes later, it came again. The sound of a pebble hitting the window and bouncing off.

'No!' Michelle cried out softly.

Another pebble. Michelle jumped out of bed and crept to the window. This time she didn't see anyone there.

Maybe it was a bird on the roof. Or maybe there was some hail mixed in with the rain.

Michelle went back to bed and crawled down under the blankets. She refused to listen anymore.

But the sound of the rain, as it beat down harder, whispered to her in her sleep. *Damon, Damon.*

4 'I'M LATE GETTING home,' she finally said. 'What do you want?'

'Hey, don't look at me like that. As I said, we're friends, remember? I just wanted to talk to you. I got a surprise for you.'

'A surprise? You mean the ute?'

He grinned and shook his head. 'Nah. Not that old bomb. I borrowed it from my uncle. No, it's this.' He opened the door of the ute and took out a beautiful box of chocolates. 'Here. Happy birthday.'

Michelle stared at the box. 'But it's not my birthday.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'So it's a late birthday gift.'

'Look, Damon, I can't accept this—' she started to say.

'But I want you to have it,' he said.

Michelle looked at him—at his lonely eyes, his thin face. 'I just wish you hadn't spent your money on me.'

'Why not spend my money on you?' His smile faded. 'But then I suppose something from me doesn't mean much, huh? I bet if Sevier gave you a gift, you'd love it.'

'Come on, Damon. Don't be ridiculous.'

'You don't fool me. I see the way you look at him in class. Why does an old man like that turn you on?'

Michelle stared angrily at Damon. 'Don't be stupid. I like Mr Sevier, but I like him as a teacher.' She pushed the box of chocolates at him. 'I think you'd better take this back.'

Damon backed away and shook his head. 'No. I told you, it's yours.'

Michelle gripped the steering wheel until her hands ached. Wild thoughts went through her head, like crashing the ute into a lamp post. But she could kill them both if she tried that. And if she couldn't slip away from Damon, what would he do to her then?

Better wait until they stopped. If Damon's uncle were home, surely he would help her.

'Turn here,' Damon told her again.

Michelle did as he ordered. Soon they reached a stretch of decaying buildings. A few shop lights brightened the late afternoon. But most of the shops were boarded up. There were rusty cars and heaps of rubbish everywhere.

'Not so nice in my part of town, huh?' Damon said.

'No, it's not. But you don't have to live here forever,' Michelle said.

'Yeah? What kind of fairytale world do you live in, Michelle? Maybe creeps like Richard Collier get richer and fatter. But not me. Nothing ever gets better for people like me. My uncle says you're born in a ditch, you stay in a ditch. What do you care anyway?'

Michelle glanced at him. The cold knife blade gleamed in the fading sunlight. 'Damon, please put that knife away. You don't want to hurt anybody.'

'Maybe I do,' he said bitterly. 'I hurt inside. I hurt a lot. When I try to talk to people and they turn away, I hurt. Every time I ask a girl out and she looks like she's going to spit, it tears me up inside. Why should I be the only one hurting? Maybe some other people should hurt, too.'

They drove on in silence until Damon suddenly pointed to an alley. 'Down there,' he said.

Michelle stopped in front of an old two-storey concrete building. There was a single garage downstairs. Upstairs seemed to be a flat.

Michelle expected he'd have her drive inside the garage. But Damon said, 'Park it here. Now get out.'

As Michelle climbed out of the ute, she desperately looked around for help. In the distance she heard a radio playing music. A woman with a lovely voice was singing along. But she seemed to be