

THE BLAKE MYSTERIES

5

Over
the
Hills

JENNY PAUSACKER

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OVER THE HILLS

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For Nadia, who knows the territory, and David, who climbs the hills.

CHAPTER ONE

Blake was back on the road. Following the wide black band of the highway through paddocks of rippling yellow wheat. Heading towards the misty blur of the horizon.

As she rode, the countryside became flatter and drier. No green grass and bushes along the edge of the highway. No trees lining the fences. No hills in the distance. Just yellow paddocks and cracked brown earth and a farm house every now and then, baking in the sun.

There was nothing to look at, so Blake started thinking instead. Thinking about her mother, of course. Her mother who gave her up for adoption - and then came back, thirteen years later. They'd spent three years on the run together. Fifteen moves to fifteen new towns. Working for peanuts, living in caravan parks.

Then she left me again, all of a sudden. Dunno why. And I can't ask her, because I don't know where she is - even though I've been searching for months, ever since I ran away from home.

So now Blake was starting from the other end. She'd been to Sunnyport, the town where her mother grew up, and she'd heard the stories they told about her mother there. That crazy old artist Daffy Clarke had said her mother had been sent away when she was fifteen, to live with her aunt in a country town called Mudgeebung. And that crazy young hacker Spider had checked the Internet and proved that her mother's aunt was still in Mudgeebung.

Maybe she'll be able to tell me how to find my mother.

I hope.

Blake sighed and lifted her eyes from the road. Saw a line of tall hills, rising up out of nowhere. Slabs of jagged grey-brown rock, overgrown with bushes and gum trees. They would've looked impressive anywhere, but here in the middle of the flat yellow plain, they looked dead dramatic.

A few seconds later she spotted a sign saying 'Mudgeebung' and turned off onto a side road. Soon the Honda Rebel was chugging up the hills and zigzagging round the curves. She reached the top and paused to look around.

A half-circle of craggy hills, hugging the shores of a lake. A little town nestling beside the lake, completing the circle. Mudgeebung. Blake punched the air and yelled, 'Yes!' Heard echoes shouting back at her.

'Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!'

Oh wow, I don't believe this. I've actually done it. At last. I've been trying to get here for ages, except that first I was stranded in the city and then I got stuck at Helena Hamilton's weird school.

But hey, third time lucky.

She grinned, flexed her arms and began to coast down the hill. At the second bend, the engine made a noise like a plane landing. The power died and the back wheel went sliding out from underneath her. Blake gulped. *Oh no. Don't tell me. The battery's on the blink.*

She leaned on the handlebars, dragging the bike upright. Then the engine made a noise like a plane taking off and the Honda went shooting ahead. One minute she had too much power. Next minute, no power at all.

Freaky. I don't know which is worse.

The Honda kept whining and roaring, as the power surged and failed. Blake glanced up and realised she was hurtling towards a bend in the road. No power, this time. No way to stop the momentum that was carrying her forward. She had three choices. Swerve to the right and risk running off the road and over the cliff. Swerve to the left and risk slamming into the rock face. Or try to steer the bike round the curve, power or no power.

I reckon I'll try for choice number three.

Her eyes flicked down the road, measuring the gap between the bike and the cliff. Then she threw all her weight onto the handlebars. The world went into slow motion. Blake was watching the gap close, centimetre by centimetre. Fighting to hold the bike up straight. Wrestling it around the bend.

And groaning with relief as she spotted a layby on the other side of the road, just a few metres ahead. The power surged again, flinging her forward, but she slapped the gears into neutral and coasted into the lay-by. She swung herself off, just before the Honda toppled sideways. Then her knees gave way and she sat down suddenly,

gasping for breath.

The whole thing had taken less than a minute. The word 'lucky' was still echoing inside her head. *Yep, I'm lucky, all right. Lucky I didn't jam my foot on the brake and go over the handlebars. Lucky I didn't run straight into a car that was coming up the hill. Lucky the bike isn't lying at the bottom of a cliff right now, with me beside it.*

I've been lucky, for sure. So how come I feel like nothing ever goes right for me?

CHAPTER TWO

Blake's heart was banging like a jackhammer. Her hands felt bruised inside her leather gloves. She took a deep breath and scrambled to her feet. Heaved the bike up and wheeled it over to a nearby tree. Trudged back to the side of the road, sat down on her pack and waited for a car to come along.

Fifteen minutes later, three cars had flashed past without stopping. Blake was starting to get worried. *Do I have bad breath or what? And how can they tell, when they haven't given me a chance to breathe on them?*

She rubbed at a dust mark on her leather jacket. *Wait a minute. I'm still wearing my motorcycle gear. Maybe that's the problem.*

She ducked behind the tree and ferreted in her pack. Tugged out a short black dress and flicked it twice, to shake out the creases. Tied a silk scarf round her neck, tucked her feet into a pair of black sandals and added some big gold earrings and a slash of red lipstick.

There. Let's see if that helps.

It worked. The next car - a battered old ute - pulled straight into the lay-by. Blake raced over and threw her pack into the tray, then climbed in beside the driver. A lean, tanned guy in his forties, dressed in a work shirt and jeans.

'Had a fight with your boyfriend, did you?' he asked as he started the ute. 'I suppose he dumped you here and told you to walk back to Mudgeebung!'

Blake laughed. 'No way. Actually, my Honda's battery went on the blink.'

'Your Honda? You don't look like a bikie.'

'No, I don't,' she agreed. 'But no one'd stop while I was wearing my leathers, so I changed.'

The driver chuckled. 'Smart move.' Then he turned serious and added, 'Sorry about that. Normally, country drivers are pretty friendly but a lot of troublemakers have come drifting into Mudgeebung over the past few days. The other cars probably thought you were part of that mob from the city.'

'Troublemakers?' she said. 'What do you mean?'

But before the driver could answer, something buzzed in his pocket. He pulled out a mobile phone and said, 'Steve Wilmott here ... No, I'm on a job at the moment ... Okay, thanks for calling.' Then he tossed the phone onto the dashboard and thumped the steering wheel. 'Blast,' he muttered. 'I haven't worked for six weeks - and now I get offered two jobs at once. That's typical. Bloody typical.'

'Why?' Blake asked.

Steve Wilmott snorted. 'Huh. I can tell you don't come from round here. Things have been pretty rugged in this part of the country, ever since the government sold off the big coal mine in Newbury. The new owners sacked half the workers and the rest of us have to find work wherever we can - which isn't easy. People only ring you once and if you don't answer, they move on to the next bloke and you go to the bottom of the list.'

'Hey, tough,' she said. But Steve wasn't listening.

'There've been times when I worked twenty-four hours straight,' he went on. 'You got no choice. You just shut up and do what you're told - and you're a zombie for days afterwards. Still, at least you got a bit of money then, if you don't blow it all on the pokies.'

Pokies? What's he talking about? Oh yeah, poker machines. That's strange. I thought the country was supposed to be quiet and peaceful. Cows and farms and wheat, not mobile phones and pokies and people losing their jobs.

She frowned out of the window, watching gum trees flash past. When she turned back, Steve Wilmott had cheered up a bit.

'Ah well, maybe this Mudgeebung job'll last for a while,' he said. 'The mayor reckons there ought to be a lot of work for drivers and builders and that. He worded me up about it two weeks ago but he only called me in at the last minute, as usual. I'm cutting it fine. Hope you don't mind if we go straight there.'

'Straight *where*?' Blake demanded. 'I don't understand any of this. Who's the city mob? Why are people blowing their money on the pokies? And what's going on in Mudgeebung?'

Steve chuckled. 'You've got a temper, haven't you? I don't have time to fill you in right now - but why don't you come to the launch and listen to the speeches? Those politicians'll tell you everything you need to know, plus a lot of things you don't need to know.'

"What politicians?" Blake snapped. But the ute had already cruised down the last stretch of hill, past a small cottage at the edge of a big caravan park. Now Steve was stopping beside a big crowd, gathered on the edge of the lake. He leapt out and Blake followed more slowly.

Do I really want to get involved? Oh well, I suppose I ought to find out a bit more about Mudgeebung. That way, I'll know where to start asking about Mum's aunt.

She elbowed her way into the middle of the crowd. Dozens of men and women with skin tanned and wrinkled by the sun, bodies that were lean and tough from years of hard work. Some oldies and a bunch of toddlers but not many kids in their teens.

Country people, for sure. Not the city mob that Steve was talking about.

When she looked harder, she noticed a group of young guys standing near a platform beside the lake. Five of them, all dressed the same-baggy pants, long t-shirts, backwards baseball caps. They kept glancing across at a row of jet skis, bobbing on the water. And when they weren't glancing at the jet skis, they were glaring at another group on the opposite side of the platform.

The second group couldn't have looked more different. Different from the jet ski boys but different from the country people too. Most of them were in their teens or early twenties, although a couple were older. Kids with beaded dreadlocks. Barefoot kids in Greenpeace t-shirts. A tall guy wearing a stockman's coat with shoulder capes and a dozen pockets. And someone else, dressed in -

Huh? I gotta get a closer look.

Blake wriggled past two women swapping recipes for apple butter. Ducked under the elbow of a man who was saying, 'Mate, Brian Malone knows what's right for Mudgeebung.' Popped out at the front of the crowd, stared for a moment and then started laughing.

Yep, I was right. That person's wearing a duck suit. Straight from a costume shop, I reckon - except they've drawn black circles around the eyes.

'Talk about weird,' she muttered and a voice beside her said, 'Nah, it's not as weird as it seems. Those greenies are smart. They really know how to use the media.'

Blake spun around. Frowned up at a guy in a purple shirt and black linen pants. Dark hair, flopping forward onto his forehead. Dark stubble round his jaw, as if he hadn't shaved for a day or two. Dark amused eyes.

'G'day,' he said. 'I'm Martin Fahey. You may've read my articles in the *Globe*.'

Oh, a reporter. Could be a useful contact. It's a pity I haven't had time to read the papers lately. But hey, it isn't hard to pretend.

'Martin Fahey?' she said. 'Great to meet you. I suppose you've come to report on - y'know, all of this.'

'Well, I had to be here,' Martin said. 'Everyone's interested in Mudgeebung these days - all because I wrote that article comparing the new mayor and the new member of

Parliament. Just take a look. A news crew from Channel 14, a pack of greenies, the Minister for Tourism - oh, and those kids with their jet skis. I bet none of them would even know where Mudgeebung was, if I hadn't called it "a test case for the government's latest rural policies".'

Blake nodded. *Good. This guy likes talking about himself. If I can keep him talking, I might even find out why all those people are here.*

'Do you think there'll be, um, any new developments today?' she asked and Martin Fahey rubbed his designer stubble.

'Could be. It depends on what the Minister says in his speech. Hey, here he comes.'

Two men were climbing the steps of the platform. A thin grey-haired guy in an expensive grey suit that fitted him perfectly. And a round rosy guy in an old blue suit that stretched across his stomach and sagged at the knees.

Blake sighed. *Rats. I still don't know what this is all about - and I'm stuck here now. I hate listening to speeches. Heard too many of them, at that fancy private girls' school my dad sent me to.*

As she shuffled her feet, the round rosy man bounced over to the microphone. The TV crew rolled their camera forward and a young woman in overalls fiddled with a soundboard connected to two huge amps.

'Most of you know me already,' the round rosy man boomed. 'But there are some strangers here today, so I'd better introduce myself. I'm Brian Malone, the new mayor of Mudgeebung and the local lawyer. And now I'm going to hand the mike over to the Minister for Tourism, who's come all the way from the city to give us some very good news.'

The grey-haired man smiled politely. 'Mr Mayor, ladies and gentlemen of the press, citizens of Mudgeebung and others,' he began, 'I stand before you today as a representative of the state government to say ...'

Blake was yawning already. She tuned out and gazed at the ripples of light across the lake. The jet ski boys shifting restlessly. The duck mob - *the greenies, I suppose* - whispering together and pointing at a big yellow earthmover, parked close to the platform.

An earthmover? What's that for? Maybe I ought to start listening again.

When she tuned back in, the minister was saying, 'You country people are the lifeblood of this nation. You're independent and you've got a strong sense of community - but you've had it tough over the last few years. That's why I'm glad to be here, launching this exciting new project.'

He pointed towards the lake and paused dramatically. Straight away the greenies began to boo and hiss. The minister realised he'd made a mistake. He leaned closer to the mike and went on, louder than before.

'An exciting new project,' he repeated. 'A chance to bring tourists from all over the

world to this sleepy little country town. Next year the International Jet Ski Championships will be held on Lake Mudgeebung. We'll be widening the lake, upgrading the town and building a five-star hotel and a casino, right here.'

His hand swivelled around, pointing to the caravan park. Half the crowd started clapping and the other half started muttering. The jet ski boys cheered and the camera swung from side to side, taking it all in.

'When my government moves, we move fast,' the minister shouted above the noise. 'To prove it, we're going to start work now.'

He brought his hand down sharply, like a signal. Heads turned and everyone looked at the yellow earthmover. The driver - *hey, it's Steve* - turned the key and the earthmover trundled forward. A second later its engine coughed and spluttered and died.

There was a loud bang. Sparks flew out of the earthmover and the greenies jumped back. More sparks, followed by balls of fire whirring through the air and a rat-tat-tat sound, like a machine gun. Then four long streaks of light shot up from the engine and bust in a shower of stars. The crowd gasped and Martin Fahey started laughing.

'Fireworks,' he said. 'Wonder who thought of that. It's going to look great on TV.'

CHAPTER THREE

While Steve Wilmott checked the engine, the greenies swarmed round the huge yellow machine. They linked hands and danced round it in a circle, chanting, 'No hotel - no jet skis. No hotel - no jet skis.'

The minister was still staring at the earth-mover with his mouth open when a small brown-haired woman darted out of the crowd. She nudged the minister aside and grabbed the mike.

'An exciting new project that's going to save Mudgeebung?' she called out. 'I don't think so. I'm Jan Shepherd, your new member of Parliament, and I'm here to tell you that we don't need hotels and casinos and jet skis. Let's spend the money on schools and hospitals and job schemes instead.'

As the jet ski boys yelled, 'No way,' the mayor came bustling forward. 'Now, Jan,' he began, reaching for the mike, but she whirled round so fast that he backed off.

'Yeah, Brian?' she asked. 'Do you want to stop me speaking?'

The mayor looked as if that was exactly what he wanted. But the TV camera was swinging towards him, so he smiled and said, 'It's a free country, Jan. Go right ahead.'

Jan Shepherd faced the crowd again. 'The government reckons they're trying to help us,' she shouted. 'But they didn't ask us what we want. They just sprung this new plan on us with exactly two days' warning - although it only took me two minutes to work out what's wrong with it. Okay, some of us'll get jobs in that big hotel but the town won't be the same, once the tourists take over. And as for the casino - people in this area are gambling too much already, because we're all broke and desperate. We don't need -'

All of a sudden the microphone let out a loud screech. Jan Shepherd went on talking but Blake couldn't hear her any more. *Huh? What happened? This place is a danger zone for machines. First the earthmover blows - and now the mike.*

She stood on tiptoe and peered across the crowd. The jet ski boys were bunched together in front of the soundboard, while the young woman in overalls danced around them, trying to get through.

Oh, I see. Dunno who fixed the earthmover hut the jet ski boys must've pulled the plug on the amps.

The tall guy in the stockman's coat shouted, 'Hey, what's happening?' and the greenies left the earthmover and came running over to the platform. Some of them clustered round Jan Shepherd, yelling, 'Don't forget the ducks.' But the rest of them charged on and tackled the jet ski boys.

The next five minutes were total chaos. Greenies shoving jet ski boys away from the soundboard. Jet ski boys thumping greenies. Other greenies dancing around, shrieking, 'Peaceful! This is supposed to be a peaceful protest. Don't hit anyone!'

Some of the crowd joined in, on both sides. Jan Shepherd shouted into the silent mike. The TV crew swung their camera this way and that, while Martin Fahey took notes at top speed, muttering, 'What a story. Oh boy, what a story.'

And the round rosy mayor hustled the Minister for Tourism off the platform, past the earthmover and over to a long black car that was waiting on the road. Blake saw the grey-haired man pause to mop his forehead with a big white hanky, before he climbed into the car.

What did he call Mudgeebung in his speech? Oh yeah, I remember. A sleepy little country town.

Not.

The black car did a U-turn and sped off, over the hills and back to the city. The mayor heaved a sigh of relief and plunged into the crowd, heading for the platform. But before he got there, he was cornered by the greenie in the duck suit, squawking, 'Quack, quack. Save the ducks.'

'Which ducks? Donald or Daffy?' Blake asked and Martin Fahey chuckled.

'Neither,' he said, while his pen went on racing across the page. 'The greenies turned up to protect the black-eyed ducks that live on Lake Mudgeebung. They're the only ones in Australia and the jet skis'd wreck their nesting places. Didn't you know that?'

'Oh sure,' Blake said. 'I was just joking.'

Then she frowned to herself, wondering why she'd bothered to lie. *Hmm. Martin's*

given me the beginning of an idea. An idea that might help me find Mum's aunt.

She looked around for a quiet corner where she could sit down and think. No such luck. No quiet corners anywhere. Half the crowd were still fighting and the other half were shouting at each other.

'Jobs, mate. This hotel means more jobs for Mudgeebung.'

'There's too many pokies in the area already. If we get a casino as well, we're finished.'

'Jet skis rule, okay?'

'Quack, quack. Save the black-eyed duck.'

Blake plugged her ears with her fingers. *This is hopeless. Can't anyone stop it?* But Jan Shepherd's mike was still dead and the mayor was still trapped in the crowd and everyone else was busy fighting or arguing.

Everyone but the four old women sitting in a row of folding chairs under a tree beside the lake. Three of them in flowery dresses. The fourth in riding pants and a broad brown Akubra hat.

They leaned together and whispered. Then the old woman in the Akubra hat went striding down to the lake, while the others merged into the crowd. Blake lost sight of them after that, because a greenie and a jet ski boy came rolling across the ground, punching and swearing and pulling each other's hair.

She jumped out of their way and edged between the mayor and the duck. Dodged over to the platform and perched on the nearest corner, looking out across the crowd. So she had a front row view of everything that happened.

The old woman in the Akubra came marching back, swinging a bucket of water. She shouldered into the middle of the fight. Lifted the bucket and tipped it over the jet ski boy and the greenie. They rolled away from each other and sat up, gasping and dripping and pushing wet hair out of their eyes.

'There,' she said, sounding pleased. 'That's the way to stop a dog fight.'

Meanwhile the rest of the old women had spread out through the crowd. They were tapping people on the shoulder. Tugging at people's elbows. Sidling between greenies and jet ski boys, murmuring, 'Excuse me, dear.' And breaking up fights all over the place.

The woman in the Akubra looked down at the young guys. Both of them were so wet that it was hard to tell which was the greenie and which was the jet ski kid.

'All right, boys,' she bellowed in a voice like a sergeant major on parade. 'Time to shake hands and make up.'

The two guys glared at each other, clenching their fists. Then they glanced at the old woman and decided they'd better do what she said. As they reached out and clasped hands, the entire crowd sighed, like a sudden wind.

Oh wow. That old lady's got style. I didn't think anyone could get this mob under

control but she managed it.

With a bit of help from her friends.

The old woman gave the guys a shove and they went squelching back to their mates. Everyone started talking again, but more quietly this time. Blake could see Martin Fahey roaming through the crowd, stopping every now and then to ask people questions.

Oh yeah, that reminds me. My bright idea. I'd better get moving.

She slid down from the platform and skirted round the edge of the crowd. Past the earthmover and over to Steve Wilmott's ute. Steve was sitting on the bonnet, smoking a rollie.

'G'day again,' she said. 'Can I make a call on your mobile?'

Steve said, 'Sure' and handed it over. Blake moved away, to make sure he couldn't hear her. She tapped out an interstate number and waited till a brisk voice said, 'Hi, this is Sheryl Newton from the *Daily Messenger*. Who's speaking?'

'It's Blake,' she said. 'Listen, I could use a bit of help right now. I'm in Mudgeebung and I need an excuse to go round asking questions, so I thought I might pretend to be a reporter. Actually, I'd like to pretend I'm Sheryl Newton, if that's okay with you.'

Sheryl laughed. 'Hey, why not? As a matter of fact, I've just been reading Martin Fahey's articles about Mudgeebung. He's one of my heroes - a guy who always asks the tough questions. Ring me back some time and tell me what he's like.'

'That's a fair trade,' Blake agreed and they chatted for a bit longer, before Sheryl hung up.

Good. It's lucky I met a reporter when I was in the state library, doing the first round of research into my mum. Sheryl's even little and blonde like me, so I ought to fool anyone who's seen a photo of her. And she works for an interstate newspaper, which means none of these reporters will have met her in person.

She dug into her pack and found a biro and a pad of paper. Remembered the mobile and went to give it back to Steve.

'These things come in pretty handy,' he commented. 'The mayor cancelled on me after the earthmover blew up - so I rang through straight away and got that other job. Mind you, I liked the Mudgeebung job better but Brian Malone reckons he can't say when they'll be starting work on the hotel. It's funny, when he seemed so definite before.'

Blake clicked her biro. *Hey, terrific. Looks like I've got my first interview right here.*

'Actually, I came to Mudgeebung on a job myself,' she said. 'I'm writing a news story for the *Daily Messenger*. Would you mind if I asked you a few questions about the accident?'

Steve started to laugh. 'Accident?' he repeated. 'That was no accident, mate. The earthmover stopped because someone put sugar in the petrol. It's the oldest trick in the

book - but the fireworks stashed around the engine were a nice extra touch. I reckon someone must've fired a pellet from a rifle and hit a cap to spark them off. It was sabotage, mate. Somebody doesn't like those plans for the new hotel.'

CHAPTER FOUR

Blake went over the story again, to make sure she'd got the facts right. It sounded pretty convincing.

Wow, I'm going to be an ace reporter. I've lucked into a great story, in my first five minutes on the job.

She jotted down the number of Steve's mobile phone and fished out her wallet, to pay for the interstate call. At first he refused to take any money. When she pushed it, he said, 'Okay, in that case I'll pick up a new battery for you and drive you back to your bike. Not a problem, mate. I'm heading back over the hills anyway. Is it a deal?'

'Deal,' Blake nodded and they arranged to meet in half an hour. Then she set off to look for some more people to interview.

The crowd had thinned out by now. A lot of people had gone home and the rest of them were standing around and chatting. So it wasn't hard to spot the mayor over by the platform, talking to the reporter. Blake sidled across and listened in. Martin Fahey was firing off questions, faster than the mayor could answer them.

'So how did you feel about today's launch, Brian? Not exactly a big success.'

'Wait a minute,' Brian Malone objected. 'I think the Minister for Tourism made an excellent speech. People know what we're planning to do now and -'

'And some of them don't like it, do they?'

'A bunch of greenies, getting worked up about some ducks? They're just a lot of city slickers, mate. They've got no right -'

'Jan Shepherd lives in Mudgeebung, doesn't she? And she didn't seem too happy.'

The mayor snorted. 'Jan Shepherd's our new MP. She has to stir up trouble, to make

it look as though she's doing something for -'

'So you think she didn't mean what she said?'

'Listen, Martin, I'm not trying to call Jan a liar. But she and I have never agreed on anything, not since we were kids in primary school. Fact is, she's living in the past. The people of Mudgeebung want this hotel and -'

Martin Fahey pushed back his floppy dark hair. 'Do they? They just wrecked your earthmover and then had a huge brawl.'

'Oh, come now,' Brian protested. 'A friendly argument, that's all. Quite harmless, really.'

'What about the sugar in the petrol?' Blake asked. 'That's sabotage, right?'

The mayor swung towards her. 'Well, well,' he said, rocking back on his heels. 'Who are you, girlie?'

'Sheryl Newton from the *Daily Messenger*,' Blake murmured and watched his rosy face go a shade redder. He stood and stared at her, while drops of sweat gathered on his forehead.

Excellent. I think I'm going to like being a reporter, if it makes people shut up and listen to you.

'Um, yes,' he muttered finally. 'A good question, Ms Newton - but unfortunately I haven't had time to check it out. Why don't you come and see me tomorrow morning at ten o'clock? Hopefully, I'll be able to give you some more information by then.'

He mopped his forehead and hustled off. Martin Fahey looked down at Blake, stroking his chin. 'A reporter, hey?' he said. 'Who told you about the sugar in the petrol?'

'A friend,' she said with a shrug and Martin narrowed his eyes.

'Okay, be like that. I bet I can find out for myself. So you write for the *Daily Messenger*, do you, Sheryl? What brings you to Mudgeebung? It's a long way from your home base.'

'Yeah, it is,' Blake agreed. 'But I've got family business here. I need to talk to someone who's been living in the area for a long time.'

'Why don't you try those old ladies who broke up the fight?' Martin suggested. 'They've lived in Mudgeebung all their lives. I bet they know everything that ever happened in this town. Look, they're over there, under the trees.'

He pointed vaguely and then loped off, aiming for Jan Shepherd. Blake grinned. *He's trying to distract me, so he can beat me to the MP. Like I care. Fact is, I'm more interested in finding my great-aunt.*

She shaded her eyes and peered across at the trees. Two of the old women were still sitting in their folding chairs. But as she headed towards them, a small voice called, 'Girl.'

Blake glanced around. Checked behind the nearest tree. Peered up through the leaves and saw a chubby little boy clinging to a high branch, with a bald brown teddy

bear dangling from one hand.

Oh no. He's climbed too far and got himself stuck. I better do something.

She thought about running to get help but she was scared the boy might fall. So she kicked off her shoes and hitched up her black dress. Hooked her hands onto the lowest branch and lifted herself until she was high enough to swing one leg over it.

'It's all right, kid,' she murmured. 'You're going to be fine. Just stay where you are and I'll come and get you.'

As she scrambled up the tree, the boy perched on his branch and watched. He was cute as a cherub. Round blue eyes, snub nose, wispy golden curls. And dimples all over-in his cheeks, across the backs of his hands, on his knees and elbows. *Just like a kid in a baby food ad. His parents could make a fortune, hiring him out.*

'Girl climb,' he babbled. 'Billy climb too. Up up up, down down down. Game. Girl play game with Billy. Girl catch Billy?'

It didn't make much sense to Blake, so she concentrated on hauling herself from one branch to the next. Then, just as she was stretching her hand out, the kid squeaked, 'Game,' and flung himself backwards. She gasped and grabbed. Wobbled and almost fell. Turned her head and saw the kid shinning down the tree like a monkey, giggling all the way.

Blast. I thought I was saving him - and he thought we were playing a game. Now I'm the one who's stuck, not him.

Blake didn't usually try to climb trees wearing a tight black dress. It took her five minutes to get back to the branch she'd started from. She dropped to the ground, landing beside Billy and another boy who was about ten years older. Thin and serious, with glasses held together by paperclips and sticky tape. Black hair chopped off in a fringe, round black eyes and a worried frown.

'That kid's a menace,' she snapped and the boy sighed.

'I know. He's always climbing things and people are always trying to rescue him. But he climbs better than anyone, even though he's only three. His name's Billy Shepherd, by the way, and I'm his brother Nathan.'

'Oh, right,' Blake said, calming down. 'So Jan Shepherd's your mum? I'd like to interview her. I'm a reporter - Sheryl Newton from the *Daily Messenger*.'

Nathan frowned. 'Mum's talking to another reporter right now but I'll tell her she has to talk to you later on. Is there anything else I can do?'

Blake thought for a moment. 'Yeah, you could tell me about those old ladies. Like, what are their names, for starters?'

'They've got great names,' Nathan said with a grin. 'May and Glad and Win and Dell. All proper words, see? The first three are pretty obvious - and 'dell' means a little valley. Mum reckons they're just nicknames, though. She says their real names are probably Mabel and Gladys and Winifred and Delia.'

'Weird names, either way,' she commented. 'So which is which?'

'Well, Dell's the one in the hat. Win's the little one. And Glad and May are sitting under that tree over there.'

'Good one. See you later, Nathan.'

Billy had wrapped himself around her and was trying to climb her leg. Blake unhooked him and headed on to the next tree. Her heart was pumping faster all of a sudden.

Why am I so nervous? They're just two old ladies. But they've lived here for about seventy years, which means they definitely know Mum's aunt. As a matter of fact, I thought one of them might actually be Mum's aunt because they're the right age and all. Only her name's Fay, not May or Glad or Win or Dell.

She went up to the old women and introduced herself. May was as plump and comfortable as a pile of feather pillows. Glad looked like an intelligent sheep, with a long face and woolly white hair. And they both loved the idea of talking to a reporter about the mayor's plans.

'Oh yes, dear,' May beamed. 'We knew Brian Malone when he was a little boy in short pants. He had some silly ideas then and he has some silly ideas now.'

'This latest idea's the silliest of the lot,' Glad bleated. 'Look at all the riff-raff who've come crowding into town. Jet skis on Lake Mudgeebung and that person dressed up as a duck. Well, I mean, really!'

For the next quarter of an hour they complained non-stop about the jet ski boys and the greenies. The minute they paused for breath, Blake said, 'Hey, I'm impressed. You know a real lot about Mudgeebung. Um, I don't suppose you know where I could find a woman called Fay Ray.'

Instantly their faces changed. Glad looked down her long nose and May folded her arms across her plump chest. 'No, dear,' she said. 'There's no one by that name around here.'

'Are you sure?' Blake persisted. 'She used to live in Mudgeebung, I'm positive about that. Maybe she moved or -'

'I really couldn't say,' Glad cut in. 'A word of warning, dear. We don't mind talking about the hotel and the jet skis but it's not a good idea to go round asking questions about the people who live here. Country people don't like strangers who are too nosy.'

That was the end of the conversation. Blake glanced at her watch and hurried back to the road, where Steve Wilmott was waiting for her. She dodged round the side of the ute. Stopped and scowled. Martin Fahey was propped against the door, chatting to Steve.

'Sugar in the petrol, hey? Thanks for telling me.' He looked over his shoulder and grinned at Blake. 'Oh, hi, Sheryl. I've been having a nice chat with your mate here. See you around.'

He licked his finger and drew a line on the air, as if he'd just scored a point. Blake frowned as she watched him wander off. *Rats. Now he knows everything I know.* Then she laughed and turned away.

Not that it matters. I don't actually need to beat Martin Fahey to the story. After all, I'm only pretending to be a reporter.

She climbed into the ute. Steve drove her up to the lay-by and helped her to replace the Honda's battery. After she'd waved goodbye, Blake swung herself onto the bike and rode back to Mudgeebung, cruising along beside the lake till she came to a lopsided sign saying C RAV N P RK.

The caravan park was as run down as its sign. Weeds sprouting everywhere. A rusty lock on the shower block. Three little old caravans, looking as though they'd fall apart if you kicked them. And a piece of cardboard tied onto the gate that said, 'Please pay at the house next door.'

Blake parked the Honda and walked over to the house. A little cottage with a neatly clipped hedge all around it. Rose bushes in the front garden, three tall trees in the back garden. One of the old women was sitting on the verandah, patting an enormous ginger cat. She was tiny and frail, dressed in a pleated blue skirt and a white blouse with glass buttons down the front. Gnarled old hands, milky blue eyes and white hair that fluffed out like a halo.

I've met Glad and May - and Dell's the one in the Akubra hat. So this has to be Win. 'Hi,' she called. 'Can I book a van for the night?'

Win jumped and the ginger cat sat up straight, hissing softly. 'Sorry, dear,' she said. 'You gave us a fright. I wasn't expecting anybody to turn up. The council used to run the caravan park, you see, but they sold it two weeks back. Still, I don't see why you can't stay there for the time being.'

She potted inside and came back with the keys. As she handed them over, she hesitated, looked around quickly and said in a whisper, 'Just watch out for yourself, dear. Don't leave the caravan after dark, no matter what sort of noises you hear.'

Then she darted back into the house with the cat trotting behind her, before Blake had time to ask what she meant. *Oh well, I'm not too worried. Win looks like the nervous type. I bet she freaks every time a twig cracks in the night.*

She strolled back to the caravan park and unlocked one of the vans. It smelt damp and musty, so she left it open while she went to have a shower. After that she found a can of baked beans at the bottom of her pack and heated them up for her dinner.

One of Mum's handy hints for life on the run. Always carry some baked beans and a can opener, just in case.

She leaned on the table with her head in her hands, remembering. All those nights in all those caravan parks with her mother. Reading, playing cards, making up stories about the people in the other caravans and talking till late.

After a while she got up and went to find her black notebook, hidden down the back of her pack. She stood there for a moment, stroking the battered cover. Knowing exactly what was inside the book. Every word her mother had ever said to her. Every fact she'd discovered since then.

Okay, it's time to check the facts about Mum's aunt. My great-aunt, come to think of it. funny, I should've worked that out before. But I never met any of my mother's family, so I don't quite believe in them. Mum was a real loner.

Like me, I suppose.

She leafed through the notebook, stopping wherever she saw her great-aunt's name. Fay Ray. Fay Delaney, to begin with, and then she married a guy called Alan Ray. But when Blake had checked the Register of Voters in the city, she couldn't find Fay Ray on its lists. That looked like a dead end - until she'd remembered her mother saying, 'Aunt Fay was crazy about orchids.'

So she'd asked her hacker friend Spider to search for all the references to orchid-growing on the Internet. He found an orchid fan in Mudgeebung whose handle was Queen Kong. And he told Blake that King Kong was an old movie, where the girl King Kong fell in love was played by an actor called Fay Wray.

Which means that Great-aunt Fay could be calling herself Queen Kong, as a sort of joke. It's not much of a clue. But it's all I've got.

My only proof that Fay Ray's still here in Mudgeebung.

She shut the notebook with a snap. Unrolled her sleeping bag and stretched out on the nearest bunk. Closed her eyes and saw pictures floating on the darkness. The Minister for Tourism, making his speech. Angry greenies. Angry jet ski boys. A tall old woman in an Akubra hat, throwing a bucket of water over a pair of kids. An old woman like a sheep and an old woman like a feather pillow, warning her not to ask questions.

Why? No, mustn't start thinking about that now. Not if I want to get any sleep tonight. Blake rolled onto her stomach and buried her head in the pillow. But just as she was about to doze off, her eyes flicked open again. She sat bolt upright, listening hard. Heard rustling and whispering outside the caravan. *The wind in the trees.* A soft hooting sound. *An owl or some other sort of night bird.*

And then a long high-pitched, blood-curdling scream.

CHAPTER FIVE

Blake struggled out of her sleeping bag and stumbled to the door of the van. She opened the door and peered out. No lights in Win's house. No one running down the road, screaming.

Hmm. Maybe I imagined it, because of Win carrying on about noises in the night.

But as she turned away, someone laughed, somewhere in the distance. A loud crazy laugh, like a maniac in a horror movie. Blake snorted.

Oh, great. I've been woken up by a practical joker. Some kids, trying to frighten poor old Win, I suppose. That settles it. Forget about Win's warnings. I'm going out to take a look around.

She pulled on her runners and a windcheater, locked the van and padded out into the night. Jogged over to the hedge between Win's garden and the caravan park. Followed it till she came to the back corner. Knelt down to peer round the corner and noticed a gap at the bottom of the hedge.

That could be where the kids crawled through. Still, I'm not totally positive that they've gone into the garden, so I better stay out here. Win would have a fit if she heard me trampling around.

She turned the corner and inched on, with her shoulder pressed against the hedge. Halfway along, she lurched and almost fell. *Oops. The hedge is way thinner here. I need to watch out.* She kept on going, past the tall trees at the back of the yard and around the next corner. As she edged down the far side of the house, the noises started up again. Blake could hear them better now.

Someone wailing 'Oo-oo-oo', like a cartoon ghost. Someone shaking the tree branches. Someone else doing the maniac laugh.

Yep, they're in Win's garden, for sure. I don't like kids who get their kicks out of hassling old ladies. Time to go and give them a scare.

She was planning to go back to the hole under the hedge but just then, her track pants snagged on a twig. When she bent to free herself, she saw a faint gleam of light between the leaves. *Excellent. Another gap.* She got down on her hands and knees and crawled through the leafy tunnel. Stood up and looked round Win's backyard.

A lawn. Three big trees. A garden shed. Some bushes. The scent of flowers and herbs, wafting towards her. And a bunch of shadowy figures clustered under one of the trees, whispering and laughing together.

While she watched, one of the shadows darted across to Win's back door. It cupped its hands around its mouth and groaned till the windows rattled. Blake smiled in the darkness.

Good. Now's my chance.

She slipped between the bushes without a sound. Tiptoed up behind the shadow. Reached out. Grabbed its arm and twisted hard. The shadow grunted and doubled over, yelping in pain as its forehead hit the door step. Blake swung her hand up, ready to chop at the shadow's neck.

Then a white light exploded inside her head and she staggered and fell.

Soft grass underneath her. Hard ground underneath the grass. Blake opened her eyes and blinked at the flashes of light. *So it's true. You really do see stars if someone hits you on the head.*

When she looked up, a dark figure was standing over her with a long stick in its hands. Blake winced and ducked away but for some reason she didn't feel frightened. Maybe because the dark figure looked so tiny and frail.

'Win,' she croaked and the old woman lowered her broom.

'Oh dear, I'm sorry,' she quavered. 'I've hit the wrong person, haven't I? But I *did* tell you to stay inside the caravan, you know.'

Blake sat up and clutched her head. 'Did the others get away?' she asked and Win sighed.

'I'm afraid so, dear. They went running off in all directions. Here, come into the house and I'll make you a nice cup of tea.'

As Blake hoisted herself up, her hand brushed against something in the grass. *A cap, by the feel of it. Must've fallen off when the shadow banged its head.* She stuffed it into her pocket and followed the old woman indoors.

'Have you got a phone?' she asked. 'We ought to call the cops straight away.'

To her surprise, Win hesitated. 'There's no policeman in Mudgeebung these days,' she said. 'The nearest station's in Newbury, the big coal town.'

'Well, you could talk to the mayor,' Blake suggested. 'Or Jan Shepherd, the MP.'

'Yes, Jan's a lovely girl,' Win murmured, wandering off to light the kettle. 'So kind and helpful. I don't like to bother her, though. After all, it was probably just some young people playing a prank.'

Blake frowned. *What's going on? It's like she wants to hush the whole thing up. I wonder if she recognised the shadows. Some of the kids from around town, maybe.*

She leaned against the bench and watched Win potter round the kitchen. 'If you think you know who's hassling you, then you ought to do something,' she said in the end.

'No,' Win said, sounding unexpectedly definite. 'Not always. Sometimes it's better to just wait and see. Please, don't tell anyone else what happened.'

Blake drummed her fingers on the bench. *I shouldn't say yes. Win could be in danger. Still, I'm a sucker for frail old ladies with big blue eyes.*

'Oh, all right, I'll keep my mouth shut,' she grumbled. 'Especially if you do something for me, in return. I'm looking for a woman called Fay Ray who -'

But she didn't get to finish the sentence, because Win dropped a plate of Anzac biscuits. She knelt down to pick up the pieces, while the ginger cat chased the biscuits across the floor.

'Why would a reporter be interested in Fay Ray?' she said over her shoulder.

Blake thought fast. *She's worried - which probably means she knows something. And if she does, I definitely want to hear it. I reckon my best bet is to tell her the truth. Or part of the truth, at any rate.*

'I'm, um, a friend of the family,' she told Win. 'I met this woman, Maureen Delaney, while I was travelling around. Maureen reckoned that her Auntie Fay was living in Mudgeebung. She asked me to look her up, if I happened to be passing through.'

There, that sounded pretty good. A nice ordinary reason for dropping in on Fay Ray. Nothing heavy, like me being Maureen Delaney's daughter and Fay's great-niece. I can get around to mentioning that after I've actually met Fay Ray.

She waited, eyes fixed on the old woman's face. 'Well, dear, I'll see what I can do,' Win said. 'But I can't promise anything.'

'So Fay Ray *is* still in Mudgeebung?' Blake asked, pushing it a bit further.

Win scooped up the cat and started stroking its bushy fur. 'I'll ask around,' she murmured.

And that was all she would say.

Blake pushed through the thin spot in the hedge and hurried across the caravan park. Let herself into the van, kicked off her runners and wriggled into the sleeping bag. As she rolled onto her side, she felt a lump in the pocket of her track pants. *Oh yeah. That cap I found in the grass. Too late now. I'll take a look at it first thing in the morning.*

For the rest of the night she dreamed about running and searching. She woke early, staggered out to the kitchen area and made a cup of tea. Then she rescued the cap from under her pillow, propped it against the toaster and studied it carefully.

It was a newish maroon baseball cap. The sort of cap every guy under twenty was wearing, except that this one looked a bit different. Most caps had the name of an American baseball team on the front - or an ad for O'Burgers - or a cartoon koala. But this cap had a little shield embroidered in gold thread, with a bird in the middle, sitting on some wavy lines that looked like water. A swan, maybe. Or a duck.

Blake sighed. *Another useless clue.* She dropped it into her pack, splashed cold water on her face and started to get dressed. Just jeans and a jacket today. *I made a good impression yesterday in my black dress. That ought to be enough.*

Five minutes later she was strolling down the main street of Mudgeebung. It was a pretty little town. Streets lined with willow trees and old wooden houses, looking the same as they must've looked a hundred years ago. Shops with the owners' names in leadlight over the door and iron posts outside, where people used to tie up their horses. Sunlight glittering across the surface of the lake, glimpsed through the gaps between the shops.

But when she looked harder, Blake could see signs of trouble. A lot of the shops were empty, with SOLD signs plastered across the windows. A bunch of men hung around outside the pub, checking to make sure their mobile phones were on. *In case someone rings them about a job.*

And the greenie in the duck costume was waddling down the street, handing out leaflets and quacking, 'Save the ducks'. A couple of jet ski boys followed along behind, teasing it and trying to trip it up. Blake was walking backwards and watching them when someone grabbed her arm.

'Hi, Sheryl,' a voice said. 'You almost bumped into us. Are you coming to interview my mum?'

Sheryl? Who's that? Oh yeah, it's me, of course.

She swung round and smiled at Nathan and his little brother. Nathan was wearing a back-to-front baseball cap this morning. Old and faded and blue, not new and maroon, but Blake leaned sideways to check the back of it, all the same. No shields, though. No golden birds. Just Mudgeebung Primary School in large black letters.

'Girl,' Billy said, pleased, and started to climb up her jacket. Blake picked him off and dumped him back on the footpath.

'G'day,' she said. 'Actually, I hadn't got around to thinking about your mum. I'm just getting the feel of the town at present. When did those shops close down?'

'About two weeks ago,' Nathan told her. 'Some big company offered them a lot of money to buy out their leases. Mum says it's all part of Brian Malone's plans for Mudgeebung. She reckons the shops'll be turned into gift shops and jet ski shops and that, for the tourists who come to the International Jet Ski Championships.'

Blake fished out her pad and pen. 'Let's see if I've got this straight,' she said. 'First someone takes over the shops. Then the mayor announces his plans two weeks later - on Wednesday, yes? And by Friday the Minister for Tourism's here in Mudgeebung for the launch.'

'Yep, that's right,' Nathan said. 'But there's more. For starters, the caravan park was sold at the same time as the shops. That's where the hotel and the casino are going to be built. Plus Lake Mudgeebung used to be protected - like, no motor boats or jet skis or whatever - but the council just happen to change the by-laws a week ago.'

She scribbled fast. 'Uh-huh. In other words, a lot of people knew about the mayor's plans, way before he went public.'

'Sure. Brian Malone lined up the whole deal in advance, to make sure no one could stop it from going ahead. But so what? Okay, Mum's hopping mad, because she reckons the people in Mudgeebung should've been allowed to have a say. Still, there's nothing she can do. It's not illegal or anything.'

'Uh-huh,' Blake muttered, taking more notes. 'You're pretty cluey about all this stuff, aren't you?'

The boy grinned. 'Hey, my mum's the local MP. I'm into computer games and books myself - SF and fantasy mostly. But Mum only talks about politics and Billy only talks about climbing, so I know a lot about that too.' Then he blinked and swung around. 'Wait a minute. Where *is* Billy?'

Blake glanced up and down. 'Not here. Not anywhere in the street,' she said and Nathan sighed.

'Oh no, don't tell me. He's gone looking for something new to climb. Quick, we better find him, before he lands himself in more trouble.'

CHAPTER SIX

They ducked between two shops, sped along a narrow lane, slithered down a muddy bank and skidded to a stop on the shore of Lake Mudgeebung. There was a weathered old grey jetty sticking out into the lake, with five sleek black jet skis bobbing beside it. Billy was halfway down one of the pylons, with the bald teddy bear tucked in the back of his shorts.

'Oh wow,' moaned Nathan. 'Look at that. Mum'll kill me.'

While they watched, Billy swung out over the water and let go. Plummeting down through the air. Dropping onto one of the jet skis. It rocked wildly but he rode the waves like a cowboy.

'Bike,' he babbled, reaching for the handlebars. 'Billy drive, vroom vroom. Drive bike across lake. Vroom vroom vroom.'

Blake couldn't help laughing. *That kid. He'll be climbing Mount Everest by the time he's ten.* Beside her, Nathan gulped and stepped out of his jeans. He waded into the lake and floundered through the waves, arms flailing, till the water was up to his chest. Braced himself, feet apart, and called, 'I'm here, Billy. Jump.'

The little boy bounced once or twice, chuckled and leapt. Spray shot out in all directions as the two boys disappeared underwater. Blake raced for the lake's edge, stripping off her jacket. But just as she was about to plunge in, Nathan surfaced, spitting bubbles. He was clutching Billy, who was clutching the bald brown bear. 'Swim,' he babbled. 'Swim now, Nathie? Bear swim. Billy swim in clothes.'

'No thanks,' his brother said, pushing his glasses up his nose. 'You've got me into

enough trouble for today.'

But the trouble wasn't over yet. By the time Nathan had splashed back to the shore, five jet ski boys were lined up, waiting for him. A tall good-looking guy with thick gold-brown hair, sky blue eyes and a confident smile. *Obviously the leader.* A wiry dark-haired guy with a narrow face, like a ferret. *The kid I saw yesterday, fighting the greenie.* A big plump guy and two small skinny kids, all watching the leader. *The sidekicks, right?*

Blake sidled up behind them and examined their baseball caps. Three shields - but they were silver, not gold, and there weren't any birds on them. The writing underneath the shield said 'St Michael's Rowing Team.' *Looks like some of those posh schools have picked up on the baseball cap craze.*

While she was checking the caps, the leader of the jet ski boys held up a bundle of denim. 'Look what I found,' he announced. 'Some smelly old jeans. Wonder who they belong to.'

'They're mine,' said Nathan. 'Give them back, Conrad.'

He leapt for the jeans. Conrad sniggered and threw them to the dark-haired boy. They tossed the bundle from one kid to the next, while Nathan jumped and grabbed and tried to pull his wet t-shirt down. Then Conrad flicked his bare legs and he lashed out, fist slamming into Conrad's forehead.

'Hey, that hurt!' Conrad said indignantly.

He gave Nathan a shove and sent him staggering into the plump boy. The boy yelped and pushed Nathan on. As the dark-haired boy got ready to shove him, Blake dodged round the circle and caught hold of his wrist. Pulling it down and then twisting it up. Pinning it between his shoulder blades.

'So, Nathan,' she said, 'you know these creeps, do you?'

'Not all of them,' he gasped, sheltering behind her. 'Just Conrad and Toby. I went to the same boarding school as them till -'

'Till Mummy decided she was going to be a big deal MP and moved little Nathie to the local school,' Conrad jeered. 'Lucky for us. He never fitted in at Kenilworth Grammar, did he, Toby?'

The dark-haired boy wrenched his arm free. 'Dead right,' he agreed. 'Now let's get rid of his mate, so we can have some more fun with the wuss.'

He reached for Blake's shoulders, trying to shunt her backwards. *Hey, some guys never learn.* She ducked and found Toby's wrist again. Tugged and twisted and heaved. Next minute he was flat on his back in the mud. And Conrad was striding towards Blake, with an ugly scowl on his handsome face.

Then he stopped, a few centimetres away. 'Hang on,' he said, looking startled. 'You're a girl.'

'So?' Blake snapped. 'Girls can fight too, y'know. Better than your friend Toby, in case you hadn't noticed.'

She dropped into a karate stance, knees bent, hands splayed in front of her. Stared straight into Conrad's eyes. *Hey, he's got a bruise on his forehead, under all that thick blond hair. Like he might've banged his head on someone's doorstep. Win's doorstep, for example.*

Although it could've happened when Nathan socked him, I suppose.

While she stared, Conrad leaned even closer. 'You're that girl reporter, right?' he said, hot breath brushing her cheek. 'I've got four words for you. Get out of here.' Then he glanced over his shoulder and said, 'Come on, team. We can deal with Nathan later.' Dropped the jeans in the mud and went striding away.

When Blake looked around, Jan Shepherd was running down to the water's edge. She snatched Billy up, hugged him and ruffled his wet curls.

'Poor Billykins,' she crooned. 'What were those nasty boys doing to you?'

'He's fine,' Nathan grumbled, scrambling into his muddy jeans. 'I'm the one they were planning to beat to a pulp - except Sheryl stopped them.'

Jan turned towards Blake. She had an ordinary sort of face. Round chin, small nose, direct hazel eyes, brown hair cut straight across her forehead. But when she smiled, Blake felt as though the sun had come out from behind a dark cloud.

'So you're Sheryl Newton?' she asked. 'Looks like you're making a habit of rescuing my boys. Nathan tells me I owe you an interview - but can it wait till tomorrow? I'm up to my ears in work. Wouldn't have left the office for a second, except that someone dropped in to say those jet ski boys were on the rampage.'

'Someone saw the guys hassling us?' Blake asked. 'Why didn't they come and help?'

Jan shrugged. 'Country people are big on minding their own business and they're not too keen on strangers - even me, and I was born in Mudgeebung. I lived in Newbury for fifteen years, though. Only came back here after I got divorced.' She sighed and added, 'My husband was a beaut bloke. But first he lost his job and then he started gambling and ...'

Her face clouded and she hugged Billy harder. 'So you really meant what you were saying yesterday,' Blake commented.

'Exactly. I know jobs are important - and I know how dangerous gambling is too. But we can talk about that later, Sheryl. Right now I'd better get back to my office. I rushed out in the middle of an interview with Martin Fahey.'

While they walked up to the main street, they arranged to meet for morning tea at the Shepherds' house next day. Then Blake checked her watch and asked how to find the mayor.

'Brian's office is at the end of the street,' Jan said. 'Be careful of him, though. I've never trusted him, not since he tied my plaits to the back of my chair in Year 2. Mind you, I got back at him. I planted a spider in his lunch box - and Brian can't stand

spiders.'

As she chuckled at the memory, Blake glanced down the street. Saw the back of a purple shirt and recognised Martin Fahey, half-hidden in a doorway, talking to a tall guy in a stockman's coat.

I've seen the tall guy somewhere before. Oh yeah, got it. He's one of the greenies. Martin must've spotted him in the street and nipped out to interview him while Jan was away.

While she watched, the reporter moved closer and patted the greenie on the shoulder. *Like they're old mates - but hey, Martin probably acts like he's best mates with everyone he interviews.* Then the greenie guy hurried off and Martin dodged back into Jan's office. Blake said goodbye to the Shepherds and wandered on down the street.

There was still a quarter of an hour before her appointment with the mayor. When she passed the local library, she found that her feet were swerving to the right and carrying her inside. For the next fifteen minutes she flicked through old copies of the Globe, reading through all of Martin's stories. Stories about police corruption. Stories about youth suicide. Stories about duck shooting and hospitals being closed down and the big new casino in the city.

Oh wow. Sheryl Newton was right. Martin's definitely got a knack for asking the hard questions. Dunno how he gets away with it. I wouldn't have the nerve.

Although I might need to learn how to ask hard questions, if I want to find Fay Ray.

The mayor's office was a chunky white building, like an old-fashioned bank. Pillars on either side of the door. Massive window sills with round arches above them. Two plaster women in plaster draperies smiling from the roof, among bunches of plaster ferns. And graffiti everywhere, in spiky green spray paint.

SAVE THE DUCKS. STOP THE JET SKIS. JOBS, NOT CASINOS.

Blake grinned and pushed the door open. In the middle of the waiting room there was a big glass case with a model town inside. She leaned on the glass and peered down at the little town. *It's Mudgeebung - or at least it's what Mudgeebung's going to look like once the hotel's built.*

Lake Mudgeebung, half a size larger and smoothed off around the edges, with some big modern jetties for the jet skis. The hills, curving around one side of the lake, and the town on the other side. And a flat strip of land between the town and the hills, where the caravan park was now - and where the hotel and the casino were going to be.

She studied the little models. *A pink pyramid - the casino. And a glass tower - the hotel. Terraces stretching down to the shore and a grandstand, so the tourists can watch the Jet Ski Championships. Very modern. It doesn't really fit with the rest of*

Mudgeebung.

'That's just one possibility,' a voice boomed from behind her. 'We can change the design of the hotel, if people have any better ideas.'

Blake spun around to face Brian Malone. He seemed smaller today, not much taller than she was. But his face was just as round and rosy and he was beaming like Santa Claus making an unexpected autumn visit.

'Interesting' she said, flicking her notepad open. 'From the way you were talking yesterday, I thought it was all settled.'

The mayor clasped his hands across his round stomach. 'Well, maybe we were moving a bit fast. We might need to take things more slowly, till we're sure the people of Mudgeebung are on side.'

'Uh-huh. So you changed your mind after the earthmover was sabotaged?'

Brian's rosy face turned redder than Rudolph the Reindeer's nose. 'No!' he yelled. 'Never! I won't give way to those greenies. A bunch of yuppies from the city who think they can walk in, wreck our machines, paint graffiti all over my office and start telling us country people how to run our lives. Well, they've got another think coming. We're going to stand firm, no matter what they do.'

'But you're *not* standing firm,' Blake pointed out. 'You just said you'd decided to back down.'

'Because I want to consult the people of Mudgeebung. Not because I'm kowtowing to the greenies.'

'Hey, why not consult the greenies as well? They've got a point, after all. If I was a black-eyed duck, I'd be pretty freaked by those jet skis. The guys who ride them are total hoons.'

'Now, you're wrong there,' Brian said, calming down. 'Those boys come from good schools and good families - otherwise they couldn't afford to own jet skis. No, Sheryl, the jet ski riders aren't the problem. The greenies are the ones who've been vandalising things and starting brawls.'

'Are you sure?' Blake asked. 'The jet ski boys look as though they're spoiling for a fight.'

The mayor chuckled. 'Ah, boys will be boys. There's nothing new about that. My own brother ran away twenty-four years ago with the wildest girl in town. He's got a steady job in the city now but he was trouble on two legs when he was young.'

Then the phone rang and he murmured, 'Excuse me,' and bounced off into his office. Blake hesitated and then edged over to the door. *Brian Malone's an expert at changing the subject. It's hard to pin the guy down. Let's see if he says anything useful on the phone.*

'Mrs Stodka,' Brian was rumbling. 'Good to hear from you ... That's right, she's here now but I haven't told her anything yet ... Of course, whatever you want. And about that

other matter - you still have the documents at your house? It might be better to leave them with me, for safety's sake. I'd like to have another look at them, anyway ... Yes, yes, feel free to talk it over with your friends. But I'll hope to see you again sometime soon.'

He slammed the phone down and there was silence for a moment. An angry silence. *He's mad at Mrs Stodka, whoever she is. I don't know her - and yet she seems to know me. At any rate, she was ordering the mayor not to tell me something. Some scandal she doesn't want Sheryl Newton, girl reporter, to write about? Or something to do with those documents?*

It's a mystery - but it's not the mystery I'm supposed to be solving. Come on, Blake. Get in there and ask Brian about Fay Ray.

When she marched into the office, the mayor was sitting behind his desk, gazing at a photo in a silver frame. He tilted it towards Blake and said, 'That's my son. The reason why I'm trying so hard to bring new jobs to this town. He's a boarder at Kenilworth Grammar now - but I hope he'll be able to come back and work here one day, instead of getting a job in the city, the way all the kids do at present.'

Blake glanced at the photo. A round rosy kid in a posh school uniform. White shirt, dark red tie and a dark red blazer with fancy gold squiggles on the pocket. She frowned, *Yeah, yeah. He's changing the subject again. Watch out, Brian, I can change the subject too.*

'Mudgeebung means a lot to you, doesn't it?' she said. 'I bet you know the entire history of the place. Ever come across a woman called Fay Ray?'

She was trying to sound as casual as possible but the question had a big effect. The mayor slammed the photo back onto the desk and glared at her.

'There's no such person,' he snapped. 'Trust me, Sheryl. I know.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Blake scowled. *Funny, whenever someone says, 'Trust me', I always want to do the exact opposite.* She looked Brian Malone in the eyes and said. 'Oh, really? I was talking to this person who lived in Mudgeebung twenty-seven years ago and they definitely knew Fay Ray.'

Brian turned his head and stared at the book case, as though he was hoping to get some ideas from the row of legal text books. Then he relaxed and said. 'Twenty-seven years? That explains it. I was away at university then, studying law. Sorry, Sheryl, can't help you there.'

'Well then, who can?' Blake persisted and he shrugged.

'Some of the older residents, perhaps. Your best bet would be four old ladies called Win and Glad and May and Dell. They've been here longer than anyone else I can think of and -'

'Yeah, I've met three of them already,' she cut in. 'But -'

'Good. Then you'll know where to find them. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got another appointment in two minutes.'

He jumped up and hustled her to the door. As she was turning to go, Blake shivered suddenly. The back of her neck felt cold, as though icy fingers were gripping onto it.

Oh no. That icy hand again. The sign that warns me when there's danger about. Haven't felt it for a while. I was hoping it might've gone away.

She whirled round and Brian Malone blinked at her. 'What's the matter, Sheryl?' he asked, looking puzzled. 'Have you left something behind?'

Blake checked the room quickly and sighed. *Can't see any axe murderers under the desk. And Brian wasn't coming at me with a cosh in his hand.*

'No,' she said, feeling as puzzled as the mayor looked. 'No, I'm fine. Thanks for your help.'

'I'm afraid I wasn't actually much help,' he apologised, while he shunted her into the waiting room.

Blake nodded. *True, you weren't much help, Brian. But then, you were just obeying orders. The mysterious Mrs Stodka told you not to help me, didn't she?*

As she headed out into the street, Blake passed Martin Fahey, heading in to see the mayor. *Ha! Brian Malone thought I was a problem but Martin's going to ask harder questions than I ever could. I bet Brian'll change the subject twenty times and get him out of the office in ten minutes flat.*

She strolled across the road and found a little cafe. Settled down at one of the tables and ordered coffee and a salad sandwich. Stared at the ripples of sunlight reflected on the lake and started to sort through all the facts she'd just collected.

The mysterious Mrs Stodka, to begin with. Someone who'd met Blake. Not Nathan's mother - her surname was Shepherd. In which case, it had to be Glad or May or Win, because they were the only other women she'd come across in Mudgeebung so far. *Although I suppose I ought to add Dell to the list as well. If the four of them are such great mates, the others have probably told her all about me.*

So her first job was to find out which of the old women was Mrs Stodka. And her second job was to find out what Mrs Stodka knew about her great-aunt. *She knows something, I'm sure. The mayor reckoned he hadn't said anything to me - but he'd been raving on like mad about the hotel. He only got cagey after I mentioned Fay Ray. That must be why Mrs Stodka rang him, to warn him to keep quiet about Great-aunt Fay.*

What's the big secret, though? Why would the old ladies want to stop me from tracking down Mum's aunt?

Blowed if I know.

She gave up on that one and thought about another interesting fact. Brian Malone and his grand scheme for bringing the International Jet Ski Championships to Mudgeebung. Yesterday it had seemed like he'd do anything to make sure the hotel and the casino went ahead. Today, after the sabotage of the earthmover, he was backing down fast.

He sounded as if he meant it when he said he wouldn't give in to the greenies. But what if the greenies didn't fix the earthmover? What if someone else did it - someone from Mudgeebung, maybe - and Brian's trying to protect them by putting his plans on

hold?

She leafed through her notepad, picking out names. Nathan. Billy. Jan Shepherd. The old women. The jet ski boys. Martin Fahey. Then she flipped the pad shut and shook her head. Hard to see why any of those people would want to wreck an earthmover - and even harder to see why Brian Malone would want to protect them.

Blake laughed. *Ah, forget it. I'm getting carried away by this reporter business. I don't want the greenies to have sabotaged the earthmover, because it's too obvious.*

But hey, sometimes the obvious solution is the right one.

After that she only had one fact left to think about. The strangest fact of all. The icy hand. Why had it grabbed her when she was leaving the mayor's office? There wasn't any danger. No threat from Brian Malone. No heavy picture about to fall on her head. Nothing that the icy hand needed to warn her about. It didn't make sense.

Then again, nothing makes much sense right now.

She leaned back and drank the last mouthful of coffee. Watched people strolling up and down the street. The green streamers of the willow trees, fluttering in the wind. The half-circle of rocky hills, brooding over the little town. It was easy to relax here. Way more peaceful than in the city.

Although it won't stay peaceful for long, once the hotel's been built.

While she was gazing around, Blake noticed Martin Fahey coming out of the mayor's office. She frowned and glanced down at her watch. *That's funny. He's been in there for forty-five minutes. Brian Malone should've thrown him out straight away, if Martin was being as tough as usual. It's like he's been having a cosy chat, instead of asking hard questions.*

As she looked up, Martin caught sight of her and waved. 'Hi, Sheryl,' he called. 'Looks like we're going to keep bumping into each other. I'm heading up to the greenies' camp in the hills. Why don't you come along? It'll save on petrol - the greenies ought to be impressed by that.'

'Are you sure you want me around while you're interviewing people?' she asked and he grinned.

'Hey, us journos have to stick together. I dropped into the library this morning and read your series on the homeless people in your city. It's good stuff, Sheryl. Really punchy. Fact is, I'd be interested to see what you make of the greenie mob.'

Blake said 'Thanks' out loud and then said thank you to Sheryl Newton under her breath. *Trust Martin to check on me. I'm glad I decided to borrow the name of a real reporter - and I'm glad he liked Sheryl's articles.*

She looked up at the hills and pushed her chair back. Jumped to her feet and said, 'Okay, let's go and find some greenies.'

Martin's four-wheel drive was parked outside the pub. Blake scrambled in and they drove out of the town and into the hills. Halfway up the first hill Martin turned onto a dirt track. They jolted along a narrow ridge and cruised down into a little valley. Pulled up in front of the greenies' camp.

It was all a lot neater and tidier than Blake had expected. Two rows of tents, all shapes and sizes. A cooking area with a trestle table and gas bottles and a meal tent behind it. The greenies were bustling around, carrying buckets of water or chopping vegetables.

Just like a school camp. Kind of disappointing, in a way.

The tall guy in the stockman's coat spotted them and came loping over. He had long hair like rope that had come unravelled, caterpillar eyebrows and a beard that straggled down till it tangled with his chest hair. Dark eyes that flicked across them and took in every detail. And a camera slung round his neck, half-hidden by the coat.

'G'day,' he said. 'Wayne Fraser's the name. Pleased to meet you. Are you from Mudgeebung?'

'No, we're journalists,' Martin told him. 'Martin Fahey from the *Globe* and Sheryl Newton from the *Daily Messenger*. We'd like to have a chat, if that's okay.'

'Not a problem,' Wayne said cheerfully. 'We're always happy to talk to the media. Park yourself on that log over there, while I get you a mug of bean soup.'

As he bounded across to the cooking area, Blake blinked and rubbed her forehead. *Hold on a minute. Something's wrong here. I saw Martin talking to Wayne in the doorway of Jan Shepherd's office, less than an hour ago. But now they seem to be pretending they've never met before.*

Wayne came charging back with three mugs of soup. 'Okay, question time,' he announced and Blake and Martin whipped out their notepads.

'So, what sort of people are prepared to leave their homes, travel to Mudgeebung and live in tents on the hills, for the sake of a bunch of ducks?' Martin began.

'All sorts,' Wayne told him. 'Barb, who made your soup, is a librarian. Joey works with computers. I'm a wildlife photographer and a lot of the others are students.'

'Do any of you live in Mudgeebung?' Martin demanded and the greenie shook his head. 'Well, then, what gives you the right to tell the people of Mudgeebung what to do?'

'Because we care,' Wayne said. 'This is our country too, y'know. We want our kids to grow up in a world where they can see black-eyed ducks swimming on natural lakes - not jet skis and concrete pylons.'

He talked on for the next twenty minutes. Telling them that the council was going to dredge the lake, smooth the edges and make it twenty metres longer. Explaining how this would wipe out the black-eyed ducks' nesting spots and kill off the fish and insects that they ate. Giving examples of other places where greenies had stopped councils and

big companies from destroying the environment.

'How far would you go, in order to stop the hotel?' Martin asked. 'Would you vandalise council property, for example?'

'The earthmover? Oh no, that wasn't us. We don't believe in violence. It's against the rules of the camp. We're here to save things, not destroy them.'

'And the graffiti on the mayor's office?' Martin persisted.

Wayne laughed. 'Graffiti? Do you really think that's worth worrying about, at a time like this?'

Blake bent her head over her note pad, to hide a grin. *In other words, he's telling us that the greenies did the graffiti but not the earthmover, although he wouldn't admit it out loud. This guy's got an answer for everything. It's interesting - but I get the feeling he's said it all before.*

'You're, like the spokesperson for the camp, aren't you?' she asked. 'Could we talk to some of the others as well? Maybe someone who hasn't been interviewed before?'

Wayne looked startled. 'Oh. Yeah, I suppose so. Did you have anyone in mind?'

'The duck,' Blake said straight away and he looked even more startled.

'I'm afraid that's not possible,' he began but then his voice was drowned out by the roar of an engine. A ten-seater van was bumping down the track, with a duck at the wheel. It leapt out, unzipped itself, wriggled and tugged. And turned into a tall lanky girl with yellow-brown eyes and a mass of red hair. Short shorts, short t-shirt and a navel ring glinting in between.

'I've handed out the second batch of leaflets already,' she called. 'Got any more?'

'Not just yet,' Wayne told her. 'These reporters want to have a word with you first.'

The girl ran both hands through her hair and glanced at Blake and Martin. 'Hi,' she said. 'My name's Em, short for Emerald. My mum's a greenie too. I'm not really into words - but I'll take you to see the ducks.'

As they headed down the hill, Martin edged over to Blake. 'Smart thinking,' he hissed. 'I bet we'll get more out of her than we did out of Wayne. Why don't you ask the questions for a while?'

Because I'm not a real reporter, so I don't know what to ask. She thought fast. Looked around and said, 'Um, the camp's pretty well organised, isn't it?'

'Has to be,' Em said, 'Otherwise the council'd throw us out, quick as. So we're really careful about fires and we keep the place tidy.' She tripped on a heap of yellow plastic and added, 'Well, except for that. It's some sort of inflatable tent that didn't work. I'll stash it in the boot of the van when we get back.'

She vaulted over a boulder and led them along a narrow rocky path. Blake had to jog to keep up with her. 'What do you do, when you're not involved in greenie protests?' she puffed.

'Drama student,' Em said. 'That's how come I got landed with the duck suit. The

others reckoned they'd feel silly but actually it's kind of fun. I can hassle people like crazy when I'm suited up. They wouldn't take it from a red-headed greenie - but they take it from a duck.'

Blake laughed and tried to think of another question. But before she could come up with anything, Em skidded to a halt. She shaded her eyes and peered down at the lake. Swore under her breath and went charging ahead.

'Hey, you!' she yelled. 'What do you think you're doing? Get away from those ducks!'

CHAPTER EIGHT

The path stopped at the edge of a high bank. Blake slid down the slope and found herself standing on a strip of brown grit, halfway between sand and pebbles. Thick clusters of reeds on either side. Water lapping at the shore. And Em glaring at a boy in a baseball cap.

'Hey, I didn't do anything,' he yelled. 'I only wanted to see the little baby ducks. They're kind of cute.'

He was the biggest of the jet ski boys - but not the toughest. Tall and chubby and awkward, with a snub nose and little blue eyes fringed by sandy eyelashes. *Kind of like a giant baby himself.*

Em snorted. 'Well, go on. Take a good look. They won't be here for much longer, not if you and your mob go ahead and screw up the lake.'

She poked him in the chest and he jumped back, runners sinking into the mud. As he looked round desperately, a voice called, 'Gareth! Where are you?'

'Over here, Conrad,' he yelled in relief and next minute the leader of the jet ski boys leapt down onto the gritty beach.

'Naughty Gareth,' he teased. 'Have you been playing with those nasty greenies? The ones who paddle round to our camp at night and spy on us.'

'In your dreams,' Em snapped. 'It wasn't us. We don't even have a canoe.'

'That'd be right,' he jeered. 'Everyone knows greenies are scared of water. That's why they never wash.'

Em's fists clenched. 'Oh wow, I wish I had my rifle here. You guys'd be running like rabbits.'

'No way,' Conrad boasted. 'Besides, girls can't handle guns.'

'Country girls can - and I grew up in Newbury, just down the road. I've got

a permit and everything. Bet I know more about guns than a soft city kid like you.'

'Hey, I'm not soft,' he said indignantly. 'I'm in the cadets at school. As a matter of fact, I brought my rifle with me, in case we saw any rabbits or -'

'Or ducks?' Em gasped. 'Listen, mate, if you touch one of the black-eyed ducks' feathers, I'll shoot *you*, okay?'

Her yellow eyes flashed, like a tiger getting ready to pounce. Conrad glanced over his shoulder, checking the escape routes. 'You're sick,' he told her. 'Seriously sick. Come on, Gareth.'

He went scrambling up the muddy slope but Gareth hesitated. 'Don't worry,' he whispered to Em. 'I won't let them shoot the ducks.' Then he squared his plump shoulders and went hurrying after Conrad. Martin Fahey chuckled.

'Well, that was interesting,' he observed. 'Wayne reckons your group never uses violence but you obviously don't agree. Tell me, Em, how do you feel about sabotaging earthmovers?'

Em lifted her chin and shook back her mass of red hair. 'I'd do it,' she said. 'If it was necessary.'

Blake bit her bottom lip, to stop herself from smiling. *Yep, she's going to make a great actor. She looks just like the heroine in a war movie.* Then her smile vanished as she noticed the bruise that had been hidden behind Em's hair. The sort of bruise you might get if you banged your head on an old woman's doorstep.

'Okay then, how do you feel about creeping into old ladies' gardens and scaring them?' she asked and Em blinked.

'That's not my style. Still, some old ladies deserve to be scared. Like, this guy told me about these four old ladies in Mudgeebung who are right behind the mayor's plans. Apparently they owned the land where the hotel's going to be built, so I suppose they're in it for the money.'

Blake's eyes opened wide. *Oh wow. She's talking about Win and the others. What if Em heard the gossip, rounded up some of her greenie mates and went off to harass the old ladies?*

She could've done it. After all, she had that bruise on her forehead. Then again, Conrad had a bruise in the same place. Plus there was another problem. The greenies only seemed to have one vehicle between them, the ten-seater van. Em couldn't have borrowed it without Wayne knowing - and Wayne definitely wouldn't approve of frightening old women. He'd say it wasn't good publicity.

No car. No boat. I think I just proved Em can't have been in Mudgeebung last night, playing ghosts in Win's garden. But I better make sure.

'What happened to your forehead?' she asked.

Em's hand shot up to push her hair back and rub the bruise. 'Those jet ski

guys kept crowding me when I was handing out pamphlets,' she scowled. 'Then Conrad tripped me and I fell over.'

Blake studied her thoughtfully. 'That's right,' she remembered. 'I saw the boys teasing you, when you were in the duck suit. Didn't see you fall, though.'

'Oh wow,' Em groaned. 'You reporters have nasty minds. You don't believe a thing I say, do you? I'm not talking to you any more.'

She swung away and went darting off. Blake and Martin watched her running up the path, as sure and speedy as a mountain goat. 'You really got to her,' Martin said. 'What was all the stuff about the old ladies? That's a new one on me.'

Blake grinned. *Too bad. I'm not going to tell you. You've got plenty of secrets, Martin Fahey - your meeting with Wayne, for example, and that long chat with the mayor. I reckon I'm allowed to have a few secrets too.*

Martin looked as though he was about to ask some more questions. But luckily, just then the reeds shivered and a duck came swimming out. Small and neat and brown, with black patches around its eyes, like a party mask. Followed by four balls of brown fluff with tiny feet and tiny black masks and tiny feet, paddling hard.

'Ducklings,' Martin said, smiling goofily as they went skidding across the water. 'Gareth was right. They are cute.'

Blake nodded. *That's for sure. How could Conrad even think of shooting them? Mind you, he was probably just stirring Em - but he does have a gun. And so does Em. And so does the person who set off the fireworks on the earthmover*

Oh wow. The more I find out, the more confused I feel. I don't know whether to suspect Conrad - or Em - or neither of them.

Martin gave Blake a lift back to the caravan park, grumbling all the way because she wouldn't give him the story on the old ladies. She hopped out of the four-wheel drive, feeling pleased with herself. At the last minute she swerved away from the van and headed back to Win's house.

Win reckoned she'd ask around about Fay Ray. If I can catch her on her own, she might actually crack and tell me what she knows.

But when she pushed the front gate open, she saw Win on the front verandah, talking to the old woman in the Akubra hat. It was the first time Blake had seen Dell up close. She was taller than the other old women, with wrinkled brown skin, tough as old leather. Iron grey hair, chopped off short. Steady brown eyes. She looked Blake up and down, as if she was measuring her.

'You're Sheryl Newton, aren't you?' she barked. 'You've been pestering

Win about some woman who's supposed to have lived in Mudgeebung. Well, I hope you're not planning to pester her again today. She's had a nasty experience and she's not feeling too good.'

She thumped Win on the shoulder and said, 'I'll drop round in the morning.' Then she tipped back her hat and strode off down the path. When Blake glanced across, Win looked frailer and tinier than ever. Her milky blue eyes were clouded and her hands were trembling.

'What happened?' she asked and Win sighed.

'Well, I went down to the shops for some cat food. And when I got back, I found *this*.'

She pointed to a puddle on the front step. Thick and glistening and red as blood, with bloody paw prints leading off across the verandah.

'I thought they'd killed my poor Ginger,' she whispered. 'But Dell says it's only red paint. All the same, I don't feel safe here any more. I'm going next door to spend the night with Glad and May. You can come too, if you like.'

'No thanks,' Blake began but then she had second thoughts. *Okay, I'm not frightened but Win is - and Glad and May won't be much help if those kids come hack again tonight. I better go along, so I can protect them.*

'Hey, can I change my mind?' she asked. 'It might be a bit scary in the van on my own.'

Win beamed. 'Don't worry, we'll look after you, Sheryl. Now, can you give me a hand to carry these things over?'

She showed Blake a pile of bags and boxes in the hall. A sponge cake and a tin of biscuits. A nightie and a hot water bottle. Ginger's bowl and kitty litter tray. Blake grinned. *Win's taking half the house. It's lucky we're not going far.*

As she stacked the boxes together, she noticed some letters on the hall table. Win was out in the kitchen, calling 'Here, pussy, pussy, pussy', so Blake picked up the top envelope and read the name on it.

Mrs Winifred Ackerley. So Win isn't the mysterious Mrs Stodka. Too bad. Out of all the old ladies, she'd be the easiest one to talk to.

She hung the bags on her arms and heaved up the boxes. Set off down the front path with Win beside her, carrying the big ginger cat. They walked along the side hedge and came to another wooden cottage, just like Win's house. Glad and May were waiting on the verandah.

'Oh, it's that reporter again,' Glad bleated, looking more friendly than last time. 'How nice of you to help Win.'

She held the door open and Blake staggered into the front room. As she dumped the boxes on the couch, she caught a flash of something white in a shadowy corner. She moved closer. *White flowers in a pot. And not any old flowers either. They're orchids.*

Orchids like my Great-aunt Fay grows.

She hurried out into the kitchen but Glad and May were busy fussing over

Win. Blake hung around for a while and then decided to go across to the van and collect her pack. *It's cool. I can ask about the orchids when I get back. With any luck, that'll give me a chance to ask about Fay Ray as well.*

While she strolled over to the caravan park, she tried to work out who could've tipped paint onto Win's doorstep. *Anyone, really. Any of the kids in town. Plus the duck - I mean, Em - was in Mudgeebung, handing out leaflets, and the jet ski boys were hanging round as well. So I can't cross any of them off my list.*

The jet ski boys seemed to like causing trouble - but they didn't have any reason to pick on the old women. On the other hand, Em thought the old women were backing the hotel development - but Blake couldn't see Em doing anything that spiteful. She sighed.

Oh, damn. Being a brilliant investigative reporter isn't quite as easy as it looks.

The sky was getting darker as Blake hurried back to Glad and May's cottage. Just a last smudge of red and gold, over to the west. She stopped and looked up at the dark outline of the hills, curved round Mudgeebung like a mother's arm. Smiled and went indoors.

After they'd eaten dinner, Glad lit a fire in the front room. While May got out a pack of cards, Blake glanced into the corner and said, 'Nice flowers. Where do they come from?'

Glad fiddled with her woolly white hair. 'I picked them in the front garden,' she bleated. 'But they're just daisies. Nothing special.'

Blake stared. Blobs of white glimmering in the shadows, the same as before. She jumped up and went marching over to the corner. Stood there blinking at a vase of white daisies.

'Goodness me,' said May, adjusting a brooch on her feather pillow chest. 'You ought to get your eyes tested, dear. I thought us oldies were the only ones who had problems.'

She shuffled the cards and dealt. Blake frowned at the jumble of hearts and diamonds, spades and clubs. *There were orchids in that corner before. I know there were. Glad and May must've hidden them, while I was over at the caravan park.*

Which means they're definitely hiding the facts about Fay Ray as well.

While they played, the old women chatted non-stop, telling stories about the town. Stories from that morning. Stories from last week. Stories from twenty or forty years ago.

'You could write a book about Mudgeebung,' Blake commented, slapping the joker onto Glad's jack of hearts. 'You're part of its history, aren't you?'

Someone even told me you owned the land where the hotel's going to be built.'

Glad stared at her jack in dismay, like a sheep that'd lost its favourite lamb. 'That was a long time ago, Sheryl,' she bleated. 'We sold most of our land to the council for the caravan park.'

'Although we'd never have done it, if we'd known the council was going to sell it off like this,' May added. 'Never.'

'Such a dreadful idea,' Win sighed. 'A big hotel in our little town. Jet skis racing across Lake Mudgeebung. Tourists everywhere. I know young Brian means well but I honestly can't agree with him.'

They looked at each other, white heads nodding. Blake smiled to herself. *There. Em was wrong about the old ladies. Just wait till I tell her. If she's been harassing the old ladies, that'll make her stop.*

She led the ace of clubs and groaned as Win trumped it with the five of hearts. 'Oh dear,' the old woman beamed. 'I seem to have won another trick. I *am* doing well tonight.'

Blake took a deep breath. *Okay, she's in a good mood now. Here goes.*

'By the way, Win,' she said casually, 'did you remember to ask around about Fay Ray?'

Win hesitated with her next card halfway to the table. 'Sheryl's a lovely girl, even if she is a reporter,' she said. 'Please, can't I tell her?'

'Tell her what?' Glad snapped and May added, 'There's nothing to tell. Is there, Win?'

The old woman let go of her card and it went fluttering to the ground. She scabbled around on the carpet, making small worried noises. When she sat up, her face was pink and flustered.

'Oh dear,' she said. 'I'm sorry, Sheryl. I made a mistake. I really don't know anything about Fay Ray at all.'

'What about Mrs Stodka then?' Blake tried. 'Do you know her?'

This time Win dropped all her cards. She disappeared under the table, while Glad and May glared at Blake. Glad's nostrils flaring like a sheep in a bad mood. May's pillowy chest heaving up and down.

'Too many questions,' Glad bleated. 'We told you not to ask too many questions.'

'Oh yeah?' Blake snapped. 'What'll happen to me if I do?'

And she was still scowling at them when she heard a loud crack, like a rifle shot.

Win jumped and hit her head on the table. May's cards flew out of her hand and scattered across the floor. But Glad tossed her woolly white curls and

went charging to the window.

'No,' May gasped. 'You mustn't look out. We don't know who's there.'

'Nonsense,' Glad said. 'It was just a branch breaking. Or a car backfiring. Or a farmer shooting at rabbits.'

Blake frowned. *Too many explanations. Something tells me she's as worried as May and Win. What about me? Am I worried too?*

She felt the back of her neck but the skin was warm. The icy hand hadn't been fingering her, to warn her that there was danger ahead. *Okay, I won't hide under the table with Win. I'll go and see what's happening.*

She padded down to the kitchen. Reached for the light switch and then stopped herself, just in time. Stood in the dark beside the window, peering out into the backyard. Silence. No rustles or whispers. No horror movie groans and screams. Just moonlight and shadows and the faint distant sound of water splashing on the shore of Lake Mudgeebung.

Blake glanced at her watch. *Ten minutes since I heard that noise. Looks like there's nothing to worry -*

Then a shot rang out. Definitely a gun shot this time. Definitely coming from the trees at the end of the garden. Blake gasped. Checked the kitchen window. Ran to check the windows in the laundry and the back door. They looked fine, not even a crack in the glass.

So they're not shooting at the house. What the hell are they shooting at?

The floorboards creaked behind her and she spun around. Saw the three old women huddled together, hanging onto each other. 'Someone's out there with a gun, aren't they?' Glad hissed. 'Have they hit anything?'

'Not yet,' Blake told her and May snorted.

'They're not country kids then. Every country kid knows how to shoot. For heaven's sake, I could still hit the back of a house with one shot and my eyesight's not what it used to be.'

Blake smiled and looked at her watch again. *Oh-oh. Ten minutes after the last shot.* Sure enough, two seconds later there was another blast from the rifle. As they stood there, staring at each other, something scabbled at the door. Another horror movie sound, like claws scraping the wood.

'It's a trick,' Glad hissed. 'Don't open -'

Then she went staggering back, as Win shoved past her. May flung herself into the doorway, plump arms spread wide, but the tiny old woman shunted her aside. She struggled with the key and pulled the door open.

And the big ginger cat leapt into her arms.

Blake slammed the door shut and locked it. 'Oh well, at least they're not shooting at us,' she said. 'If they were, they would've had a go just then. Looks like they must've been taking potshots at Ginger.'

Glad said, 'True.' May said, 'That's a relief.' And Win crooned, 'Who's a brave pussy, then?' into Ginger's fur. But none of them made a move, all the

same. They waited in the corridor, while the luminous hands on Blake's watch ticked round and round.

As the minute hand moved on for the tenth time, another shot echoed across the garden. Win squeaked and Ginger yowled.

'So that's it,' said Blake. 'They're not aiming at us - or the house - or even the cat. They're just firing shots in the air, every ten minutes. Trying to scare us, I suppose.'

'Well, I'm scared,' Win quavered. 'It's working, Sheryl.'

'Not any more,' Blake told her. 'Now I know what their game is, I'm going out there to chase them off.'

She made a grab for the door handle but at the same moment the old women made a grab for her. May dragging at her wrist. Glad jerking on her belt. Win winding her small fist into the back of Blake's windcheater. They weren't very strong, though. Blake could've shaken them off easily.

If she hadn't felt the icy hand gripping her by the shoulder.

CHAPTER NINE

They sat in the front room with the lights out. Win stroking Ginger's ruffled fur. Glad and May on either side of Blake, keeping an eye on her.

'Okay, okay,' she snapped. 'I promise not to go charging off. That dweeb with the gun might get startled and shoot me by mistake.'

The old women relaxed slightly but they still kept watching her. *Hey, it's cool. The icy hand warned me and these days I always do what it wants. After all, it's generally right - except for that time when it gave me a danger signal in the mayor's office.*

Blake puzzled about that for a while. Then she tried to think about all the other mysteries she'd come across in Mudgeebung. But she couldn't concentrate, because she couldn't help waiting for the next shot. Around two in the morning the gun shots finally stopped. Glad and May staggered off to bed. Win tottered into the spare room and Blake settled down on the couch. Not that it helped much. It took her ages to fall asleep and when she did, she kept waking every ten minutes, listening for the gun.

Towards dawn she gave up and tiptoed down to the kitchen. Made a pot of tea and sat out on the front verandah, warming her hands on the mug and watching the sun rise. Rosy clouds bobbing above the roofs of Mudgeebung. Golden light stroking the sides of the hills. Pink ripples across the lake.

It all looks so peaceful. But it's not.

Behind her, someone said, 'Sheryl' and she checked to see who they were talking to. 'Sheryl!' the voice repeated and Blake snapped to attention.

Oops. That's me. I'd forgotten for a moment, because I'm still half asleep.

She leapt to her feet and saw Dell at the front gate. 'What's the matter with you, girlie?' she grumbled. 'I must've called out at least four times. What are you doing here, anyway? Are Win and the others all right?'

'Sorry,' Blake mumbled and then she told Dell the whole story. The old woman scowled and smacked her palm against her riding breeches.

'Damn,' she growled. 'I shouldn't have gone home - or, at any rate, I should've come straight back with my rifle.'

Blake grinned. *Dell's kind of different from the rest of the old ladies. Wish she had been here last night. I bet the two of us could've worked out some plan for cornering the guy with the gun.*

She jumped out of the way as Dell went striding past. The other old women crowded around her, all telling their versions of the story. Blake listened for a while and then went back outside.

I was there, which was bad enough. I don't need to go through the whole thing again.

She leaned on the verandah, soaking up sunlight. Next time she reached for her mug, it was empty, so she headed into the house for some more tea. As she padded down the hall, she heard Dell say, 'The third time, Win? You mean this has happened twice before?'

Blake froze. She flattened herself against the wall, listening hard.

'That's right,' Win said. 'The gunshots last night. Those strange noises the night before. And the night before *that*, someone was prowling round my garden, flashing a torch through the windows. I called out "Go away" and they did. But afterwards I started to get scared.'

'Scared,' May repeated heavily. 'That's what this whole thing is about, isn't it? Somebody's trying to scare us - and we all know why.'

Do you? I wish you'd tell me.

'Well, it's time to do something about it,' Dell announced. 'We'd better give the -'

'Ssh, not so loud,' Glad hissed. 'That reporter might hear you.'

Dell lowered her voice, so Blake edged closer to the door - and her mug clinked against the door frame. She straightened up and walked into the kitchen, trying not to look guilty. The four old women turned and stared at her.

'Good morning, dear, Glad bleated. 'Thanks for helping us last night. Now, I'm sure you've got a lot of people to interview, so you'll probably be out all day. But do feel free to come back and sleep here again tonight, won't you?'

Blake stormed into the front room and grabbed her wallet and pen. *Relax, ladies. I'm out of here. You can keep your stupid secrets.*

At the last minute she stuffed the maroon baseball cap into her pocket. *If I*

bump into the greenies or the jet ski boys again, I'll put it on, to see whether any of them recognise it.

She walked down to the main street and treated herself to breakfast at the cafe. Wrote postcards to Spider and Josh Bathwater at the Internet cafe. Went back to the caravan park, picked up her bike and rode round Lake Mudgeebung to the far side of the town, stopping in front of Jan Shepherd's place.

It was an old farm house, snuggled against the hills, in the middle of an enormous block of land. Two bikes and a tricycle on the verandah. A Commodore stationwagon parked outside. A brown dog sleeping in the sun. And two rows of plane trees lining the drive.

As she strolled up the drive, Billy dropped out of one of the trees and landed at her feet, holding out his skinny brown bear.

'Bear and Billy climb, high high high,' he boasted. 'Way up top. Hide in tree.'

Blake grinned. 'You like playing hide and seek, do you?' she asked.

The little boy frowned. 'Not hide'n'seek,' he told her. '*Hiding*. Billy hide things. In tree. Under house. Big jar in kitchen. Good game.'

While he babbled on, Nathan came running down the steps. 'Hi, Sheryl,' he called, looking pleased. 'Billy, stop hassling her. She doesn't want to hear about all the places where you hide stuff.'

Billy stamped his foot. 'Cave, Nathie. Tell girl cave. Tell tell tell.'

He whacked Nathan with the bear. Nathan scooped him up and swung him over his shoulder. 'We went on a picnic in the hills a year ago,' he explained, while Billy hung upside down and squawked. 'There was this little cave, tucked behind some boulders, and Billy fell in love with it. In his mind it's, like, the best hiding place. He keeps wanting to go back there - but we've never been able to find it again.'

'*Billy find cave*,' the little boy insisted. Nathan laughed and set him down on the verandah.

'Billy better run along now, while Sheryl has a chat with Mum,' he said. 'But maybe she'll come and talk to us afterwards.'

He glanced shyly at Blake and she nodded. *Hey, it's nice to have a few fans. My only fans in Mudgeebung so far.*

When she went inside, she found Jan Shepherd sitting in the bay window of the lounge room, scanning the paper. 'Only a small news item by Martin Fahey in today's *Globe*,' she commented. 'I'm afraid the Mudgeebung newsagent doesn't stock the *Daily Messenger*, so I'll have to wait till I can have it sent up from the city.'

'Don't bother,' Blake told her. 'I haven't written anything yet. I'm working on a long article - y'know, an opinion piece.'

'So you want my opinions?' Jan said. 'Not a problem. I've got heaps of

opinions about Brian Malone's hotel development.'

She started talking straight away. Telling Blake how the hotel design was too modern for an old-fashioned place like Mudgeebung. How the tourists would take over the little town. How the jet skis would ruin the lake and drive the black-eyed ducks away. How the casino would con people into gambling and losing all their money.

Fifteen minutes later she broke off suddenly and laughed. 'Sorry, Sheryl,' she said. 'Once I get going, it's hard to stop. I've raved on for long enough, though. It's your turn to ask questions now.'

Blake started with some questions about the hotel and the International Jet Ski Championships. Then she said, 'Actually, I've got a personal question, as well. I'm looking for a woman called Fay Ray and I was wondering whether you know where she is.'

For the first time Jan hesitated. 'You're staying at the caravan park, aren't you? So you must've met Win. What did she say about Fay Ray?'

'Nothing,' Blake admitted.

Jan Shepherd frowned. 'Well, I'll see what I can do. The trouble is -' and then, just as the conversation was getting interesting, the phone rang.

Blake leaned back against the cushions and gazed out at the line of elm trees. *This whole business is very frustrating. Nobody will tell me a thing about Great-aunt Fay - and yet everyone acts as though they could tell me something, if they were allowed to. So who's stopping them?*

'Mrs Stodka?' Jan said into the phone. 'What a surprise ... Oh, really? That's very interesting. Please go on.'

Blake sat up straight. Mrs Stodka, the mysterious woman who was probably one of the four old ladies. Mrs Stodka who'd phoned the mayor and told him not to talk to Blake. Mrs Stodka who obviously knew where Fay Ray was living now. *Why is Mrs Stodka ringing Jan Shepherd?*

She twisted around, so she could hear better. But it wasn't much use, because Jan Shepherd's half of the conversation didn't make a lot of sense. She just kept murmuring 'Really?' or 'Wonderful' and at one point she said, 'This changes everything.'

And she didn't even ask about Fay Ray.

After she'd put the phone down, she stood there for a moment, breathing fast. Blake sneaked a sideways look at her. There were two red patches on Jan's cheeks and her hazel eyes were wide and dark. *Like she's had a shock - but a good shock, by the sound of it.*

'Sorry, Sheryl, I have to go out now,' she said. 'We'll talk again later, okay? And listen, forget everything I said about the hotel. Who knows, Brian Malone's plans mightn't even go ahead.'

Blake sighed. *So Jan Shepherd takes orders from Mrs Stodka too. What a let down. I was starting to feel as if she was the only honest person in*

Mudgeebung. But she's hiding the facts about Fay Ray, just like everyone else.

She walked to the door and watched Jan hug Billy and Nathan goodbye. Jan's brown head, Nathan's black head and Billy's golden curls pressed close together. 'The three of you look pretty different,' she commented to Nathan, as Jan ran over to the Commodore.

He grinned at her. 'Well, so we should. Billy and I are adopted, you know.'

'Me too,' Blake blurted, before she could stop herself. Then she swung away and stared across at the lake, studying the play of light on the water. After a while, she added, 'Um, how do you feel about it?'

Nathan wrinkled his forehead. 'I guess it makes me feel special,' he decided. 'Like I didn't just happen - I was actually chosen. Jan's the best mum. I'd do anything for her. Anything.'

His jaw tightened and for a second or two he looked ten years older. Like an adult, instead of a kid. Then he smiled and added, 'What about you, Sheryl? Don't you feel special too?'

Oh sure, I feel special. Like someone in a special freak show.

'It's different for me,' she muttered. 'I wasn't just adopted. There's more to it than that. A great big complicated mess.'

She hadn't meant to tell Nathan quite that much. So it was a relief when Billy started tugging at her jeans, babbling, 'Game. Girl play game? Billy hide bear, girl find.'

'Not now,' Blake told him. 'I've got work to do.'

'Find bear,' the little boy insisted. 'Big jar in kitchen.'

'Oh no,' Nathan grumbled. 'Your bear's going to be covered in flour. Listen, Sheryl, would you mind pretending to look for his stupid bear, just to shut him up?'

By now Blake was desperate to get away. *If I stay any longer, I might end up telling Nathan the story of my life.* 'Sorry,' she snapped. 'Gotta go.'

She tugged the maroon baseball cap out of her pocket and put it on, to make the point. Turned away and clattered down the steps. But Nathan came racing after her.

'Hey, Sheryl,' he called. 'Wait a minute. You've got my cap.'

CHAPTER TEN

Blake whisked the cap off her head, as if it was scorching her. Looked down at the gold shield, with its gold bird sitting on a wavy gold line. *Nathan's cap? The cap that was left behind by one of the boons in Win's garden? Why the hell would a nice kid like Nathan want to frighten a little old lady?*

There was only one reason that she could think of. Nathan would hassle Win if his mum told him to do it. What had he said just now? 'I'd do anything for her. Anything.'

Oh wow, I really hope I'm wrong about this.

She tossed the cap in the air and caught it. 'Yours?' she said. 'What makes you so sure?'

'Well, I suppose it could be Conrad's cap, or Toby's,' Nathan told her. 'But it looks too new. They've been at Kenilworth Grammar for yonks and I was only there for a year.'

'So this is a Kenilworth Grammar cap, hey?'

He nodded. 'Yeah, that's the Kenny crest. It's a phoenix, this mythical bird that burns itself on a nest of fire and then rises up out of the ashes. And my favourite fantasy series is called *The Time of the Phoenix*, which is why I went on wearing the cap. Can I have it back, please?'

Blake whipped the cap behind her back. 'One more question first. Where did you lose it?'

'I didn't. Conrad took it off me, the day he arrived. He reckoned I didn't have the right to wear it, because I wasn't a Kenny boy any more. But really, he couldn't give a stuff about Kenilworth Grammar. He just likes picking on me.'

Blake's breath went whistling out in a long sigh of relief. 'Thanks for telling me,' she said. 'Listen, do you mind if I keep the cap for a day or two longer? I'd like to show it to a few people.'

Nathan blinked at her from behind his glasses. 'Seriously weird,' he commented. 'But hey, it's cool by me. I mean, I've figured out what you're doing here in Mudgeebung. You're on a quest, aren't you? Just like D'ar il Ai'ia, the elf swordswoman in *The Time of the Phoenix*.'

The Honda cruised around the curves of Lake Mudgeebung. Blake pushed back her visor, to let the wind cool her cheeks. *On a quest, for heaven's sake. What crazy things kids dream up.*

Although he's right, in a way. I suppose I am on a sort of quest for my great-aunt.

She spotted the jet ski boys sunbaking on the jetty and slowed down. Parked the Honda and went marching towards them. As her shadow fell across Conrad, he lifted his sunglasses and peered up at her.

'The girl reporter,' he yawned. 'Thought I told you to leave town. Oh well, never mind. You might as well stay now, so you can do a news story about our jet ski exhibition.'

'It's tomorrow at two o'clock,' Gareth told her. 'We've pasted up posters all over town. There'll be races and displays of fancy riding, to show Mudgeebung how terrific jet skis can be. You *will* write about us, won't you?'

'I might,' Blake said. 'If you do something for me first - like, tell me whether you recognise this.'

As she pulled the cap out of her pocket, Toby started to laugh. 'Oh yeah, the wuss's cap. Conrad snaffled it a few days ago.'

Then someone nicked it from me during the night,' Conrad said lazily. 'Probably that greenie girl. She keeps paddling round our camp at night, spying on us - and taking souvenirs, by the look of things. Where did you find the cap, anyway?'

'The greenies don't have any boats,' Blake said, ignoring the question. 'Are you sure you're not being paranoid?'

'Listen, I'm in St Michael's rowing team,' said one of the other boys. 'I know the sound of oars when I hear it. But if you don't believe us, why don't you go and ask the greenies?'

Blake sighed. *Oh, great. More work - but I suppose it's worth it.* 'Funny you should mention it,' she said. 'That's exactly what I'm going to do.'

As the Honda bumped down the track, Blake could see greenies rushing round the camp like excited ants. A flash of yellow, as something was bundled into the food tent. Then more frantic racing around. By the time she braked, Wayne had laced up the flap of the food tent and was hurrying over to meet her.

That's a lot of effort, just to make the camp tidy for a visitor. Unless they've got something to hide. Hey, why not? Everyone seems to have secrets around here.

'Hi,' she said. 'I don't want to get in your way. I just came to ask Em one more question.'

Wayne beamed at her. 'Sure,' he said. 'Em'll be happy to co-operate.'

Will she? She didn't look too happy, last time I saw her.

But a few seconds later Em came striding over, smiling a toothpaste smile. 'G'day,' she said. 'Nice to see you again. Anything I can do to help?'

'Yeah,' Blake told her. 'You can take a look at this.'

She flipped the cap to Em, who turned it round to check the shield.

'Kenilworth Grammar,' she said. 'Conrad's, I suppose. You can keep it, Sheryl. It doesn't go with my hair.' She chuckled the cap back to Blake and added, 'Is that all?'

'Well, since I'm here, there's a couple of other details I might as well clear up. For starters, when did your mob arrive in Mudgeebung?'

'On Thursday, the same as the jet ski gang. We needed to set up camp, so we'd be ready for the Minister on Friday.'

'Uh-huh. And did you bring any boats or canoes with you?'

Em laughed. 'You've been talking to Conrad, haven't you? If you're asking whether we've been paddling over and spying on them - hey, you can see for yourself. Have you noticed any boats around this place?'

'Not exactly,' Blake agreed. 'Okay, one last thing. Who told you the old ladies owned the land where the hotel's going to be built?'

'One of the jet ski guys, the big plump kid called Gareth. That's why I believed him - like, Gareth's not smart enough to lie.'

'Well, he got it wrong,' Blake informed her. 'Win and the others sold their land to the council ages ago.'

She watched Em closely. *To see if she looks guilty about hassling Win, for no reason.* But the greenie girl just shrugged and tossed her mass of red hair.

'So they say. You can't trust grown-ups, though, especially when they're talking about money. It's all secrets and deals and cover-ups, right?'

Blake hesitated. 'Sometimes,' she admitted. 'Still, I reckon the old ladies are on the level.'

Em flashed her another big sunny smile. 'Hey, that's cool. We don't have to agree on everything. Thanks for dropping by - and if you think of any more questions, you can catch me tomorrow at the jet ski show. You'll be there,

won't you? See you then.'

She sped off and Blake trudged back to the Honda, sorting through the facts she'd found out. *Well, that was a waste of time. I still don't know who dropped the cap in Win's garden. Conrad definitely had it at one point - but Em thought it was Conrad's cap, so she could've pinched it from the camp to annoy him.*

The jet ski boys or the greenies. Will I ever work out which of them's harassing the old ladies?

As she swung onto the bike, Wayne waved to her and one of the other greenies called, 'Have a nice day.' That reminded Blake of something else. *The greenies were incredibly polite and friendly today. Too friendly. Now I'm convinced they've got some new plan under way - but they needn't have worked so hard to hide it from me, because I couldn't be less interested.*

Frankly, I'm exhausted. I just want to curl up somewhere and have a nap.

She rode down the hill, taking the bends carefully. Headed over to Glad and May's place, stopped the bike and sneaked inside. *I'll collect my pack and go back to the caravan. That'll give me a chance to catch up on the sleep I missed last night.*

But when she tiptoed into the front room, four pairs of eyes swivelled towards her. The four old ladies were sitting round the card table, which was littered with sheets of paper. Scribbled maps. Lists of names. Pages headed Plan One and Plan Two and Plan Three.

'Sheryl,' Dell beamed. *As though she's actually pleased to see me, for once.* 'We think we've worked out a way to catch those trouble-makers. But we're going to need your help.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Blake sat up and rubbed her eyes. Looked around and tried to remember where she was. Lace curtains swayed at the window and there was a patchwork rug tucked over her knees.

Oh, right. Glad and May's bedroom. I hate sleeping in the afternoon - but I feel way better now.

She swung her legs off the big bed and felt around for her runners. When she switched on the bedside lamp, light glinted off a glossy postcard, propped against a stack of books. Blake picked it up. On one side, a rave about holidaying in Surfer's Paradise from 'your loving niece, Susan'. On the other side, the address, starting with Mrs Mabel Hepplewhite.

Hepplewhite, not Stodka. So May isn't the mysterious Mrs Stodka and neither is Win. That leaves Glad and Dell. Typical. I don't like my chances of getting information out of either of them.

She pushed her feet into her runners and plodded out to the kitchen. 'Oh, good,' Glad said, smiling like a sheep in a good mood. 'I was just coming to wake you. Have some tea, dear.'

'Everything's going according to plan,' May chipped in. 'Win went down the main street this afternoon, telling all the shopkeepers that she didn't feel she could impose on us any longer. She managed to say it in front of some of the greenies and the jet ski boys too. By now, the whole of Mudgeebung knows she'll be at home on her own tonight.'

'Dell's over there already,' Glad bleated. 'And we can creep in as soon as it's dark. It was lucky you'd already gone round the hedge and found the weak spots, Sheryl. Otherwise we would've had to check the garden by daylight -

and someone might've noticed.'

Blake yawned and stretched and sipped her tea. *The old ladies are pretty excited. Well, no wonder. So am I. It's a good plan. I'm looking forward to cornering the trouble-makers and finding out who they are.*

May filled three thermoses and Glad wrapped cheese and chutney sandwiches in greaseproof paper. Then they peered out of the back door and decided it was time to leave. May led them across the garden, through a little gate and over to the hedge around Win's house.

Blake found the place where the hedge was thinnest and they squeezed through, one by one. As they scattered across Win's garden, Dell came gliding soundlessly out of the darkness and squatted down on the lawn beside the hedge.

Setting the last trap, now we're all here.

She crossed the lawn and hid in the darkest patch of shadow she could find. Her back propped against the wall of the shed. Her eyes fixed on the gap underneath the hedge. *The gap that leads to the car park. I hope the kids come this way tonight.*

Once she'd settled down, she arranged her survival kit in a row beside her. Thermos. Cheese sandwiches. Two coils of rope. Her torch. And the screwtop jar that Dell had left for her.

My favourite part of the plan. We've really thought of everything.

It was a long wait but Blake had expected that. There was no way of guessing what time the trouble-makers would arrive. They'd turned up at two o'clock last night - eleven o'clock the night before - and around twelve on the night before that, as far as Win could remember.

But we have to be ready and waiting, no matter when they get here. I reckon I'm going to need that thermos.

By half-past eleven Blake had drunk most of the tea and eaten all the sandwiches. She'd recited every poem she knew, tried to remember the words of at least fifty songs and started setting herself maths puzzles. She was in the middle of figuring out the square root of her birth date when she felt a cold tickle down her back, as though an icy fingernail was running along all the bumps of her spine.

Yes! My own personal built-in danger signal. Here they come.

Leaves rustled together as a dark figure swung under the hedge, feet first. As its runner hit the lawn, it snagged and caught. Blake was on her feet already, twisting off the lid of the screwtop jar. She tipped it over the struggling figure. Grabbed the coils of rope. Then pounced.

She dug her knee into the kid's chest. *Definitely a kid, not a grown man. I can tell, even in the dark. And definitely a guy too.* As he gasped for breath, she gripped his arms and forced them back. Pinned his wrists with one hand and used her other hand to loop the rope around them.

After she'd hitched the rope into a sheet bend, Blake swivelled round and felt for the boy's runners. His right foot was easy enough to find. *So it should be. It's caught in one of Dell's homemade rabbit traps. A noose of thin wire, held down by an iron staple, left in exactly the right place for someone to put their foot in it.*

Meanwhile the guy's left foot was kicking wildly. Way too wildly. *My karate teacher'd tick him off for wasting all that energy.* If he'd aimed better, he could've sent her flying. But luckily he was still thrashing around as she flung herself forward and nailed his leg. Wrenched sideways and dragged his ankles together.

The guy had been struggling so hard that the wire was cutting deep into his skin. *That's the way Dell's traps work. The minute your foot goes through the noose, you automatically pull back - but the more you pull, the tighter the noose gets.*

After Blake had lashed the second rope around his ankles, she found the iron staple and tugged it out of the lawn. She was just beginning to work the wire loose when two more dark figures went scurrying past. The guy on the ground yelled, 'Watch it.' But he wasn't quick enough.

A second later Blake heard a pair of muffled yelps. She scrambled to her feet and strolled down the side of the house. The other two kids were struggling in a huge net, hooked between the house and a tree. Glad and Win were unhooking the net and tying the ends together, while Dell watched.

'Everything okay at your end?' she asked and Blake nodded. 'Good girl. In that case, you'd better go and make sure May's all right.'

Blake darted round to the gap on the opposite side of the garden. Saw two blobs of shadow, grunting and heaving.

'May?' she gasped and the old woman's voice said, 'I'm sitting on him, dear. He can't move - but I can't quite reach his legs. His hand's stuck in Dell's trap but he's kicking like a wounded kangaroo.'

Blake chuckled. *She sounds so calm, like she does this sort of thing every day. Next time I'm in trouble, I hope I've got four old ladies with me. They could sort anyone out.*

May told her where to find the rope and she tied the guy's hands and feet. While she was tugging at the second knot, she heard a shuffling sound. She glanced back and started to laugh. An enormous string bag was wobbling towards her with two kids inside, lurching and stumbling as their feet caught in the net.

Dell prodded them with the butt of her rifle and shunted them through the shed door. After that she and Blake rolled the other two across the grass and bundled them into the shed as well. Dell slammed the door and shoved the bolt into place, as the others came hurrying over to join them.

'That was fun,' Win sighed. 'We ought to celebrate. Can we do that thing

I've seen on the telly? You know, the thing American kids do with their hands.'

'High fives?' Blake said. 'Hey, why not?'

So the four old women stood in the middle of the lawn and slapped palms with her, while a moon like a silver party balloon soared up above the hills.

Win brought out a bottle of something called Stone's Green Ginger Wine. Blake took one sip and sidled off to spit in the sink. But the others emptied their glasses and held them out again.

'Jolly good show,' Dell said in her sergeant major voice. 'You all did a great job. The whole operation went like clockwork.'

'Except for one thing,' Blake remembered. 'We were supposed to shine a torch on their faces before we locked them in the shed, so we'd know who they were.'

Dell chuckled. 'Not a problem. You tipped the jar of sheep dye over your bloke, didn't you? And so did we. Even if they manage to escape - which they won't - we'll be able to recognise them again. There won't be too many bright blue kids wandering round Mudgeebung.'

They clinked glasses in a toast and Win poured more Green Ginger Wine. 'Actually, we've got two reasons to celebrate,' she twittered. 'Can I tell Sheryl about the second thing?'

'Oh, why not?' Dell said with a shrug. 'After all, she's part of the team now.'

Win leaned closer to Blake and said, 'Well, dear, we're celebrating because we think we can stop that awful hotel - and that terrible casino - and those dreadful Jet Ski Championships.'

'How?' Blake asked in surprise and May cackled and said, 'Riparian rights.'

'Come again. Would you mind explaining?'

'Not at all,' Glad bleated. 'We've had a lot of practice lately. The thing is, May and Win and I - and our late husbands, of course - used to run three small farms right here on the edge of Mudgeebung, in the days when the place was much smaller. Dell had a bigger farm, out past Lake Mudgeebung, but she moved back into town after her husband died and bought the land next to ours, just before the hills.'

'In the end we all got far too old to work the land,' Win went on. 'So we sold it to the council when they wanted to set up a caravan park. But we kept four smaller blocks, where our cottages are now. And we kept the riparian rights. After all, a caravan park doesn't need riparian rights, does it?'

'I wouldn't know,' Blake complained. 'You still haven't told me what they are.'

Dell grinned at her. 'We're a bunch of old gasbags, aren't we? But hold

your horses, Sheryl. We're getting there at last. "Riparian rights" mean the right to moor your boat on the shore of the lake. Twenty feet of waterfront that the law says you're allowed to use.'

Blake shut her eyes and tried to picture it. *Twenty times four. Eighty feet of waterfront. That's a big chunk out of the shore of the lake.* Then her mind flashed up a picture of the model town in Brian Malone's waiting room. Her eyes flicked open and she gasped.

'Oh, I see. The hotel's supposed to have a grandstand where people can sit and watch the Jet Ski Championships. They're planning to build it right at the water's edge - but you control the shore in front of the hotel.'

Win giggled. 'That's right, and we don't intend to give them permission to use it. They can't move the hotel, either. There isn't enough room anywhere else on the lake, unless they start pulling down the whole of Mudgebung.'

They laughed and clinked glasses again. 'To us,' Glad bleated. 'Most of all, to Dell. She was the one who said we should take our documents to Brian Malone, because he's a lawyer, so he could check them for us.'

'And she was the one who looked round at the launch - and saw those politicians and reporters and city folk getting all worked up - and realised exactly how much power we'd got,' May added. 'To Dell!'

As the other three old women raised their glasses, Blake shifted in her chair. 'These documents,' she said. 'Do you keep them at home or -?'

'Now, now,' Glad cut in. 'We may be old but we're not silly. Don't worry, dear, we moved the documents to a safe place after those lads started firing rifles outside our house. And we're getting some good advice about the best thing to do next.'

'Where -?' Blake began but before she could finish the question, there was a loud crack just outside the kitchen window. Win jumped and clutched the big ginger cat.

'The gun!' she squeaked. 'The person with the gun's come back again.'

'Calm down, Win,' Dell snapped. 'That bloke's locked up safely in your garden shed. I promise you, it was just a branch snapping.'

Blake wanted to believe her. But an icy finger was stirring the hair on the back of her neck. 'I think I'll go out and check on those guys,' she said, standing up. 'Just to make sure.'

'Oh, all right,' Dell grumbled. 'I'll come too. I suppose it'll set Win's mind at rest.'

She collected a torch from the bench and they walked out into the garden, shivering in the chilly night air. Dell swung the torch around and its long beam went probing through the darkness. Lighting up the wall of the shed. The half-open door. The pile of netting, in a heap on the floor.

The shed was empty. The four kids had gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

After that, the celebration party wasn't the same any more. Win stuck the cork back into the Green Ginger Wine and Glad and May tottered off, taking Dell with them.

'We'll catch those kids in the morning,' Dell said, trying to cheer them up. 'They'll be covered in blue dye, remember.'

'Yes, I know,' Win sighed. 'But it won't be the same. I *liked* the idea of four old biddies handing four great big louts over to the police.'

She lent Blake one of her nighties and settled her in the spare room. Blake scrambled into bed and collapsed against the stack of pillows. It felt strange to be wearing a rose-spotted flannel nightgown. Even stranger to be there without her pack.

Shouldn't have left it at Glad and May's place. I always read my black notebook before I go to sleep. What am I going to do instead?

Think about what happened tonight, I suppose.

There was plenty to think about. For the past few days Blake had been sure she was dealing with two totally different crimes. Firstly, the sabotage of the earthmover. Secondly, the way the old women were being harassed. But now it was starting to look as though the two crimes were connected.

The old ladies aren't just the victims of a nasty practical joker. I bet this is all happening because of the hotel. Someone wants to scare them into handing over their documents. If it's the greenies, they're planning to use the riparian rights to keep Lake Mudgeebung safe for the black-eyed duck. If it's the jet ski boys, they're planning to tear up the documents and make Lake Mudgeebung safe for jet skis.

Only one problem. The greenies and the jet ski boys are outsiders. How would they have found out about the riparian rights?

Well, Brian Malone knew about the riparian rights, of course. So did Jan Shepherd, if Blake was any good at guessing. After all, the mysterious Mrs Stodka - who was one of the old women - had rung Jan yesterday and Jan had looked really excited. And she would be excited, if she'd just got some news that'd help her to stop the hotel.

Rats, I can think of reasons for suspecting everyone. I'll just have to wait till tomorrow and see who's looking blue. That ought to sort things out a bit.

She wriggled under the blanket and tried to go to sleep. But the flannel nightie kept tangling round her legs and a cold fingertip kept tickling her ribs. The danger signal. Blake closed her eyes and made her mind go blank. Lay there, waiting, until thoughts started to drift into the empty space.

Danger. Not danger to me, though. Danger to the old ladies. No, to the old ladies' documents. They think the documents are in a safe place - but they're wrong.

I gotta do something about it.

Do something.

Something ...

Blake opened her eyes and saw light around the edge of the blind. Bright light. When she reached for her watch, she realised she'd slept half the morning away. Still, her brain seemed to have gone on working while she was asleep, because she was convinced she knew where the documents were.

She leapt out of bed and tripped on the nightie. Pulled it off and struggled into her clothes. The house was empty, except for Ginger, sunning himself on the kitchen windowsill. Blake let herself out, wriggled under the hedge and went running over to Glad and May's house to collect her bike.

As she roared through Mudgeebung, she spotted old ladies everywhere. Dell sitting on the end of the jetty. May strolling down the main street. Glad following the duck. Win chatting to the mayor outside his office. *They're out hunting for blue kids. Good luck to them. But I've got something even more important to do.*

She parked the Honda outside the Shepherds' house and went running down the drive. Past Billy, who was hiding his bald brown bear in a hole halfway up the elm tree. Past Nathan, who waved a fat book at her and called, 'Hey, I just got the fourth volume in the *Time of the Phoenix* series.' Up the steps and into the big front room, where Jan Shepherd was sitting at her desk.

'You've got the old ladies' riparian rights here, haven't you?' Blake gasped. The MP looked up, with a lift of her eyebrows. 'How did you know?'

Because the old ladies decided to move them to a safer place yesterday - the day when the mysterious Mrs Stodka phoned here. 'Never mind,' she said. 'It's not important. Will you go and look at the documents, to make sure they're safe?'

Jan sighed and stood. 'I don't know what this is all about. But, oh well, I suppose it can't hurt to check.'

Blake dropped into a chair and waited, digging her nails into her palms. A few minutes later Jan came strolling back. Blake noticed a smudge of flour on the seat of her jeans, where she must've wiped her hands. *Right. So the documents are hidden in that jar in the kitchen where Billy hid his bear.*

'Everything's fine,' the MP said. 'And now, would you mind explaining?'

But a cold hand was gripping Blake by the shoulder. Gripping her and shaking her hard. 'No time for that,' she snapped. 'You gotta tell the old ladies to show the documents to Martin Fahey. They need to go public and let the whole world know that the hotel's finished. Win and the others asked you for advice before, didn't they? They'll listen to you.'

Jan Shepherd hesitated. 'Yes, they asked me for advice - and I told them to keep the documents secret for a while.'

'Why?' Blake demanded. 'Secrets are dangerous. Dangerous for the old ladies and dangerous for Mudgeebung. People need to know the truth.'

'Oh, Sheryl, you're very young, aren't you?' Jan sighed. 'It isn't as simple as that. I believe in telling the truth, just as much as you do. But, trust me, sometimes it's just not possible.'

Blake gulped. *This is unreal. Jan ought to be jumping at the chance to give the documents to the press - but she's not. Why? Is she trying to win votes from the people in Mudgeebung who want the hotel development?*

Or has she been bribed by the company that's building the hotel?

Blake's hands were shaking. She tucked them between her knees and looked across at Jan.

'Why do you want us to show the documents to Martin Fahey?' the MP demanded. 'You're a reporter too, Sheryl. You could write a story for our own paper.'

She swallowed hard. 'No, I couldn't,' she mumbled, staring down at her hands. 'I'm not a real reporter. I came here because I was looking for Fay Ray. Then I got involved because - well, because I kind of like the old ladies. And the ducks. And your kids. And the guy who gave me a lift into town.'

Fact is, I like the whole of Mudgeebung by now. It's my great-aunt's town. The town where my mother lived for a while. I don't want to see it turned into a theme park for tourists just because Jan and Brian are cutting deals.

When she looked up, Jan Shepherd was smiling. But not the sunshine smile she'd smiled beside the lake. A small, tight, secret smile.

'Yes, I know you're not a reporter,' she murmured. 'As a matter of fact, I

know more about you than you think. For example, I know why you're looking for Fay Ray - and I can help you to find her.'

'How?' Blake whispered and Jan smiled again. 'If you're serious about tracking down your great-aunt, you need to talk to Dell. You'd better be quick, though. I spoke to her on the phone a few minutes ago. She's at home right now but she won't be there for much longer.'

Blake touched the cold patch on her shoulder. *Damn. What am I supposed to do now? I can't work it out. Should I stay here, so I can guard the documents and have another go at talking Jan around?*

Or should I grab the chance to learn more about Fay Ray?

The Honda skidded round the curve of the lake. Blake clutched the handlebars and squinted into the sunlight. Peered down the road towards the little cottage, sheltering under the hills.

Oh wow, I hope I made the right decision.

She pulled up outside Dell's house and jumped off the bike. Saw Glad opening the front gate and letting herself out. Blake waved and hurried past but the icy hand tapped her on the shoulder. She swung back.

Huh? Why's the icy hand warning me about Glad? Oh, right. I think I know.

'G'day, Mrs Stodka,' she called and Glad looked around.

'Good heavens' dear,' she bleated. 'Where did you get that idea? I'm not Mrs Stodka. My name's Gladys Babbage.'

She went bustling off down the road, while Blake stared after her. *Okay, that settles it. Win is Mrs Winifred Ackerley, May is Mrs Mabel Hepplewhite and Glad is Mrs Gladys Babbage. So Dell must be Mrs Delia Stodka.*

The mysterious Mrs Stodka. It figured. The other old ladies all looked up to Dell. She was the one who'd been running the show. The one who'd been ordering everybody to shut up about Fay Ray.

I just hope she changes her mind and agrees to talk to me.

Blake ran up the path and hammered on the door. No answer. She peered through the front windows, then sped around to try the back door. No one in the kitchen or the laundry either. Nobody home.

She sighed and slumped against the door. Gazed round at Dell's backyard. It was a lot messier than the other old women's gardens. Trees whose branches tangled together overhead. A tangle of bushes underneath them. And a glint of light, somewhere behind the trees.

Blake scouted around till she found a narrow path. She pushed through the bushes and stopped suddenly, blinking and rubbing her eyes. Dazzled by the sunshine reflected back at her from the glass walls of a small greenhouse.

Her heart started to beat fast, then slow and then faster again. *Thump-*

thump-thump, thump-thump-thump, *thump-thump-thump*, like the SOS signal in Morse code. She walked over to the greenhouse. Reached out. Flung the door open. And gasped.

Dell was standing at the end of a long table, her brown hands patting earth around the roots of a waxy green orchid plant. More orchids crowded the benches down the sides of the greenhouse. White and pink and fawn, with red or purple or brown-spotted tongues.

Orchids like my great-aunt grows.

As Dell glanced up. Blake stammered, 'I - I know who you are. Dell's not short for Delia, is it? It's short for Delaney. The nickname that Win and Glad and May have been using, ever since you were at school together. You're - you must be my Great-aunt Fay.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dell lifted up the waxy green orchid and shifted it across to the bench. 'I suppose you were bound to find out in the end,' she observed. 'Yes, I used to be Fay Delaney, till I married Alan and became Fay Ray. Then Alan was killed in a tractor accident and I moved back into town and met Fred Stodka, so after that I was Mrs Fay Stodka. Mind you, everyone always calls me Dell, apart from the family, of course. Can't stand the name Fay. Doesn't suit me at all.'

Blake stared down at a spray of tiny white orchids, like dancing butterflies. *Boy, did I get things wrong. When I think of people who've been married more than once, I think of Hollywood movie stars, not brown-faced old country women. So it never occurred to me to ask the register of Births, Deaths and Marriages whether Fay Ray had married again. Could've saved myself a whole lot of trouble.*

'But you knew I was looking for you,' she burst out. 'Why did you warn everyone to keep quiet?'

Dell shrugged. 'You were asking around for Fay Ray, which meant you had to be one of the family - but I don't have any great-nieces called Sheryl Newton. That made me suspicious, right from the start, so I wanted to wait till I'd had a good look at you. And the minute I saw you, I realised you were Maureen's kid.'

'So?' Blake said. 'You could've told me then.'

'True,' her great-aunt admitted. 'But Maureen and I didn't get on too well. I couldn't help feeling ... I was worried that ...'

Her voice trailed away. It was the first time Blake had seen Dell looking

nervous and she didn't like it. *Okay, time to face the facts. I've been asking everyone whether they knew Fay Ray - but I never asked them whether they knew Maureen Delaney, even though she was in Mudgeebung for a couple of years as well. Why? Was I scared of what I might find out about my mother?*

She got into trouble when she was living in Sunnyport - that's why her parents packed her off to Dell. Did she get into trouble here too?

Is that why Dell and the others aren't keen to tell me about her?

Blake took a deep breath. Opened her mouth to say, 'I want to know.' But before she could get the words out, the door of the greenhouse flew open and a gust of cold air came swirling in. Followed by Nathan Shepherd, clutching his side and gasping for breath.

'Sheryl!' he panted. 'Sheryl, you gotta help me.'

His black hair was plastered to his sweaty forehead and his black eyes were blank with shock. Dell pushed him down onto a rickety chair. Shoved his head between his knees and told him to breathe deeply. When he sat up, his face was still pale but his eyes looked more focussed.

'All right,' the old woman said briskly, 'what happened?'

Nathan shuddered. 'These five guys in balaclavas broke into our house. They grabbed me and said they'd beat me senseless, unless Mum handed over those documents you gave her. But when she went to the kitchen, the documents weren't in the jar. I reckon Billy nicked out and collected them when he saw the guys. He's gone off to hide them somewhere safer - and he hasn't come back. We have to go and find him!'

'Not so fast,' Dell said. 'Are you sure those blokes in the balaclavas didn't take Billy with them when they left?'

'That's what Mum thinks too,' Nathan sighed. 'She's on the phone right now, trying to get the cops over from Newbury, so they can hunt for the balaclava guys. She wouldn't listen when I told her Billy's bear was missing - even though it proves he had time to get it down from the elm tree before he ran off. That's why I sneaked out and came to find Sheryl. I knew *she'd* believe me.'

Dell rubbed her nose. 'Now that's something I don't quite understand. What makes you so sure my great-niece can help you?'

'Because she's Da'r il Ai'ia,' he explained. 'Da'r il Ai'ia's a hero. She always knows what to do.'

Blake groaned. *A hero? I don't think so. This is all my fault. The icy hand kept trying to warn me. I should've stayed at the Shepherds' house but no, I let Jan bribe me - like, if she told me about my great-aunt, then I'd go away and leave her alone.*

All my fault. So I have to help Nathan find Billy.

'Okay,' she said, 'any idea of where your brother might've gone?'

'Up into the hills,' Nathan said straight away. 'To that little cave I told you

about before. Billy reckons it's the world's best hiding place. I bet he would've headed straight for it, after getting scared by those guys.'

'Excellent,' Blake said. 'We'll go there first. And if he isn't -'

'No, you don't get it,' he cut in. 'We never managed to find the cave again. I can't take you there, because I don't know where it is. And Billy doesn't know either - he just thinks he does. Fact is, he could be anywhere.'

'Well then, we'll just have to search everywhere,' Dell said. 'Off you go - and I'll round up some of the blokes from the town.' She went striding to the door but at the last minute she swerved to give Blake an awkward pat on the shoulder.

'Best of luck,' she said gruffly. 'We can finish our chat later on, all right?'

Blake stopped outside Glad and May's house. Ran in, emptied her pack and sorted out some of the basic camping equipment. *Torch, muesli bars, my new space blanket - stuff like that.* Ran out, tossed the pack to Nathan and scrambled back onto the Honda.

'There's a road that winds all the way round the hills,' Nathan said. 'Then there's lots of little dirt tracks, leading off the road. Where do you reckon we ought to start?'

'The road first,' Blake decided. 'After that we can go back and check the tracks.'

Just past the Shepherds' house, the road veered off into the foothills. They coasted along a ridge, Nathan peering down the left hand side, Blake looking to the right. Bumped up a sudden slope. Wheeled round half a dozen hairpin bends. Sailed down into a valley and began to climb the next hill.

There were six peaks in the range of hills. Blake counted them off, one by one. By the time the Honda chugged to the top of the sixth peak, her heart felt like a hard lump inside her chest. *Okay, this isn't going to be easy. We're not just going to find Billy and his bear toddling along the road.*

'No luck,' she shouted back. 'I've had another idea, though. Hold on tight, Nathan.'

She swung the bike off the road and jolted down the hill to the greenies' camp. But the camp was empty. Blake pushed back her visor and scratched her forehead.

'Blast. I thought we could ask the greenies to help. Still, maybe they're over by the lake, watching the ducks. Reckon it's worth having a look?'

Nathan nodded. They slid off the bike and went scrambling down between the rocks to the water's edge. No greenies there either. Blake was about to say, 'Ah, forget it' when she heard a sudden roar. Saw five black jet skis pulling away from the jetty near the town, with five dark riders covered from

neck to ankle in black wet suits.

'Oh yeah,' she remembered. 'The jet ski boys are putting on a display this arvo, to show us how fantastic jet skis are.'

The riders zigzagged across Lake Mudgeebung, moving together with split-second timing. But as they reached the end of the lake and turned, ten yellow dinghies shot out of the reeds. Nine greenies, oars dipping and lifting, while Wayne Fraser circled them with his camera ready. They sped to the middle of the lake and spread out in a jagged yellow line.

Inflatable plastic canoes. Bright yellow, like the stuff the greenies were trying to hide when I dropped in on them yesterday. So the jet ski boys weren't just being paranoid. Em could've been paddling round their camp at night.

And she and her mates could've paddled across the lake to harass the old ladies too.

The jet ski boys came scudding towards the greenies at top speed. 'Move, ya bastards,' Conrad shrieked. 'Get out of the way.' The greenies glanced at each other and stayed still, yellow dinghies bobbing on the water.

And at the last minute the jet ski boys swerved, skidding off to the side of the lake.

For a second or two Lake Mudgeebung looked like an enormous fountain. Jet skis toppling. Jet ski boys flying over the handlebars. Spray shooting up in all directions. Then five of the yellow dinghies went darting over to the jet ski boys. The greenies helped them on board and came paddling back to the shore. They spilled out onto the sand, laughing and slapping the jet ski boys on the back.

'Great display,' Em said, shaking out her red hair. 'You gave us the best chance to show how far we'd go to protect the ducks. And Wayne's got the photos to prove it.'

The other jet ski boys dodged past her and started scrambling over the rocks to their camp. But Conrad stood there, hands on hips, scowling at Em - and then scowling over her shoulder at Nathan.

'The wuss,' he said. 'What are you doing here? Have you joined the greenies now?'

Nathan scowled back. 'As a matter of fact, my little brother's missing. We came to ask if you'd help us look for him.'

'Your problem, mate,' Conrad snarled. 'Nothing to do with us.'

But as he turned his back, the plumpest jet ski boy came slipping and sliding down the rocks. He stopped in front of Nathan, head bent, foot scuffing the sand. 'Billy's missing?' he mumbled. 'That spunky kid who tried to ride Conrad's jet ski? Listen, I'm sorry about the little boy. And I'm sorry about the other stuff too. Fact is, I'm sorry I ever got involved.'

He lifted his head and held his hand out to Nathan. Blake's eyebrows shot

up so high that her forehead hurt. *Yep, I can see Gareth's sorry - and I can see something else as well.*

That bright blue dye, all down the left side of his face.

The greenies said they'd search the hills round their camp and Gareth bossed the jet ski boys into searching the middle hills. As they scattered, Blake sidled closer to Gareth.

'Listen,' she murmured, 'what did you mean when you said you were sorry about "the other stuff"?''

Mind you, it isn't hard to guess. After all, four of the jet ski boys are covered with blue spots, from Dell's sheep dye. And Conrad must've been the one who sneaked in later and let them out of the shed.

Gareth sighed. 'It's not nice, frightening little old ladies. We shouldn't've done it but the thing was, Conrad told us they were trying to ban the jet skis. We believed him, because we saw them trooping over to see the mayor, on the day we arrived in Mudgeebung.'

He sighed again and added, 'Mind you, it was probably all lies. I mean, Conrad got me to tell Em that the little old ladies were, like, in favour of the jet skis. I reckon he was hoping the greenies'd hassle them too - but Em's not as much of a hot head as she makes out. Still, if he could lie to Em, he could lie to us as well, right?'

Then Nathan yelled, 'Come on' and Blake went hurrying after him. As they struggled up the rocky track, she could hear Em and Wayne arguing together. She sprinted ahead, till she was walking right behind them.

'Ah, come on,' Em was pleading. 'Let me have my rifle back. What if I find the little kid and he's broken a leg or something? I'd need to fire a shot, to show you where we are.'

'No way,' Wayne said sternly. 'You can't go round carrying a gun. It'd be really bad for our image. I told you so, the day you got here - and I'm keeping that gun locked in my equipment box till the day you leave.'

Em went on arguing but Blake had tuned out. *Too much information I don't have time to think about it now.*

They waved goodbye to the greenies, climbed onto the Honda and set off, up the track and back onto the road. Blake counted hills again. *One, two, three, four, five. Okay, it's time to check out the tracks.*

She cruised down towards the foothills, planning to start with the track closest to the Shepherds' house and then work her way up the hills. But as they looped round the hairpin bends, she felt a twinge between her shoulder blades, like a sharp pinch from an icy hand.

Okay, okay. I get the message.

She turned off at the next dirt track. Jolted along for a while, wrenching at the handlebars whenever the front wheel skidded into a rut. Then slowed to a halt under a big gum tree. Ahead of them, the dirt track split into three. One track plunging down into the valley. One winding round the side of the hill. One heading up between the rocks. And all of them even narrower and bumpier than the track they were on. Way too narrow and bumpy for the Honda.

'So what are we going to do now?' Nathan asked. *Like he's sure Da'r il Ai'ia'll come up with an answer.*

Blake scowled and revved the bike till it bucked and shuddered underneath them. Birds flew out of the gum tree, squawking in protest. The leaves shook.

And a bald brown bear tumbled down from one of the branches and landed in the dust at the start of the third track, with its paw pointing out in front of it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Blake hitched up her pack and began to climb. It was half past three and the sun was dropping down towards the hills. She'd already wasted five minutes persuading Nathan to walk back and tell the search parties about Billy's bear. It would've taken even longer, if he hadn't been convinced that she was an elf swordswoman in disguise.

At the next bend there was a gap in the trees. Blake paused for half a second, eyes flicking ahead. She was halfway up the hill by now, facing a long narrow ridge, furred with trees. A steeper, rockier slope. And a wall of grey boulders, four times her height, marking the peak.

Nathan reckoned Billy was wearing an orange windcheater but I can't see any orange blobs. What if Billy's fallen and -? No, Blake. Get a move on.

She kept trudging along the ridge. After she'd been climbing for three-quarters of an hour, she glanced up and saw the wall of boulders looming over her. The ridge was even narrower than before, so she had to watch her feet all the time. When she kicked a lump of yellow stone, she heard it go rattling down the hillside.

Down. Down. Down. Down.

Blake gulped and remembered her friend Marty's first law of climbing. *Don't look down.* She fixed her eyes on the stony ground, adjusted her pack and kept edging on. More stones. A stunted little tree, clinging to the side of the hill.

And a flash of orange.

'Billy!' she yelped - but it wasn't Billy's windcheater. The rock had just changed colour, from yellowish brown to dull orange. Blake checked around and realised she'd almost reached the slope that led up to the peak. But at the

point where the ridge met the slope, the ground had caved away. Nothing left but a rocky bridge, spanning a steep drop.

She shuffled forward, studying the bridge carefully. And forgot to watch her feet. Her runner slipped sideways, as the orange rock crumbled into orange sand. Blake lurched onto one knee. Watched her right foot go skating down the hillside. Gasp. Wobbled. And made a grab for the stunted tree.

Hold on tight, little tree. I hope you've got nice strong roots. If not, I'm a goner.

But the tree held. Blake hung there, suspended over the drop. Left hand clinging to the wiry tree trunk, right hand clutching at empty air. She flung her right hand up, to shift her centre of gravity, and pushed down hard on her left knee. *Not too hard, though, in case I go too far and fall down the other side.*

Centimetre by centimetre, she dragged herself upright. Hauling her foot back onto the ridge. Whimpering as her runner touched solid ground. Crouching there for a moment and hugging herself tightly, until she'd stopped shaking. Then she took a deep breath and inched forward onto the rocky bridge.

The ground dropped away. Blake's eyes crossed and she felt giddy. 'Don't look down,' she whispered but she *did* look, of course - and instantly collapsed onto her hands and knees. She grinned shakily and started to crawl. It wasn't a bad idea. She could almost pretend she'd done it on purpose.

When she got to the far side of the bridge, she stood up, dusting her hands on her jeans. Turned and began to scramble up the slope, placing each foot carefully and then rolling it forward, to make sure the ground was firm. Every now and then she steadied herself on a jut of rock. Testing it first. Only leaning her full weight on it once she knew it wouldn't break under her hand.

Gotta watch out. Nathan warned me about rock slides - and I don't want to start one.

It was a long hard climb but eventually she was standing right under the wall of boulders, breathless and sweaty, with one last stretch of the slope ahead of her. The steepest stretch of all. A cliff so sheer that it was almost vertical. Blake groaned. For the first time since she'd started to climb, she let herself think about giving up.

Until she heard a small voice calling, 'Girl.'

'Billy!' she shouted. 'Billy, where are you?'

'Billy here,' the voice told her. 'Billy climb, up up up. Find cave but not my cave. Not nice cave. Billy stuck.'

Blake scanned the slope but she couldn't see the orange windcheater

anywhere. Her heart sank. *Rats. The kid's only three. He won't be able to explain where to go.* Then she shook her head and laughed at herself. *Hey, what am I stressing about? I've found him, haven't I? That's more than I was hoping for a minute ago.*

'Keep talking,' she yelled. 'I'm coming.'

She hoisted herself up the slope, using the tricks Marty had taught her for climbing walls in the city. Left hand wedged into a crack in the rock. Right hand stretching up to find another crack, while her left toe scrabbled for a foothold. Then, as soon as she was steady, she started all over again. Left hand, right foot. Right hand, left foot. Up and on, until her knuckles jarred against the base of the boulder.

What now?

Billy was still chatting away somewhere nearby. Babbling about his bear - and the men with no faces who'd burst into his house - and how he'd taken his mum's letters, to hide them in a better place. Blake listened hard.

Over to the right, I think.

She worked her way sideways across the cliff face. Brushed her hand across the stone and yelped as it reached into empty space. Tried again and hooked her elbow over a rocky ledge. Heaved and pushed and rolled into a shallow cave.

Next minute Billy landed on top of her, nose butting her neck like a frightened puppy. 'Girl,' he panted. 'Billy stuck. Girl come.'

'That's right,' she said, hugging him. 'I came. Now let's see how to get you out of here.'

Blake levered herself up and looked around. She was sitting on a bed of soggy moss, with a dark pool gleaming in the shadows behind her. *Uh-huh. The water obviously drains down here from the peak when it rains. It's gradually worn away the rock and made a little cave.*

She crawled to the edge of the cave and peered out. Saw a sheer cliff face, plummeting straight down to the trees below. Billy wriggled under her arm and frowned at the drop. 'Girl stuck too,' he commented.

'No, it's okay,' she told him. 'We're not stuck. We just need to climb sideways for a bit, before we start climbing down.'

The little boy stared blankly. 'Stuck,' he repeated and shoved his thumb into his mouth.

Oh, great. He doesn't understand long sentences. What am I going to do? Maybe I can show him.

But when she started to swing herself out of the cave, Billy wrapped his arms round her ankle and hung on tight, bawling at the top of his lungs. 'Okay, calm down,' Blake snapped, tumbling back over the rim. 'I can tell that's not going to work. You can't see where we're going, so you don't believe me. And I'm not strong enough to carry you down the slope.'

Billy blinked up at her. 'Girl cross?' he asked, bottom lip wobbling.

Blake sighed and said, 'Nah, I'm not cross. We probably shouldn't try climbing down the hill, anyway, because it'll be getting dark soon. But I don't fancy spending the night in a wet cave. Let's see if there's another way out.'

She shuffled to the back of the cave and felt her way along the wall, fingers bumping across a line of boulders. Tested them, one by one, till a rock shifted under her hand. Blake strained and heaved. Heaved again. Sat back on her heels and saw a broad line of light above her head.

Good. That's the exit.

When they wriggled through the gap, they found themselves standing on a ring of stony ground, inside the wall of boulders. Blake smiled. *Way cool. This must've been a volcano, a few millennia ago. We're about to camp in its crater.*

She studied the orange and gold sunset clouds, swirling above the wall, and sent Billy off to collect all the twigs and branches he could find. They shared a couple of muesli bars and some peppermint tea from the thermos. Waited until it was dark, lit a fire and squatted close to the flames, drying the wet patches on the seats of their pants.

Blake watched the red flicker of firelight across the rocky wall. *Yep, that ought to show the search party where we are - unless they think the old volcano's come alive again.*

She spread out the sleeping bag but Billy backed away. 'Not,' he said. 'Billy go home now. Home home home home home.'

Blake looked at him in alarm. Then she smiled and pulled the bald brown bear out of her pack. Billy squeaked and fell on it.

'Bear,' he said. 'Girl bear find Billy safe now. Girl present.'

He was babbling even worse than usual but somehow Blake felt she could understand every word. Especially when he wriggled his hand down the back of his pants, tugged out a damp bundle of paper and handed it to her.

My present. He's given me the old ladies' documents. The proof that they own the riparian rights.

Blake lay on her back and watched the blaze of stars overhead. Billy was snuggled beside her, warm as a hot water bottle, with the brown bear clutched to his chest. She closed her eyes and let her mind drift back over the day.

She'd solved one of the mysteries, at any rate. The jet ski boys were definitely the ones who'd been hassling the old women. Not that she'd needed to do a whole lot of detective work. The jet ski boys were blue. The greenies weren't. End of story.

It didn't feel like the whole story, though. For one thing, Blake still couldn't

work out why the jet ski boys had done it.

Okay, they're hoons, especially Conrad. I mean, look at the way he kept picking on Nathan. I wouldn't even be surprised if he sabotaged the earthmover - after all, he had a rifle and Em didn't. Still, the old ladies are a different matter. I can't see how Conrad would've known where they lived, unless somebody told him.

Yeah, that must be it. I bet there was somebody behind him, pulling the strings. But who?

Jan Shepherd, who seemed to be playing some kind of double game? Martin Fahey, who'd had a secret meeting with Wayne Fraser and a long cosy chat with the mayor? Em? No, not Em. She'd never co-operate with the jet ski boys. And Brian Malone was definitely off the list as well. After all, Brian actually wanted the hotel. The sabotage of the earthmover was just a big problem for him.

Blake sighed and wriggled into a more comfortable position. *It's none of my business, really. But I hate mysteries and secrets, so I'd like to know what happened, all the same. Maybe I'm starting at the wrong end. Maybe I ought to be asking questions, not trying out answers.*

She let her mind go blank. Images from the last few days flashed across the darkness, like a video on rewind. Then the video stopped suddenly and Blake stared at the picture inside her head. Herself, turning to leave the mayor's office, with the icy hand clutching at her shoulder.

That was strange, all right. The icy hand's usually a danger signal - but I wasn't in any danger then.

She opened her eyes and looked up at the stars. White dots of light, burning so bright that they almost dazzled her. As she blinked, she remembered the last time the cold hand had touched her. Outside Dell's house. Reminding her to ask Glad whether she was Mrs Stodka.

Oh. Oh, I get it. The icy hand isn't always a danger alert. As a matter of fact, I can think of dozens of times when it nudged me because there was something I needed to notice - or pushed me across a room because there was someone I needed to meet.

Sometimes the icy hand's telling me to watch out for danger. But sometimes it's just telling me to pay attention.

Blake shut her eyes again. The picture of the mayor's office was still there, waiting for her. She studied it for a minute and then started to laugh.

Of course. It all fits together perfectly. Why didn't I think of that before?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Blake dreamt that she was running from someone, through a huge empty house. As she ran, the walls creaked and groaned and then started to cave in. Bricks clattering. Beams falling towards her with a dull roar.

She sat up with a jerk and squinted at the grey dawn light. The dream had gone - but the clattering roar was still there. She looked around and laughed.

'Hey, Billy,' she said. 'Wake up. They've sent a helicopter for us.'

Two guys in coveralls helped them up a swaying rope ladder. Blake collapsed into the back seat and made room for Billy. Then the world lurched underneath her. The wall of boulders tilted and the treetops came rushing up to meet them. A few minutes later the helicopter landed halfway down the hills, on a bare strip of ground ringed by a wall of trees.

One of the guys lifted Billy out but Blake hesitated for a second. *Hmm. Looks like we've got a welcoming committee. The mayor, of course. Great-aunt Dell and the other old ladies. Martin Fahey with his notebook.*

And Jan Shepherd, stumbling forward and pulling Billy into her arms.

She jumped down and strolled over to the group. 'Hi,' she said. 'We're back - and I've got a few questions to ask you.'

'Not now, dear,' Win fussed but Blake shook her head and said, 'Yes, now. Martin, you're first. Tell me, why did you pretend you didn't know Wayne Fraser?'

The reporter ran his thumb over the stubble on his jaw. 'Oh, so you saw us talking in the doorway of Jan's office? I was trying to get some of Wayne's photos, to use with my article - but I thought people wouldn't trust me, if I seemed to be mates with the greenies. Sorry if I confused you, Sheryl.'

Blake shrugged. 'Hey, not a problem,' she told him. 'Jan, you're next. Why did you tell the old ladies to keep quiet about the riparian rights?'

The MP looked her straight in the eyes. 'Because I was planning to bargain with the mayor and the company that's building the hotel. I don't want to see a casino in Mudgeebung but I know we need more jobs, to keep the town alive.' She hugged Billy hard and added, 'It was a mistake, though. You were right, Sheryl. Secrets *are* dangerous.'

'All right, that's enough,' the mayor interrupted. 'We'd better take you and Billy back to town, so you can see a doctor and -'

'Not yet,' Blake cut in. 'I've got two more questions. Great-aunt Dell, could you tell me when you went to see the mayor?'

'On Thursday, the day after he announced his plans,' Dell barked. 'In other words, the day before the launch. Why?'

Blake grinned at her. *Yes! It's all falling into place. Just one last question to go.*

She turned to the mayor and said, 'Your son goes to Kenilworth Grammar, right? I saw his photo on your desk, wearing that maroon blazer with the gold phoenix on the pocket.' *And if I'd looked closer when the icy hand told me to pay attention, I could've saved a lot of time.* 'So okay, Brian, is Conrad one of your son's mates?'

Brian Malone shoved his hands into his pockets, stretching his coat tight across his round stomach. 'Well, well,' he said. 'What a clever girl you are. You know, don't you?'

Blake nodded. 'Yeah, I do. I was sure you couldn't be involved, because you'd worked so hard on the plans for the hotel and the casino and the International Jet Ski Championships. Arranging everything behind the scenes. Keeping it secret till the last minute. Bringing the Minister for Tourism to Mudgeebung for a big launch. But the day before the launch, you found out that Dell and the others held the riparian rights to the shore of the lake. You needed to buy more time to talk them around - or frighten them. So you sabotaged your own launch.'

'Did I?' Brian asked, beaming like Santa Claus. 'How did I manage that, when I was up on the platform with the Minister?'

'Oh, you didn't do it yourself. You got the jet ski boys to do your dirty work. Conrad set off the fireworks on the earthmover with his rifle - I figured that out once I realised that he had a rifle but Em didn't. And he and the others terrorised the old ladies as well. I reckon you got that idea when you tried to break into Win's house on Thursday and steal her documents. It didn't work but you frightened her, so then you realised you could get the jet ski boys to frighten her even more.'

The mayor glanced at the others. 'I won't admit to this in public,' he warned them. 'Off the record, though - yes, Sheryl's right. I did everything she says ...'

but I did it for the good of Mudgeebung. I don't know whether you'll believe me, Sheryl, but it's the truth.'

Blake snorted. *What a liar. No way do I believe him.* But when she checked around. Martin was nodding, Jan was sighing and even the old women were looking as though they could see the mayor's point.

'Hey, come on. What's the matter with you?' she demanded. 'Can't you tell the guy's a jerk?'

'Brian's been a jerk ever since primary school,' Jan Shepherd told her. 'But jerks can love their home town too.'

'So?' Blake snapped. 'How come you're making excuses for him? This is the man who sent his junior thugs round to threaten your kids, remember.'

'That was a bad idea,' Brian cut in quickly and the MP looked him up and down.

'It certainly was,' she agreed. 'I'll be taking that up with Brian later. Still, the fact is, he really was trying to save Mudgeebung. He's not making any money for himself out of this project, y'know. He's a small-town lawyer, not a building contractor. And he's not even rich enough to own shares in Interco - the company that's backing the hotel.'

Blake winced and ducked her head. *Oh no. Interco. The big multinational company that my father runs. They're everywhere. I can't get away from them, even here.*

She pushed the memories of her father to the back of her brain. By the time she looked up, Brian Malone had bounced into the centre of the group and taken charge.

'Thanks, Jan,' he beamed. 'In our own ways, I think we both want what's best for Mudgeebung. You talked about making bargains - and that's exactly what I'd like to do right now. The first thing I need to know is, where are the documents?'

Jan started to pat Billy's pockets but Blake was already foraging in her pack. 'Here,' she said, flourishing the wad of paper. 'Billy gave them to me last night, as a present.'

She waited till the mayor was looking really worried and then handed the documents to her great-aunt. Dell glanced across at the other old women. When they nodded, she passed the documents back to Blake.

'Do what you like with them,' she growled. 'We trust you.'

'Th'ks,' Blake mumbled. She turned towards the reporter and said, 'Okay, Martin, you wanted a good story and here it is. Take this stuff and let everyone know what's going on.'

She gave the documents to Martin Fahey and he stood there, weighing them in his hand. 'You've got some funny ideas about reporters, Sheryl,' he commented. 'I've known what was going on in Mudgeebung, ever since Brian and I had a long talk. But my job's to ask questions, not to make the big

decisions. I'll leave that to the politicians.'

He held the documents out to Jan Shepherd. The MP took them and swung round to face Brian Malone. 'No casino,' she announced. 'A new design for the hotel that fits with the rest of Mudgeebung. And a wildlife sanctuary for the black-eyed ducks. What do you reckon, Brian? Is it a deal?'

A huge smile spread across the mayor's round rosy face. 'You drive a hard bargain. But I think I can square it with Interco. Trust me, Jan, you won't be sorry about this.'

As she handed him the riparian rights, Blake sighed and stared down at her empty hands. *Rats. Now I wish I'd hung onto the documents. Brian Malone got everything he wanted in the end. Well, not quite everything, I suppose. The ducks are safe and there won't be a casino in Mudgeebung. Maybe this isn't such a bad deal, after all.*

She yawned and stretched. Peered through the trees and spotted the Shepherds' Commodore, parked on the road nearby. She was heading over to ask Jan for a lift back to her bike when Martin Fahey reached out and grabbed her arm.

'Not so fast,' he said. 'It's your turn to answer a few questions now. For starters, who are you?'

Blake froze. 'I'm Sheryl Newton,' she said, lifting her chin and staring straight at Martin.

The reporter shook his head. 'Oh no, you're not. When I rang the *Daily Messenger* to check on you, I talked to someone who seemed to think *she* was Sheryl Newton. So I tested you, by saying I liked your article on homeless people. Sheryl Newton's never written about homelessness - but you obviously didn't know that. You're not Sheryl, are you? Why don't you tell us your real name?'

Blake thought fast. Couldn't come up with any smart ideas. She tried again but her mind stayed blank. Finally she mumbled, 'It's none of your business.'

'Wrong,' Martin told her. 'I'm a reporter. That's my business. Like you said, I've been looking for a good story - and I just found it. If you won't tell me who you are, I'll follow you round till I can work it out for myself.'

Blake's eyes flicked from one side to the other. The road, twenty metres away. The bush behind them. The hill towering over them. *And my bike's halfway up the next hill. No way to escape unless I hijack the helicopter - and I'm not quite that desperate.*

She was still scowling at Martin when Win let out a small shriek and clutched the reporter's arm. 'Did you hear that, dear?' she gasped. 'It's a rock slide! Quick, everyone. Run!'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

While the rescue squad raced to save the helicopter, the others scattered. Blake felt bony fingers close round her wrist. Dell tugged hard and dragged her away. They pushed through the grey-green wall of bushes and trees. After a while Dell paused and nodded.

Blake stood still and listened. Heard Martin saying, 'Hold on! That was a trick. There's no rock fall - and no girl either. She's completely vanished.'

'What's he talking about?' Blake breathed. 'We haven't gone that far.'

'No, but the scrub's very thick,' Dell whispered back. 'You can't see through it and it muffles any sounds. Don't worry, though. I know the bush like the back of my hand. You won't get lost while you're with me.'

Blake told her where she'd left the Honda and they set off along a bushy ridge, with Dell leading the way. After a while she glanced back and growled, 'I suppose you want to know about your mother now.'

'Yes, please,' Blake said politely.

Dell marched on in silence for a few more minutes. Then she said, 'I don't like talking about Maureen, because I'm not proud of the way I handled her. I was pretty busy back then, helping Alan to run the farm. I didn't have time to sit around gasbagging with a teenage girl and besides, I was suspicious of Maureen right from the start.'

'Why?' Blake demanded and Dell shrugged.

'Well, her parents sent her away because she got into trouble, remember. And she was trouble from the minute she arrived in Mudgeebung. She didn't know a thing about farming - she mouthed off at everybody—and she hung around with Brian Malone's brother Kenny, who was a misfit too. What's more

...'

She broke off and swore at a particularly thorny bush. Blake counted to twenty and then said, 'Go on.'

Dell's breath puffed out in a long sigh. 'This is the bit I'm ashamed of,' she muttered. 'I didn't trust Maureen because I knew she was adopted. It's different these days. People talk about that sort of thing a lot more. I can see now that Maureen was probably playing up to get some attention but at the time I thought - well, I thought it was a case of bad blood.'

Blake walked straight into an overhanging branch. As its twigs flicked her cheek, she flinched and tried to pull herself together. She felt as though she'd split into three parts. One part that wanted to yell at Dell for being so hard on her mum. One part that wanted to hug her for changing her mind, years later.

And one part of her that kept repeating, over and over: *adopted. Adopted. My mum was adopted, same as me.*

'Bad blood?' she said after a while. 'What do you mean?'

'Bad genes, they call it these days,' Dell rasped. 'Bad parents - that's what it all boils down to. My brother, Ron Delaney, knew where Maureen came from and he reckoned she had bad blood. Besides, good parents wouldn't give their kiddy away, would they?'

'Mum gave me away,' Blake told Dell's back and the old woman stopped suddenly and swung around.

'Oh dear, there I go again, putting my foot in it as usual. Sorry, Sheryl - or whatever your name is. I'm a silly old biddy who's better with sheep than people.'

Blake stepped back and studied her. The Akubra hat. The riding breeches, covered with bits of twig. The worried look in her faded brown eyes. *Okay, she's not perfect, but who is? And she's still my great-aunt.*

'My name's Blake,' she said. 'Well, it's one of my names, at any rate. Maureen named me first and then my adoptive mother gave me another name. But Blake's the name I chose for myself.'

Dell wiped her hand on her breeches and stuck it out. 'G'day, Blake,' she said, grabbing Blake's hand and shaking it hard. 'It's been a pleasure to get to know you. Come on now, let's find that bike of yours.'

Fifteen minutes later Blake was slipping her key into the Honda's ignition. 'Want a lift?' she asked her great-aunt. 'I gotta head back to the town, to get my things from Glad and May's place.'

'Nah, I'll walk,' Dell told her. 'The exercise'll do me good. But here, take this before you go.'

She handed over a slip of paper. 'What's that?' Blake asked.

'It's Kenny Malone's address. He was Maureen's best friend, while she was living in Mudgeebung. I haven't heard from Maureen since she and Kenny took off twenty-four years ago - from a little country town to the biggest city in Australia. But Kenny still keeps in touch with his brother, so I got his address from Brian while we were waiting for the copter. You never know, Kenny might still keep in touch with Maureen too.'

Blake tucked the scrap of paper into the inside pocket of her jacket. 'That's ace,' she said. 'You're a ripper, Great-aunt Dell.'

The old woman shuffled her feet, looking almost embarrassed. 'I wrote down Glad and May's address for you as well,' she mumbled. 'Win and I are selling our houses and taking off, to travel round Australia by in a combi van. Mudgeebung's changing, which is fine, but we're too old to be bothered with it. You can always contact me through Glad and May, though. If you want to, that is.'

'Hey, you're stuck with me now,' Blake told her. 'I'll write to you from the big city and let you know whether I find Maureen. And, um, thanks for everything.'

They shook hands again and Blake scrambled onto the bike. Dell stood under the gum tree and waved as she jolted down the dirt track. A last backward glance at the tiny figure in the Akubra hat - *goodbye, Great-aunt Dell* - and she was cruising down towards the foothills. Around the lake and through the town. *Goodbye, Mudgeebung*. A quick stop to collect her stuff and leave a note on the kitchen table. *Goodbye, Glad and May and Win*.

As she rode along the shore of Lake Mudgeebung, Blake noticed four lines of silver light across the wafer, rippling behind four brown dots. The mother duck and her ducklings, out for a paddle. She smiled and lifted her hand in a salute.

Then she gunned the engine and the bike started to climb. Up the road, over the hills and back to the highway. Heading for the big city and her mother's friend, Kenny Malone.

*I'm getting closer all the time. Maybe this time I'll be lucky.
Maybe.*

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