

THE BLAKE MYSTERIES

3

One Way Street

JENNY PAUSACKER

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ONE WAY STREET

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For Nancy and Hugo, the Sunday team, with thanks for the emergency typing, and Ben and Mark who checked the Net talk.

CHAPTER ONE

Blake was wandering round a big, open-air market. Stalls heaped with glossy black eggplants and Roma tomatoes. Pyramids of plump oranges and polished green apples.

She flicked through a pile of second-hand books, their yellow pages smelling of musty cupboards. Pushed a rack of white shirts and watched them swing to and fro, like dancing ghosts.

Feels good to be back in the city. Maybe things are starting to go right, for a change.

A smiling man with a big moustache gave her a free sample of Turkish delight. A Vietnamese baby waved at her over its mother's shoulder. Blake waved back and went to stand on the corner in the sunshine, eating the sticky pink sweet. As she licked powdered sugar off her fingers, she realised she was staring at a sign saying 'Market Terrace'.

The exact place I was looking for. It's my lucky day, for sure.

Actually, she'd had a run of good luck lately. For starters, she'd shaken the pair of private detectives who'd been on her trail. She had enough money in her wallet to last her for at least a month. And she had some new information about her mother.

Blake had spent the past six months searching. She'd written down everything her mother had ever said to her - but that didn't help. She'd gone back to the last place where they'd lived and talked to some of her mother's friends - but they couldn't help either.

And while she was trying to find her mother, the detectives, Greg and Thumper, were trying to find her. They'd had better luck than Blake, though. They had broken into

the house she was renting and she had only just managed to escape. After that she'd gone on the run, heading for Sunnyport, the seaside town where her mother had grown up.

And now I know heaps more than I did before. Too much, really. I'm still taking it in. I can't believe how lucky I've been.

Afterwards Blake decided that was her first mistake. It's not smart to boast about being lucky. She should've touched wood straight away or crossed her fingers. Spat at a black cat walking under a ladder. Or whatever.

But she didn't. She just crossed the road and stopped to buy a newspaper from an old man in a wheelchair. Told him to keep the change. Slid her wallet back into the inside pocket of her denim jacket and hesitated for a moment on the corner. A small sturdy kid with hair like winter sunshine, looking up at a sign that said 'One Way Street'.

Market Terrace was a narrow laneway, tucked between two crossroads. One of those tiny back streets you can find in any big city. There were a couple of office blocks, about fifteen storeys high - old buildings with ledges for the pigeons, not glass skyscrapers. A ski shop, a shop selling science fiction comics and half a dozen cafes.

Including an Internet cafe, if the guy at the State Library was right.

Halfway down the street, Blake's luck ran out. One minute she was strolling along, reading the names on the cafes. Next minute she was staggering into the gutter. A pair of long thin hands with shiny black nails shot out and hauled her back onto the footpath. Blake looked up. And up. And up.

Oh wow. That's the tallest woman I've seen all day.

Her jet black hair was teased into a spiky halo. She was wearing black leggings and a tight black t-shirt. A silver chain around her neck, with a silver bat dangling from it. Black lipstick. White make-up. Heavy black lines around her green eyes. And a name tag pinned to her t-shirt that said, 'Morticia'.

'Sorry,' she said, sounding the opposite of sorry. 'I didn't mean to bump into you, kid. But it was his fault, really. So don't blame me. Blame him.'

His fault? Who's she talking about?

Morticia straightened the lapels of Blake's denim jacket. Looked her up and down, checking for bruises, and then went storming off. A man in a business suit flattened himself against the wall and the newspaper guy wheeled his chair backwards, to get out of her way. She flounced round the corner and disappeared.

Blake tugged at her jacket. *Hope there aren't too many people like Morticia in Market Terrace.* She glanced around cautiously and spotted a sign on a nearby building. It was a bit hard to read, because the letters were bright green slashes, like the numbers on a

digital clock. But it seemed to be saying something about computer courses.

Sounds like what I'm looking for. I'll give it a try.

She pushed the door open and walked into the foyer. As she headed for the desk, a small man with an armful of papers came scurrying toward her. Blake dodged to the left and so did he. She moved to the right but the man moved with her. Then they both took a step forward and banged into each other, scattering papers across the floor.

'Sorry,' they said in unison and started to laugh. Blake bent to pick up the papers but at the same moment the guy tried to pat her shoulder. His elbow got caught in her jacket, dragging her sideways. She lost her balance and crashed to the floor.

Oh no. Not again.

The little guy blinked down at her from behind his thick glasses. His mouse-coloured hair was rumpled and his hands were clasped behind his back, like a kid waiting to be ticked off. Blake sighed. *Impossible to get mad at a guy who's such a complete nerd.*

She sat up and reached for the scattered sheets of paper. As she stacked them together, she read a few lines here and there. Lines of jumbled up letters and numbers that didn't seem to make any sense.

'Hey,' she said, 'is this a computer program? You wouldn't happen to work at the Internet cafe, by any chance?'

The guy blinked even harder. 'Me? Oh no. The cafe's on the other side of the street. I work for Carstairs' Computer Courses and Consultancy - CCCC, for short. If you ever need any help with computer programming, just come to the second floor and ask for Terrence.'

He held out his hand but Blake pretended she hadn't seen it. *No way. He'd probably send me flying head first into the desk, while he was trying to help me up.* She scrambled to her feet and gave Terrence his papers. Then she scuttled out into the street, heaving a sigh of relief when no-one else tried to knock her down.

The cafe over the road was called A Byte to Eat. Blake peered through the window. There was a bunch of people, crowded together on a couch, and a row of kids, sitting on high-backed stools at the counter. Just like any other cafe in the street.

She started to frown and then grinned instead. *Hang on, I get it. 'Byte,' not 'bite.'* *That's computer language. Looks like I've come to the right place, after all.*

She opened the door and marched in. The people on the couch were crowded round an old computer, with spiky green text scrolling down its screen. Blake propped herself against the couch and read a couple of lines.

<rachy> hi ail :—)

<jay> hi rachy

<jay> hi blue

<blue> what's up? isn't anyone chatting?

HELLOO!

It didn't seem like the sort of thing she was looking for, so she shrugged and moved on. Seconds later she was snapping her fingers and whispering, 'Yes!' Because the kids on the stools were sitting in front of glass windows, set into the counter. And under each window there was a state of the art computer screen.

The nearest stool was empty. Blake whisked off her jacket and hung it over the back of the stool, to make sure no-one else took the spot. She peered through the glass. Saw purple words shimmering on a bright blue background.

JOSH BATHWATER WELCOMES YOU TO A BYTE TO EAT.

So far, so good. But what am I supposed to do next?

She looked around for help. On the next stool two young guys were jammed together - one drop-dead gorgeous, the other a small, skinny nerd. Next to them a girl in lycra bike shorts was typing furiously. And at the far end of the row a guy in a suit bent over his screen, chuckling to himself.

Blake edged towards the two young guys and cleared her throat. But they were concentrating so hard that they didn't even notice her, so she kept edging on. As she paused between the lycra girl and the suit, she spotted a guy behind the counter. He was tall - even taller than Morticia. Pale and thin, with baggy clothes and a wispy brown beard. And a name tag pinned to his shirt that said, 'Josh Bathwater'.

She leaned across the counter and yelled, 'Hey! Mr Bathwater!' The tall guy spun round and came loping towards her.

'No, no, no. Not Mr Bathwater. Call me Josh, please. Now, what can I do for you?'

Blake hesitated. 'I, um, want to log onto the Internet and check some information. But -'

Josh Bathwater beamed at her. 'You're new to this, aren't you? Don't worry, I'll show you where to start. That's what I'm here for.'

'Great,' she said with a sigh of relief. 'But first, could you tell me how much this is going to cost?'

'Nothing. You just pay for your coffee - or your hamburger - or whatever.'

'Hey, cool. I'll have a hot chocolate and some advice, please, Josh.'

She watched him gallop off to the kitchen. When she turned, the lycra girl and the two young guys had disappeared. *So I didn't need to save a stool for myself, after all.* She pulled on her jacket and studied the keyboard next to the screen, until Josh came speeding back.

'Your chocolate, madam,' he said, pushing the cup across the counter.

Blake reached for her wallet. Her hand dived into the inside pocket of her jacket and

came out empty. So she checked the outside pockets as well. Took off her jacket and shook it. Patted the pockets of her jeans.

Looked up at Josh Bathwater and said in a shaky voice, 'Sorry, I think I just lost all my money.'

CHAPTER TWO

Blake clutched the counter, trying not to panic. *Okay, that was my second mistake. I shouldn't have brought all my money with me. Should've left most of it in my backpack. But how was I supposed to guess this would happen?*

Everything had been going so well. She'd arrived in town that morning. Parked her motorbike at the garage of a truckie she'd met at a pit-stop on the road. Gone to the Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages. Checked the Register of Voters at the State Library and then headed across to the Internet cafe near the market for the next piece of information she needed.

It should've been nice and simple. Instead, it was a disaster.

'I was planning to leave town this afternoon,' she told Josh. 'But with no money - and my bankcard was in my wallet as well ... Oh wow, what am I going to do?'

'You could always work for me,' Josh suggested. 'My waitress walked out on me today, so I could use a bit of help.' Then he backed away and added, 'No. no, no! Don't listen to me. I'm being selfish. You'll probably find your wallet. Maybe you dropped it in the street or something.'

Blake shook her head. 'Nice idea. But I don't think so.'

Her brain was starting to work properly again. She remembered taking out her wallet to pay the newspaper man. She remembered bumping into Morticia - those long thin hands straightening her jacket. She remembered being knocked down again by Terrence the nerd.

And she remembered how she'd left her jacket hanging on the back of her stool,

while the two young guys and the girl in the lycra bike shorts got up and walked past it and left the cafe.

That's it, for sure. One of those five people pinched my wallet.

She stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled. The tall guy stopped halfway along the counter.

'Okay,' Blake said. 'I'll take that job. When do you want me to start?'

'Right this minute,' said Josh Bathwater.

Blake explained that she didn't know much about the Internet. Josh explained that it didn't matter. 'I'm the cook and Internet adviser,' he said. 'You've only got to take the orders, bring out the food and drinks and let me know when anyone needs some help with the Net.'

Before he had time to explain anything else, twelve more guys in suits surged in. For the next two hours Blake scurried around the cafe, moving faster than the Road Runner. She slammed hamburgers onto the counter. Taught herself how to use the espresso machine. Wrote down pages of orders and then crossed them out when the suits changed their minds. Asked Josh how to find the virtual news stand at the Cybernet Cafe.

And while she worked, she went on thinking about her lost wallet. She felt pretty sure that Terrence hadn't taken it. The guy was such a nerd - and besides, she knew where he worked, so it'd be easy to track him down.

The three kids seemed a lot more likely but she'd solved that problem in advance. Now she was waitressing at A Byte to Eat, she could just wait till they came back again. They didn't look all that tough. If one of them had stolen her money, she could probably scare the kid into giving it back.

But Morticia was different. Morticia scared Blake. If Morticia had nicked the wallet, she would definitely have to go to the police. *And I don't want the cops to know where I am. If they know, then Greg and Thumper might be able to find me too.*

She slid three more coffees along the counter. Stopped and looked around. No-one was waving at her. No-one was bellowing, 'Waitress! Over here!' In fact, there was hardly anybody left in the cafe, except for a couple of kids, reading the chat line on the old computer and giggling.

Blake kicked off her sandals and wriggled her toes. She padded into the kitchen and leaned against the bench, watching Josh cook two more hamburgers.

'You'll need some decent shoes tomorrow,' he said, when he noticed her bare feet. 'It's a big mistake to wear sandals while you're waitressing.'

'Well, I didn't know I was going to end up as a waitress, did I?' Blake pointed out.

'Listen, Josh, there's a question I want to ask you. Two questions, actually.'

'Not a problem. Go ahead.'

'Well, the first thing is, I need to find somewhere to sleep tonight, so -'

He looked surprised. 'No, no, no. Didn't I tell you? There's a room upstairs - nothing special but at least it's got a bed and a cupboard. I sleep there sometimes, when I can't be bothered going home. But it's yours, for as long as you want.'

'Thanks,' Blake mumbled, staring down at her toes. 'That's really ... I mean, you're very ...'

'Ah, shut up,' Josh told her. 'Ask me the next question. I hate being thanked.'

Good. I hate thanking people. Even nice people like Josh.

She looked up again and said, 'So, okay, I saw this woman in Market Terrace today. I was wondering whether you knew who she is. She's incredibly tall and incredibly thin. One of those Goth types, dressed in black, with black nail polish and -'

'Black lipstick,' Josh said sadly. 'Yeah, I know her. That's Tricia - I mean, Morticia. She's the waitress who walked out and left me in the lurch. And she's also my girlfriend.'

Blake groaned to herself. *Oh, great. Terrific.* She swung away and headed back into the cafe. Behind her. Josh said, 'Hey, wait a minute.' Blake tensed.

Oops. He's going to ask me why I wanted to know about Morticia.

But when she turned round, Josh was smiling and holding out one of the hamburgers.

They sat at the counter and munched their burgers in friendly silence. 'The next big crowd generally turns up in an hour or so,' Josh said after a while. 'So if you want to go out for a walk or something -'

Before he'd finished, Blake was cramming her swollen feet into her sandals. 'Yeah, that'd be ace,' she told him. 'See you in an hour.' And she limped out of the cafe.

She hobbled down Market Terrace and caught the newspaper man, just as he was packing up the last of his papers. 'Hi,' she said breathlessly. 'Remember me?'

'Of course I do, girlie. I remember all my customers. You bought the morning paper from me halfway through the afternoon, right?'

'Right,' Blake agreed. 'Great memory. You don't happen to remember whether I dropped my wallet, do you?'

'Oh no, I would've noticed that. Mind you, I couldn't swear the Vampire Queen didn't pick your pocket when she bumped into you. She's a nasty piece of work, that one - always mad as fire about something or other.'

'The Vampire Queen?' Blake said, grinning, and the old man rubbed his prickly chin with his thumb.

'Sorry, girlie, that's just my little joke. I don't know most of my customers' names, so I give 'em all nicknames. Helps me keep track of 'em, like.'

'I see ... You must know an awful lot about Market Terrace.'

'I surely do,' the old man said with pride. 'Been here on this corner for fifteen years, rain or shine, ever since I lost the use of me legs. I seen 'em come and go and I could tell you some stories, indeed I could. Tommy Tranter's the name, girlie. And you're ...?'

'Blake,' she told him and he reached up from his wheelchair to shake her hand. 'Listen, Mr Tranter, could you tell me a few stories about some of the people who hang around here? Two boys, a handsome one and a weedy one, for example? And a girl who wears lycra bike shorts?'

He wheezed out a chuckle. 'Ah, Beauty and the Beast and the Pedalpusher Girl. They're mates, all three of them, but Beauty and the Beast in particular. What do you want to know about them?'

'I was wondering if ... if any of them might be a thief.'

'Well, they haven't tried to pinch the change out of my money tin - but they wouldn't want to try. I may be stuck in a wheelchair but my eyes are as good as they ever were.' He chuckled again and added, 'Seriously, though, the two lads spend a lot of time hanging round that science fiction comic shop. I know Captain Marvel who runs the place and he's never complained about them nicking his comics.'

Blake sighed. *Rats. All my suspects are turning out to be honest and lovable. That's nice—but not much help.*

'Okay then, what about a little guy with mousy hair? Works at CCCC. Falls over his own feet. Drops things and-'

'Oh, *him*,' said Tommy Tranter. 'The Walking Disaster Area, I call him. Whenever I see him coming, I start wheeling my chair out of the way, same as I do with the Vampire Queen. He sent me spinning once - and then nearly tipped me into the gutter when he tried to catch the chair. But he means well, all the same, and he's a hard worker. Haven't seen him leave, so I bet he's still slaving away right now.'

'He is? Fantastic. That's the best news I've heard since I lost my money. Excuse me, Mr Tranter, I gotta go. I'll catch up with you later.'

'You do that, girlie. And I'll keep a watch out for that wallet of yours.'

Blake hurried back along the street. When she got closer to the tall building where Terrence worked, she glanced up at the windows of the second floor. A row of lights gleamed down at her. *Great. Looks like Terrence the Walking Disaster Area is working late tonight, for sure.*

But as she watched, the lights blinked and vanished. For a second or two, the entire

building blacked out. Then the lights came on again, except that this time they looked different. Different lights, in different windows. Clustered together. Making some kind of pattern.

Blake crossed the road and went to stand in the doorway of the comic shop. She leaned back and stared up at the office building. The lighted windows were grouped into a pattern, all right. The same pattern, repeated four times. Three across, two down and then three more across.

Oh, I get it. The lights spell CCCC. Carstairs' Computer Courses and Consultancy. The name of the company Terrence works for. I guess this must be an advertisement for them.

The door of the building swung open and someone came running out. Not Terrence, though. Just a young woman in blue leggings and a flowery silk shirt. *One of the other computer programmers, probably, making sure that the CCCC ad is working okay.* She parked herself next to Blake and they swapped small smiles. Then Blake started to read the second row of letters.

This time all the four letters were different. The first letter looked like something from a Snakes and Ladders game but after she'd squinted at it for a while, she decided it was an S. The second letter was easy - P, for sure. The third letter was an E. And the fourth letter turned out to be a square sort of W.

S - P - E—... Hey, wait a minute. Something tells me this isn't an advertising gimmick, after all.

She started to laugh. At the same moment the young woman burst into tears.

CHAPTER THREE

'Look at that,' she sobbed. 'CCCC - SPEW! They've done it again. I hate them. I really, really hate them.'

Blake took a closer look at her. She couldn't be much more than twenty years old. Small and slim and pretty. Gold-brown hair, cut short to frame her pixie face. Gold-hazel eyes, shining with tears. Chunky gold earrings and a slash of bright red lipstick. *Definitely the girlie type - except that, even when she's crying, she somehow manages to look tough.*

'Who are they?' she asked. 'Come to think of it. who are you?'

'I'm Clio Carstairs,' the young woman said, wiping her eyes. 'And they're the scumbags who've been hassling me for the last three weeks. They're trying to wreck my business. But I won't let them.'

She clenched her fists and glared up at the lighted windows. Blake read the letters again but this time she didn't feel like smiling. She could see Clio's point. The lights covered eleven floors of the building - the top eleven floors. People would be able to read the sign from halfway across the city, which wouldn't be too great for CCCC.

'Clio Carstairs?' she said. 'Does that mean you're the boss at CCCC?'

The young woman nodded. 'It's my first real job. I was doing a business degree but then I found out that the government was giving people money to run computer courses for kids who were unemployed. I know a lot about computers, so I decided to drop out and start my own business. It was going really, really well - until now.'

'Sounds like a smart idea. I'm impressed.'

Clio shrugged. 'Actually, it was my dad's idea. He works for one of the big companies in the city and he knows heaps about this sort of thing. But I run CCCC by

myself, without any help from him. And I want to solve this problem by myself too, instead of running back to Daddy whenever I get into trouble.'

Her hazel eyes darkened and her fists clenched even tighter. Blake could feel her own fists clenching in sympathy. *I was right. This kid is tough - and I like the way she thinks. I feel exactly the same way about my own dad.*

'So what's been going on?' she asked. 'When you saw the lights, you said, "They've done it again." What else have they done?'

'All kinds of stuff. Little things, mostly, but really, really annoying. Like cutting into our phone calls or switching the channels on the TV in the office or making the lights in our rooms flash on and off. At first I thought we were just having a run of bad luck but this business with the windows changes everything. Someone's obviously out to get us.'

'Yeah, sure. But who?' she asked and Clio sighed.

'Hey, I wish I knew.'

'What about the students in your computer courses? I mean, you must've failed a few kids, from time to time. Maybe one of them got mad and decided to hit back at you.'

Clio shook her head. 'Sorry, that's not the answer. Okay, some of our students fail, because they can't handle the course. And other students have trouble holding onto a job, even though we try really, really hard to find work for them. We've had a few nasty letters - kids blaming CCCC for all their problems - so I wondered whether one of them was the troublemaker. But if this kid is good enough to mess with our phone and lights, then he - or she - would've been good enough to pass the course and get a top job.'

Blake frowned. 'Hold on, could you run that past me again? You're saying someone's using a computer to play all those tricks on you?'

'Of course. What else? I mean, they're not creeping into our office and flicking the light switches, right? If they were, we would've caught them weeks ago. But these days the phones and the power and the water supply are all controlled by computers. So, if you know how to hack into their computer systems, you can play all sorts of nasty tricks.' She glanced across at Blake and added, 'I thought everybody knew that. Where have you been for the last ten years?'

On the run. Worrying about how to survive, not how to improve my computer skills.

She scowled at Clio and said, 'Hey, I've heard about hackers. I'm just not a major computer buff, that's all. But you are - so why can't you stop them?'

'It's not that simple,' Clio snapped. 'Like, fourteen year old schoolkids have broken into some of the US Air Force's secret computer systems - and trust me, the US Air Force works way harder than we do at keeping people out. I'm trying to run a business, okay? I can't afford to spend twenty-four hours a day looking for hackers.'

'Fair enough,' Blake agreed. 'In that case, you'd better start from the other end.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, if I was you, I'd make a list of everyone who might have a grudge against you

or CCCC. Yeah, I know you said you couldn't think of anything but that just means you need to try harder. I bet you could come up with a few ideas. Like another business that's running computer courses or -' She stopped suddenly, because Clio was backing away from her.

'Wait a minute,' the young woman gasped. 'Why are you so interested in CCCC? Are you trying to get information out of me or what? Who are you, anyway?'

'Calm down,' she said with a grin. 'My name's Blake. I've always been interested in mysteries, so I can't help asking questions. But I'm not the hacker, I promise.'

'Yeah, right. Like you'd tell me, if you were. Fact is, you were hanging round the building at the exact moment when the lights came on. It looks pretty suspicious to me.'

'Too suspicious,' Blake told her. 'The hacker wouldn't be that stupid. Actually, I was coming to visit one of the people who works for you - a guy called Terrence. He bumped into me this afternoon and I think he might've gone off with my wallet, by mistake.'

'That sounds like Terrence,' Clio admitted. 'The guy's great on a computer and hopeless everywhere else. Okay then, why don't you come back to the office with me right now? If Terrence says he knows you, I might even decide to believe your story.'

She grabbed Blake's arm and steered her across the road. *Like a cop holding onto a prisoner. Oh, wow. She really thinks I could be the hacker.*

I was trying to solve the mystery of my disappearing wallet but it looks like I've got involved in another mystery as well.

The CCCC office was still dark, except for a puddle of light on one of the desks. As they got closer, Blake saw that Terrence had tied a torch onto his desk lamp. He must've used at least half a ball of string but it kept slipping, just the same.

'Terrence!' Clio called out. 'I want to ask you -'

'Not now,' he said, shaking his head till his hair fluffed out like a mouse-coloured dishmop. He shoved the torch back into place and went on tapping at his keyboard. A few seconds later the lights came on.

'There,' he said, sounding pleased. 'I thought that'd do it. I tracked the hacker through the electricity company's data base and reversed his instructions. So everything's worked out okay. This time.'

'Yeah, this time,' Clio sighed. 'What about next time, though? Like, what if the hacker decides to shut down our computer system? We'd be stuck then. Really, really stuck. Imagine it - a computer business with no computers.'

Terrence blinked hard and wrapped his arms around his chest. *As though Clio was talking about chopping off both his hands.* 'Oh no,' he protested. 'The hacker couldn't do that. Well, he could, of course - but he wouldn't, would he? Hackers have their own

rules, you know. They go against the law sometimes, when they think the laws are stupid, but they're basically very honest.'

Clio sniffed. 'Are you sure? I mean, most hackers leave things the way they found them but our guy keeps changing the data, just to hassle us. Maybe he's gone feral. Like those maniacs who invent computer viruses that can destroy years and years of work.'

Terrence went pale. 'That's a horrible idea, Clio,' he said in a shaky voice. 'I don't believe - no, I've changed my mind, I *do* believe you. I'd better work out some better ways to protect myself. Right now.'

He thumped a button and a new display appeared on the screen. Blake leaned forward to peer over his shoulder but Clio pushed in between them.

'Terrence, turn around,' she ordered. 'Take a look at the girl who's standing behind you. Now, tell me whether you've ever seen her before.'

Terrence blinked at Blake. 'No,' he said and turned back to his keyboard.

Instantly Clio swung away and headed for the nearest phone. 'Okay, I'm calling the cops,' she announced

'Hold it,' Blake said. She grabbed a folder from the desk and sat down on the floor, scattering sheets of paper around her. As Terrence stared at her, she said, 'Well? Do you recognise me now?'

He smiled happily, like a kid with a new toy. 'Of course I do. You're the girl in the foyer, aren't you? The one I knocked over this afternoon. I'm afraid I didn't actually notice your face. But I remember how you looked, sitting in the middle of all my papers.'

Clio dropped the phone and started to laugh. 'Smart thinking, Blake. I like the way your mind works. Listen, you said you were interested in mysteries, didn't you? How about I hire you to solve this mystery for me?'

Blake's eyes widened. *Wow. Clio moves pretty fast. One minute she thinks I'm a hacker, next minute she's offering me a job. An interesting job too - but I can't walk out on poor Josh.*

Besides, I don't want to get involved with other people's problems, not right now. I've got too many problems of my own.

'Please, Blake,' Clio urged, sidling over to her. 'We'd make a great team. Dad would send in a whole bunch of security experts, if I ask him. He'd do anything to help me, because I'm the only one of his kids who's interested in business. But I'd rather find my own experts. And it'd be really, really great to give the job to a young woman, like me.'

Blake glanced down at her watch and shook her head. 'Thanks, but no thanks,' she said. 'I've got a job already, at the cafe next door. Actually, I ought to be heading back there, as soon as I've asked Terrence a question.'

'Well, if you ever change your mind, just let me know,' Clio told her. Then she grabbed the back of Terrence's chair and spun it around. He blinked up at them through

his thick glasses. 'Quick, Blake,' she said with a grin. 'Ask your question, before he vagues out again.'

Blake nodded. 'Terrence, did you see a wallet lying around, after you bumped into me? Maybe you stuck it in your pocket, by mistake. Or maybe it got mixed up with your papers.'

'No,' Terrence said. He glanced over his shoulder at the computer screen but Clio was still holding on to his chair.

'Show us your wallet,' she said. 'Oh, and the. papers you were carrying, as well. After you've done that, you can get back to work.'

Terrence pulled out a wallet and flipped it open. He reached into his pockets, one by one, and turned them inside out. *Like a conjurer, proving he's got nothing to hide.* Paper clips and tissues and chewing gum showered down onto the floor. But no more wallets.

He slapped his wallet onto a pile of papers, shoved them at Blake and turned straight back to his computer. Blake stared down at the wallet and saw Terrence's photo goggling up at her, from the front of his driver's license. She riffled through the papers and sighed.

'No luck. Oh well, at least I can cross one person off the list. It was nice to meet you, Clio. I hope you catch your hacker soon.'

She shook hands with Clio. Waved to Terrence, who was hunched over the keyboard with his pockets still hanging inside out. And hurried back to A Byte to Eat.

CHAPTER FOUR

The cafe was beginning to fill up again. Blake took two orders for hamburgers on her way in. She watched a boy in a Mambo t-shirt browse through a series of Web pages, jumping from one site to the next. Served twenty burgers and eight bowls of pasta. Started answering people's questions about the Internet. Just the easy questions, though - she still saved the hard questions for Josh.

And then suddenly it was eleven o'clock and the cafe was almost empty. Josh staggered out of the kitchen and told the last two customers that he was closing up. He collapsed into a chair and combed shreds of lettuce out of his beard.

'What a day,' he said. 'Why on earth did I decide I wanted to run a cafe?'

'Well, why did you?' Blake asked him and he groaned.

'I can't remember. No, no, no, that's not true. I like cooking and I like mucking round with computers. So an Internet cafe seemed like the perfect place for me and Tricia - I mean, Morticia. There's only one small problem. She keeps walking out.'

'How come?' *Like, does she walk out every time she's pinched one of the customer's wallets?*

Josh found a splotch of tomato on his shirt and flicked it onto the table. 'She says it's all my fault,' he muttered. 'She gets mad at me, because I'm too nice. Morticia reckons you don't get anywhere by being nice. That's why she started wearing all that Goth gear - to show people how not-nice she was.'

Blake remembered being pushed into the gutter. Tommy Tranter, wheeling his chair out of Morticia's way. *Morticia can forget the black nail polish and the bat necklace.*

Nobody would ever think she was nice, even if she was wearing pink frills and a curly gold wig.

'So will you go and talk to her tonight?' she asked casually. 'Maybe you could drop in on your way home. Where does she live?'

Josh sighed so hard that his beard shivered. 'Ah, what's the point? She'd just slam the door in my face. I can't even apologise for being too nice, because Morticia reckons only nice people ever apologise. It's a no-win situation.'

Rats. I thought he might tell me Morticia's address. Oh well, never mind. With a bit of luck, I'll find the address written down in the cafe's accounts book. Or perhaps Morticia'll come storming in here tomorrow.

I just hope she doesn't want her job back too soon.

She yawned and stretched. Josh glanced across at her. 'Poor kid, you must be exhausted,' he said. 'I'll quit whingeing and let you go to bed. Have you got a toothbrush and, um, stuff like that?'

Blake shook her head. 'No, all my things are in my backpack. And I left my pack with my motorbike, at this all-night service station run by a truckie I know. I was going to head back and pick it up after work. But it's a bit late now.'

'Not a problem. I can easily drive you there. I'd like to do it. Otherwise I'll just sit around brooding.'

He frowned earnestly at Blake and she smiled back at him. *Looks as though Morticia's right. Josh Bathwater is definitely a nice guy.*

Josh's car was a very old Kingswood. They rattled across to the edge of the city and Blake collected her pack, stashed behind the front wheel of her Honda Rebel. She leaned against the bike for a moment, stroking the silver star on its grey tank.

I'd like to jump on board and hit the road, right now. But I wouldn't get far without any money.

She said goodbye to the Honda and went to find the owner of the service station. 'Listen, Mack, can you keep the bike here for a bit longer?' she asked. 'I can't pay you yet, because I've lost my wallet, but -'

'Hey, no worries,' he cut in. 'Just remember to cancel any credit cards in your wallet, mate. Otherwise some turkey could clean your account right out.'

Oops, I forgot about that. But it's not quite as simple as Mack thinks.

She sighed and climbed into the Kingswood. They rattled back through the midnight streets, thinking their own thoughts. Josh gave her a key and she let herself into the cafe. It was dark and shadowy, so Blake fished around in the side pocket of her pack till she found a little silver torch. Followed its thin beam of light across the cafe and up the

stairs.

The spare room was small and dusty. One grimy window that looked out on to the back of the next building. A carpet, so old that she couldn't guess what colour it used to be. A cupboard full of rusty coat hangers. And a bed with a stained, lumpy mattress.

It's not the Ritz - but hey, it beats sleeping on the streets.

After she'd spread her sleeping bag out on the mattress, Blake went back to her pack and found a battered black notebook. She sat up in bed, running her torch across the pages. Reading words that she already knew by heart.

Every word her mother had ever said to her.

Every fact she'd found out since then.

I should be in a country town called Mudgeebung tonight, getting ready to find out more facts. But instead, I'm stuck here in the city with no money. Oh wow, I can't believe I was feeling lucky this afternoon.

I definitely don't feel lucky now.

She tossed and turned on the lumpy mattress. Dreamed and woke. Dreamed and woke. Finally she fell into a deeper sleep and dreamed an old, familiar dream.

I'm running from someone, through a huge empty house. And I'm searching for someone, down long empty streets. Running. Searching.

Running and searching.

Searching for my mother. Running away from -

And then she was sitting bolt upright, staring around in panic. *Where the heck am I? Oh right, of course. The Internet cafe.* She took a deep breath and tried to relax. Gave up in the end and went downstairs.

It was six o'clock, two hours before the cafe was due to open. Blake raided the kitchen and made coffee and toast. Then she perched on one of the stools, staring out of the window and thinking about her problems.

Her bankcard, for example. The card Mack had told her to cancel. It was a sensible idea, except that every time she used the card, the two private detectives seemed to find out about it. So far, Blake had solved that problem by drawing out money just before she hopped on a plane or hitched across to the next state. But if she cancelled the card, Greg and Thumper would know where she was. And she was stuck here, so it would be easy for them to corner her.

In other words, I might as well forget about trying to get a new card. That means the thief can empty my account but I don't care. I always hated using that money, anyway.

Blake stretched and sighed. At least she knew what she was up against now. She'd lost the money in her wallet and she'd lost the money in her bank account. But she had

a job - and a room - and the chance to earn some more money. Things could be worse.

She went back to the kitchen and found an old vacuum cleaner. Hauled it up the stairs and started cleaning her room. For the next hour she scrubbed and dusted and polished. *Just like my last job as a maid at the hotel in Sunnyport - except that this place hasn't been cleaned for a hundred years.*

She was sloshing soapy water onto the window panes when she heard a noise from downstairs. At first she thought it was Josh, coming to open the cafe. But seconds later, she started to shiver, as though a cold hand was drawing patterns down her back.

Oh-oh. That icy finger again. The sign that always warns me when there's danger around.

She turned and padded to the door. Crept down the stairs, hanging onto the banister, so she could pull her foot back straight away if one of the steps started to creak. At the bottom of the stairs she paused and looked around. No-one in the cafe. No sounds coming from the kitchen. Nothing suspicious at all.

Except for a line of light, along the back wall of the cafe. Marking out the shape of another door that she hadn't noticed before.

She tiptoed across to the door. Flattened herself against the wall. Twisted her head around and tried to peer through the crack. Couldn't see a thing. Reached out and pushed the door gently.

Then groaned as it swung wide open, creaking all the way.

CHAPTER FIVE

The first thing Blake saw was a stack of boxes labelled 'Coffee', 'Sugar', 'Tomato Sauce', 'Paper Napkins'. All the things Josh needed for the cafe. *Okay, it's just a store room.*

But in the middle of the floor there was a table. On the table there was another computer. And in front of the computer there were two young guys. One drop-dead gorgeous. The other a small, skinny nerd.

Oh, right. The kids I saw in the cafe yesterday. Maybe that's why the icy finger was prodding me, so I'd come downstairs and meet them.

While she stared, the gorgeous guy took two long strides towards her. He grabbed her arm and dragged her into the room.

'Gotcha!' he said. 'You can stay here till Josh turns up. We'll let him decide what to do with you.'

Blake scowled. *What a nerve. He's acting like he thinks I've broken into the café - but I know he's broken into the cafe.*

She stepped back, onto his foot. Dragged her arm forward and down. Wrenched out of his grip and whirled around to face him with her hands up, ready to strike. The guy lunged at her. Then froze as the skinny kid started clapping.

'That was ace,' he said. 'You're an even better fighter than Marty - and I thought he was pretty good.'

'I *am* good,' Marty growled. 'Good enough to rescue you from those hoons, right?'

'Oh, sure,' the kid agreed. 'But the hoons were pretty stupid.'

'Ah, come off it, Spider. You weren't so cool when they were beating you to a pulp.'

'Hey, fighting's not my thing. That's why we make such a great team. I'm the brains and you're the body.'

Blake started to laugh. 'Slow down, you two,' she said. 'What are you talking about?'

Marty turned towards her. 'That's how him and me met, see? Like, I'm supposed to be doing this special computer course for kids on the dole but I walk out, because I can't understand what the teacher's raving on about. So I'm standing on the corner and I see these four big guys, picking on some skinny little runt. Him.'

He jerked his thumb at Spider, who blinked hard. 'Yeah, it was pretty scary. Luckily, Marty jumped the guys. He grabbed two of them and banged their heads together. And the others ran off straight away, like a pack of cowards.'

'Then Spider and me got talking,' Marty went on. 'He was real grateful, so he reckoned he'd teach me how to use a computer. Turns out he's, like, a serious computer phreak. That's p-h-r-e-a-k, in case you didn't know.'

He glanced down at Spider. *Looking proud of him, like the kid's an unusual kind of pet.* Blake smiled to herself. They were an interesting pair. Marty about seventeen years old, wearing faded jeans and a tight t-shirt that showed off his muscles. Broad shoulders, brown hair with blond streaks and a dimple in his chin.

Beside him, Spider looked like a little kid, although he must've been at least fourteen. He was skinny and pale, with light grey eyes that kept blinking non-stop. Baggy shorts, a t-shirt that came down to his knees and expensive runners, like silver moon boots.

'So Josh lets you practise on his own personal computer,' she guessed and Spider nodded.

'Yeah, we tried working at my place but my folks weren't too crazy about Marty. As a matter of fact, they're not crazy about me either. They'd like to have smart, popular sons with smart, popular friends. But instead they scored me and my big brother.'

'You look okay to me,' Blake told him. 'What's your brother like?'

'He's ace,' Spider sighed. 'He's the one who got me into computers in the first place. My folks reckon he's a bad influence, though. They keep telling him to find a proper job but he just goes, "Hey, I can hack into any computer in the world and I can do all the tricks in *The Boys' Book of Conjuring*. What more do you want?" '

Marty laughed. 'Your folks ought to meet my stepdad some day. He gets a real kick out of criticising people too.' He laughed again, more bitterly. 'Kick. That's a joke, right? - 'cause he likes kicking and bashing.'

'Does he bash you?' Blake asked. Marty clamped his mouth shut. 'Listen, you ought to sign up for karate classes. If you try a few moves on him, he'll soon—'

'Nah,' Marty muttered. 'It wouldn't work.'

'Don't say that till you've given it a go. Karate's the best, Marty. Remember how I

broke your hold, even though –‘

‘No!’ he said loudly and Blake stopped in the middle of the sentence. *Okay. Fair enough, you can't tell people things, unless they want to hear them.*

She turned away and studied the display on the computer screen. Marty narrowed his eyes and started to look suspicious again. ‘Who are you, anyway?’ he demanded. ‘How come you're nosing around here?’

‘I'm working at the cafe.’ Blake told him. ‘Josh gave me a job, because I lost all my money.’

She flicked her eyes across them, to check their reaction. But Marty was pacing around the room and Spider was bending down to fiddle with his shoelace. *Just a coincidence? Or have they got something to hide? I better try again.*

‘As a matter of fact. I might've dropped my wallet in the cafe. You didn't happen to notice it, did you?’

Marty laughed. ‘Hey, Spider never notices anything, unless it's on a computer screen.’

‘Well, you're just as bad,’ Spider said straight away. ‘You didn't even notice when Morticia dyed her hair green.’

‘So what? Morticia always looks weird. Green hair's, like, normal for her.’

‘Maybe. But I noticed it, all the same.’

Blake sighed. *There they go again. It's a great double act - and they've managed to avoid answering my question.* She had almost decided to go back and finish cleaning her room when Josh came barging through the door.

‘Oh, good,’ he said. ‘Spider and Marty. I was hoping you'd be here. Blake lost her wallet yesterday and I've been trying to work out what could've happened to it. Do you have any bright ideas?’

Blake glanced up at him gratefully. *Thanks, Josh, you really are a nice guy.* Then she spun around to check on the two boys. Marty just shrugged and said, ‘Hey, Blake already asked us about that.’ But Spider was wriggling uncomfortably in his chair.

‘About your wallet,’ he began, blinking even faster - but before he could finish the sentence, Blake heard footsteps clicking across the cafe floor. A few seconds later, Clio Carstairs burst into the room.

‘Oh, Blake!’ she gasped. ‘I'm so glad I've found you. CCCC's in even bigger trouble now. We've got a worm!’

Blake shivered. The back of her neck felt cold, as if an icy hand was clutching it. *My sixth sense again, warning me about something. But what?*

‘A worm?’ she said, puzzled. ‘What harm can a worm do, for heaven's sake?’

She swung away from Clio and stared at the others. Marty looked blank. Josh was tugging a grey hair out of his beard. And Spider was bouncing up and down with excitement.

'It's not a garden worm,' he said impatiently. 'A worm's a special kind of program that wriggles into computer networks and starts messing them around. Like the Father Christmas worm, for example, that got into hundreds of machines and sent everyone a Christmas card on Christmas Day.'

'In other words, this is just a joke, right?' Blake said with relief but Clio shook her head.

'No way. Someone's *invaded* CCCC's computer systems. That's not my idea of a joke.'

'So what's your worm doing?' Spider asked. 'Is it destroying data - or changing your passwords-or deleting your files - or -?'

'Not yet,' Clio cut in. 'It just keeps flashing this message onto all our screens. But hey, I know the worm could wreck our whole system, once it gets started. I'm going crazy, wondering what it's been programmed to do next. It's really, really spooky.'

She shuddered and pulled at the neck of her silky shirt. As *though she's having trouble breathing*. Her gold-brown hair was damp and spiky and her gold-brown eyes looked several shades darker. Blake frowned.

'Sorry, Clio, I don't get it. Why are you so upset? I mean, CCCC runs computer courses, right? But the worm can't stop you teaching people, can it?'

'Well, it wouldn't look too good if those stupid messages started flashing up in the middle of a class. That's not the main problem, though. The thing is, we do other stuff at CCCC as well. Like, because we get government money for the courses, I was able to organise a really, really good deal with this big multinational company. CCCC's doing all their computer programming at the moment but ... '

'But if the company finds out you've got a worm, they'll back off faster than the speed of light,' Spider finished. 'And if the worm manages to wriggle into the company's networks -'

Clio clutched at her hair and screamed. 'No! Please! I don't even want to think about it. We've got to stop the worm before it gets that far.'

'I'm sure you will,' Josh murmured, patting her shoulder, but Spider shifted restlessly in his chair.

'Worms aren't easy to stop,' he said, blinking hard. 'Wish I could have a look at it - I've never actually seen one. By the way, what's this message that it keeps sending?'

Clio Carstairs' cheeks went bright scarlet. She turned her head away and muttered, 'The message goes, "CCCC makes me spew".'

CHAPTER SIX

Blake's lips twitched. She covered her mouth with her hand but the grin kept spreading. When she tried to hide behind Marty, she realised he was sniggering too. Even nice, kind Josh was finding it hard not to smile.

'Um, excuse me, Clio,' he said in a rush. 'I better go and, um, check the cafe,' and he hurried out, with Marty tagging along.

Blake was heading for the door as well but Clio reached out and grabbed her as she went past. *'Please come and work for me,'* she whispered, squeezing her hand. 'I had to ring my father this morning and ask him to send in some of his experts. But I really, really want someone like you on my side.'

She hesitated. *It's kind of tempting. This is turning into a pretty interesting mystery and I wouldn't mind trying to solve it. Plus Clio seems keen to have me around. And I'd like to help her.*

Then Clio added, 'I'd pay you more than Josh does, too.' Blake sighed and shook her head.

'Sorry. I can't walk out on Josh. He's been incredibly nice to me, so it wouldn't be fair. Besides, I don't know the first thing about computers. You really ought to hire Spider instead - except that he's way too young.'

She was trying to make a joke but Spider looked up and glared. To her surprise, Clio gave him a friendly nod.

'Big mistake, Blake,' she said. 'You're never too young to be a whiz with computers. I might even think about asking Spider for advice. Right now, though. I need to get back

to CCCC. I'll catch up with you later and let you know what's happening, okay?'

She fluffed out her gold-brown hair and sped off, looking more cheerful. Blake paused in the doorway. There was something that Spider had said to her earlier on. Something important. Something she needed to ask him about.

But before she could remember what it was, Josh yelled, 'Blake! Four coffees, please - now!' She tucked her t-shirt into her jeans, took a deep breath and scuttled into the cafe.

It was another busy day at A Byte to Eat. A bunch of shoppers, resting their feet and finding out what the Internet was all about. The lunchtime crowd, surfing the Net in search of jokes and Hollywood gossip. And a guy who'd invented a computer program that wrote poems and wanted to organise a poetry reading at the cafe.

Halfway through the morning Blake stopped in between two tables and said, 'Got it!' A man in a suit snapped his fingers at her and she went racing off - but she still remembered the question she wanted to ask Spider.

She didn't get a chance to talk to him for ages, though. First he and Marty were shut away in the back room with Josh's computer. After that she spotted them out in the street, doing exercises. Well, Marty was swinging his arms and touching his toes and running on the spot, at any rate. Spider was just pretending.

Finally, when things got really frantic, the two of them came and helped her carry meals and coffees to the tables. Josh was pleased.

'It's nice of you to give Blake a hand,' he said. 'I can't afford to pay you - but I'll make you a burger, as soon as I get a spare minute.'

So an hour later they were sitting together at the counter, with three hamburgers piled as high as the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Blake waited till Spider had wolfed down most of his burger. Then she leaned forward and said, 'Okay, kid, what were you going to tell me about my wallet?'

Spider looked up at her. Gaspd and choked. Marty thumped him on the back for a while and then murmured. 'Yeah, Spider. What were you going to say?'

'Nothing much,' Spider croaked. 'Just, um, that I thought I saw an old guy slip his hand inside your jacket, while it was hanging on the back of the stool. A guy with a long white beard and, um, bright blue eyes. But I've never seen him before, so it's not going to help you much.'

Yeah, that's for sure. Something tells me Spider made up that entire story. I reckon he gasped because Marty kicked him on the ankle, to shut him up. Plus that old guy sounds suspiciously like Father Christmas.

She smiled sweetly and said, 'Oh well, thanks for trying, Spider.' The skinny kid

blushed and stared down at his plate. *That settles it. He was definitely lying - and he's not very good at it. I wonder what he was really planning to say.*

She was trying to think of a way to mention her wallet again when someone called out, 'Yo, Spider.'

'Yo, Wedge,' Spider said with relief and next minute a girl was sliding onto the stool next to Blake. *The girl I saw in the cafe, the first time I came here.*

Wedge was plump and cheerful, with a snub nose, messy brown hair and a thousand freckles. A bit older than Spider - probably about the same age as Marty. She was still wearing her lycra bike shorts, plus a t-shirt with the words 'Critical Mass' across the front.

'I've been at the market, talking to Cuong,' she said. 'He'll be here as soon as he can get a break from helping his parents. Where's Morticia? And who's this?'

'Morticia walked out again,' Spider explained. 'And Blake's the new waitress.'

Wedge grinned. 'Hey, lucky for us. Last time Morticia walked out, we all had to pitch in and do her job for a couple of days.' She glanced at Blake and added, 'Not that I'm complaining. We owe Josh, because he lets us have swap meets here, every second Tuesday. That's how I met Spider and Marty and Cuong.'

'Swap meets?' Blake echoed. 'What are they?'

'Well, phreaks come here from all over the place and swap stuff. Like, maybe I want to change my modem and you've got the kind of modem I need, so I give you a top copy of Dream Chaser 3 software in return.' Blake frowned and she said, 'You don't know Dream Chaser? It's one of the latest games. The baddest.'

'Are you allowed to copy games like that?' Blake asked. 'I thought -'

'Listen, phreaks make their own rules,' Wedge told her. 'In cyberspace we share everything - software, information, ideas, the works. It's a whole new world, with a whole way of operating. You can find out things you'll never read in the newspapers. You can hack into - ouch!'

She stopped suddenly and glared at Marty. *Rats. Something tells me he's been kicking people on the ankle again. I wish he'd let Wedge finish. I wanted to know what she was going to say. She reckons phreaks and hackers make their own rules - but it sounds like they don't take much notice of other people's rules. So how far would they be prepared to go?*

Like, for example, would a phreak think it was funny to plant rude messages on CCCC's computer screens?

Blake stared at Wedge. Thought of a dozen more questions and then decided to forget it. CCCC was Clio Carstairs' problem, not hers. Right now, she needed to concentrate on her own problems.

'You guys know a lot about the Internet, don't you?' she said. 'There's some stuff I need to find but I don't know where to look. Do you reckon you could help me check it

out?'

'Sure,' said Spider. 'But I don't know why you need our help. I mean, a kid like you - I would've thought you'd be linked to the Internet through your home computer.'

'Why?' she asked and the skinny kid blinked at her.

'Well, you've got a posh voice, right? That means you're rich and rich kids usually learn to surf the Net while they're at school, because it's useful for homework and assignments and all that. So -'

'Nah, you got it wrong this time. Spider,' Marty cut in. 'Blake doesn't have a posh voice. She sounds real ordinary, like me.'

'No, she doesn't.'

'Yeah, she does.'

'No, she -'

'Hang on a minute,' Wedge said. 'You're both right. Fact is, Blake's voice keeps changing. Sometimes she talks like a rich kid and sometimes she talks like an ordinary kid. I noticed that before. It's kind of weird.'

They all turned and looked at her. Blake stretched her foot out and kicked the counter, swinging her stool sideways.

'Hey, I think I heard Josh calling from the kitchen,' she said. 'Sorry, I gotta go.'

For the next hour Blake pretended to be superbusy. She pounced on people's coffee cups the minute they were empty. She went racing over to anyone who walked through the door. She asked Josh to teach her more about browsing the Web.

And she stayed well away from Spider and Marty and Wedge.

They're too smart, those kids. They notice too much. I'm supposed to be finding out things about them - but if I'm not careful, they'll find out even more about me.

Then, just when she thought she was safe, Wedge reached out and grabbed her as she raced past. 'Hey, Blake, this is Cuong,' she said. 'You'll see him round here a lot because his folks run a stall at the market.'

Blake relaxed and smiled at the kid beside Wedge. He was tall and slim, dressed in baggy pants and another of those 'Critical Mass' t-shirts. Skin the colour of gold leaf, dark chocolate eyes and glossy black hair that fell forward in a jagged fringe.

'Hi, Cuong,' she said. 'Are you into computers too?'

He smiled back at her. 'Not really. I just go to the swap meets because my uncle gives me all this cool software. He's got his own company called Net City - have you heard of it?'

She shook her head. 'Sorry, I don't know much about that stuff.'

'Don't apologise,' he said with a grin. 'It's nice to meet someone who's not a phreak,

just for a change. Hey, you look pretty tired. Why don't you sit down with us for a few minutes?'

'Sounds good,' Blake agreed - but this time Josh was calling her for real. She turned away and went speeding out to the kitchen, where he was flipping hamburgers on the grill.

'We're almost out of tomatoes,' he told her. 'Would you mind dashing over to the market and picking up a couple of kilos? If it's not too much trouble, of course.'

'Not a problem,' she said. 'I like the market. And I'll get Marty and Wedge to take over while I'm away.'

Josh laughed. 'Good choice. Cuong works hard enough on his parents' stall - and Spider'd probably spill coffee over all the customers.'

He gave her some money and she scooted off. Bumped into an old guy who was hovering on the door step. An old woman was hovering just behind him. 'Sorry, dear,' the old guy said. 'We were blocking your way, weren't we? I'm Harry Bottomley and this is Mrs Bottomley. Could you tell us whether we've come to the right place? We're looking for Josh ...'

'Josh Bathwater,' Mrs Bottomley chimed in. 'Does he work here, dear?'

'Yeah, he'll be out in the kitchen,' Blake told them. 'Can I -?'

'No, dear,' Mr Bottomley said firmly. 'We'll be fine now.'

They went on hovering. Blake watched them for a moment, feeling puzzled. *They're not the usual sort of Internet cafe customers. Wonder what they want.* Then she shrugged and kept walking. There were enough mysteries in this one way street already. Thieves and hackers. Phreaks and worms.

She didn't need any more puzzles at present.

It was good to be out in the open air. Blake strode down Market Terrace, checking the display of science fiction comics. Glancing up at the windows of the CCCC office. Waving to Tommy Tranter who was handing out afternoon papers to a queue of men in suits.

Then she plunged into the market and went speeding along the aisles between the stalls. Some people were packing up already. Other people were telling the world about their last minute bargains.

'Get your apples here,' one man shouted. 'Fresh and crisp, only two dollars a kilo!'

'Apples, lovely apples,' another man yelled back. 'Ten dollars a case-best value in the market.'

Blake grinned and hurried on. She spotted a stall that sold tomatoes. Stopped and squeezed one, to see whether it was ripe. Stood there, gazing at heaps of glossy black

eggplants, pyramids of plump oranges and polished green apples. And then froze, as her eyes settled on a man standing at the next stall.

Oh no. Not possible. I don't believe it.

But the icy finger was poking her in the ribs. Blake dropped the tomato and edged away. As she turned her back on the man, she heard a voice growl, 'Come on, Thumper. You're not here to stuff your face. We're supposed to be working, remember.'

Blake's heart skipped a beat. She straightened her shoulders and started to walk up the aisle. Slow and steady, the way you walk when there's a huge, hungry-looking dog waiting at a gate nearby.

Okay, I've changed my mind. I believe it, after all. It's them.

Greg and Thumper, the private detectives who've been following me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'I just want some of them apples,' Thumper grumbled. 'They're real cheap, Greg. If you can get yourself a new cap, I reckon I ought to be able to buy something to eat.'

'Listen, mate, I need a new cap. But you've been eating all day. Why can't you wait and pick up a Big One from O'Burgers later on?'

'Hey, gimme a break. Apples are more healthier, right? I'll let you have one of them, if ...'

Then their voices faded, drowned out by the sounds of the market. Stall owners shouting. Trolleys rumbling. A busker strumming somewhere in the distance.

Good. That means I must be leaving them behind.

Blake strolled on. She desperately wanted to look over her shoulder and check whether the guys were following her. But she knew it'd be a mistake. *They haven't spotted me yet. I need to make sure they don't get a chance to see my face.*

She clenched her fists and kept walking. Past stalls stacked with boxes of runners, stalls hung with patterned squares of carpet, stalls piled high with rolls of material. Finally she glanced sideways and saw a row of flowery dresses, swinging from a rack. She dodged between two tables. Ducked behind the rack. Leaned against it and let her breath out in a long, shuddering sigh.

Okay, I'm safe for the moment. It's time to ask myself a few questions. Like, what are Greg and Thumper doing here? Are they after me - or are they working on some other job? And what the heck am I going to do next?

She looked around. There was a mirror propped against the canvas wall behind her.

A big rubbish bin. A curtain strung across the back corner, to make a tiny changing room.

As she frowned to herself, an old baseball cap came whizzing through the air and dropped into the bin. Blake's eyes widened. *Excellent! I can snaffle that cap and wear it to hide my face. But I better check the exits, before I go.*

She grabbed two of the flowery dresses and eased their hangers apart. Peered out through the gap and saw two men at the nearest table, rummaging in a pile of baseball caps. The icy finger poked her again but it was too late.

She was staring straight at Greg and Thumper.

Blake had only seen Greg and Thumper once before - and then she'd been hiding on the roof of a house, while the two men searched for her in the yard below. So this was her first chance to get a proper look at them.

It's a bit risky - but I can't resist. I need to know what I'm up against.

Greg was in his mid-forties. Small and wiry, like a jockey, with a lined face and sandy hair creeping back from his forehead. The kind of guy you'd never even notice in a crowd. Nothing special about him, except for a pair of pale blue eyes that went everywhere and saw everything.

Thumper was a head taller than him and twice as wide. He was wearing a green singlet and trackpants with a speed stripe - and somehow Blake could tell that he'd still be wearing trackpants and a singlet in the middle of winter. The kind of guy you'd definitely notice in a crowd, because everyone would be trying to get out of his way.

As she watched, Greg tugged a cap over his sandy hair and said, 'Yeah, this one feels right. I'd like to see how it looks, though. You got a mirror around here?'

Blake bit her lip. *Oh-oh. I'm standing right next to the mirror.* She snatched the cap out of the bin and dived behind the curtain. Crouched in the tiny changing room, listening to the two men.

'What do you reckon?' Greg asked and Thumper rumbled, 'Looks fine to me.'

'You don't think the cap's too small?'

'Yeah, maybe.'

'But it seems to fit pretty well.'

'Sure, sure. It's a great fit.'

'Stop agreeing with me all the time,' Greg snapped. 'I want to know what you *really* think.'

There was silence for a moment and then Thumper said, 'I think I'll try on one of these singlets. I need a few more and they're a dead set bargain.'

Greg sighed loudly and muttered, 'Hopeless. Totally hopeless.' Behind the curtain,

Blake started to grin. Then the grin stuck halfway, as she realised what Thumper was saying.

He wants to try on a singlet. In the changing room. Where I am.

Footsteps came thumping towards her. *Thumper, for sure.* Blake looked around, panicking. There was nowhere to hide. Nothing but two canvas walls, laced together by a thin white rope. And a bent wire coat hanger that wouldn't even make a good weapon.

Then, at the last minute, her brain started to work again. She whisked off her shirt and turned towards the canvas wall. Just in time. The curtains rattled and Thumper gasped at the sight of her bare back.

'Geez, miss, I'm sorry,' he mumbled. 'Didn't know there was anyone in here. Hope I didn't give you a shock or nothing. Sorry about that. Um, sorry.'

The curtain dropped and he stumbled backwards. Straight into the rack of dresses, by the sound of it. Blake could hear Greg swearing. The stall owner yelping in alarm. And a noisy clatter as the rack went crashing to the ground.

Thanks, Thumper. That ought to give me enough time to escape.

She bent forward and tugged at the white rope. The canvas buckled and she pushed her head through the hole. Her shoulders stuck for a moment but she heaved and wriggled and shoved. Tumbled, head over heels, into the next stall.

A woman wearing a looped headscarf was watching her in surprise, from behind a trestle heaped with crumpled pieces of material. Blake sat up and smiled politely. She scrambled to her feet, pulled on the cap and then changed her mind.

No, Blake, think again. That's Greg's old cap, remember. He'll recognise it if he sees it.

But the cap - and the woman - had given her an idea. She headed for the trestle. Sorted through the material till she found a big square of white cotton. Folded it in half and tied it round her head. It slipped sideways and the woman laughed.

'Here,' she said, undoing Blake's clumsy knot. 'Like this - and roll down your sleeves. That's better. Now you look like Turkish girl.'

She held up a small square of mirror. Blake peered into it and nodded. The white scarf blended with her white shirt and made her skin seem browner. It hid her hair and changed the shape of her face.

Oh wow, that's great. A really simple disguise - but I couldn't look more different. No need to worry about Greg and Thumper now. I'm off to get Josh's tomatoes.

Blake strolled back along the aisle to the fruit and vegetable stalls. She wandered around till she found the ripest and rosier tomatoes. Watched while the stall owner loaded them into a bag. Handed over the money. Turned away.

Then jumped as a voice said, 'Now can I buy those apples?'

Oh no. Here we go again. That's Thumper. Why can't they leave me alone?

Her eyes flicked desperately from side to side. It was even worse than before. No racks of clothes to hide behind this time. No curtains. No canvas walls. Basically she had two choices. She could walk straight past Greg and Thumper - or she could turn and run like mad.

Her hand reached up to twitch the scarf into place. *Okay, I was sure this was a good disguise. Let's test it out.* She took a deep breath and kept moving. Swerved around Thumper and sidled past Greg. Glided on down the aisle, grinning like a maniac.

And heard someone call out, 'Blake! Hey, Blake, over here.'

She whirled around and saw Cuong, waving to her from the next stall. Saw Thumper stiffen and start to swing towards her. No time to think. Blake dropped to the ground and rolled. Across the asphalt. Under the stall. Between two pairs of surprised-looking legs and through a gap in a row of crates.

She flattened herself behind the crates and lay there, gasping for breath. Her heart was banging like a bass drum. When it quietened down, she heard Cuong talking to his parents in Vietnamese. And another voice, further away, growling, 'Did you hear what I heard, Greg?'

'Dunno,' Greg said. 'I mean, it's kind of hard to answer, unless you tell me what you think you heard.'

'Oh, right. Well, I reckon I heard somebody say, "Blake." Blake, right? Like that kid we're supposed to be looking for.'

Greg sighed. 'Wrong case, Thumper. Besides, there must be approximately a million people in the world called Blake - and I bet at least fifty of them are in the market right now.'

Silence, while Thumper thought about it. 'Yeah, maybe,' he said finally. 'Still, I reckon we ought to take a look around.'

'We could do that,' Greg agreed. 'Or we could buy those apples. But not both. We've wasted too much time already.'

Another silence, stretching out for half a minute. Blake lifted her head and listened so hard that her ears hurt. Then Thumper rumbled, 'Hey, mister, a kilo of apples, please' and she collapsed backwards, bumping into Cuong's runner.

'Axe you hiding from those two guys?' he whispered, squatting down beside her. 'It's okay, they're heading out of the market now. Who are they?'

Blake sat up and rubbed the back of her skull. 'They're a pair of private detectives,' she said. 'They've been tracking me for about six months but they've never come this close. Well, only once before, at any rate.'

She waited for Cuong to ask more questions but he just nodded and settled down beside her. 'You fall well,' he told her. 'Karate, right? My sister's been learning it since

she was four.'

'Four? Wow, she must be really ace by now.'

'Well, she's only nine. But yeah, she's pretty good.'

They leaned back against the cases, stretching out their legs to catch the last of the sunlight. *I like Cuong. He's cool - not nosy, like most people would've been. I'd like to say something friendly to him. Except that I'm not real good at friendly.*

She glanced across and read the words on his t-shirt. 'Critical Mass,' she said, trying to sound as friendly as possible. 'Is that something to do with computers?'

Cuong grinned. 'No, I'm not a real nethead, remember. I'm more into cycling. That's what Critical Mass is - a bunch of cyclists who take over the city once a month, to show people that bikes own the road, just as much as cars do. It's fun watching the cars crawl along at the same speed as our bikes. You should try it some time.'

The sunlight was making Blake sleepy. She wanted to listen but her eyes kept closing. 'Sorry,' she mumbled. 'I better get back to the cafe. Josh'll be wondering what's happened to me.'

She struggled to her feet. Waved to Cuong's parents. Gave Cuong a special smile. Squeezed through a space between the stalls and hurried off down the aisle, clutching her bag of tomatoes.

It's been a long day. One thing after another. Hard to keep track of it all. Right now I have a feeling there's something I've forgotten - but I'm not sure what it is.

She reached the edge of the market and stepped out into the street. As she hesitated on the corner, a hand dropped onto her shoulder and a man's voice said, 'Blake?'

That's it. I remember now. I forgot to watch out for Greg and Thumper.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Blake groaned. It was too much. She'd spent half an hour running away from Greg and Thumper. Now she was sick of running.

She turned slowly, fists clenching at her sides. Then her eyes opened wide.

'Oh,' she said. 'Hi, Constable Maloney. What are you doing here? I thought you worked on the other side of the city.'

The freckle-faced cop beamed at her. 'I got transferred,' he said. 'They need extra people around the market at the moment. There's this nasty piece of work who keeps trying to drag little kids into his green Holden. You don't happen to know anything about it, do you?'

'Me?' Blake said. 'No way. Why ask me?'

Constable Maloney frowned. 'Well, maybe it's just my imagination but you seem to turn up whenever something strange is going on. That haunted factory, for example - none of the street kids are scared of it now, not since you spent a couple of days there. And I've got a mate down in Sunnyport who tells me you nailed an arsonist for them too.' He narrowed his eyes and added, 'So ... why are you hanging around the market? Are we trying to catch the same guy? Or are you investigating something else?'

'I've been buying tomatoes,' she told him, holding up the bag. 'I'm working at the Internet cafe in Market Terrace. Working way too hard to have time for mysteries.'

The cop raised one sandy eyebrow. 'That sounds convincing, Blake. Why don't I believe you? Oh well, never mind. You might as well get back to your cafe for now. If you're mixed up in something, I'll find out about it sooner or later.'

'Don't worry, Constable Maloney. I'm not planning to mess up your case.' *This time.*
'See you round, okay?'

She dodged around him and scuttled across the road. Stopped at Tommy Tranter's news stand to buy a paper. The old man pushed back his cap and wiped his forehead with a huge white hanky.

'I tell you, girlie, it's been a busy day,' he sighed. 'Half a dozen new faces to remember, including that cop I just saw you talking to. A mate of yours, is he?'

Blake grinned. *Nice try, Mr Tranter - but I'm not going to tell you where I met Constable Maloney.* She shrugged and said. 'No, he's not exactly a mate' and the old man's eyes twinkled.

'All right, girlie. Keep your secrets. I don't mind - it gives me something to think about. Any luck with finding your wallet?'

'Not yet,' she told him. 'Right now I'm watching out for two other guys. A big, muscly one and a little one who looks like a jockey. You haven't spotted them in Market Terrace, have you?'

Tommy Tranter screwed up his face until his eyes were half-closed. 'Muscleman and Jockey,' he muttered, as if he was searching through his memory. 'No, girlie, I can't say I've noticed a pair of blokes like that. Want me to keep an eye out for them too?'

Blake nodded. 'That'd be ace, Mr Tranter.'

She swung off down the street, feeling safe for the first time in an hour. *Tommy Tranter reckons he hasn't seen Greg and Thumper - and he notices everything. So I ought to be fine now. I can stop worrying about them.*

I can start worrying about how to find my wallet instead.

The cafe was empty, for once. Blake found Josh in the kitchen, making himself a cheese and lettuce sandwich. She dumped the tomatoes in the fridge and perched on the bench beside him.

'Sorry I took so long,' she said. 'I got caught up at the market.' *Nearly got caught by Greg and Thumper too. But I don't think I'll bother to mention that.*

'No, no, no, don't worry about it,' Josh told her. 'You deserve a break every now and then. You're a hard worker, Blake, and I haven't even had time to train you properly. Do you want me to explain anything else about the cafe, while we've got a bit of peace and quiet?'

'Names,' she said straight away. 'Could you tell me why everyone has such weird names?'

He laughed. 'That's right, I suppose it would seem weird to someone from outside. They're handles, Blake - the names that phreaks and hackers use when they're on-line.'

Partly as a disguise and partly because their handle says something about them. Like, Wedge loves Choc Wedge ice-creams. And Spider - well, Spider practically lives in the Web.'

'What about your name?' Blake asked and Josh blushed.

'Oh, my name's not a handle,' he mumbled. 'I had this really stupid surname, so I decided to change it years ago. You know how people say, "Don't throw the baby out with the bath water"? Well, I kind of felt sorry for the bath water too ... and that's how I picked my new name.'

Blake couldn't help laughing. *Yep, that's typical Josh. So nice that he even feels sorry for imaginary bath water. I still can't figure out how he ended up with a girlfriend like Morticia.*

'Is Morticia a handle as well?' she said and the tall guy shook his head.

'No, no, no, Tricia isn't a phreak or a hacker. Fact is, hackers are mostly guys. She just changed her name to annoy her family. She can't stand them, you see. Won't have anything to do with them. Doesn't even want to share the same name.'

He sighed and shoved the rest of the sandwich into his mouth. His beard waggled sadly while he chewed. *Poor Josh. Now he's feeling sorry for Morticia - but I bet she gets a real kick out of annoying her folks.*

'Why don't you and Morticia get married?' she suggested. 'That way, she could score a new name without even trying.'

'I'd love to marry her,' Josh said mournfully. 'But Morticia—'

He stopped suddenly. Blake swivelled around and saw Morticia standing in the doorway. Her black eyebrows tugged down in a scowl. Her black nails tapped on her studded belt.

'Oh, great,' she said. 'I go away for twenty-four hours and you start talking about me behind my back. Who's this kid? Another one of your strays?'

'As a matter of fact, Blake's the new waitress,' Josh said. 'Don't frown at me like that, Tricia - I mean, Morticia. I've got a cafe to run. I had to hire someone else.'

'Well, I'm here now,' Morticia snapped. 'So you can un-hire her, right?'

She glared at Josh and he wriggled uncomfortably. 'No. no. no,' he said. 'I can't do that. I promised Blake a job and she needs the money.'

Morticia swung around and glared at Blake instead. Blake took a step backwards. *Hey, no way. Leave me out of this.*

'Excuse me,' she muttered. 'I think I heard someone in the cafe,' and she ducked between them and darted out of the kitchen.

One of the regular customers was typing away on the chat-line keyboard. Blake made her a cup of coffee and then went to lean on the counter. *Oh wow, more problems. What am I going to do? If I tell Morticia she can have her job back, I'll get Josh out of trouble - only then I'll be in big trouble myself.*

Like, no money, no room and no way of ever finding my wallet.

She frowned and gazed out of the window. Counted the people going past. Three girls in school uniform. Two men in suits. Four boys shunting a heavy trolley, loaded with sacks of onions. A big guy in a green singlet, followed by -

Oh no.

She dropped to her knees and went crawling across the floor. Pushed at the door and crawled into the kitchen. Stood up and faced Josh and Morticia, who were staring at her in surprise.

'It's okay,' she said. 'You can stop fighting. I resign.'

Blake sat at the kitchen table, with her head in her hands. *One step forward, two steps back. That's the story of my life right now. I lose my wallet and find a job. Then Greg and Thumper turn up in Market Terrace and I lose my job, because I can't risk letting them see me.*

Still, it's not all bad. Greg and Thumper haven't actually spotted me yet. And Josh said he'll let me stay in the upstairs room, even though I'm not working for him any more. That means I can keep on watching Morticia and the phreaks.

Things could be a lot worse.

But they could be a lot better too.

She sighed and stared down at the table. A plate came sliding towards her, with a cheese and lettuce sandwich on it. 'Thanks, Josh,' she muttered, without looking up. 'You needn't have bothered, though. I'm not really hungry.'

She went on sitting there, scowling gloomily at the sandwich. After a while she realised that the plate was empty. *That's interesting. I must've eaten the sandwich without noticing. Funny, I feel a bit better now.*

She lifted her head and looked around. The kitchen shone with a soft, red glow. The light from the sunset. Outside, the market would be empty and the shops would be shut. Tommy Tranter would be heading home in his wheelchair. Terrence would be tapping busily on his keyboard in the CCCC office.

'Yes!' Blake said with a snap of her fingers. 'That's it!'

She jumped to her feet and hurried into the cafe. Josh's old parka was hanging on a hook by the door. She grabbed it and pulled it on, rolling up the sleeves and tugging the hood over her head. Then, with a quick glance from side to side, she stepped out into Market Terrace.

I lost my money and found a job. So, if I lose my job, I need to find some more money. Fast.

Here goes.

CHAPTER NINE

The doors of the lift slid open. Blake marched across the office. Stopped in front of a desk, piled high with folders. Said, 'Hi, Clio. Still want me to come and work for you?'

Clio Carstairs pushed her chair back. In the light from the computer screen, her face looked grey and tired.

'Would you do that?' she breathed. 'Oh, Blake, that's really, really great. The best thing that's happened all day.'

She slumped down in her chair. Blake shifted a stack of folders and perched on the corner of the desk. 'So,' she said, 'what else has been happening today?'

Clio sighed. 'Well, my dad sent a bunch of guys around to give me a hand. This top computer expert who went after the worm. And a pair of private detectives who work for him sometimes.'

'Any luck with the worm?'

'Maybe. He reckons he can stop the worm getting into the computers of the big company that CCCC's working for. See, when the worm burrows into a computer site, it starts by looking for its own name, to make sure it hasn't wriggled in there before. So this guy's going to write a program that pretends to be the worm. When the real worm meets the pretend worm, it'll automatically destroy itself.'

Blake laughed. *I like the way this stuff works. Don't really understand it but I like it, all the same. Tricking a real worm with a make-believe worm - that's pretty cool. Like a karate move in cyberspace.*

'Sounds good,' she said. 'You ought to be okay now, right?'

'Wrong,' Clio told her. 'For starters, Terrence panicked. He was convinced that the worm was going to mess with his data, so he wiped all his files. There's nothing left. Six months of work, down the toilet.'

'Oh no! You mean he actually *did* what he thought the worm was planning to do?'

'Afraid so. The computer expert told me to sack him and - well, I had to agree. It was really, really sad, though. Terrence'd been working here since CCCC started. I'm going to miss him.'

Blake stared across at Terrence's desk, remembering the nerd who'd knocked her down in the foyer. The guy Tommy Tranter called the Walking Disaster Area. *I thought the worm was just a game—but the game's beginning to get serious. It's wrecking people's lives. Terrence's life, for starters.*

She turned and caught Clio watching her. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'Terrence'll be okay. He'll find another job soon. He's an ace programmer and, believe it or not, he works as a clown at weekends, juggling and doing conjuring tricks for little kids' parties.'

Blake couldn't help smiling. 'A clown? That's perfect! He can get paid for dropping things and falling over his own feet.'

'Yeah, he's good at that,' Clio agreed, smiling back. 'Maybe I should learn clowning too. Then I can work with Terrence if CCCC goes bust.'

'Hey, CCCC won't go bust. Your computer expert'll fix the worm. You'll go on running computer classes and doing the programming for that big company. And you won't need to hire me, after all.'

'Oh yes, I will,' said Clio. 'Maybe Dad's expert will fix the worm and maybe he won't. Either way, there's a hacker out in cyberspace who hates CCCC. I want to find out who he is and I want to stop him. Come on, Blake. Let's get down to business.'

She looked up at Blake, her gold-hazel eyes bright and determined. Blake nodded. 'Okay then, time for a few questions. First, have you been able to think of anyone who's got it in for you? Like a friend that you dropped or a guy that you used to go out with?'

Clio shook her head. 'No, nothing like that. My friends are all pretty cool and I haven't gone out with anyone in ages. I've been way too busy setting up CCCC.'

'Well than, what about your brothers or sisters?' she asked and Clio frowned.

'Jake and Patty? How do you know about them?'

Blake shrugged. 'Hey. you told me your father was keen to help you because you're the only one of his kids who's interested in business. Maybe your brother and sister feel jealous or something.'

'No way,' Clio said with a grin. 'Jake and Patty are, like, the family rebels. They don't want to be close to Dad. As a matter of fact, they keep trying to get as far away from him as possible.'

'Oh yeah? Where are they now?'

'Jake's in India, I think, studying yoga. And Patty could be anywhere. We haven't

heard from her for at least three years.'

Blake shivered suddenly, as though an icy finger was tapping her on the shoulder. She paused and listened to the echo of a voice inside her head. Tommy Tranter's voice, saying, 'It's been a busy day. Half a dozen new faces to remember ...'

'Are you sure Jake or Patty haven't been prowling around here lately?' she said and Clio laughed.

'Hey, I think I'd recognise my own brother and sister. Try again, Blake.'

'All right then, if you don't have any enemies, what about CCCC? Maybe the hacker hates the company, not you personally.'

Clio tugged at a handful of her gold-brown hair. 'Yeah, I've been wondering about that, ever since the first time I talked to you. The hacker can't be one of the students who failed the course - they wouldn't have the brains to create a worm. And I'm sure he's not employed by any of the other places that are running computer courses. There's enough work for all of us, so they wouldn't need to sabotage CCCC.'

'But?' Blake prompted and Clio hesitated for a moment.

'But there's one more possibility,' she admitted. 'I haven't talked to Dad's detectives about it, because I didn't want to get the guy into trouble. He's a friend of mine, you see. Not a really, really close friend but a friend, all the same. I can't prove that he's got anything to do with the worm. I'd just like you to check him out - without letting him know that I suspect him, of course.'

'Sure. That shouldn't be too hard. You better tell me a bit more about him, though.'

'Well, his name's Sang Nguyen. He's really, really smart - like, he was in the same course as me but he was studying computer science as well. Last year he decided to set up his own business. It's smaller than CCCC, because I've got four programmers working for me and Sang basically works by himself. When that big company was looking for someone to develop new software for them, we both applied for the job ...'

'But the company chose you, not Sang,' Blake finished. 'And now you're wondering whether he's still mad at you. Mad enough to try and wreck CCCC.'

'No, it's not that simple.' Clio protested. 'Sang's brilliant, right? I can't believe he'd waste his time brooding about something that happened months ago. Still, he's just starting out, which means he's looking for work. If CCCC bombs, the company would probably ask him to take over the job.'

Blake nodded. 'In other words, Sang's got a motive for planting a worm in your computer systems. I can see why you want to find out a bit more about him. I'll go and talk to him tomorrow - and don't worry, I'll be really tactful.'

'I know you will. That's why I picked you. We're two of a kind, Blake. I can trust you to do things the way I want them done. You won't barge in and start bullying Sang, like Dad's detectives would. So I'll tell you everything they find out - but I won't tell them about you. Like, you'll be my special secret.'

She clasped her hands behind her head and leaned back, staring at her computer screen. Blake studied her thoughtfully. *I like Clio. She's determined to solve this problem and yet she doesn't want Sang to get hurt, not if he's innocent. She was worried about Terrence as well, even though he made things harder for her by wiping those files. She cares about CCCC - but she cares about people too. I like that.*

And I like the way she's dealing with her father. He's obviously dead keen to help but she won't let him take over. She wants to be independent. Make her own decisions. Run her own life. I can relate to that.

Hey, I didn't let my father take me over, either.

She smiled at Clio, feeling pleased with her new job. But, as she watched, Clio's face changed. Her gold-hazel eyes widened and her mouth narrowed into a thin red line. Blake slid down from the desk. Peered over her shoulder. Read the words flashing in orange and yellow on the screen.

CCCC MAKES ME SPEW.

'This is so unfair,' Clio groaned. The hacker's out there somewhere, laughing at me, and I don't know how to stop him. Oh Blake, what if Dad's expert can't fix the worm? What am I going to do then?'

She swung away from the screen and buried her face in her hands. Blake reached over and patted her arm.

'It's okay,' she said. 'We'll find the hacker, I promise. We're two of a kind, remember. The kind who never give up.'

Blake propped her elbows on the windowsill and stared out at the night. The window was half-clean and half-smudged. *I better finish washing it tomorrow.*

But it didn't really matter, because there was nothing much to look at. Just the backyard of the cafe, crowded with weeds that were almost as tall as Josh. The backyard of the science fiction comic shop, crowded with wobbly towers of old packing cases. And a tiny laneway, squeezed in between the tall buildings.

Market Terrace is like an island, cut off from the rest of the city. A one way street. A little world, with its own population and its own problems.

She started to count off all the people she'd met in the past two days. Tommy Tranter in his wheelchair. Keeping an eye on the street. Tall, friendly Josh and tall, scary Morticia. Handsome Marty and skinny, little Spider. Cuong and Wedge in their Critical Mass t-shirts. Clio Carstairs and her worried gold-hazel eyes.

Oh, and Constable Maloney's patrolling the market as well. And I mustn't forget

about Greg and Thumper - or that funny old pair who dropped into the cafe, looking for Josh. There's a lot going on in Market Terrace at the moment.

Too much, if you ask me.

She swung away from the window and collapsed onto the bed. Leaned back against the lumpy pillows and closed her eyes. Pictured herself on her Honda Rebel, speeding off down the highway. Heading out of the city. Leaving Market Terrace behind.

It was a nice idea - but it wasn't the answer. For one thing, she still hadn't managed to check out the Internet and find the information she needed. And for another thing, she was still broke.

Well, I've got fifty dollars that Clio gave me, for fares and phone calls and stuff. But I don't want her to pay me till I've proved I can do the job. I mean, it's not like I'm a real detective or anything. Okay, I solved a couple of mysteries in the past - but maybe I was just lucky.

Right now she wasn't feeling lucky at all. It was bad luck that Greg and Thumper had turned up at the market. They weren't looking for her, she was positive about that. 'Wrong case,' Greg had said, when Thumper heard Cuong calling her name. So it was just a coincidence - but it definitely made things harder. Especially since Blake had a nasty feeling that she knew which case they were working on.

I bet Greg and Thumper are Clio's dad's detectives - which means they'll be dropping into CCCC all the time. That ought to be interesting. Wonder whether I'll manage to solve Clio's problem before Greg and Thumper catch up with me.

She tossed and turned on the lumpy mattress. Rubbed her ribs, as though she was scratching a mosquito bite. The icy finger was tickling her again. Her sixth sense that always warned her when there was danger ahead.

Danger - and maybe other things as well. Daffy Clarke, that crazy artist in Sunnyport, told me to trust my powers. She reckoned I need to study the signs and work out what the power's trying to tell me. But I can't. It doesn't make any sense.

Blake sat up and reached for the black notebook, lying beside the bed. She switched on the light and flicked through the pages. But for the first time in six months, she couldn't concentrate on the words.

What's the point? I'm never going to find my mother, because I'm never going to get out of here. I'll be stuck in this place forever.

Trapped in a one way street.

CHAPTER TEN

Sunshine woke Blake early. She bounced out of bed. Yawned and stretched. Touched her toes twenty times, swung her arms in circles and then went to look out the window. A brand new day. She couldn't remember why she'd felt so down the night before.

Okay, I'm off to catch a hacker. Despite Greg and Thumper. And without any help from that icy finger. I'm going to do this all by myself.

Watch out, world. Here comes Blake the Great Detective.

She clattered downstairs. As she hit the bottom step, icy fingers tugged at her wrist. Blake took no notice. She swerved into the kitchen and slammed two slices of bread into the toaster. There were crumbs all over the bench, so she grabbed a cloth and wiped them away.

Then she paused and frowned. *That's funny. I thought I wiped that bench before I went to bed.*

Blake was still frowning when the toast popped up. She wandered out into the cafe, crunching loudly. Sat on the nearest stool and gazed at the blank computer screen. Winced as she felt another cold touch on her wrist. Another urgent tug.

All right, all right. I get the message. I'll take a look around, as soon as I've finished my breakfast.

She took a small bite of toast and chewed it slowly. Half a minute later she shrugged and slid down from the stool. She hesitated for a few seconds, staring at her wrist. Then she headed for the back of the cafe.

The storeroom smelt of stale coffee and old socks. Coke cans on the floor, a half-eaten piece of toast on the computer and a pair of silver moon boots under the table. And Spider, gazing bug-eyed at the glowing screen, as though he'd been hypnotised.

'Oh wow,' Blake said. 'Have you been here all night?'

Spider turned and blinked at her. 'Is it morning already? Then, yeah, I've been here all night.'

'You're a maniac, kid. What are your parents going to say?'

He blinked harder. 'Nothing. I sent Marty off to sleep in my bed. It was fine by him. His stepdad's on the rampage again.'

'Are you sure that's going to work?' Blake asked. 'You and Marty look pretty different, y'know.'

'That won't bother my parents. They just look into my room last thing at night, to make sure there's a body under the doona. And Marty'll climb out of the window before they wake up next morning. He should be here for his next lesson any minute now.'

Blake strolled over to peer at the computer screen. 'Why do you bother teaching Marty?' she said. 'He walked out of the CCCC computer course, after all. So he's not really interested, is he?'

Spider's hand shot out and hit one of the command keys. The display on the screen disappeared. 'Hey, that course was no good,' he told her. 'Marty's doing fine now.'

She smiled at him. *He's wrong about CCCC's courses, for sure. But it's nice that he's sticking up for his mate. They're an odd pair of friends, those two. Still, it seems to work pretty well.*

'So why were you spending the night in Josh's storeroom?' she asked. 'Is this, like, a school project or something?'

'Just stuff,' Spider said vaguely. 'Listen, you wanted me to run an Internet search for you, didn't you? I'm still pretty hyped. I could do it for you now, if you like.'

I think he's trying to change the subject. But who cares? I need help with that search.

'Okay, here's the deal,' she told him. 'I'm searching for someone who seems to have disappeared about a year ago. So I'm checking into her past, to see whether any of her old friends or her family know where she is. I went back to Sunnyport, the town where she grew up, and found that she was sent off to the country, to live with her aunt in Mudgeebung. But when I went to the Register of Voters and the Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, I couldn't find her aunt's name and -'

'And you started to wonder whether it was worth going to Mudgeebung,' Spider nodded. 'You're still interested, though, so you must've remembered something else about the aunt. One of her hobbies, maybe. Do you want me to access the web pages for some hobby groups?'

Blake stared at him in surprise. 'You're pretty quick, aren't you? Yeah, I've got this book where I've written down everything that my - that this person ever said to me. I

remember her telling me that her aunt was crazy about orchids. And the guy at the State Library reckoned there might be a web site for orchid growers, with a list of members. Could you check it out for me?'

He blinked. 'Not a problem, Blake. We'll use one of the other computers, so I can get a search engine from the cafe's home page. Come on.'

She followed him into the cafe, waited while the skinny kid switched on a computer and typed the password. Next minute purple words were shimmering on a bright blue background.

JOSH BATHWATER WELCOMES YOU TO A BYTE TO EAT.

Great. I'm back to where I started, two days ago. Maybe I'll actually get somewhere this time.

'See, there's a menu - a list of choices - at the bottom of the page,' Spider said. 'We'll go with "Searching the Net".'

He dragged an arrow across the screen and clicked on the words. The image on the screen changed. A white background now, with neat little boxes and step-by-step instructions. Spider typed fast and Blake watched the letters appearing in one of the boxes.

'Orchid growing,' she read out. 'What next?'

Before she could check the instructions. Spider shunted the mouse around and clicked on two more boxes and some highlighted words. As the screen changed again, he started to laugh.

'Six hundred and nineteen references to orchid growing. Too much. We need to narrow the search.'

His hands darted across the keyboard. His pale eyes glinted. Blake sighed. *He's been up all night but he can follow this better than I can.* She leaned on the back of the stool and listened while Spider explained.

'I've asked for "Orchid growing in Victoria" and - yes! We've cut it down to twenty-nine references. That one's just a nursery catalogue. And this one's obviously some guy's home page. But look here, Blake. "The Victorian Orchid Grower's Association." Let's see whether they'll give us a list of their members.'

He sent the arrow skimming across the screen. Tapped and clicked. The screen display kept changing, too fast for Blake to keep track of it. Finally she found herself staring at columns of names and email addresses.

'There you go,' Spider said, pleased. 'Now, what's the name of your friend's aunt?'

'Fay Ray, according to the Register of Voters from twenty years back. She was Fay Delaney, to start with, but she married a guy called Alan Ray. I reckon she must've really loved him, to take on a name like Fay Ray.'

The skinny kid frowned. 'Funny, I know that name from somewhere. Let me think. A late night movie or ...'

'Hey, who cares?' Blake said impatiently. 'Check that list for me, okay?'

He scrolled down the screen. Stopped at someone called Radovich. Moved the arrow slowly along the rest of the R-names. Frowned, started to shake his head and then jabbed his finger at the screen.

'There! That's her. I remember now.'

'Queen Kong,' Blake read. 'One of those handles that Josh was talking about, right? But what's it got to do with my friend's aunt?'

Spider blinked at her. 'Well, *King Kong's* an old movie. I've seen it a few times. And the girl that King Kong falls in love with is played by an actor called Fay Wray. So your friend's aunt could be calling herself Queen Kong, as a kind of joke. Trust me, Blake, that's how most people pick up their handles.'

'All right, I believe you. But it doesn't really prove anything. How can we be sure Queen Kong's my friend's aunt? And how can we find out whether she's still in Mudgeebung?'

'We could try the chat line,' Spider suggested.

So Blake leaned on the back of his chair, while he jabbed at the keys. They scrolled through the chat pages. Watched out for Queen Kong's handle. Found out more than they needed to know about orchid growing. And finally turned to each other and shouted, 'Yes!'

'Queen Kong reckons it's hard, being an orchid fan in Mudgeebung,' Spider read out. 'She says it's too isolated. Too far away from all the nurseries and the orchid shows.'

Blake nodded. *That's my aunt, for sure. Mum said she was always complaining about something.*

'Spider, you're brilliant,' she said and the skinny kid wriggled.

'Hey, it was easy. I can do better than that. Anything else you want me to try?'

Blake hesitated. *Hmm. I'm starting to get the hang of this. If a fact's entered into a computer system somewhere, then there are ways of finding it out. And there's one fact I'd definitely like to check.*

'Do you mean it?' she asked and Spider nodded. 'Okay then, can you tell me whether anyone's been using my credit card? The one I lost when my wallet was stolen.'

'Sure,' he said confidently. 'I just need to find a way into the bank's system. If you give me the details, I can use one of my scanning programs on Josh's computer - and um, maybe you'd better make some more coffee and toast while I get going.'

Oh-oh. He doesn't want me in the room, watching him. Sounds like he might be planning to do something dodgy.

'Spider, are you sure this is cool?' she said. 'I mean, I don't want to get you into

trouble or -'

He snapped his fingers. 'The details, Blake. Coffee. Toast.'

His pale eyes were glazing over already. Blake frowned. *I shouldn't encourage him - but I really want to know whether my money's gone. Besides, I have a feeling that Spider's been playing dodgy games with Josh's computer all night. One more bit of dodgy business can't hurt ...*

She scribbled down the name of the bank and the number of her account. Turned away and walked out into the kitchen. Sliced bread. Filled the electric kettle. Carried the toast and coffee out to the back room.

As she pushed the door open, Spider glanced up and whistled softly. 'Lots of money in that account! And nothing's been taken out, not for a month and a half. Is that what you expected?'

'No,' Blake told him. 'As a matter of fact, I reckon it's dead weird. Why the heck would someone steal my credit card and then decide *not* to steal my money?'

The gleam in Spider's eyes faded. He fidgeted and turned his head away. *Like he's come crashing down from cyberspace, back into the real world. I bet he knows something about my wallet. If he's not the thief, then he knows who it is.*

'Spider -' she began and he swung his chair towards her.

'Hey, your money's safe,' he said in a rush. 'Why don't you just ask the bank for a new card?'

'Because I'm on the run. Because two private detectives are after me and they always seem to know when I use my card. Because I'm stuck here, like a sitting duck, and I don't want to give them the chance to catch me.'

She stopped herself and swallowed hard. *What's the matter with me? I don't usually tell strangers all about myself.* Then she sighed and relaxed. *Oh well, Spider just took a big risk for me. At least I can be honest with him in return.*

She glanced across and found the skinny kid watching her intently. 'On the run?' he said. 'That's tough.'

Blake shrugged. 'Hey, I've been there before. Me and my mum were on the run for three whole years. Fifteen moves to fifteen new towns. Working for peanuts, living in caravan parks. Hoping all the time that my dad wouldn't find us.'

'But you're not with your mum now, are you?' Spider asked and she shook her head.

'No. She's the person I'm looking for.'

There was silence for a moment. Spider studied the keyboard. Blake stared down at her feet. Then the skinny kid said, 'Listen. I could run a check on your mum, if you like. Not now, because I'm starting to spin out. But later, after I've had a sleep.'

'Spider, you're a genius!' she breathed but he shook his head.

'If you think I'm smart, you ought to meet the Huntsman. I'm just an ordinary little spider, in comparison. Huntsman's pure poison. The best hacker in the country.'

Blake studied him thoughtfully. 'You're a hacker too, aren't you?' she asked and Spider blinked at her.

'Used to be. Then I got caught hacking into the Defence Department's computer systems and my folks made me promise to give it up. So I don't do that sort of stuff any more. Except every now and then, for my mates.'

He yawned until his jaw cracked and slumped sideways in the chair. Stood up and staggered across to a heap of blankets in the corner. Collapsed onto the heap, curling up like a baby, with his thumb in his mouth.

Oh wow. That was quick. He's half-asleep already. Now's my chance.

She tiptoed over and knelt down beside him. 'Spider,' she whispered in his ear, 'where's my wallet?'

'Gone for good,' he mumbled drowsily. 'Unless I can ...'

Then his eyes closed and he fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Blake tugged at one of the blankets and draped it over Spider. *Nice going, kid. That was a great time to doze off. Just before you told me the truth about my money.*

As she tucked the blanket around his shoulders, she felt an icy finger trail across the back of her neck. She jumped up and whirled around. Saw Marty in the doorway, glaring at her.

'What've you done to my mate?' he demanded.

'Nothing,' Blake said. 'He's been sitting in front of that computer all night. He did a couple of searches for me and then suddenly keeled over, so I covered him up. Is that okay by you?'

Marty shifted from foot to foot, thinking hard. Then he took a step forward and held out his hand.

'Sorry, Blake,' he said. "Thanks for looking after him. The runt's got a great brain but his body can't always keep up with it. It's okay, I'll take care of him now. See you around.'

Blake shrugged and shook his hand. Strolled out into the cafe. Glanced down and noticed a smear of red on her palm. Blood. Her heart missed a beat and then she started to laugh.

Hey, you just shook hands with Marty, remember. He probably bites his nails or whatever. Come to think of it, there was something strange about his finger. The skin was really thick and rough, as hard as the skin on the soles of my feet.

It was another mystery. One too many. She pushed it out of her mind and looked

round the cafe. The front door was open. Josh was at the counter, starting up the computers. Morticia was filling the salt shakers. And one of the regular customers was already linked up to the chat-line.

Blake frowned and checked her watch. Ten o'clock. She must've spent a couple of hours in cyberspace with Spider. *Time to go and talk to Clio's rival. Sang Nguyen, the guy who lost out on that job with the multinational company.*

She yawned and glanced out the window. Rubbed her eyes. Looked again. It was true. Thumper was still lounging against the wall of the CCCC building, staring up at the sky.

Blake swung away and scuttled into the kitchen. *Oh wow, what am I going to do now?* She hung onto the bench, breathing fast. When she lifted her head, Morticia was standing in front of her.

'There's someone outside that you don't want to meet, isn't there?' she said. 'Relax, kid. I know exactly what to do.'

She flexed her fingers and tugged at her spiky black hair. Bit by bit, it peeled away from her head. Blake gasped.

'Oh,' she said. 'It's a wig.'

'That's right,' Morticia told her. 'Here, put it on.'

She pulled the black wig over Blake's blonde hair. Reached for a handbag on the kitchen table and took out a stick of black eyeliner. Tilted Blake's chin and held her eyelid in place with one finger, while she drew thick, black lines around her eyes.

'Excellent,' she said, stepping back. 'Your own sister wouldn't recognise you now. You're a real Goth. Not quite as scary as me, of course, but that takes practice.'

Blake's eyes were watering. She squinted up at Morticia, blinking fast. *Wish I could see her properly. I'd like to know what she looks like without the wig. And I'd like to know whether she's smiling, because I think she might've just cracked a joke.*

'Good one, Morticia,' she said. 'Um, thanks for helping me.'

Morticia's hands spread out in a shrug. 'Hey, I took your job, so I owe you something. Off you go.'

Blake blinked again and her eyes cleared. But before she could focus on Morticia's face, the tall woman gave her a push. Blake lifted her hand in a salute and headed for the door. Took a deep breath and strode across the street.

She strolled past Thumper, so close that she could've snapped her fingers under his nose. The big guy shifted uneasily and moved his feet out of her way. Blake grinned and kept walking. Glanced at her reflection in a shop window and waved to the small sturdy Goth with panda eyes and dangerous hair.

Morticia's right. My own family wouldn't recognise me. No wonder Thumper didn't have a clue.

Half an hour later she was standing in the foyer of a small office building. She tilted her head back and read the names on a board beside the lift. *Net City. Yep, that's Sang's business. Funny, I feel as though I've heard the name before.*

Oh, right. I remember.

As she stepped into the lift, she pulled the wig off and stuffed it into her bag. No need to scare Sang out of his wits, before she'd even started talking to him. It'd be better to act friendly - and luckily she had the perfect opening line.

Sang's office was small and crowded. Files jammed into the book shelf, books stacked on the floor. Letters and scraps of paper pinned onto an enormous notice board, fluttering in the breeze from the door. And a state of the art computer, in the only clear space on the desk.

Sang beamed up at her from behind the computer. An elegant guy in his early twenties, with slicked back hair and a stylish autumn brown shirt. Gold skin and dark chocolate eyes, just like his nephew Cuong.

'G'day, my name's Blake and I'm a mate of Cuong's,' she said. 'He told me about your business. So, when I spotted the name, I decided to come in and say hi.'

He jumped up and cleared a chair for her. 'Looking for work, are you?' he asked. 'Cuong sends a lot of his phreak friends around. He's not a real phreak but he knows everyone. I suppose you've met Huntsman - and Spider - and Wedge.'

'Not Huntsman. But the others, yeah.'

'That's right, Huntsman hasn't been around for a few months. Oh well, street kids are always moving on. The Huntsman did some good work for me, though. And Spider's brilliant, of course.'

'You actually give jobs to fourteen year old kids?'

'Just small, one-off jobs,' Sang explained. 'It keeps them out of trouble - and hey, you kids are the cutting edge. Things change really fast in this game. Me, I'm old-fashioned already.'

He didn't look too worried about it, though. His eyes flicked around the office, as though he still couldn't believe his luck. Blake smiled at him.

'What kind of work are you doing right now?' she asked.

'Hmm. It's hard to describe in one sentence. You've heard about the "killer application"—the missing link that'll make everyone want to hook up to the Internet? Well, I'm kind of playing around at the moment, looking for a killer app. That's partly why I like working with you kids. You're the Net generation. You're what it's all about.'

Blake grinned. *Sang thinks I'm the same age as Wedge or Spider. His mistake - I'm just small for my age. But that's cool, if it means he'll go on talking to me like this.*

'The killer app, hey?' she said. 'So you're not working on the same sort of stuff as

Clio Carstairs?'

Sang's eyebrows shot up. 'Clio Carstairs? I'd almost forgotten about her. We were friends at business school but then we both applied for a job with Interco ... and Clio got it because her dad's on the board of directors. I think she must've felt a bit guilty - at any rate, she hasn't spoken to me since then. She needn't have worried, though.'

'Why not?' Blake asked and he beamed at her again.

'Well, the Research and Design guys at Interco liked my work, so they're paying me to check out the killer app. It's a dream job, Blake. Way better than the job they gave Clio. So it all turned out pretty well in the end.'

Sang patted his computer proudly. His eyes glowed and his mouth stretched into an unstoppable smile. *He's telling the truth. You couldn't fake a smile like that. Which means he isn't Clio's enemy, after all.*

'Thanks,' she said. 'I gotta go now but I'll drop in next time I'm down this end of town.'

'So you don't want to sign up for some work?' he asked. 'Oh well, that's cool. Say hi to Cuong when you see him. And tell Spider, "Happy hacking".'

Blake was turning to go but the icy finger poked her in the ribs. She swung back. 'Happy hacking?' she repeated. 'I thought Spider had given that up.'

'Right,' Sang said quickly. 'Of course. It was a joke, okay?'

Blake paced along the city streets, head down, arms swinging. She'd pulled Morticia's wig on before she left Sang's building, so everyone kept out of her way.

I'm glad I went to see Sang. He isn't Clio's hacker, I'm sure of that, but he gave me a few ideas. For one thing, he convinced me that Spider's still hacking, big time - though I can't see why Spider would want to send a worm into CCCC's computer system.

And for another thing, Sang told me the name of the company that CCCC's writing programs for.

Interco. Blake knew that name, nearly as well as she knew her own. She'd heard it almost every day, while she was growing up. Interco, short for International Consolidation. The big multinational company that her father ran.

That explains how Greg and Thumper arrived on the scene. They work for Dad some of the time, trying to track me down, but they obviously do other jobs as well. The job at CCCC, for example. They were hired by Clio's dad - and, according to Sang, he's on the Interco board of directors.

Blake sighed. Interco was everywhere. It owned factories and offices and warehouses and smaller companies, all over the country.

Oh well, too bad. I'll just have to get used to it. There's no point in freaking every

time I hear Interco's name. Besides, I've got more important things to worry about. Like, how to find Clio's hacker and stop the worm.

She looked up and realised that she was heading towards the gateway to the market. As she got closer, she spotted three kids on bikes, circling around outside. Cuong and Wedge in their Critical Mass t-shirts, on cross-terrain bikes with twenty-one gears and Shimano brakes. Marty on a rattly old Malvern Star, with rusty mudguards.

She waved to them but they looked straight through her. Blake started to frown and then remembered she was still in disguise. She laughed and swung around the corner. Crossed the road and stopped beside Tommy Tranter's news stand. Waited to see whether the old man would recognise her.

When he glanced up and saw her black eyeliner and spiky hair, he started to wheel his chair backwards. Then he lifted his hands from the wheels and clapped them together.

'Mystery Girl!' he said. 'Looking like the Vampire Queen's little sister.'

'Yeah, the Vampire Queen lent me some of her stuff, so I could sneak past those guys,' Blake explained. 'Have you seen them around today?'

Tommy Tranter snorted. 'Muscleman and the Jockey? Can't get rid of them, girly. Mark my words, there's something odd going on in this street. They've been running up and down Market Terrace all day, like cats on a hot tin roof.'

'Rats,' she said. 'I'm still trying to stay out of their way. I'll probably be safe while I'm wearing Morticia's wig but it's good to know where they are. Thanks for the warning, Tommy.'

'Thanks for the entertainment, Mystery Girl,' he retorted. She could hear him cackling at his own joke as she headed off down the street. *Mystery Girl. So Tommy's made up a nickname for me too.*

Not a bad nickname, either.

Thumper was propped against the wall of the CCCC's building, in exactly the same place as before. Blake dodged across Market Terrace and darted into the cafe. Morticia was polishing the espresso machine but she dropped the tea towel and hurried over.

'Hey, it worked,' she said, pleased. 'I'm not surprised, y'know. You look really different with black hair.'

'Well, you look kind of different too,' Blake pointed out and Morticia scowled.

'Yeah, I look more normal. Josh thinks it's terrific.'

Blake stepped back and studied her. Morticia was still incredibly tall and amazingly thin. But, without the wig, her short hair was the colour of honey. And, without the rings of black eyeliner, her eyes looked brown, not green.

'You don't look normal,' she said honestly. 'You look nice, though.'

'Nice,' Morticia spat. 'I don't want to be *nice*.' Then she groaned and sat down on the stool next to Blake. 'Or do I? Maybe it'd be nice to be nice, for a change. Maybe it'd be

nice to marry Josh and look after him and let him look after me and -'

Her voice trailed away and she stared down at her hands. 'Well,' Blake said, 'what's stopping you?'

Morticia blushed. 'It's his name,' she whispered. 'I can't handle the idea of being called Morticia Bathwater. I keep asking Josh to tell me his real name - but he won't. So I won't marry him.'

She leapt up and marched off. Her black high-heeled boots clacked angrily across the floor. Blake couldn't help chuckling. *I thought Morticia could handle anything. But she can't even handle having a weird surname.*

She stared at the computer screen, under the glass window in the counter. Thoughts drifted through her mind, like patterns in a kaleidoscope. Weird names. Morticia's brown-gold hair and hazel eyes. Cuong and his uncle Sang. Morticia saying, 'Your own sister wouldn't recognise you.'

Then the icy finger tapped Blake on the shoulder and the patterns in her mind shifted and changed. *Oh. That's it. I get it now.* She glanced across at Morticia, who was scrubbing the espresso machine furiously. Called out, 'Hey, Patty,' and watched the tall woman spin around.

'Why did you say that?' Morticia snapped. 'How do you know my name?'

CHAPTER TWELVE

'Well, Josh keeps calling you Tricia, short for Patricia,' Blake said. 'But your family called you Patty, didn't they? Y'know, I've never actually heard your surname. What is it?'

'You tell me, if you're so smart,' Morticia snarled.

Blake shrugged. 'It's Carstairs, right? You're Clio's sister. The one who hasn't contacted the family for three years.'

Morticia stared at her in surprise and then started to laugh. 'That's right. Clio's walked past me every day for months and she still doesn't know who I am. She thinks she's such a hot-shot but she can't even recognise her own sister.' She stopped, thought for a moment and added, 'So how did *you* recognise me?'

Yes, how? I remembered that Cuong and his uncle looked alike. And I noticed that Morticia and Clio both had gold-brown hair and hazel eyes. But, most of all, I knew I was right because the icy finger tapped me on the shoulder.

I don't think I'll tell Morticia about that, though.

'Oh, there were lots of little things,' she said. 'Somehow they all added up. Mind you, there's one thing I still don't understand. Why don't you want to talk to Clio?'

'I hate her,' Morticia said straight away. 'Little Miss Goody Two-Shoes, always sucking up to Dad. That's why I walked out of the café - because Josh gave her a cup of coffee after I told him not to serve her. I went home and made a wax model of her and stuck pins in it. And it worked, didn't it? She got a worm in her stupid computer system.'

Behind them, someone coughed nervously. Blake jumped and whirled around. Josh was standing by the kitchen door, combing his beard with his fingers. He caught Blake's

eye and turned away.

That's funny. Josh looks guilty. Like he's done something wrong.

Oh no. Don't tell me he's been messing with Clio's computer system.

Blake sat at a table near the window, watching Thumper, who was watching the street. *I hope he goes off-duty soon. Or do I? Once he leaves, I'll have to go and talk to Clio. And I'm not sure how much I want to tell her.*

The more she thought about it, the worse she felt. Morticia wasn't a phreak but Josh knew all about computers. He could've planted the worm to make Morticia happy - and to prove that he wasn't always nice.

There was only one problem with that theory. Blake liked Josh. She even liked Morticia, better than before. On the other hand, she liked Clio Carstairs as well.

More proof. I have to find more proof. But how?

She looked up and blinked. The wall opposite the cafe was empty now. Blake raced to the door and peered out. Greg and Thumper were strolling down Market Terrace. Heading towards the market.

Off to buy some more apples or something, I suppose. Okay, this is my chance to see Clio.

She dumped Morticia's wig on the table and skidded across the street. Dashed into the lift. Hurtled out and spotted Clio at the door of the CCCC office, talking to a lanky guy with grey hair and a young face.

'Thanks a lot, Ed,' she was saying. 'You've done the best you can. It's not your fault that it didn't work. We'll try again tomorrow. See you then.'

The guy nodded sadly and ducked past Blake into the lift. 'Your computer expert,' she guessed, glancing at Clio. 'And he didn't manage to catch the worm.'

Clio sighed. 'Well, Ed fooled the worm at first, with a program that pretended to be the worm. But then the hacker changed the worm's process name, so Ed's program didn't look like the worm any more. Plus he taught the worm how to hunt down Ed's program and destroy it. The worm's back - and it's even more dangerous than before.'

Blake reached over and patted her arm. 'Hey, you'll be fine,' she murmured. 'I bet Ed'll think of something else. If he can hold off the hacker in cyberspace, I'll have time to find him in the real world.'

'Maybe. Time's running out, though. The hacker's getting nastier. He's thought of a new trick.'

'Oh yeah? What's that?'

Clio glanced warily round the office. *As though she's scared the hacker might jump out of a cupboard and shout, 'Bool'*

'Someone broke into the office, last night or early this morning,' she whispered. 'They didn't steal anything. They just left something behind.'

'So? I mean, it's bad luck that a burglar picked on CCCC. But it's just a coincidence, Clio. It's got nothing to do with the hacker.'

'That's what you think,' Clio snapped. 'Look at this. There's a dozen of them, hidden on the desks - or in the filing cabinets - or under our chairs.'

She marched over to her desk and pointed at a stack of papers. Blake looked down. On top of the papers there was a lumpy circle of plastic. *One of those things you buy in joke shops. A pool of plastic vomit.*

'Oh,' she said. 'I see. "CCCC makes me spew." You're right, Clio. The hacker must've planted it.' She stared at the plastic vomit, thinking fast. *Wait a minute, this might let Josh off the hook. Somehow, I can't picture him breaking into CCCC.*

'Y'know, the hacker might've gone too far this time,' she said. 'The vomit trick tells us a whole lot more about him - like, he's a good burglar, as well as a good hacker. How did he break in?'

Clio rubbed at the shadows under her gold-hazel eyes. 'We don't know,' she said. 'The door to the office was locked when I got here. No-one had left it open by mistake - and no-one had messed around with the lock, either.'

'So that means the hacker must've got hold of a key.'

'Impossible. Trust me, Blake, the programmers wouldn't lend their keys to their best friends right now. They're really, really freaked, just as freaked as I am. They wouldn't do anything that might put CCCC in danger.'

Blake thought for a moment. 'What about Terrence? Does he still have a key?'

'No, he gave it back before he left.'

'He could've had another key cut, though.'

'No way,' Clio told her. 'CCCC has these special keys, for security. Keys that can't be copied.'

Blake sighed and started to pace around the office. She opened a cupboard. Looked behind the photocopier. Peered under a desk. Turned round and saw Clio watching her with a puzzled frown.

'Just making sure the hacker couldn't have hidden in the office and waited till you went home,' she explained. Clio laughed bitterly.

'Not a chance. For one thing, there's nowhere to hide. And for another thing, he couldn't get out, so he would've still been here in the morning. Although, come to think of it, Mr Fender and Mr Rabbitt - Dad's detectives - said one of our windows was open. But that doesn't help much, unless the hacker can walk up and down walls, like a human fly.'

Mr Fender and Mr Rabbitt. That must be Greg and Thumper. I wonder which is which - no, hang on, I bet I can guess. I always wanted to know whether Thumper got

his name from the rabbit in Bambi or whether he just likes thumping people.

Sounds like he was named after the rabbit.

Thinking about Greg and Thumper reminded her that she'd better get out, before they came back. 'Sorry, Clio,' she said. 'I gotta go. You've given me a lot of useful information, though. We'll track the hacker down, I promise you.'

As she headed for the door, Clio came running after her. 'One last thing,' she called. 'If you see Spider around, could you ask him to come and talk to me? I'm thinking about hiring him to help catch the worm.'

Blake hesitated. 'That's not such a good idea,' she said slowly. 'Spider's parents don't want him to spend too much time playing with computers.'

'Pity. Ed's okay but I'd like to know what a young guy thinks. Still, at least I've got you on my side, Blake. Two of a kind, right?'

She smiled at Blake, looking small and jaunty and brave. Still smiling, despite the hacker and the worm.

Blake forced herself to smile back. Then she swung away and hurried towards the lift. As the doors closed, she let her breath out in a long sigh.

I told Clio not to hire Spider, because his parents wouldn't like it. That's true - but it isn't the whole truth. I've been trying to stop myself from thinking about Spider, because he helped me to find Mum's aunt. But the fact is, I'm sure he's a hacker.

What if he's been hacking into CCCC's computer system?

She trudged back to the cafe, hands in her pockets, head bent. Kicked at the gutter, stubbed her toe and swore. *I hate suspecting Spider, almost as much as I hate suspecting Josh. But hey, maybe neither of them did it. They're better with their brains than their bodies, right? They'd both be ace at creating a worm but I can't see either of them managing to break into a locked office.*

That cheered her up. She danced into the cafe and bumped straight into Morticia. 'Oh, good,' the tall woman said. 'I sent Spider off to buy more lettuce but now Josh tells me we need milk as well. Would you mind getting a couple of cartons from the market?'

'Not a problem. I'll just put your wig back on, before I go.'

She jammed the spiky black wig over her short fair hair. Morticia insisted on touching up her black make-up again. Then she set off down Market Terrace.

It was a sunny afternoon. Blake waved to Tommy Tranter. Spotted Constable Maloney's back, disappearing around the corner of the market. Stopped to read a message chalked on the footpath, saying 'Critical Mass meets on Friday at the State Library.'

Critical Mass, the bicycle mob. No prizes for guessing who wrote that.

She looked around to see whether Cuong and Wedge and Marty were still circling the market on their bikes. No sign of them, though. Just a green car pulling into the curb and a tiny Vietnamese girl chaining her bike to a post.

Blake shrugged and headed off down the nearest aisle. Stopped suddenly as the icy hand clutched the back of her neck. *Ouch. Danger alert.* She swung around. The door of the green Holden was open and a man was striding across towards the tiny girl.

'Hello, dear,' he said. 'Would you like to go for a drive?'

Then he reached out and picked her up and carried her off.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Blake gasped. *Oh no. That's the guy Constable Maloney was looking for. The nasty piece of work who tries to drag kids into his car.*

She glanced from side to side but there was no-one else around. No-one who was near enough to help, at any rate. *Okay then, it's up to me.*

She pelted back down the aisle. Hurdled a pile of cartons. Knocked against a stall and sent apples rolling in every direction. Tore across the footpath and then skidded to a halt, eyes widening.

The tiny girl was wriggling in the man's arms. She pulled her hand free, aimed and slammed it against his chin. His head jerked backwards and he let go of the girl. She dropped to the ground, swung her foot out in an arc and kicked the back of the man's knees. Hard.

He grabbed desperately at the air. Grunted and staggered and fell flat on his face. The tiny girl started to jump up and down on him, giggling wildly.

Blake took a step forward. 'Hi,' she said. 'You're Cuong's little sister, right?'

The girl hesitated and flung herself at Blake. She hugged the kid tightly, then said, 'Hold on, he's trying to get away.' As the man struggled to rise, Blake shoved her knee into his back. She pushed him down onto the footpath again, leaning on his shoulders with all her strength.

Then Cuong and Wedge were racing towards them. Cuong gasping, 'Ly, are you okay?' Wedge gasping, 'Blake, what can I do?'

'Fetch Constable Maloney,' Blake said through gritted teeth. 'He should be round at

the front of the market.'

She shifted her knee to adjust her balance. Pressed down so hard that her arms started to shake. A hand dropped onto her shoulder - not an icy hand this time but a big, warm, freckled hand. Constable Maloney's hand. Blake stood up and said, 'Okay, he's all yours.'

Constable Maloney glanced across at the green Holden. He glanced down at the man, who lay on the ground, whimpering, 'She hurt me. She *hurt* me.' Then he glanced at Blake and said, 'Well, well, well. I didn't recognise you in that wig. Doing my job for me again, are you?'

'Hey, Ly did the real work,' she told him. 'I just happened to come along when it was almost over.'

'Oh yeah?' he said. 'Funny how you always happen to come along at the right moment.'

He bent down and hauled the man to his feet. A crowd had gathered while Blake had been pinning him to the ground. Stall owners from the market, muttering angrily. Cuong and Ly's parents, arguing with their kids in Vietnamese. And Marty and Spider, hovering on the edge of the group.

Blake dodged through the crowd and went to tug at Marty's sleeve. 'Come on,' she said. 'You need to hear about this.'

'What do you mean?' he asked. 'Who are you?'

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' she snapped and then she remembered the wig. She pulled it off and stuffed it in her back pocket. 'I'm Blake, you idiot.'

Spider chuckled and Marty looked puzzled. She gave him a push and led him over to Cuong and his family. 'Okay,' she said, 'tell him what Ly just did.'

Cuong's father looked away. 'Very naughty girl,' he said in a low voice and Ly bent her head and scuffed her foot against the gutter.

'Hey, wait a minute,' Blake began but Cuong put his hand on her arm.

'Listen, we're proud of Ly for fighting that guy off,' he told her. 'She's a great little karate kid - but she shouldn't have giggled when she was jumping on him. She knows that too, Blake, and she's ashamed of herself. It's just that - well, the guy took her by surprise and she lost it for a minute or two.'

Blake frowned and rubbed her forehead. *All right, I think I get it. Vietnamese kids aren't supposed to lose it, even when they're karate-chopping a nasty piece of work. They're supposed to stay cool, because cool's important.*

I can understand that. Being cool's important to me too.

Marty elbowed her from behind. 'So that little kid totalled a guy three times her size, just by using karate?' he whispered. 'Okay, Blake, I get the message. Maybe karate *would* help me front up to my stepdad.'

She swung around to say 'Great idea'. Glanced over Marty's shoulder and groaned.

Greg and Thumper were shoving through the crowd. Heading towards her.

Relax, Blake. Don't panic. You're in disguise, remember. Wearing Morticia's wig.

But something was still bothering her. She scratched her head and then froze, as her fingers touched short fair hair.

Wait a minute. I'm not wearing Morticia's wig ...

Blake turned and bolted into the thickest part of the crowd. She bumped against someone, backed into someone else. Ducked under four sets of elbows, dropped to the ground and crawled between two pairs of legs. Stood up, checked around and saw Greg and Thumper closing in on her.

She pelted across the road and dived into Market Terrace. There was a loud thud behind her, followed by a muffled yell. Blake looked back and saw Greg and Thumper, sprawled across the footpath. Tommy Tranter was watching them with a huge grin.

He must've rolled his chair in front of them, to trip them up. Thanks, Mr Tranter.

She lifted her hand in a salute, then spun away and charged on. Seconds later, she heard the clatter of footsteps, getting closer all the time. *Rats. That was quick. They'll catch me any minute now, if they can run as fast as this.*

She was hurtling towards the cafe when a hand clutched her t-shirt. She braked straight away and dropped into a karate stance. As she whirled around, someone started to laugh.

'Hey, don't hit me.' Marty said. 'I'm on your side.'

He grabbed her hand and dragged her along the street. Just before the corner, he veered sideways. They jolted down a bumpy alley and swung round another corner.

Oh, right. I know where I am. It's the back lane, the one I can see from the window of my room.

Marty jogged up the lane, counting the buildings. He stopped in front of a rusty iron fence. 'This is the back of the cafe,' he gasped. 'Here, I'll give you a leg up.'

He lifted her easily, shoulder high. Blake reached for the top of the fence. She swung one foot over and found the crossbar. Dropped down into a pile of broken crates.

As she headed for the cafe, Marty caught up with her. He rattled the door handle, frowned and then rammed the door with his shoulder

'Rats,' he said. 'Now I remember. The back door's jammed. Josh has been meaning to fix it for weeks.'

Blake slumped against the brick wall, In the distance she could hear Thumper's voice complaining and Greg's voice urging him on.

'Listen,' she groaned. 'They're working their way down the lane, peering into all the yards. They'll find us in another ten minutes, because we've got nowhere to go.'

'Yes, we have,' Marty told her. 'We can go up the wall.'

Blake laughed. 'Yeah, right. That ought to be easy,' she said and he beamed at her.

'Great. So you'll give it a try?'

Hey, wait a minute. I thought I was making a joke - but this guy's taking me seriously. Is he crazy or what? Human beings can't climb up walls.

She was getting ready to explain this to Marty when he reached for her hand. 'You're left-handed, aren't you?' he said. 'So we'll start by finding holds for your left hand and your right foot.'

He sounded so calm and definite that Blake decided to give it a try. She stood on tiptoe and hooked her fingers into the gap between two bricks. Heaved hard, until her feet were dangling in mid-air. Kicked out and wedged her toe into another gap.

'What next?' she croaked.

Marty swung himself up beside her. The first rule of climbing is never look down,' he said. 'Your feet aren't important - if you can find a hand-hold, you can find a toe-hold. If necessary, you can scrape your shoe against the brick until you *make* a toe-hold.'

'Oh, good,' Blake said faintly. 'And what about my arms? I reckon my fingers are going to drop off any second.'

He chuckled. 'That's right, your arms are going to do most of the work. Us rock-climbers have great arm muscles - we can do press-ups on one finger. But don't worry, you'll be able to manage a little climb like this. Come on, lift your right arm and look for the next hold.'

She gulped and flung her arm up. Marty swarmed ahead, pressed flat against the wall like a lizard. While she grabbed and hauled, he talked non-stop, guiding her and encouraging her.

'That's it. When you're holding on with your left hand, you move your right leg. Then the other way around. Good kid. You're getting the hang of it.'

Left hand, right foot. Right hand, left foot. Blake ran her hand across the wall until her fingers found a hole in the mortar. Gripped tight, swung her foot up and jammed it into a crack. And then started all over again. Five moves later, she glanced across at the next building and realised she'd climbed twice her own height.

But looking sideways must've been nearly as bad as looking down. When she reached up again and touched a smooth stretch of brick, she panicked.

'It's okay,' Marty murmured. 'You'll be fine. Want to go back to where you were and try again?'

Blake clenched her jaw. 'No way. I want to go on.'

'All right then, I'll tell you what to do.'

So she hung by one hand for a second, while her feet changed places. Then she took a deep breath and flung her other hand across to the same hold. Swung the first hand out and up.

'There you go,' Marty said. 'A nice new hold, ready and waiting. I'll go ahead and open the window.'

'You mean we're nearly there?' she gasped with relief and he stopped in mid-swing.

'Oh no,' he said sternly. 'You can't relax yet. A lot of people fall when they get near the top, because they think it's all over, so they stop concentrating. You have to finish the climb, Blake. Put your hand on the windowsill - and now the other hand. Bring your knee up and - yes! You've done it.'

She pitched forward onto the floor and lay there, shaking. Sat up after a while and stared at her bleeding finger tips. Marty was kneeling beside her, peering over the windowsill. He laughed.

'Here come your mates. They've only just got to the cafe, so they can't have seen us. You're safe, for sure.' He scrambled to his feet and grinned at Blake. 'Gotta go now. I have to collect my bike from the market - and Spider too.'

'Tell Spider to buy some milk for the cafe,' she said, remembering. Marty nodded and strolled out, looking as though he'd just gone for a nice afternoon walk.

He's amazing. I wonder where he learnt all that stuff. He must be the kind of guy who climbs walls for fun, like a human fly. A human fly ... I've heard that somewhere before.

Oh.

Right.

I remember.

It was Clio, talking about the guy who broke into CCCC.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Blake hugged her knees and started to shake again. In a horrible kind of way, it all made sense. Marty knew how to climb walls and wriggle through windows. Spider said he wasn't a hacker any more but Cuong's uncle seemed to think he was still hacking. And Spider and Marty were best friends.

Between them, they could do everything that the hacker had done.

Poor Clio. Those little rats must've decided to terrorise her, just for fun. I need to warn her. Better dash over there straight away.

She jumped to her feet and then remembered Greg and Thumper. *On second thoughts, I'd better ring her from the phone in the cafe.* She clattered downstairs and headed for the phone on the counter. But Morticia cornered her before she got there.

'Where's the milk?' she demanded. 'And what took you so long?'

Blake sighed. 'I got chased by those guys again - but Spider's bringing the milk.' She felt in her back pocket and added, 'Sorry, Morticia, I seem to have lost your wig somewhere along the way.'

'Forget it,' she said with a wave of her long thin hand. 'I'm over that. You can call me Tricia from now on - but not Patty, not ever. I've even decided to marry Josh ... if he'll tell me his name.'

Blake smiled and reached for the phone. Felt the ghost of an icy hand, pinching her wrist. *Huh? Is my sixth sense trying to tell me I know Josh's name. That can't be right.*

She closed her eyes. For the first time in her life, she relaxed and let the icy hand

take over. Its touch shifted from her wrist to her neck. Colder and stronger now. Pushing and tugging. She opened her eyes and found herself staring at the cafe door.

A picture took shape in her mind. 'Yes!' she said. 'That's it. Two old people came to the cafe the other day, asking for Josh. I bet they were his parents - and their name was Bottomley.'

Morticia flinched. 'Bottomley? Yuck. That's way worse than Bathwater. Come to think of it, Tricia Bathwater doesn't sound too bad. Thanks, Blake. Consider yourself invited to the wedding.'

She hugged Blake and went speeding over to Josh. Blake laughed and picked up the phone. 'Clio?' she said. 'It's -'

Then a hand slammed down and cut her off.

She looked up to find Marty looming over her. He grabbed her arm and wrenched it behind her back. 'Okay, Blake, we need to talk,' he hissed. 'Not here, though. In the storeroom. Start moving.'

Blake's eyes flicked from side to side, looking for help. But Josh and Morticia were wrapped around each other, kissing as though they would never stop. She took a step forward and felt Marty shove her hard. Went stumbling towards the back of the cafe.

Spider was waiting in the store room. He watched in silence while Marty shut the door and leant against it.

'I told Spider what we done,' he said. 'And he told me you'd guess we were the ones hassling Clio. He reckons you can't prove it, though.'

'Yes, I can,' Blake said. 'I saw you on the morning that Clio's office was broken into. Your finger tips were bleeding, like you'd just done a major climb.'

Marty glanced at Spider. 'See?' he said. 'She knows, all right. We gotta stop her, before she goes running off to Clio. Or that cop mate of hers.'

His fists clenched and his shoulder muscles bulged. Blake shivered. *What's the matter with me? First I let Marty march me in here - and then I tell him I can nail the two of them. Am I looking for trouble or what?*

Then again, the icy finger didn't try to warn me this time. So maybe things aren't as bad as they seem.

While she hesitated, Spider edged between them. 'Cool it, Marty,' he said. 'There's only one way out. We have to tell her the truth.'

'Yeah,' Blake agreed. 'That'd be a smart idea.' She fixed her eyes on Spider and waited. 'You're right,' he said. 'We did it. But we had a good reason. We wanted to get back at Clio, because she's been ripping kids off.'

'I don't believe it,' Blake repeated for the third time. 'You're telling me that CCCC's

computer courses are a big fake. The kids aren't taught properly - and Clio promises them jobs but the jobs only last for a week. Why the heck would she do that?'

Spider blinked. 'Well, the government gives her money for training kids. I think she must be trying to cut costs on the courses, so she can use the money for something else.'

Ouch. That's possible. Clio told me way back that she was able to offer Interco a good deal, because she had the government money. But I still can't believe she's ripping kids off.

'Listen, I know Marty had problems with the course,' she said. 'Still, you'd have to admit that he's not the world's greatest thinker. So that doesn't really prove anything.'

'Hey, Marty's not the only one,' Spider told her. 'I've talked to dozens of kids since then and they all say the same thing. Besides, I've got inside information about CCCC. I've written it all down. You can check my files, if you like, or you can talk to the kids yourself.'

Blake stared off into the distance for a moment. Then she shook her head. 'No, Spider,' she said. 'I've got a better idea. I'm going to talk to Clio.'

'We can't let you do that,' Marty growled but Spider nodded.

'Relax, mate. We're telling the truth, so we've got nothing to worry about. Go right ahead, Blake.' Marty shrugged and backed away from the door. Blake marched out to the phone, hesitated for a second and then dialled. A few seconds later Clio's voice said, 'Hello, this is Carstairs' Computer Courses and Consultancy.'

Funny, she sounds exactly the same as usual. Somehow I thought she'd sound different now.

'It's Blake,' she said. 'There's been some new developments. You'd better come over to the cafe and talk about it. See you soon.'

Then she sat down at one of the back tables to work out what she was going to say to Clio. She'd only just decided on a story when Clio walked in. Her gold-hazel eyes lit up when she saw Blake and she came hurrying over, smiling her friendly smile. *She looks exactly the same as usual too. Please, Clio, tell me Spider's got it all wrong.*

'So,' she said, sliding into the chair opposite Blake, 'what have you found out?'

Time to start lying. 'Well, I've been checking around and I came across a few dodgy characters. For starters, there's this kid who did your course a while back. His sister's good with computers, good enough to create a worm - and the kid himself has a big grudge against CCCC. He reckons your courses are terrible and your jobs aren't real jobs. But that's not true, is it?'

Clio laughed. 'It isn't totally untrue. My computer programmers run the courses and they're not very good at teaching. As for the jobs - well, the government won't hand over any money unless I promise to find work for the kids, so my dad gives them jobs at Interco and then sacks them after a week.' She glanced at Blake and added, 'Don't look

so worried. It's not like I'm breaking the law or anything. This is all totally legal.'

'Um, what about the kids, though?'

She frowned. 'The kids? I'm not hurting them, Blake. Okay, they don't have jobs, like they expected - but there aren't many jobs around these days, so they need to get used to that. Who knows, they might even learn something from the course. And they haven't lost anything, except their fee for the course.'

'The kids pay you, as well as the government?'

'Only a few hundred dollars, for six weeks training. It's not much.'

She smoothed her gold-brown hair and watched Blake from her gold-hazel eyes. Blake turned her head away. *This is like when I was a kid, building houses out of cards. Balancing the cards against each other and adding another layer on top, until the whole thing looked really steady and solid.*

Then my father would slam the door.

And the house of cards would come tumbling down.

She wanted to storm and shout. Wanted to stand up and thump the table and yell, 'Clio, that's terrible. You *are* ripping those kids off.'

But Clio didn't seem to have noticed. She just smiled again and asked, 'So who are those other suspects you were talking about?'

Blake looked at her in alarm. *Hey, I was lying. I made up the entire story. What am I going to say now?*

She glanced round the cafe, searching for ideas. The door opened and Josh and Morticia walked in. Morticia held up her hand, flashing a huge red ring, and all the regulars started to clap. Clio turned to see what was happening.

'Patty!' she gasped. 'Oh, Blake, don't tell me my sister's the hacker.'

At the sound of her name, Morticia swung round and came striding over. 'Little Clio,' she said, towering over them. 'So you've recognised me at last. How are you going? Have you made your first million yet?'

'I've done better than you, at any rate,' Clio retorted. 'I'm not just a waitress in some grotty cafe.'

'Hey, don't knock it,' Morticia told her. 'At least I earn my money honestly, unlike some people. Still sucking up to Daddy, are you, kiddo?'

'Patty, I *don't* suck up to Dad. I try to be really, really independent.'

Morticia laughed. 'Yeah, right. Great line. It may work on Dad - but it doesn't fool me, because I stopped living off Dad's money years ago. Thanks for dropping in, kid, but don't bother to come here again. I'm a partner in this cafe now and you're not welcome.'

She turned away and marched back to Josh. Clio stared down at her shaking hands. 'Sorry, Blake, I'd better go,' she muttered. 'We'll talk tomorrow, okay?'

As she pushed back her chair, Blake reached out and grabbed her wrist. 'One more thing,' she said. 'I thought I'd keep a watch on your building tonight, in case the hacker's

planning another break-in. Can I borrow your spare key?'

Clio fished around in her bag and handed over the key. 'Dad's detectives'll be watching CCCC too,' she said. 'But go right ahead - you might spot something that they miss. Oh, and by the way I haven't paid you yet. Do you want some money now?'

No, thanks. I'm like Morticia. I'd rather earn my money honestly. And I'm not interested in money that's been taken from unemployed kids.

'You can pay me when I catch the hacker,' she said and Clio nodded.

'Fair enough. See you around.'

Not if I see you first.

A few minutes later Morticia came back to show Blake her ring. 'Josh is so romantic,' she said, sounding quite pleased. 'He rushed me straight out to buy this. I've decided to wear a black velvet dress for the wedding. And I'm going to invite all my family, just to annoy them.'

She gave Blake a cappuccino with double chocolate, to say thank you, and went back to work. Blake stared out of the window and sipped her coffee slowly. *Broke again. Every time I think I've scored some money, something always goes wrong. I'm never going to get out of here. I'll probably spend the rest of my life in this one way street.*

Still, she couldn't have taken Clio's money. Not when she knew where it came from. *Clio kept saying we were two of a kind - but we're not. Frankly, I'd rather be like Morticia. Or Spider, that skinny little runt who realised that kids were being ripped off and decided to do something about it.*

I want to do something about it too.

She jumped to her feet and headed for the store room. Spider and Marty were sitting in front of the computer, with Cuong and Wedge watching them. They all looked up at her.

'I was right, wasn't I?' Spider said straight away and Blake nodded.

'Yeah,' she sighed. 'You were right.'

'So what are you going to do about it?' Marty demanded. 'Are you going to hand us over to the cops? Or do you understand why we wanted to get CCCC?'

'I understand,' she said. 'I just don't think you went far enough. I've thought of an even better plan. Are you interested?'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Greg and Thumper were huddled together in the doorway of the science fiction comic shop. 'I'm hungry,' Thumper complained. 'Can I go and get a Big One from O'Burgers?'

'No, mate. You should've thought of that before. Right now, we're supposed to be keeping an eye on CCCC.'

'But it's early, Greg. The front door's still open and all. I bet the hacker won't turn up till midnight - and by that time I'll have starved to death.'

'Too bad,' Greg told him. 'We said we'd be watching the place from the moment Ms Castairs left the building. So that's what we're going to do.'

'Yeah, yeah. I know what we said. But I still reckon it wouldn't hurt if I nicked up to O'Burgers for five minutes.'

While they argued, two bicycles came spinning round the corner. Two kids in parkas with the hoods pulled over their heads, pedalling fast. They sped down the street and then slowed near the comic shop.

'Look out, Blake,' one of them hissed. 'I think I just spotted those two guys.'

Thumper dug his elbow into Greg's ribs. 'Did you hear that?' he muttered. 'The kid said. "Blake." This is our big chance, mate.'

'No way, Thumper. We got a job to do.'

'So? We was hired to look for that Blake kid as well, remember. Plus there's a nice fat bonus if we catch her.'

Greg scratched his scalp. As he hesitated, one of the bicycles wobbled and one of

the kids nearly fell off. He made up his mind.

'All right, mate, you got a point. The hacker probably won't rock up before midnight. And I could use that bonus. Come on.'

A car engine revved and a voice growled, 'Hey, wait till I shut the door.' Blake and Spider and Marty sidled out of the cafe and watched Greg and Thumper driving off down Market Terrace.

'Quick,' Blake said. 'We gotta get into the office while they're chasing Cuong and Wedge.'

They scuttled across the road to the CCCC building. Piled into the lift. Jostled out into the corridor. Blake whisked Clio's key from her pocket and unlocked the office door.

'Boot up the computer, Spider, and find the addresses of all the kids who've done the course,' she said. 'Marty, you better guard the door. And I'll look for some paper with the CCCC logo on it.'

She raced over to search the cupboards. By the time she'd found the paper, Spider was blinking at a display on the screen. 'Easy,' he said. 'A total cinch. What do you want me to do next?'

Blake flashed him a fierce grin. 'We're going to write a letter, admitting that the computer courses were a stuff up and telling the kids that they can have their money back. And we'll sign it with Clio's name, okay? Can you copy her signature, if I can find it somewhere?'

'Can a fish swim in the sea?' Spider said, grinning back. 'Not a problem, Blake. I'll scan it in faster than Clio would've written it.'

'Great. Then we're in business.'

She paced round Clio's desk while she told Spider what to write. Found a letter signed by Clio and handed it over. Waited beside the printer and watched a stack of printed sheets drop into the tray, followed by a stack of envelopes with printed labels.

'So far, so good,' she said. 'Now can you hack into the accounting system and tell it to spit out some of those computer-generated cheques?'

'Sure. It's pretty simple, compared to creating a worm.'

'Maybe,' Blake said. 'But this is going to teach Clio an even bigger lesson.'

She started to fold the letters and stuff them into envelopes. Marty came over to help. 'Y'know, you're almost as smart as Spider,' he told her. 'I never would've thought of sending everyone's money back. It'll help the kids and it'll hit Clio in the place that hurts her most - her bank balance.'

Blake raised one eyebrow. 'Actually, we could be helping Clio too. She keeps saying she wants to be independent, so this'll be her big chance. If she can make it without her

father backing her - *and* without ripping people off - then she'll be a really, really good businesswoman, after all.'

Marty chuckled. 'Helping her? Yeah, maybe. But I bet she won't see it that way.'

He went on chuckling till they'd finished folding the letters. Spider called out, 'Okay, the cheques are coming through. This is great - but, listen, what if Clio just decides to make more money by conning more kids into doing her course?'

'Don't worry, I thought of that,' Blake said. 'You're going to print out another ten letters now. One for the government department that funds the courses and the rest for all the major newspapers. Clio's courses aren't exactly illegal - but they're pretty dodgy. Once people know what she's been doing, she won't be able to get away with it.'

Spider nodded and Marty sighed happily. Blake gathered up the letters and carried them across to the franking machine, stamping 'Postage Paid' on each envelope. As she dropped the last letter into a plastic bag, Marty came charging over.

'Blake!' he hissed. 'I just heard the lift. Someone's coming upstairs. We better get out of the way. Fast.'

Spider looked up, blinked and switched off the computer. 'There's nowhere to hide,' he pointed out.

'Oh yes, there is,' Marty told him. 'Come on.'

He opened the window and pushed Spider out. Blake paused to grab the cheques and letters from the printer. Then she ducked through the gap, wriggled around and swung her feet out.

Found herself standing on a narrow ledge, high above Market Terrace.

She edged sideways, to make sure she couldn't be seen through the window, and bumped against Marty. As she clutched his muscly shoulder, the office door clicked open and Thumper said sulkily, 'See? No-one there.'

'I wouldn't be so sure about that,' Clio told him. 'I'm not impressed, Mr Rabbitt. You were supposed to be guarding CCCC but when we came along, you'd vanished. Anybody could've got into the office while you were away.'

We? Clio - and who else? Her father? Or someone new?

'Sorry about that, Ms Carstairs,' Greg mumbled. 'It was a big mistake. We'll search the place for you now. Right, Thumper?'

Blake gulped and Marty leaned towards her. 'They'll think of the window soon,' he said in her ear. 'And we better not be waiting here when they do.'

He shuffled his feet around till he was facing the wall, then knelt down on the ledge. Blake looked past him and saw Spider's face, white and scared in shadows.

'I can't do it,' he breathed. 'I just can't.'

Marty nodded and pointed to his shoulders. Spider hesitated for a moment and then scrambled onto his back. Beside them, Blake was copying Marty and sliding down onto her knees. She glanced across and said quietly, 'What next?'

'Luckily, this is one of those old buildings, with lots of scrolls and shields and ledges,' he whispered back. 'Reach down and sideways with your right foot, Blake. There should be a bit of stone sticking out underneath you.'

Blake tied the bag of letters onto her belt. Took a deep breath. Clung tightly to the ledge and let her leg drop. For a few seconds her foot dangled in empty air, swinging from side to side. Then her runner bumped against a jutting stone scroll.

She rested her weight on the stone. Unfastened her left hand from the ledge, one finger at a time. *I really don't want to do this. But there's no other way.* Stretching down, she ran her hand across the stone and found a crack. She wedged her fingers into it and swung her right hand off the ledge as well, flattening herself against the wall.

'Nice going,' Marty whispered. 'You're thinking for yourself. We'll make a climber out of you yet. Now reach out to the right and grab hold of the water pipe. There's a row of those stone scrolls, so you can step onto the next one and then slide down the pipe.'

Blake groped across the wall and latched onto the cool metal of the pipe. She steadied her left foot on the first scroll, while her right foot felt for the second scroll. Next minute she was wrapped round the pipe like a monkey, gripping it with her fingers and her elbows and her knees. Slithering down it, a few centimetres at a time.

Slowly, Blake. Slowly. And remember, don't look.

It was lucky she'd warned herself, because for some reason she desperately wanted to glance down at the street below. This climb was different, not like the last one at all. She felt giddy. Out of control.

And I forgot to ask Marty where I go from here. Oh well, I'll just have to figure it out for myself.

She clung to the pipe, thinking fast. There was another row of windows to her left, so there ought to be another ledge as well. Plus another row of stone scrolls underneath it.

Sounds logical. I'll give it a try.

She locked her hands round the pipe. Her left foot kicked out and landed on a stone scroll. Blake found a hand hold and shuffled from one scroll to the next. She climbed onto the ledge and pressed herself against the wall, waiting for Marty.

Seconds later he came sliding towards her, with Spider clinging to his back. 'Good work,' he said. 'Going down's always harder, because you don't have eyes in your feet.'

Oh, right. No wonder I was feeling giddy. Maybe I'm not losing it, after all.

She started to say, 'Thanks' and realised that Marty was still talking. 'Listen, mate,' he said, 'there's trouble ahead. Like, the pipe ends in a metre or so, which means we'll have to climb down the wall after that. I'll go ahead, so I can guide you, but it won't be easy. Reckon you can handle it?'

Blake swallowed hard and nodded. 'Sure,' she said. 'Sure I can.'

Straight away she knelt and slid her foot off the ledge. Back to the stone scroll and then on and down. Her hands brushing in long arcs across the wall. Her feet nudging for

a toe hold. Her eyes fixed on the stone in front of her.

After a while she stopped worrying - or thinking - or wondering how far she'd come. There was nothing else in the world except the next hand hold and the next foot hold. And Marty's calm, steady voice, telling her what to do.

Hey, it's cool. We're going to make it. I'm good at this.

With a rush of confidence, Blake leaned out and looked down. Her balance shifted. For a second or two her fingers scrabbled at the wall and then they lost their grip. Her knee buckled. Her foot slipped out of its hold.

She fell.

And landed like a cat, knees bent to take the shock. Blake gasped and staggered back. Looked up at the wall and realised she'd only fallen for about a metre. As she stood and stared and shook, Marty dropped onto the footpath beside her.

'One good thing about going down - it doesn't matter if you fall at the last minute,' he said. 'Well, here we are, all in one piece. And there's Cuong and Wedge.'

As the two kids hurried over, Spider slid down from Marty's shoulders. 'That was ace, Marty,' he said. 'Can we do it again some time?'

Marty flexed his arms and groaned. 'Gimme a break, runt. I'm wrecked - and we still gotta post those letters. Did you bring my bike, Wedge?'

'Yep,' she said. 'And Cuong brought his sister's bike for Blake. You'll have to dink Spider, though.'

'Story of my life,' Marty sighed. 'Oh well, we got away from Blake's thugs, at any rate. They opened the window and looked out but they couldn't see us.'

Did they? I don't remember hearing the window rattle. Then again I don't remember hearing anything much, apart from Marty's voice.

She leaned down to rub her knees. Straightened up and saw Spider staring past her. 'Um, I don't think we *have* got away from Blake's thugs,' he said. 'As a matter of fact, I think they're walking out of the building right now.'

Straight away the kids scattered. 'Here, Blake,' Cuong called and she darted across to the cafe. Ly's bike was leaning against the wall. She swung her leg over it and winced as her sore hands gripped the handlebars. Then she pushed away from the curb.

As she swooped past the CCCC building, she heard Thumper say, 'Get that, Greg? It's Blake again. She must've been helping the hacker. Come on, we can catch two birds with one thingummy.'

'Stone, Thumper,' Greg snapped. 'Two birds with one stone. All right, get a move on.'

Blake glanced over her shoulder. The car doors were slamming but Clio was still standing on the steps. She stared after them, her face pale and tense. At the last minute

she lifted her hand and waved.

'Good luck, Blake,' she called.

Good luck, Clio. Hope you sort it all out.

Then she forgot about Clio, because the car was roaring up behind them. Going the wrong way along a one way street. 'Spread out,' Wedge yelled and they fanned across the road. Bumped onto the footpath and circled the market. Wheeled out into the main road, heading for the centre of the city.

Marty and Wedge and Cuong went speeding ahead, with Spider bouncing on the back of Marty's bike. Blake pedalled along behind them, legs pumping hard. Then, as she skimmed round a corner, a car's mudguard clipped her back wheel.

The bike swerved and zigzagged across the road. Blake clung to the handlebars and wrestled it back towards the curb. She turned and looked straight into the window of the car. Greg at the wheel. Thumper, banging his fist on the dash board. And someone else, crouched in the back seat, half-hidden in the shadows.

That's not Clio, so it must be the person who came to the office with her. The mysterious stranger. Who is he?

Then the car veered towards her again, one wheel climbing the curb. Blake hauled at the handle bars and jolted onto the footpath. She dodged round a family loaded with shopping bags and cycled on. Buildings flashed past - an office block, a car park, a big department store. And the State Library, where she'd been checking the Register of Voters only a few days before.

Seems like years ago. So much has happened since then.

'This way,' Wedge called and they went skidding across an intersection. Greg gunned the engine and surged after them.

'It's hopeless,' Blake panted. 'We can't possibly go faster than a car. They'll catch us any minute now.'

'No, they won't,' Wedge said.

She thrust at the pedals and swung round the next corner. Raced along for half a block and then suddenly slowed down. Blake glanced up in alarm and started to laugh.

The street ahead of them was swarming with cyclists. Dozens of them, spreading out across the road and blocking the traffic. Old bikes and new bikes. Grotty anoraks and the latest lycra gear. She'd never seen so many cyclists in the one place before.

Cuong flicked back his jacket and flashed his t-shirt at her. 'Critical Mass,' he called and Blake laughed even harder.

Critical Mass, the bunch of cyclists who take over the city once a month. Meeting at the State Library. Picking a different route each time. Showing people that bikes own the road, just as much as cars do.

We're safe now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

They pedalled up the hill and ducked between the last few cyclists. Pushed on further, deeper into the crowd. When Blake looked back, Greg and Thumper were trapped in a long line of traffic, crawling slowly up the street.

See you later, guys. Much, much later.

She cruised over to join the others. Wedge and Cuong were cycling with a group of kids, swapping Critical Mass gossip. She waved to them and dropped back to catch Marty's eye.

'Let's peel off, as soon as we see a post box,' she called. 'I won't feel totally relaxed till those letters are in the mail.'

A few minutes later the three of them were sitting on a bench behind a fountain, pushing cheques into the envelopes. When they'd finished, they carried them over to the box. Marty tugged at the handle and Blake and Spider heaped the letters onto the tray. It shut with a loud clang and they heard the letters clattering down inside.

They turned to each other and shook hands. 'Well, that's it,' Blake sighed. 'I've finally cleared up all the mysteries in Market Terrace. The worm. The hacker. Josh's surname. The nasty piece of work in the green Holden. I know everything now - except the name of the person who took my wallet.'

And that was the most important mystery of the lot, worse luck. Because, without my wallet, I can't head off to Mudgeebung.

Spider cleared his throat. 'About your wallet,' he said. 'Um, here it is.'

He held it out and Blake snatched it from his hands. She flicked it open and checked for her money and her credit card. All there. Nothing missing. Nothing at all. *I'm free at last, free to go.*

A smile was tugging at the corners of her mouth but she stopped it halfway. 'So *you* stole my wallet,' she said to Spider.

The skinny kid blinked. 'Not me, Blake. My big brother, Terrence. He picked your pocket when he bumped into you in the foyer of the CCCC building. He looks clumsy but he's an excellent magician.'

Oh, great. The one person I'd definitely crossed off the list. I should've known. After all, Clio told me he did tricks at parties - and Spider told me his brother was a conjuror. Why didn't I put those two things together?

Because I couldn't see Terrence as a thief, that's why.

She frowned. 'So how come your brother pinched my wallet? What's he got against me?'

'Hey, he's got nothing against you,' Spider said. 'He was happy to give the wallet back, once I managed to get hold of him. It's just that - well, Clio had been talking about hiring a woman detective. Terrence thought you were the detective, so he wanted to scare you off.'

'What a stupid idea,' she said crossly and Spider grinned.

'Not so stupid. I mean, you *are* a detective, aren't you?'

'I suppose I am,' Blake admitted. 'I'm not always real good at detecting, though.'

'So?' Spider said. 'We all have our down times. Like, I ran that check on your mum but I couldn't find a thing, not under the name you gave me.'

Blake's shoulders drooped. *In other words, my mum's definitely trying to disappear. Doesn't matter. I'm not going to stop looking for her.* She sighed and said, 'Oh well, it all turned out okay in the end. I've got my money back, which means I can set off for Mudgeebung at last.'

'You'll need your pack, though,' Marty reminded her. 'It's still at the cafe but we can pick it up. Where will we bring it?'

She thought for a moment and then gave him the address of Mack's garage. 'Is there anything I can do for the two of you in return?' she asked.

Spider nodded. 'As a matter of fact, there is. If you're heading up country, you could watch out for that hacker mate of mine - the one who disappeared. Some of the street kids reckon they spotted Huntsman on a highway near Gladesdale. You could ask around, if you're in the area. It'd be nice to know what happened.'

'Hey, not a problem. I like asking questions.'

'That's for sure,' Marty commented. 'You asked us enough and you found out way too much. But like you said, it all turned out okay in the end.'

They grinned at each other. Spider gave Blake a quick description of Huntsman and then Marty said, 'Come on, runt, we better get back to the cafe. You can ride Ly's bike this time.'

Blake leaned against the post box and watched as they pedalled away. The drop-dead gorgeous guy and the skinny little nerd. A strange pair but the

best of friends, all the same.

Goodbye, Spider and Marty. Nice knowing you.

Then a taxi came sailing down the street, so she stepped out and hailed it. She leaned back, closing her eyes, and a picture took shape in her mind. The Honda Rebel, speeding up the highway towards Mudgeebung. Leaving the one way street behind.

I'll send a postcard to Tommy Tranter - and a wedding present to Morticia and Josh -and after that, I'll have tied up all the loose ends. Except for that mysterious stranger in Greg and Thumper's car ... but it was probably just Clio's dad. Nothing to do with me, anyway.

So I'm free again. Ready to hit the road.

I can go on searching for my mother now.

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