

Meeting the Robinsons

My name is Toby Mann. My family is either dead or gone. Today my caseworker Frank is driving me to a new home. I'm going to live with strangers because some social workers said I couldn't live by myself. Jim and Jess Robinson are going to be my foster parents.

'Are you okay, Toby?' Frank asks. He looks over at me and smiles. 'The Robinsons are nice people. They're really happy that you're going to live with them. Our social work team have chosen a special family for you.' Caseworkers are always very *nice*.

I don't reply. The Robinsons are happy? I'm not. Why do these people want me? They don't know me. I've been moved from place to place around Wollongong since Granny Mann died. Some foster parents only take children for a short time while the social workers find a family that wants a child for a long time. No one wants a sixteen-year-old boy.

Frank says, 'We're nearly there.'

I stop staring at my feet and look out of the car window. It's summer and the sun's shining. The houses we drive past are big, with tall fences or walls and gardens full of trees. My home with Granny Mann was in a small flat in Port Kembla, near the harbour. There weren't many gardens and trees back there.

Frank parks the car in front of a white wooden fence. Behind the fence is a large house. It's white too, with a big red front door. There are red, white and pink roses on either side of the path that leads from the gate up to the front door.

'Come on,' says Frank. He opens his door. 'Do you need help with your bags?'

I don't want to get out and I don't want to meet the Robinsons, who own this big white house in Mount Keira. I

want things to go back to the way they were when my big brother Barney and I lived with our Grandad and Granny Mann. Before Barney ran away and Grandad died. Before Granny Mann died last year and left me alone. Just before she died Granny said, 'Please try to find Barney. He'll be your only family soon.' She'd tried to get Barney to come home but he didn't. It made her sad.

Frank is out of the car now. He opens my door. 'Out you get, please, Toby.'

I climb out, dragging my two bags with me. I have a few clothes and my schoolbooks from last year at Port Kembla High. It's hot outside. Frank leads the way through the gate to the front door. It opens and a man and a woman appear. They are both smiling at us. These are my foster parents.

Jim Robinson is taller than Frank, who's short and fat. Jim has short brown hair and blue eyes behind his glasses. Jess Robinson is shorter than her husband, with brown hair too, and big brown eyes. Jim is wearing grey shorts and a blue T-shirt; Jess is in a blue dress with white dots.

Jim shakes Frank's hand then reaches his hand out to me. I have to shake it. It's warm and dry.

'Hi, Toby,' he says. 'We're really pleased that the social workers chose us to be your foster parents.'

Jess walks forward and puts her arms round me. 'Hello, Toby. I hope you'll be very happy with us.'

I stand still and say nothing. She lets me go. Her eyes are sad. I don't want to be unkind, so I say, 'Hi. Nice to meet you.' It isn't really. I stare at the roses. I don't want anyone to see the tears in my eyes.

'Come in,' Jim says.

We go inside. This is where I'm going to live. We're in a large living room. Jess points to the staircase at one end of the room. 'The bedrooms are upstairs. We'll show you your room later. Leave your bags here for now. Are you hungry? Let's go into



the kitchen.' She talks on and on, but I don't listen. I'm too busy looking at things. Everything is big. And clean. There are pictures on the walls and thick rugs on the wooden floors. The Robinsons must be rich.

'Toby,' Frank calls.

I put down my bags and follow everyone into the kitchen. Big windows look out to the garden behind the house. There's a swimming pool behind a high fence. I'm certain now: the Robinsons are rich.

'Tea or coffee, Toby?' Jess asks.

I turn and look at her. 'Tea, please.' Some cups and plates with roses on them are on a large table. A cake sits on a plate. I remember Granny Mann's old table and the old cups we drank out of.

Jim points at the chair beside him and smiles. 'Sit, Toby.'

I sit down.

Jess says, 'I made this chocolate cake for you. I hope you like it.'

Granny Mann made me a special chocolate cake every birthday. I try to smile but I want to cry.

Frank says, 'Toby!'

'Thank you,' I say to Jess.

She cuts me a large piece of cake. I'm not hungry but I bite into it. It's good so I eat it all.

They all smile at my empty plate. I have to say something; they're all watching me. 'That was good.'

I drink my tea and eat another piece of cake while the adults talk.

Jess says to me, 'If you go upstairs, you'll find your bedroom. It's the room with the door open.'

Jim says, 'You have your own bathroom too.'

In Granny Mann's flat there were two bedrooms – Barney and I slept in one when he lived with us – and one bathroom.

I go back to the living room, pick up my bags and climb the

stairs. On the wall going up the stairs there are photos. Some are of the Robinsons at the beach, and on a boat. Do they have a boat too? Then there are photos of another man and woman, and of children with red hair. Who are they? Frank said the Robinsons don't have any children. He also said I'm their first foster child. I stare at the faces in the photos. Everyone's smiling.

At the top of the stairs I see four doors. Three are closed, so I walk towards the open one. The bedroom is large with big windows. The bed has a blue and white cover, and there are dark blue rugs on the wooden floor. There's a cupboard, and a desk under the window with lots of books on it. I look outside. I'm looking down at the swimming pool.

The bathroom is through another door in my room. It's blue and white too. I turn on a tap and wash my hands with nice soap. The water's hot.

What am I doing here? This is a rich kid's house.

I walk slowly back down the stairs to the kitchen. I'm almost at the door when I hear Jim say, 'He's tall but he looks too thin, Frank.'

I stop and listen.

Frank says, 'He hasn't been eating much. His grandmother was sick for months and there wasn't much money for food. He misses her too.'

'Poor kid,' says Jim.

It's quiet for a moment, then Jess says, 'He's quite dirty, Frank. Those old clothes! And that long hair!'

Frank says, 'Toby had to wash in cold water because there was no money for hot water. So he didn't wash very often.'

'Oh dear, are we doing the right thing, Frank?' Jess asks. 'Will we be able to look after a kid like him?'

Jim says, 'He needs a lot. Are we really the right people to help him?'

‘Of course you are,’ says Frank. ‘Toby’s a good kid, and clever. Give him time. He needs a family.’

I turn away from the kitchen. *Dirty! Old clothes!* I march up the stairs. I want to pull the happy photos off the wall. I close the bedroom door and sit on the clean bed in my dirty clothes and put my dirty shoes on the cover. The Robinsons don’t understand kids like me. I want Barney very badly. I have to find my big brother. Soon.

At dinner that night Jess and Jim talk about themselves. Jess is a writer; Jim teaches music and plays the violin in an orchestra. They ask me about myself. My replies are short. I’m angry with Jess. Her words about my hair and clothes were unkind.

After dinner Jim says, ‘Washing the dishes will be one of your jobs here, Toby. Can you fill the dishwasher now, please?’

Dishwasher? Granny Mann washed her dishes herself and I dried them. I take the plates and put them in the dishwasher.

Jim shows me how it works. Jobs are okay. When Granny Mann was sick I did everything at home. I cooked (opened cans), cleaned (a bit) and washed clothes (sometimes). And I washed the dishes.

I turn on the dishwasher, then ask, ‘May I go to my room now?’

Jess says, ‘Of course. It’s been a long day for you.’

They smile at me. Jim says, ‘Everything will be okay, Toby.’

Will it? I say goodnight then climb the stairs to my room. Jim begins to play his violin downstairs. The sound is sweet. He must be good to play in an orchestra. I fall asleep on the bed with my clothes on.

When I wake in the morning my shoes are off and I’m covered by a rug. Who did that? I don’t need them to look after me.

I have to find Barney. He’s the only real family I have now.

At the beach

Days go by. Jess and Jim are at home a lot, so that we can all get used to each other. We eat together, and I do the jobs Jess and Jim give me. Jim has three old cars that he keeps in a garage next to the house. I help him to clean them. He has a dark blue Mercedes, a black Bentley and a red Jaguar. They're from the 1970s. The Jaguar is my favourite.

I swim in the pool and read the books that Jim and Jess had in my room. I like stories set in other places and books that make me laugh.

Jim tells me I must wash every day, and I do. I use a lot of hot water. It's nice to be clean. Jess takes me to the shops and buys me shorts, T-shirts and other clothes. Jim gives me a computer and an old mobile phone. But I don't have anyone to call. Yet.

It's almost the end of the summer holidays. I'm starting at a new school, North Wollongong High. It's closer to the Robinsons' than my old school. I'm not happy about changing schools but Jess tells me it's not a rich kids' school.

One hot Saturday morning Jess says, 'We thought we could go to North Wollongong Beach today. Okay?'

'Okay,' I say. I used to surf before Grandma got sick. I sold my surfboard when we needed the money.

'My brother Pete and his wife Denise and their kids are going to meet us there,' Jess continues. 'We'll have a picnic.'

I want to go to the beach but I really don't want to meet other people. When we're in Jim's Mercedes on the way to the beach I ask, 'How old are the kids?'

Jim says, 'Zed's sixteen and Jade's fifteen. You'll like them. They're nice kids.'

I hope they are.

We reach the beach and park the car. When I see the blue-green water and the white waves, I'm happy for a minute. I wish Barney was here. He loves surfing too. Or he used to.

I carry the picnic basket. It's heavy. Jess made sandwiches and an orange cake. There are cans of soft drink too.

Jess waves and points to some people sitting on the beach. 'There they are!'

When we get close to them Jess says, 'Everyone, this is Toby.'

They all stare at me and smile, and say, 'Hi, Toby.'

I put the picnic basket down and say, 'Hi.'

Jess tells me their names. 'This is my brother Pete, and his wife Denise ...'

Pete Fraser has a face like his sister Jess's but he's older than she is. His hair is white. Denise Fraser has a round face, blue eyes and grey hair.

'... and this is Zed, and Jade.'

The boy and girl are the ones with red hair in the photos at the Robinsons' house. Jade is pretty.

There are three surfboards on the sand.

Zed says, 'Do you surf, Toby? We brought a surfboard for you.'

'Yeah,' I say.

'Let's go, then,' says Jade. 'The waves are perfect.'

We take our boards down the sand to the water.

I fall off the board at first but soon I'm standing. When I catch the perfect wave, I shout as I ride it to the beach. I remember how much I love surfing. It feels so good.

Later, the three of us lie on the sand a few meters away from the adults. I close my eyes and listen to the waves.

'Are you kids ready for the picnic?' Jess calls.

Of course we are. We go and get sandwiches and cake and soft drinks.

I say to Jade, 'You surf really well.'



'Pete and Denise taught us to swim when we were very young,' says Jade. 'Pete surfs all year so he taught us to surf too.'

'Really?' I say. I learned to swim at school classes and Barney taught me to surf. I ask her, 'Why do you call your parents Pete and Denise, not Mum and Dad?'

'Oh, didn't you know?' Jade says. 'They aren't our birth parents. We're foster kids too.'

My face goes red. 'I didn't know.'

'It's okay,' Zed says. 'We've lived with Pete and Denise for about ten years.'

'We still see our mum,' Jade says, 'but she's not well, so she can't look after us. And our dad's dead.'

'I'm sorry,' I say. I tell Zed and Jade my story. 'I've never met my father and I don't see my mum, Willow. She wanted to live in India so she left my brother Barney and me with our grandparents. But they're both dead now.'

'Wow!' says Jade. 'And your mum didn't come back?'

I shake my head.

'What about Barney?' Zed asks.


'He ran away when he was fourteen. He used to come back to see Granny Mann but I haven't seen him for almost two years.'

Jade puts her hand on my back. 'That's sad.'

'Yes, but I'm going to find him and then I'll live with him. I don't want to be a foster kid.'

This is the German version of **Big Brother Barney**

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