

**1** IT WAS A chilly April afternoon. The sky was pencil-lead grey and a stiff north wind scattered leaves through the air like confetti. The five students waiting outside Oak Ridge High School huddled against the building.

‘Where is that Lloyd?’ Connie Russell grumbled. ‘He knows we’re leaving at three o’clock. It’s freezing out here’.

‘Here, sweets’. Ramon Tonelli, Connie’s boyfriend, took the scarf off his neck and wound it around her head. His dark eyes twinkled. ‘There you go, Connie. Now you’re ready for Halloween—the mummy!’

Connie smiled at Ramon. He was so nice to her. They had met at the district art show a month ago and had been going out ever since.

‘I’d rather be home drinking hot chocolate’, Connie admitted. ‘It’s times like these when I don’t know if being an Acorn is worth it’.

'Oh, come on. You won't say that after your ears thaw out', Ramon assured her.

Connie smiled again. Ramon was right. She actually loved being an Acorn. The Acorns were six students with special interests. Some, like Ramon and Connie, liked art. Others were interested in maths, science, journalism, music or the theatre. The Acorns got to go on field trips and attend special events. Most of these were scheduled for after school or weekends. So any Acorn, no matter what his or her interest, could attend any field trip or special event. Last year, they had all gone to Canberra. They'd even had lunch with a senator.

'I'm not cold', Mimi Corwin announced. She looked down her thin nose at Connie. 'Some people just like to complain'.

'Girl, the only reason you're not cold is 'cause you're already an ice cube'. Alissa Jackson tossed her head of thick black braids and winked at Connie.

Alissa was Connie's best friend. She was short and plump, with ginger-brown skin and big dark eyes. She was also edi-

tor of *The Oak Tree*, the school's newspaper. Alissa had a way with words and her favourite subject was Mimi. No one liked Mimi Corwin very much. Connie tried to be nice to her, but Mimi was usually as sour as a lemon, especially to Connie.

Mimi's special interest was science, more specifically environmental biology. The year before, both Mimi and Connie had competed in the school's annual essay contest. Mimi had written an impassioned plea for saving the tropical rainforests. Connie's paper was about teen drug abuse. Mimi's paper won second place and Connie's came in first.

But an angry Mimi filed a protest with the judges. She claimed Connie had plagiarised a newspaper article. The judges didn't agree. They awarded Connie the prize—a voucher for five hundred dollars. Mimi had been furious. Now she stood glaring at Alissa.

'I don't know why you're even coming on this trip', she said. 'You don't have any interest in endangered species'.

'News is news', Alissa grinned. 'I'm

going to write an article about this trip for *The Oak Tree*. Besides, I just lo-o-ove spending time with *you*, Mimi’.

The other students laughed. Mimi frowned and turned her back on the group.

Just then, the van pulled up to the kerb. Marcy Dodd, the science teacher and Acorn advisor, came scurrying out of the building. With her ruffled hair and round glasses, she looked like a worried owl.

‘Come on, people’, she ordered, clapping her hands. ‘Let’s load up. Dr Calhoun is expecting us’.

The group lined up and climbed aboard the van. Lloyd Martin, the driver, sat behind the wheel. Ms Dodd stood next to him and checked her list.

‘Is everyone here?’ she asked. ‘Connie? Ramon? Mimi? Alissa? George?’

George Quinn waved his arms in the air, nearly falling out of his seat. ‘I’m here! I’m here, Ms Dodd!’

Everyone laughed. George was the Acorns’ clown, always ready with a joke