

THE JUST & UNCLE MYSTERIES

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Looking
for
Blondie

JENNY PAUSACKER

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CHAPTER ONE

My name is Just, short for Justine. I'm short for my age, as well. (Fourteen years and 140 centimetres.) I have good teeth and boring hair and a boring life. Okay but boring. The most exciting thing that ever happened to me was Blondie getting kidnapped.

So I'll tell you about that.

It all started when Uncle decided to do a drama course at the CAE. Uncle always picks a new hobby on New Year's Day and it was acting that year. On the first night the teacher showed the class how to talk in this deep growly voice that came from the bottom of their lungs. Apparently, the best growler was a sixty-year-old great-grandmother.

'But I was second best,' Uncle growled at me, while he was checking my homework in his study next day. 'They all told me I sounded like a real tough guy.'

I said, 'Dream on' but I said it fairly quietly. I should've said it louder. Two seconds later the phone rang. I got there first, because I thought it was one of my friends, but I spent the next five minutes listening to a woman with a voice like a rubber duck.

When the duck-woman stopped quacking, I covered the phone with my hand and said, 'Uncle, it's for you. Some woman from Radio MF2. Do you want me to tell her you don't do interviews?'

Uncle shook his head so hard that his hair fluffed out. 'No way,' he growled. 'This is a perfect chance to try out my new voice. Give me that phone, Just.'

I handed the phone over and went to hide in the kitchen, so I wouldn't hear Uncle making a fool of himself. Uncle writes crime novels, okay? Twenty of them so far, about this tough private eye called Jake Hackett - a cool dude who spends half his time fighting the bad guys and the other half kissing beautiful blondes. People love reading about Jake. Uncle sells zillions of Jake Hackett books, all round the world.

There's only one problem. Uncle is a complete wuss. When the lid on the Vegemite jar gets stuck, he calls a plumber. He wears a woolly cap in the middle of summer, because he's terrified of catching cold. If his readers found out what he was really like, they'd probably stop believing in Jake Hackett on the spot. So he never talks to people from the newspapers or TV or whatever ... and everyone thinks the guy who writes the Jake Hackett books is a Man of Mystery.

But now Uncle was talking to a duck-woman from Radio MF2. 'Well, so what?' I said out loud. 'It's none of my business. He's the uncle, I'm just the niece.'

I ate two Vegemite sandwiches at top speed and then I cracked. There's a radio in the kitchen. When I turned it on, the rubber duck was still quacking away.

'And where do you write your hard-hitting novels, Sam?' she asked. (Uncle's name is Sam Wedgwood.) 'Do you have a grimy little office on the wrong side of town, like Jake Hackett?'

'I'm sitting at my desk right now, babe,' Uncle growled. 'Looking out at the concrete freeways of this big city and the wall of an old mattress factory.'

Yeah, sure. The factory was turned into trendy apartments five years ago and there's a velvety green golf course on the far side of the freeway. The duck-woman was impressed, though.

'Oh, Jake - I mean, Sam,' she breathed. 'You're as tough as the characters you write about, aren't you? Do you have any soft spots?'

I crossed my fingers and shut my eyes and tried to send Uncle a message by ESP. Please don't tell her about the woolly cap. Please don't tell her about being scared of spiders. And don't tell her about -

Too late. Before my message could get through, Uncle was growling, 'Only one soft spot. I can't write a word, unless I have my special mascot on my desk.'

'Your mascot?' the woman quacked. 'What is it, Jake - I mean, Sam? Our listeners would love to know. Is it an army knife? A bullet from a revolver? A letter from a serial killer?'

A few seconds of silence, while Uncle thought fast. Then he growled, 'No, it's more special than that. The most important woman in my life gave it to me when we were both a lot younger - but that's all I'm going to say.'

The duck-woman nearly fainted from excitement. While she was quacking 'how romantic' and 'you're the best crime writer in this country, apart from Ray Handler' and 'sorry we've run out of time', I switched the radio off and went racing upstairs to the study. Uncle was winding a long woolly scarf round his neck and drinking cough mixture from the bottle.

'My throat's sore,' he said in his normal voice. 'Stress isn't good for me - and those interviews are very stressful. That silly woman actually thinks Ray Handler's a good crime writer. Don't let me talk to any radio people again, Just.'

He picked up his special mascot and sat it on his knee. It's a Blondie doll. You know what they're like - long legs and eyelashes, big hair and boobs. Jake Hackett wouldn't be seen dead with a Blondie doll.

'Do you remember the day you gave me Blondie?' Uncle asked for the thousandth time. 'It was the day when you came to live with me. I was terrified, because I didn't have a clue about how to look after a little kid. But after that, I knew everything would be fine.'

As a matter of fact, I gave Blondie to Uncle because I always hated dolls, even when I was only four. Still, I was glad he liked her so much. He actually makes clothes for her - a new set to match the new blonde in every new Jake Hackett book.

Like I said, my uncle is a complete wuss.

CHAPTER TWO

The next day was a Saturday. I'd planned to sleep in, because Uncle and I had stayed up late, watching *Star Trek* videos. But halfway through this cool dream where I was captain of the starship Enterprise, a bunch of Klingons started yelling, 'Just! Just, wake up!'

When I opened my eyes, Uncle was standing at the end of the bed, looking pale and miserable. 'Oh, Just,' he whispered. 'Someone's kidnapped Blondie.'

I sat up and gasped, 'Oh no! The Klingons!' Then I giggled and said, 'Sorry, that was a dream. Have you been having nightmares too?'

'No,' Uncle snapped. 'This is serious. Blondie's gone. She's not on my desk ... and I'm supposed to start my next Jake Hackett book on Monday.'

'Yeah, that counts as serious,' I agreed. 'Like, you can't write unless Blondie's watching. Remember what happened when she slipped down the back of your filing cabinet? Hey, maybe that's where she is now.'

I scrambled out of bed and headed for the study, with Uncle trailing along behind me. 'I looked there,' he grumbled. 'I've looked everywhere.'

Yeah, sure. Uncle looked everywhere for his sunglasses the week before last and I found them perched on the top of his head. Uncle isn't very practical but I am. (Well, one of us has to be.) So I wasn't going to believe him till I'd checked for myself.

I shifted the filing cabinet away from the wall. Crawled across the carpet, peering under the furniture. Moved all the papers on the desk, while Uncle hovered beside me, warning me not to get his notes mixed up. A

breeze from the window blew one of the pages onto the floor and I bent down to rescue it.

'Got it!' I said. 'The window's open. You must've left Blondie on the window sill by mistake. I bet she's fallen out into the garden.'

Uncle reached for his scarf and looped it round his neck. 'Oh, turtles,' he said. (That's Uncle's idea of swearing.) 'I always keep my window shut, so I don't catch a cold. The kidnappers must've broken in that way.'

'Stop raving on about kidnappers,' I told him. 'Kidnappers steal people. Blondie's just a doll.'

'A very valuable doll,' Uncle said indignantly. 'One of the first Blondie dolls ever made. Collectors pay big money for the original Blondies, you know.'

I didn't know - and plus, now that I knew, I didn't care. 'Come on,' I said, tugging on the end of his scarf. 'Let's go and look at the garden. Even if we can't find Blondie, we might find some clues.'

'Clues,' Uncle repeated, looking happier. 'Jake Hackett's good at clues. And I invented Jake, so I ought to be good at it as well.'

I towed him down the stairs and out the front door. As I hurried round the side of the house, he grabbed the back of my t-shirt. 'Slowly, Just,' he hissed. 'We don't want to mess up the crime scene.'

That made sense. I tiptoed carefully across the grass and looked up at the study. But I couldn't see the window properly, because the side wall's covered with ivy, so I looked down at the ground instead. And guess what, I found a clue straight away. Two deep dents in the earth, about a metre from the wall.

'A ladder,' Uncle gasped. 'The kidnappers' ladder. Well, Just, do you believe me now?'

'Hmm,' I said. 'Maybe. But maybe you put the ladder there yourself, to cut back the ivy or whatever.'

Uncle laughed. 'Hardly. Have you forgotten? I'm scared of heights.'

He is, too. We've got really high ceilings in our house and Uncle makes me change all the light globes.

'Okay, then maybe Tony-the-gardening-guy was cutting the ivy,' I said. 'Or maybe someone used a ladder to check the gas meter - or the electricity meter - or the water meter. Or maybe a kitten or a kid's football got stuck in the ivy and they climbed up to rescue it.'

'Nice try, except that the water meter's round the back of the house and the electricity and gas meters are out at the front,' Uncle said, ticking them off on his fingers. 'That ivy hasn't been pruned for months and none of our neighbours have kittens.' He ran out of fingers and frowned at his empty hand. Then he said, 'Face it, Just. Blondie was kidnapped.'

By that time, I was almost convinced. But I still couldn't see why anyone would want to kidnap - I mean, steal - a doll.

'Are you sure?' I asked and Uncle said firmly, 'Yes, of course. I have a feeling in my bones.'

Uncle has feelings in his bones about a lot of things. He'd been wrong when he had a feeling that our house was going to be struck by lightning in this big storm two days ago. On the other hand, when he'd had a feeling that our hot water service was going to explode last winter, he'd turned out to be right.

'Can you feel anything now?' I said and Uncle nodded.

'I have a feeling that someone's watching us,' he whispered.

Yeah, sure. Like the kidnappers would still be hanging about in our garden, after all this time. I sighed and turned round - and let out a yell that nearly broke the sound barrier. Someone was lurking in the shadows of a tall spiky bush beside the factory wall.

Watching us.

CHAPTER THREE

'Who are you?' I snapped and the person took a step forward.

'My name's Brett McCluskey,' he said. 'Me and my sister just moved into the house across the road. Have you lost something?'

I stared suspiciously at Brett McCluskey. A skinny dark-haired kid, about sixteen years old, with a pale oval face and a pointy nose, like Data on *Star Trek*. He was taller than me, which isn't hard, but he was taller than Uncle as well.

'No, we haven't lost anything,' I said, to get rid of him, and at the same moment Uncle said, 'Yes, we have. My doll's been kidnapped.'

Brett stared at Uncle, almost as suspiciously as I'd stared at him. Fair enough, too. After all, most forty-year-old uncles don't own dolls.

'It's his special mascot,' I said quickly. 'He can't write without it.'

'I'm the author of the Jake Hackett books,' Uncle explained. 'Have you read them?'

Brett shook his head. 'No way. I'm not into books. I'm more into TV shows, like *Top Cop* and that.'

'Oh good,' Uncle said. 'So you like detective shows? Do you want to help us find Blondie?'

Uncle keeps asking other people to do things for him. It's embarrassing sometimes. Like, when my science teacher dropped me home after school camp, she ended up banging nails into the study walls, so Uncle could hang his Sherlock Holmes pictures. (Uncle's hopeless with hammers. He only ever hits his thumb.)

The funny thing is, people usually do exactly what Uncle wants. Take Brett, for example. He didn't say, 'No way,' not this time. He just shrugged and said, 'Why not?'

I'd been waiting for Brett to go home but it looked as though we were stuck with him.

'Okay, what now?' I asked, and Uncle said, 'Now we start detecting.'

Next minute Brett and I were sitting side by side in the study, while Uncle handed out pens and notebooks. He clasped his hands behind his back and started pacing up and down.

'Means, motive and opportunity,' he said, so suddenly that Brett and I both jumped.

'What do you mean?' Brett said. 'I mean, what are means?'

He must've realised how stupid that sounded, because he went bright red. I giggled, to show him I'd noticed.

'Explain,' I said to Uncle. 'We don't know what you're talking about.'

Uncle stopped pacing and blinked at me. 'Oh, sorry,' he said. 'I'm talking about the three main rules for detectives. If you want to catch a criminal, you have to prove they had the things they'd need to commit the crime - that's the means. Then you have to find out whether they had a reason for committing the crime - that's the motive. And finally you have to check their alibi, to see whether they had time to commit the crime - that's the opportunity.'

Brett thought for a moment. 'Okay, I get it,' he said finally. 'So, in this case, the means is the ladder?'

'Brilliant!' Uncle said, getting over-excited. 'Yes, Brett, we know the kidnapers must've climbed up a ladder to get through the study window. Therefore, the kidnapers have a ladder. A very long ladder.'

I was beginning to feel left out, so I said loudly, 'Wait a minute. Those people stole Blondie, remember. They could've easily stolen a ladder as well.'

'Yes, of course,' Uncle sighed. 'But they obviously stole it from somewhere near by - unless you think they carried a two-storey-high extension ladder half way across the city.'

He started laughing and Brett joined in. 'I didn't say they carried it,' I snapped. 'They might've tied it onto the roof of their car.'

'So?' Brett said. 'People don't usually drive round with ladders on their cars. I reckon someone would've spotted it. In other words, the ladder's still crucial. Right, Mr Wedgwood?'

'Call me Sam,' Uncle said, super-friendly. 'You're doing very well, Brett. What next?'

That shut Brett up. Okay, he'd had one good idea but when you hang around with Uncle, you have to keep having ideas non-stop. While Brett was going 'um' and 'ah', I cut in quickly.

'Well, we've done means,' I said. 'Now we have to do motive and opportunity. Why would anyone want to steal Blondie?'

'I told you before,' Uncle said with a shrug. 'Original Blondie dolls are worth a lot of money now.'

'True,' I agreed. 'Except most thieves wouldn't realise that. An ordinary thief would've nicked your gold medal from the Crime Society or sneaked downstairs and taken our TV. But the medal and the TV are still here, which means the thief must've been looking for Blondie. So ... how many people knew that you own an original Blondie doll?'

Uncle frowned. 'Not many. Only two, as a matter of fact. You know and my agent knows.' He turned to Brett and added, 'Agents help writers to sell their books and take a share of the money. My agent's called Mairi O'Reilly. Actually, she's a writer too. She just wrote an article about Blondie dolls for *Modern Woman*, using a photo of my Oh!'

'Exactly,' Brett said, grinning. 'That's a motive, for sure. Some collector could've seen the photo and asked this Mairi person who owned the doll. But listen, I can think of another motive as well. You reckon you can't write without Blondie on your desk, so maybe someone stole her as a way of getting at you. Do you have any enemies, Sam?'

Uncle shivered. He wrapped another loop of scarf around his neck and glanced at the window, checking for drafts. 'Enemies?' he squeaked. 'Me? Nonsense. I'm a kind, gentle, friendly sort of person. Everybody likes me, don't they, Just?'

'Almost everybody,' I said. 'My science teacher dumped you after three dates, because you kept conning her into fixing things round the house. Mairi O'Reilly gets mad at you, because your books are always late. Ray Handler sent you a nasty letter, after you wrote that review of his latest crime novel where you said his detective was a wuss. And you upset those two Mormon missionaries who knocked on our door last month, because you went on talking and talking and wouldn't let them say -'

'Stop it!' Uncle yelled. 'You're exaggerating. I admit that some of those people might've been a bit cross. But they aren't enemies.'

He collapsed into a chair and hitched his scarf up till it covered his mouth and nose. Brett stared down at his trainers, totally embarrassed. I couldn't really blame him. I mean, he'd asked one small question and Uncle had started acting like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum.

'Let's forget about motive,' I said in my most adult voice. 'How about opportunity?'

Brett swung towards me, looking relieved. 'That's a hard one,' he said. 'We don't really know enough yet. Like, the Blondie doll must've been stolen after Sam left his study last night and before he went back to his study this

morning - but that covers a lot of hours. We need to narrow the time down. Maybe we ought to talk to all your neighbours, like they do on *Top Cop*.'

I flipped my notebook open and wrote PLAN in big letters. 'Why don't you interview them?' I suggested. 'You're the *Top Cop* fan. You'll know the right questions to ask.'

Brett sat up straighter and gave me this serious frown, like a TV cop. 'All right,' he said. 'And what about you, Just? You could copy your favourite detective too.'

'No, thanks,' I told him. 'Most of the detectives in books and on TV are guys. I'm going to be a new sort of detective - a cyberdetective. I'll access the Internet and go hunting for Barbie collectors who live around here.'

We grinned at each other, feeling pleased with ourselves. Then we remembered Uncle. When we turned to look at him, he was still hiding behind his scarf and sulking.

'I'll stay here and think,' he said in a muffled voice. 'That's what Sherlock Holmes used to do. We can meet again at lunchtime. Now off you go, children.'

CHAPTER FOUR

I spent the next two hours studying websites and then I went to check on Uncle. He was curled up in his chair, having a nap, so I headed outside to look for Brett. I found him straight away, sitting on our brick fence and scribbling in his notebook.

'How's it going?' I asked. 'Any luck so far?'

Brett scribbled faster, then shut the notebook and glanced up at me. (He really did look incredibly like Data. I couldn't help noticing, because Data's my favourite *Star Trek* character.)

'I've talked to most of the people in the apartments next door to you,' he reported. 'They didn't see anything - except for this one guy who reckons he got so drunk that he thought he saw a ladder walking across the road. He was too drunk to remember the time, though.'

'Still, that's a start. For one thing, it tells us the ladder came from the opposite side of the road. How's this for an idea? We could creep into all the back yards and look through the sheds, to see if -'

'Too dangerous,' Brett interrupted. 'People'd probably think we were thieves. I was planning to knock on their doors and say something like, "Me and my sister just moved in and our roof leaked in that storm last night. Do you have a really long ladder we could borrow?"'

Brett didn't just look like Data. He was smart like Data as well. For the next hour we worked our way up the street and then down the street, telling Brett's story. Everybody was really nice to us ... but nobody had a two-storey-tall ladder.

Still, it was fun getting to know Brett. By the time we arrived back at my place, we were cracking jokes like we'd been friends for years. There were two doors that we hadn't knocked on yet but without even bothering to check with each other, we both sat down on the fence to have a rest.

'So you live with your uncle - like, full-time,' Brett said. 'What about your parents?'

'Car accident,' I told him. 'And you?'

'Really, really bad divorce. My sister's way older than me, so she's taking over for a while.'

That was all we needed to say. We sat there for a while, soaking up the sun and kicking our heels against the bricks. Then Brett yawned and said lazily, 'Your uncle's a bit of a weirdo. Scared of heights. Plays with dolls. Freaks when he hears the word "enemy". A complete wuss, isn't he?'

I'm allowed to call Uncle a wuss but I won't let anyone else say it. I changed my mind about Brett on the spot. He wasn't like Data at all and he definitely wasn't a friend of mine.

'You think Uncle's a weirdo?' I snarled. 'Just wait till you meet Phil Macy. He's really weird.'

Phil Macy lives across the road, next door to Brett and his sister, in one of the two houses we hadn't visited yet. We hadn't gone to Brett's place, because Brett obviously knew whether his sister owned a long ladder. And we hadn't gone to Phil's place, because his house was kind of spooky. High fences with barbed wire on top. A Rottweiler on a long chain. A security camera over the front door.

Seriously weird.

I stood up and went marching across the road. Brett had to follow me or else he would've looked like a wuss. I knew he was scared - hey, I was too. But I wanted to scare Brett, because he'd been mean about Uncle.

The front gate creaked when I pushed it open. Phil's enormous black dog lunged at us as we scuttled past. Before I got a chance to ring the bell, the door swung slowly open. Oh, great. Phil had probably been watching us on the security monitor.

Brett edged closer to me. 'Ladder,' he babbled. 'Can we borrow a ladder? The roof leaked. Want to climb up and ...'

His voice faded out, which didn't surprise me. It'd be hard to keep talking, with Phil Macy glaring down at you. Phil's incredibly tall. He has a long face and a Frankenstein crewcut. His skin's whiter than white, because he never goes outside, and his eyes are dark and deep-set and totally intense.

'You want to borrow my ladder, so you can spy on me?' he said, smiling at us. 'That's a joke. A very good joke. Tell the Men in Suits to buy their own ladders. And tell them they shouldn't be using children as spies.'

Phil's smile is more frightening than other people's frowns. I wanted to run but I was too terrified to move. Then, as I stared up at him, I heard a duck quacking. No, not a duck. That woman from Radio MF2. So Phil Macy listened to Radio MF2, same as us. It made him seem more human.

Well, a bit more human.

'Sorry, Mr Macy,' I said in a rush. 'We didn't mean to bother you or - anyway, we're sorry.'

And, before I could freak again, I grabbed Brett's hand and hauled him back to the gate, across the road and into our house.

CHAPTER FIVE

'Thanks for rescuing me,' Brett said, as I banged the front door shut.

A lot of guys wouldn't admit that a girl had rescued them. (Jake Hackett, for example. He always rescues the blondes, never the other way around.) I changed my mind again and decided I liked Brett, after all.

'Not a problem,' I said. 'I've had a lot of practice. I had to rescue Uncle a month ago. He was trying to explain that these guys who'd knocked on Phil's door were just Mormon missionaries. Phil was convinced they were Men in Suits.'

Brett frowned. 'Wait a minute. Mormons do wear suits. They're, like, famous for it.'

'Yeah, I know. But the thing is, Phil has some crazy theories. He thinks all the rich people want to start a new world order, by putting drugs in the water and sticking barcodes on everybody. Plus he reckons that if anyone tries to investigate the conspiracy, Men in Suits turn up on their doorstep to scare them off.'

I said "Men in Suits" really carefully this time, to make sure Brett could hear the capital letters. He started giggling, just like in the *Star Trek* episode where Q makes Data laugh.

'Oh, no!' he gasped. 'Where does Phil get his ideas from?'

'From the Internet,' I admitted. (I love the Net but there's weird stuff, as well as good stuff.) 'Phil used to work for a building company but he fell off a scaffolding and wrecked his back, so he hasn't been able to work for two years. He spends most of his time online, swapping ideas with people from all

over. Mainly Americans, though. Apparently, lots of Americans are scared that someone's secretly trying to take over the world.'

Brett giggled again. 'Like Bill Gates or MacDonald's? Nothing secret about that.' Then he snapped his fingers and said, 'Hold on, Blondie dolls are everywhere. Did you ever hear Phil say that Blondie was trying to take over the world?'

That made me giggle. 'A secret army of Blondies?' I asked. 'I love it. Come on, let's tell Uncle.'

But when we charged upstairs, Uncle was still snoozing in his chair. He opened one eye and said, 'Oh, it's you. Well? What have you found out?'

'More than you,' I told him and Uncle raised an eyebrow.

'I wouldn't bet on it, Just. I've been thinking, like Sherlock Holmes.'

'Yeah, sure. I read all those Sherlock Holmes books but I can't remember any stories where he solves cases in his sleep.'

Uncle scowled and waved a newspaper at me. 'I might've looked as though I was sleeping but actually, I was thinking about my enemies,' he said. 'I remembered this article in the paper, saying Ray Handler had gone overseas to teach Canadians to write crime novels. So he can't have kidnapped Blondie. Then I remembered that my agent's in Sydney, writing a travel article. So Mairi's off the list. And after that, I had a dream - I mean, I thought about your science teacher. When I rang her, she said she wouldn't go out with me ... but she's coming round tonight, to change the washer on that dripping tap in the bathroom.'

My science teacher is a sucker. She said she'd never fix anything else for Uncle, ever again. Still, if she really hated him, she wouldn't have agreed to change our washer, would she? It looked as though she was off the Enemy List as well.

Brett whisked the newspaper away from Uncle and checked the article. 'That Ray Handler looks like a real tough guy,' he commented. 'Yeah, he's in Canada, all right.'

Uncle sniffed. 'Ray may look tough but underneath he's pure marshmallow. Me, I'm tough inside, where it counts. Okay, now you know what I've been doing. What have you done?'

'I talked to your neighbours,' Brett began. 'Phil Macy was -'

'Phil!' Uncle yelped. 'Oh dear, I should've warned you to stay away from him. A terrifying man. He shouted at me last month. I don't know what would've happened, if Just hadn't dragged me away.'

All of a sudden this picture started to take shape in my brain, bit by bit, like an image appearing on a website. Dark night. Long ladder. The study window. And a man beginning to climb ...

'Phil Macy,' I said. 'We should've put Phil on the List of Enemies. He was mad at you, for sure. Maybe he stole Blondie, as a way of making you miserable.'

'I'd believe anything about Phil,' Uncle said with a shudder. 'There's just one small problem. I'd never talked to him before we had that argument about the Mormons - and I certainly haven't talked to him since then. So there's no way he could've known that Blondie's my special mascot. Forget Phil and tell us what you found out on the Net.'

I reached for my notebook. 'Well, I found eighty seven Blondie sites but most of them were about Blondie's hair or Blondie's clothes or stories about Blondie and her friends,' I said, flicking through the pages. 'There was one site for Blondie collectors, though. The main Australian collector's called Ken Furphy. He owns every Blondie doll that was ever made, except the very first one.'

'Ken Furphy?' Uncle repeated. 'I know that name. Oh right, he's a friend of Mairi O'Reilly.'

'Unreal,' Brett breathed. 'That's the best clue we've come across. What if Mairi told this Ken guy that you own one of the first Blondies?'

'No,' Uncle said firmly. 'Mairi wouldn't do that.'

'How do you know?' Brett asked and Uncle said, 'I have a feeling in my bones.'

Once Uncle gets a feeling in his bones, nothing can shake him. But, of course, Brett didn't know that. He went on arguing with Uncle, so I zoned out and thought about Mairi instead. Uncle reckoned she was in Sydney but Sydney's only an hour away by plane. Mairi could've flown down, pinched Blondie, sold her to Ken Furphy and zapped back to Sydney on the morning flight ...

Two seconds later I was over at the desk, rummaging through the shoe box where Uncle keeps his most important messages. I found a note headed, 'Mairi's phone number in Sydney.' When I dialled the number, a voice said, 'Republic Hotel. This is your friendly receptionist Wayne.'

'Hi, Wayne,' I said, being friendly back at him. 'Can I speak to Mairi O'Reilly, please?'

'I'm sorry,' Wayne said. 'Ms O'Reilly was planning to stay for a week but she checked out yesterday, in quite a hurry. I think she said she was off to catch a plane.'

I put the phone down and turned round to find Uncle blinking at me, like he knew it was bad news. After I'd passed on Wayne's information, he sat and stared at the floor for a while.

'How do your bones feel now?' I said finally and Uncle sighed.

'I'm not sure. It looks bad - but I still can't see why Mairi would do a thing like that. Okay, she'd probably get a lot of money from Ken Furphy. On

the other hand, she'd lose the money she would've made from selling my next book.'

'Maybe,' I said. 'Or maybe not. Are you positive you can't write, unless you've got Blondie on your desk? I bet you could manage it, if you tried extra hard.'

'I tried this morning, while you were out,' Uncle said sadly. 'Couldn't write a word. I just kept looking at the place where she usually sits. I miss Blondie, Just. If we can't find her, I -'

He gulped, like he'd got something stuck in his throat. Then he tugged a hanky out of his pocket and blew his nose, muttering, 'Must be catching a cold.' Oh, great. Now Brett would be totally convinced that Uncle was a wuss.

But when I glanced sideways, Brett was blowing his nose as well. 'It's all right, Sam,' he said in a rush. 'Don't worry. Blondie'll turn up. We'll find her soon, I promise.'

CHAPTER SIX

For the next five minutes we all sat and stared miserably at the empty space on Uncle's desk. Luckily, at the start of the sixth minute the door bell rang. Uncle jumped.

'Eep!' he said. 'That's probably Phil, come to complain about you. I hope he's not in a shouting mood.'

He pulled his scarf tight, like it could protect him against Phil, and went clattering downstairs, with me and Brett close behind. As he flung the door open, he growled, 'Well? What's the problem now? I told you before -'

Then he stopped and blushed. Uncle's fairly pale, so when he blushes, he goes red as a tomato. He stood there, doing his tomato imitation and gazing at this tall blonde woman. Her nose was a bit pink but apart from that she looked totally gorgeous. Long legs and eyelashes, big hair and boobs. Just like all the blondes in the Jake Hackett books. Or like Blondie.

'Hi,' said the Blondie-woman. 'I'm Kara McCluskey. One of your neighbours told me Brett might be here.'

'Oh, sorry,' Uncle wittered. 'I'm sorry. Really very sorry. I thought you were Phil Macy.'

Kara's blue eyes opened wide with surprise. (Fair enough, too. She didn't look a bit like Phil Macy.)

'Oh, right,' she said. 'That strange guy who lives next door. The one who's turned his house into a fortress. He shouted at me yesterday - something about this street being full of spies for the new world order.'

'You too?' Uncle said with this dopey smile. 'How could anybody shout at a beautiful woman like you?'

Brett made a gargling noise, like he was about to spew, but his sister just smiled back at Uncle. 'Well, I was sitting on our roof, taking photos of Phil's house,' she explained. 'I should've asked him first, I suppose. The thing is, I needed a picture of a gangster's house in a hurry and Phil's place looked perfect. I work as a photographer, you see. I'm doing the photo credits for the next series of *Top Cop* at present.'

'A photographer?' Uncle said, flirting like mad. 'What an interesting job. I'm a writer myself. Sam Wedgwood, author of the Jake Hackett detective stories. Have you read any of them?'

Before Kara could answer, Brett butted in. 'Hang on,' he said. 'If Phil thinks this street's full of spies, he must think you're a spy, Sam. I bet he broke into your study, looking for clues, and then stole Blondie because he guessed she was important. I just wish we could find out whether he owns a ladder. Did you score any pictures of his back yard, Kara?'

'Actually, I did,' she admitted. 'Although I won't use them now, because I wouldn't want to upset Phil.'

'Wonderful!' Uncle exclaimed. 'This could be our lucky break. Would you mind if I examined the photos?'

'That's fine,' Kara said, looking puzzled. 'But why -?'

She stopped in the middle of the sentence, wrinkled her nose and sneezed. Three times in a row. Uncle backed away and pushed me in front of him.

'On second thoughts, I've got some other things to do,' he said quickly. 'Brett and Justine can check the photos instead. Watch out for an extension ladder or anything else that looks suspicious. And Kara, you must come to dinner, just as soon as your cold's better.'

He shoved me and Brett outside and slammed the door. I couldn't help grinning, because I knew exactly what Uncle would do next. He'd go racing to the bathroom, grab a handful of vitamin C pills and start gargling with salt water. Uncle likes beautiful blondes, just as much as Jake Hackett does. But he hates catching colds.

Kara frowned at the closed door for half a second. Then she shrugged and strolled off down the street. Brett and Kara's house was smaller than ours - just two bedrooms, a kitchen-and-lounge area and this dark narrow room where Kara printed her photographs. She switched the light on and unpegged half a dozen photos from a washing line strung across the room.

'There,' she said. 'Have a look at those, while I develop my *Top Cop* pictures. And after that, you can sit down and tell me what this is all about.'

Brett grabbed the photos and I chased him back to the kitchen, moving so fast that I almost skidded in a puddle of water on the floor. While I flapped my arms, to stop myself from falling over, Brett spread the photos out across the kitchen table.

'Nice shots,' he said. 'Clear as. There's a huge shed in Phil's yard, big enough to fit a really long ladder. The door's even open ... but it's a black and white photo, so the inside of the shed just looks kind of shadowy.'

'Oh, turtles,' I said, sounding like Uncle. 'Have you got a magnifying glass, so we can make the photo bigger?'

Brett shook his head. 'Sorry, the magnifying glass is in the darkroom - and if we open the door, we'll wreck Kara's photos. We'll have to wait till she's finished.'

'No, we won't,' I said. 'We can look at the real thing instead. Follow me.'

I headed for the back door but Brett dodged past me and cut me off. 'Not that way,' he said. 'Phil's fences are too high. We need to climb something, like the tree near our front fence.'

'Race you,' I yelled and went pelting down the hall and out into the garden. (I love climbing and there aren't any good trees in our garden.)

I made a jump for the lowest branch, swung myself up and scrambled from one branch to the next, until they got too skinny to hold my weight. Brett caught up with me a few minutes later and we perched side by side, like a pair of very large birds, peering down at Phil Macy's house.

It looked different from Brett and Kara's house, because of the barbed wire and stuff. But it must've been built at the same time, because it was exactly the same design. I waved to the Rottweiler in the front yard, then tried to check out the back yard.

'Oh, turtles,' I grumbled. 'I can't see the shed, because the roof gets in the way.'

'Not a problem,' Brett told me. 'Kara should be out of the darkroom by now. She's pretty fast.'

Yeah, sure. He could've said that before I climbed all the way up the tree. Then again, I guess I'd gone rushing off without giving Brett the chance to say much. I shrugged and followed him down the tree and back to the house. We scooted past the two bedrooms - past the open door of the darkroom - through the lounge room and into the kitchen.

All the rooms were empty. No sign of Kara anywhere.

'The back yard?' I said in a small shaky voice and Brett skidded across to the door.

'Empty too,' he said, peering out. 'This is freaky. Kara's gone. She's really gone.'

Bad news is always hard to believe. I hadn't believed Uncle at first, when he told me Blondie had been kidnapped, and I definitely didn't believe that Kara could've disappeared as well.

'Relax,' I said. 'Remember how your sister told us she needed photos of a gangster's house? She reckoned the *Top Cop* people wanted the pictures

in a hurry. I bet she raced out to hunt for another house that looked like Phil's place.'

Brett scowled. 'No way. She would've told me first. Kara always lets me know where she's going. And plus we were up in that tree the whole time. She couldn't've walked out the front door without us spotting her.'

He had a point there. I thought for a moment and said, 'So maybe she used the back door and, um, climbed over the fence.'

It sounded pretty weak. I wasn't surprised when Brett just blinked and said, 'Why?' He wandered round the kitchen for a while, opening all the cupboards, like he was hoping to find his sister sitting on one of the shelves.

Then he pointed at the phone and said, 'Ring your uncle, Just. This is getting serious. We need help.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

While we waited for Uncle, I sneaked off into Kara's dark room, found her magnifying glass and took a closer look at the strip of film labelled 'Phil Macy's back yard'. I felt a bit guilty, like I shouldn't've been worrying about Blondie, now that Brett's sister had gone missing. But hey, I'd known Blondie longer than I'd known Kara - and besides, it didn't do any good. I still couldn't see whether there was a ladder inside Phil's shed.

I was squinting crossly at the film when the door bell rang. Brett and I hurtled down the hall and threw ourselves at Uncle. He hugged both of us - Uncle's a good hugger - then pulled a peppermint tea bag out of his pocket and told Brett to put on the kettle.

'All right,' he said. 'What's the problem?'

Most of the time I tend to forget that Uncle's an adult. But he is, even though he doesn't usually act like one. After he'd made us tell our story twice, he got up and rang the cops straight away. He sounded pretty impressive, not wussy at all. The cops must've been impressed as well, because two of them turned up half an hour later. They made us go through the story all over again and then frowned at each other.

'Sorry, sonny,' said the first cop. (Meaning Brett.) 'I agree with the young lady.' (Meaning me.) 'Your sister probably went off to take some photos or visit her boyfriend or whatever. You can stay with your friends tonight, can't you? Call us again tomorrow, if your sister isn't back by then.'

'You don't get it!' Brett wailed. 'Kara isn't like that. She doesn't even have a boyfriend.'

Uncle looked pleased but Brett was looking really upset. It was all my fault. I was the one who'd mentioned the *Top Cop* photos. If I'd kept my mouth shut, the cops might've taken him more seriously. I felt so terrible that I actually burst into tears.

'Kara's been kidnapped,' I howled. 'There's a maniac living next door. She took pictures of his house and he got mad and ...'

I couldn't keep on talking, because I was sobbing so hard. It was embarrassing. Trust me, I don't usually do that sort of thing. Uncle gave me a cough lolly and the cops started backing towards the door, like they were desperate to get away from this crying kid.

'We better have a word with your neighbour,' the second cop said and they went hurrying off, faster than the speed of light.

The cough lolly worked. (It's hard to sob and suck at the same time.) I was blowing my nose on Uncle's spare hanky when the cops came back.

'Mr Macy's an odd sort of bloke,' the first cop said with a grin. 'But he's not a kidnapper. He let us search the whole house - the front bedroom, the office and the lounge and kitchen area - and Miss McCluskey definitely isn't there.'

They told us that most missing people come back within a few days. It was probably true ... but it wasn't much help to Brett. We left a note for Kara on the kitchen table and carted him back to our house. Uncle made cheese on toast but we could only eat a few slices. My throat was still sore from crying and Brett was looking seriously depressed.

Uncle tried to tell a few jokes - he knows heaps of blonde jokes - but Brett just groaned and pulled a cushion over his head. 'That does it,' Uncle told him. 'I'm sick of cheering you up. It's time you did a bit of thinking.'

'About what?' Brett mumbled around the edge of the cushion. 'About how my sister's locked up in a cellar somewhere ... or being tortured by gangsters ... or ... or ...'

Before he could say 'murdered', Uncle yelped, 'No! Not Kara! I spend hours and hours writing about things like that. I don't want to deal with them in real life as well. Come on, Brett. Help me to work out where Kara is.'

Brett dropped the cushion and kicked it across the lounge room. 'You make it sound real easy,' he whinged. 'But it's not. Fact is, if Kara isn't in Phil Macy's house, we don't have a clue what's happened to her.'

'Oh yes, we do,' Uncle said. He paused to make sure Brett and I were looking at him and then announced, 'We have a very important clue. Blondie.'

'Your stupid doll?' Brett said. 'What's she got to do with my sister?'

Uncle got up and started pacing round the room. 'Think about it,' he said. 'Blondie's a blonde - well, that's fairly obvious. And Kara's a blonde as well.'

It didn't mean much to me but Brett looked interested. 'You reckon the kidnapper might have a thing about blondes?' he said. 'But that's not much use, is it? I mean, we still don't know who nicked your doll.'

'Ah, but we know who didn't kidnap Blondie,' Uncle said, wagging his finger. 'Ray Handler didn't do it, because he's in Canada. Mairi O'Reilly didn't do it, because the feeling in my bones tells me so. Phil Macy didn't do it, because I asked the police to check for Blondie dolls while they were searching his house. So that leaves ...'

He stopped in the middle of a sentence, like a teacher waiting for an answer. My mind went blank, the way it always does in class. I glanced round the room and spotted my notebook, half hidden under a pile of cheesy toast crusts.

'Ken Furphy!' I gasped. 'Ken Furphy, the Blondie doll collector! What if he's decided to start collecting real live blonde girls?'

Uncle beamed at me. 'Well done, Just,' he said. 'Ken Furphy could've seen Kara, when he came sneaking round to steal my Blondie. Let's go over to his place and ask him some hard questions.'

'What good will that do?' Brett asked. 'The guy's not about to open the door and go, "Hi, I'm the maniac who stole your sister".'

Uncle sighed. 'Jake Hackett always drops in on all the suspects in his cases,' he explained. 'He's such a tough guy that he scares them into telling him everything.'

I looked at Uncle, who was hopping on one foot and twirling his scarf excitedly. Frankly, my uncle couldn't scare a new-born baby. Then I looked across at Brett. He didn't seem to be depressed any more. In fact, he looked almost as excited as Uncle did.

Oh, right. Clever Uncle. He'd dreamed up this whole idea to stop Brett worrying about Kara.

'Okay then, how do we find Ken Furphy?' I asked, to help the plan along.

'The phone book, turtle-brain,' Brett told me.

He jumped up, found the A-K book and lugged it over to the coffee table. There were only two K. Furphys in the list of names. Uncle dialled the first number and a woman answered.

'Ken Furphy?' she bellowed in a voice like a loud hailer. 'No, dear, I'm Kate Furphy, Kenny's mum. You'll find Kenny's number after mine but there's no point in ringing him. He's not answering the phone this weekend. Something to do with those Blondie dolls. Don't ask me what, because I don't know. Where do you live, dear? Oh, that's nice and convenient. Kenny's only a few blocks away. He probably won't answer the door either but there's a spare key in the pot plant on the window sill. Give him my love, dear. Bye bye.'

Uncle put the phone down and rubbed his ear. 'If everyone was like her, Jake Hackett would be out of a job,' he complained. 'What's the use of being a good detective, if people tell you things before you even ask them? Oh well, at least we know where Ken Furphy lives. Off we go.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

Before we left, Uncle found a photo of Blondie and gave it to Brett. 'So you'll recognise her, if you see her in Ken Furphy's collection,' he said. 'That's the photo Mairi O'Reilly took for her article - but Blondie's wearing a different outfit now. I made it for her this week. A green and gold tracksuit, just like the sporty blonde Jake Hackett's going to meet in the first chapter of my next book. If I ever get to write it.'

He puffed out a huge sigh and Brett sighed back at him. 'This is a lousy photo,' he said. 'My sister takes much better photos. You ought to get her to photograph your doll for you. If we ever find Kara and Blondie.'

They stood there, sighing like a pair of marathon runners. It was very irritating. I shoved them out of the house and marched them round to Ken Furphy's place. Uncle insisted on ringing the door bell, because he said it was rude to walk into other people's houses without being asked, but Ken Furphy's mum was right. We waited for five minutes but Ken didn't answer the door.

In the end, Brett dug the key out of the pot plant and we walked into the house. At the end of the corridor he stopped and gasped. I peered over his shoulder and said 'Wow' in his ear.

The room was packed full of Blondie dolls. Four tall bookshelves, with Blondie dolls standing in rows. Blondies sitting on the couch. Blondies sprawled on the floor. Blondies peering round the curtains. Old Blondies and new Blondies. Bridesmaid Blondie, Basketball Blondie, Brain Surgeon Blondie and hundreds more.

'Perfect,' Brett breathed. 'One of the detectives in *Top Cop* always says, "If you want to hide a leaf, hide it in a forest." I bet we'll find Sam's Blondie here.'

'Blondie?' said a soft whispery voice. 'You're Blondie fans, are you? Welcome to the best collection in the country.'

The voice made me jump. I'd been so busy counting Blondies that I hadn't noticed the man sitting at a computer in the far corner. Ken Furphy had a face like a full moon and a stomach like a beach ball and a t-shirt that said 'I love Blondie'. He didn't seem at all surprised to find three strangers in his lounge room.

'I'd love to show you around,' he whispered. 'But I'm afraid one of you will have to keep an eye on the computer, while I introduce the others to my girls.'

Uncle glanced at me hopefully and I headed across to the computer. It was only fair. For one thing, Uncle needed to look for Blondie and Brett needed to look for Kara. And for another thing, Uncle gets freaked by strange computers, so he usually panics and hits the nearest key. I didn't think Ken Furphy would be too pleased, if Uncle wiped his entire Blondie data base by mistake.

Ken Furphy heaved himself out of his chair and I sat down in front of the screen. 'What am I supposed to be looking for?' I asked.

'Blondie fans from all round the world are having an online conference this weekend,' he told me. 'I want you to read all the posts and call me, if somebody says they've got an original Blondie doll for sale. I own every Blondie doll ever made, except for the very first one, so I'd hate to miss out.'

The online conference was like a Blondie chat room. Zillions of posts about how Blondie dolls were made and whether Barrister Blondie was a feminist statement. It was even more boring than the Blondie websites. I was starting to zone out, when I had this brilliant idea.

I swivelled the chair round, to make sure Ken Furphy wasn't watching me. Not a problem. He was making Brett and Uncle shake hands with Beach Blondie and Ballerina Blondie. Brett was examining all the Blondies carefully but for some reason Uncle was just staring at the ceiling. I shrugged and turned back to the computer and typed in a quick question.

At the same moment Brett said, 'Um, can I please use your toilet, Mr Furphy?'

I could tell he was planning to search the house but, worse luck, Ken Furphy whispered, 'Of course. I'll show you where it is.'

As they headed out of the room, the fax machine began to whirr. It could've been another clue. But I didn't have time to check, because the Blondie fans were answering my question. I read a message from America, a

message from Norway and a message from Darwin, all saying the same thing.

Then Ken Furphy came back and went on whispering to Uncle about Babysitter Blondie. Five minutes later Brett came back as well. Uncle took one look at him and said, 'Sorry, Mr Furphy. We have to go now.'

'Really?' Ken Furphy whispered, sounding disappointed. 'But you've only met fifty three of my girls so far. Can't you stay a little longer?'

'No,' Uncle said, glaring at the Blondies. 'No, we can't. Goodbye.'

By the time we got to the door, Ken Furphy was back at his computer. We let ourselves out, hid the spare key in the pot plant and turned to look at each other.

'He didn't do it,' we all said at once.

After that we all shut up, then we all tried to say something and then we all shut up again. Finally, Uncle said, 'Brett, you can go first. What did you find out?'

'Well, Ken Furphy didn't kidnap Kara,' Brett told us. 'I looked right round his house in five minutes flat. It's pretty small, plus the cupboards are full up with Blondie books and printouts from Blondie websites. But I didn't manage to check all the dolls, so I guess your doll could be on one of those shelves.'

'No, she isn't,' Uncle said sadly. 'I'd recognise Blondie anywhere. I could tell she wasn't there, the minute I walked into the room.' (So that's why he'd been staring at the ceiling, instead of studying the dolls.) 'It was very depressing,' he added. 'Those other dolls kept reminding me of my poor Blondie. Your turn, Just. Tell me something interesting, to cheer me up.'

'You're both right,' I said. 'Ken didn't kidnap Kara or Blondie, because he's been online for the whole of this weekend. I talked to three conference people from three different time zones. They all reckon he's posted at least one message every half hour. He hasn't even slept since Friday, so he definitely hasn't been prowling round our street. And plus he still wants to buy an original Blondie, which means he can't have stolen yours.'

'That's good, Just,' Uncle said, trying to sound positive. 'We can cross Ken off the list, for sure.'

'But it's bad, too,' Brett said, sounding negative. 'We don't have anybody left on the list now - unless your bones made a mistake about Mairi O'Reilly.'

We walked down the main road in silence, thinking our own thoughts. After a while, Uncle started to whistle. I looked at him suspiciously. Uncle only ever whistles when he's done something wrong. (He whistled the entire first movement of Beethoven's fifth symphony, before he told my science teacher that he'd dropped her favourite s.f. novel in the bath.)

'Okay, Uncle,' I said sternly. 'What've you done now?'

'Oh, turtles,' Uncle said. 'You guessed. I stole Ken Furphy's fax. Would you believe, Mairi O'Reilly was sending him a wedding photo from Canada. She married Ray Handler yesterday - just when I'd almost decided I was in love with her.'

He shoved a crumpled sheet of fax paper at us. 'Another blonde,' Brett commented, glancing at the photo. 'There's a lot of blondes in this case. Well, that explains why Mairi went racing off to catch a plane. She wouldn't have been thinking about stealing Blondie dolls, not if this Handler guy had just proposed to her.'

Uncle winced. 'I should've proposed to her,' he muttered. 'First Blondie, now Mairi. All the women in my life are disappearing.'

By this time, we were halfway up our street, almost in front of Brett's house. Brett gave Uncle a funny look and then told us to wait while he went to see whether Kara had come back. Uncle was still muttering away about Mairi and Ray Handler, so I decided to go inside with Brett. But that wasn't a good idea, either. The minute I walked into the kitchen, I remembered how I'd burst into tears in front of the cops, which made me embarrassed all over again.

I was so busy being embarrassed that I couldn't even think of anything to say when Brett found out that Kara wasn't there. We went outside and told Uncle, who said, 'Typical. Blondie, Mairi and Kara.' After that we headed back to our place and found a cross note from my science teacher on the front door, saying she'd come round to fix the tap but no one was home. Uncle instantly decided he was almost in love with my teacher, which meant he stopped muttering about Mairi. But that was the best thing that happened all night.

Around nine o'clock Uncle turned into an adult again and sent us off to bed, promising to wake us if Kara turned up. I showed Brett the spare room and gave him some clean sheets. As I turned to go, he grabbed hold of my hand.

'Thanks,' he said. 'The cops wouldn't've checked Phil's place, if you hadn't cried at them. You're a great actor, Just.'

I danced off to my room, feeling okay for the first time in four hours. Brett didn't think I was an embarrassing idiot. He thought I was great. I decided to stay awake and think, until I'd figured out how to find Kara for him.

But actually I fell asleep in ten seconds flat.

After a day like that, you'd think I would've dreamed about maniacs and gangsters' houses. Instead, I dreamed I'd grown up and become an architect, drawing plans for people's homes. The sun woke me, round about dawn. I jumped out of bed, staggered into the hall - and saw Brett curled up on the floor, in front of Uncle's door.

I couldn't help smiling. Poor Brett. He must've felt scared in the night, so he'd gone crawling out to sleep near Uncle, because it made him feel safe.

Oh well, he'd been nice about me crying, so it was my turn to be nice to him. I backed into my room and banged around for a few minutes, making heaps of noise. By the time I stepped out into the hall again, Brett had sneaked back to his room.

I went down to the kitchen and started cooking bacon and eggs. As soon as the bacon began to sizzle, Brett and Uncle appeared, looking sleepy and hungry. Uncle was wearing his scarf, his Sherlock Holmes dressing gown and a red beanie. (He always sleeps in a woollen cap, because he reckons it stops his brain from freezing up overnight.)

'I've been thinking,' he announced, halfway through his first egg. 'I'm still convinced that the two kidnappings are connected.'

'Dead right,' Brett said. 'I reckon there's a serial killer in our street. Serial killers always go for the same type of person. Maybe this guy started on a doll, for practice, and now he wants to murder my sister. Well, tough luck. I won't let him.'

He stared at Uncle, like he was sending an ESP message. I choked on a mouthful of toast. Oh, turtles. Brett thought Uncle was a serial killer. So that's why he'd been sleeping in the hall - to stop Uncle from creeping out to the place where he'd stashed Kara.

I changed my mind about Brett again. I didn't like him, after all. As a matter of fact, I hated him. Hadn't he noticed that Uncle's the nicest, kindest person in the entire world? He may write books about murders but he couldn't hurt a Blondie doll, let alone a real human being.

Uncle's so nice that he didn't even begin to guess what Brett was thinking. 'Don't worry,' he said kindly. 'I'm sure we're looking for a kidnapper, not a serial killer. Most serial killers are pretty stupid but the person who stole Kara was smart. Look at the way he - or she- smuggled Kara out of the house. It's a perfect example of a locked room mystery.'

He started to give us a lecture about locked room mysteries. The one where the murderer shot an arrow through a keyhole. The one where a guy was stabbed with an ice dagger that melted ten seconds later. The one where people said nobody had gone to the house, because they didn't count the postman.

I'd heard it all before, so I vagued out and went on thinking about our mystery. When I tuned in again, Brett was saying, 'You know a lot about this stuff, don't you, Sam? You're pretty smart, just like that guy in *Silence of the Lambs*.'

The guy in *Silence of the Lambs* is a smart serial killer, right? It looked as though Brett still thought Uncle was a serial killer too. I had to prove he was wrong - and I knew exactly how to do it. My dream. The duck-woman on the radio. The cops' description of Phil's house. Kara's mysterious disappearance. Suddenly everything slotted into place.

'Come on, you two,' I said, leaping up. 'I've got something to show you.'

I went speeding into my room and switched on the computer. While Brett and Uncle watched over my shoulder, I clicked the icon labelled ProgramPlan. I drew a map of Brett's house - bedroom, bedroom, darkroom, lounge-and-kitchen area.

'Your house looks the same as Phil's house,' I told him. 'But you've got four main rooms - and according to the cops, Phil's house only has three rooms.'

I clicked again and turned the plan into 3D. Then I blanked out the darkroom door, drew a new door on the dining room wall and put a cupboard in front of it.

'See?' I said. 'Now no one would guess the room was there. Phil's a builder - he could handle the job, no problems. And he'd love to have a secret room where he can hide stuff from the Men in Suits. I bet he's hiding Kara there too.'

'Oh, turtles,' Brett groaned. (Uncle's favourite swear word is kind of catchy.) 'How did he manage it? Do you reckon he turned a gun on her?'

'No need,' I said. 'He could've just come to your back door and invited her over to his place, while we were up in the tree. We never got around to telling her why we were suspicious of Phil, so she probably just thought he wanted to apologise for shouting at her.'

Brett was beginning to look more hopeful but Uncle still looked puzzled. 'What about Blondie?' he asked. 'Where does she fit in?'

'Oh, Phil stole her too,' I said. 'He listens to Radio MF2, which means he could've heard you talking to that duck-woman about your special mascot. He thinks you're a spy, remember. I reckon he kidnapped Blondie to make you stop spying on him.'

Uncle picked at a loose bit of wool near the end of his scarf. 'It'd work,' he admitted. 'I'd do anything to get Blondie back. But why hasn't Phil said anything to me?'

'Because he hasn't had time, of course. He's been too busy kidnapping Kara.'

'That's an interesting theory,' Uncle told me. 'In a way, it almost makes sense - but what can we do about it?'

'Easy,' I said. 'We break into Phil's house, find the secret room and rescue Kara. That's what Jake Hackett would do, isn't it?'

'Sure thing,' Uncle growled in his tough guy voice. Then he switched back to his normal voice and added, 'But I'm not Jake Hackett. I can't go around breaking into people's houses, Just. It's against the law. Like the police said, we just have to wait and see whether Kara turns up.'

Uncle had changed into an adult again but this time I thought he was making a big mistake. I was still glaring at him when Brett jumped to his feet.

'Talking of Kara, I think I'll just nick off and make sure she hasn't come home,' he said.

He went racing out, before we could say anything. Uncle stared after him and sighed. 'Poor kid,' he said. 'Kara obviously isn't there, because she would've seen our note. Still, Brett needs to feel as though he's doing something.'

'Me too,' I agreed. 'I might check those house plans again. Go and finish your breakfast, okay?'

Uncle drifted away down the hall, still fiddling with his scarf, and I waited till I heard the radio in the kitchen. Then I switched off the computer, tiptoed down the stairs and went looking for Brett.

CHAPTER NINE

When I caught up with Brett, he was standing beside his front door, gazing helplessly at the rubbish bin. I remembered that it was rubbish day in our street, so I wheeled the bin out to the footpath for him.

'Well?' I asked when I got back. 'Did you find Kara?'

'No,' Brett said. 'But I didn't really think she'd be here. I'm going to break into Phil's house, like you suggested. You better go home, so you don't get into trouble too.'

'Forget it,' I snapped. 'This was my idea. I want to see whether I was right. Let's go.'

So we sidled through Phil's front gate, circled around the Rottweiler and went sneaking down the side of the house. The back door had three locks and two security chains - but the locks were unlocked and the chains were hanging loose. Brett and I looked at each other and nodded. He pushed the door open and we tiptoed inside.

The first thing we saw was an electric jug on the kitchen bench, puffing out clouds of steam. And the first thing we heard was the sound of footsteps. I ducked behind the fridge, pulling Brett with me. While we watched, Phil Macy came out and started making coffee.

Two cups of coffee.

He picked up the cups and headed back into the lounge room. Brett and I tiptoed after him. As we dodged round the bench, I noticed this long crack in the lounge room wall, the right shape for a secret door. Phil turned sideways and slid through the crack.

'Here,' he said. 'That'll help you to wake up.'

I heard a loud yawn and then a voice saying, 'I can't believe I fell asleep. I just hope Brett wasn't too worried. I better go now - but listen, Phil, I meant what I said about introducing you to the producer of *Top Cop*. You've got a great imagination. I reckon you'd make an excellent script writer.'

'Really?' Phil asked, sounding shy and pleased. 'That'd be a terrific way to get my message across. I'd like to warn everyone about the Men in Suits. They're real, y'know. I saw one of them the night before last, carrying a ladder over to -'

But he didn't get a chance to finish, because Brett said, 'Now I'm really mad' and went storming into the secret room.

'Kara!' he yelled. 'You're hopeless! Me and Just and Sam spent the entire night worrying about you - and all the time you were snoring on Phil Macy's couch.'

'Oh, Brett, I'm sorry,' Kara said guiltily. 'Phil dropped in to apologise and I got, like, totally involved in his stories about the Men in Suits. We came back here to look at some of his files and - well, the room's kind of stuffy and my cold was getting worse, so I guess I must've fallen asleep.'

I stood on tiptoe and peered over Brett's shoulder. The little room was lined with shelves, full of books and magazines and computer print-outs. Kara was sitting on the couch, rubbing her eyes, and Phil was watching her with this wussy smile. He didn't look like a monster any more. As a matter of fact, he looked like he had a king-sized crush on Kara.

Time for the Happy Ending, right? No, not quite. Just when everything seemed to have calmed down, the door bell rang. Phil bounced out of the secret room, strolled along the corridor, opened the door - and froze. Two men were standing on the front doorstep.

Two men in suits.

'Oh, that was quick, Phil snarled, changing back into Monster-Phil. 'You must've planted bugs in my house, so you can listen to everything I say. I suppose you heard I've got a chance to write for a TV show, so you've come charging in to stop me. Well, think again. Nothing's going to stop me now.'

There was a broom propped against the wall. Phil reached for it and began to poke the men in suits, like he was sweeping them off his verandah. The poor guys backed away, trying to explain that they were just Mormon missionaries. Phil got even madder. Brett made a grab for the broom. Phil swiped him. Kara swiped Phil. I shut my eyes and screamed, 'Help!'

And Uncle came wandering up the front path, with his scarf in one hand and a ball of crinkly wool in the other hand. 'Look at this,' he whinged. 'My scarf's falling to pieces. I just pulled at this bit of wool and now the whole thing's unknitting itself. What am I going to do?'

Like I said before, Uncle has a knack for making people do what he wants. Everyone stopped fighting and started helping him with his scarf. One

of the Mormons showed him how to tie a knot in the wool. Kara said it'd be better to use a big sewing needle and sent Phil inside to find one. The second Mormon tried to explain the difference between purl stitches and plain stitches. Phil came back with a scarf that his mum had knitted and gave it to Uncle.

Three minutes later, the fight had turned into a small street party. The Mormons told Phil they were sorry for scaring him and Phil apologised for prodding them with the broom. Brett and Kara hugged each other. Phil handed round glasses of lemonade and Kara ran home to get a tin of biscuits. Uncle sat on the steps, admiring his new scarf. Then the Mormons gave us some pamphlets and we went out into the street to wave them goodbye.

'All's well that ends well,' Uncle told me, flicking the scarf over his shoulder.

'Yeah, sure,' I shouted. 'But it hasn't ended yet. What about Blondie?'

CHAPTER TEN

I had to shout, because the rubbish truck was rumbling down the street. Brett glanced across at me, said 'Oh, no!' and ran. I started chasing after him but he didn't run far. He just hurtled across to the rubbish bin outside his house and started tossing bags onto the footpath.

One of the bags burst and I almost tripped over something that had spilled out of it. A paperback book - and not just any old book, either. There was a picture of a tough guy with a gun on the cover, plus some words as well. 'Looking for Blondie. A Jake Hackett mystery by Sam Wedgwood.'

I stared down at the book, thinking of five different things at once. Five clues that I'd missed. Brett calling Uncle 'Mr Wedgwood' before we'd got around to swapping names. Radio MF2 playing in Brett's kitchen. That puddle of water on the kitchen floor. The story Brett told our neighbours, when we were searching for the ladder. Brett making sure I didn't go into his back yard.

I turned around and said, 'Why did you do it, Brett?'

'I used to be a Jake Hackett fan,' he mumbled. 'I heard that interview on Radio MF2 the other day, where Sam said he could see a freeway and an old mattress factory through his window. It was such a buzz, realising that Sam Wedgwood lived in the same street as me. I really wanted to meet him, so ... I decided to steal his mascot, then pretend to find it for him.'

'Okay, that's the motive,' I said. 'What about the means?'

Brett hauled another bag out of the bin. 'Well, Kara really did climb up to fix our roof after it leaked in the storm,' he told me. 'That's when she realised that Phil's house would make a perfect photo. So our ladder was

leaning against the back of the house, ready and waiting. I only needed to cart it across the road.'

'Means and opportunity,' I noted. 'One more question. Why didn't you give Blondie back?'

'I liked Jake Hackett, because he's a real tough guy,' Brett said in a small voice. 'But Sam seemed like such a wuss. I threw out my Jake Hackett books ... and I threw Blondie out as well. Then, later on, I realised Sam *is* tough, in his own weird sort of way - but I never got a chance to rescue Blondie, because I was never alone in the house. And now she's gone for good. I can't find her, Just. Somebody must've stolen her from the bin.'

'Relax,' I said, poking the burst bag with my toe. 'She's here, along with your Jake Hackett books.'

Brett's face lit up like a Christmas tree. He pounced on the rubbish bag, rummaged through it and went streaking back to Uncle. When Uncle noticed Brett, he turned red as a tomato and his knees wobbled.

'Oh, turtles,' he gasped, clutching Kara's arm. 'It's Blondie.'

*

Uncle started his next Jake Hackett book the same night. He also took Kara out to dinner. (Her cold was better by then, after that long sleep on Phil's couch.) Brett and I sat around in our lounge room, watching DVDs, and halfway through the first *Star Trek* movie I thought of another question.

'You dumped Blondie, because you decided you didn't want to meet Uncle,' I said. 'So why did you hang around, pretending to help us look for her?'

Brett went red as a tomato. 'I wasn't interested in Sam or Blondie,' he mumbled. 'But I was kind of interested in getting to know you.'

It was a good answer. We're still getting to know each other, a year later. And what else? Oh yeah, Phil Macy's the head writer for a new TV series called *Men in Suits* and he's getting married to Kara next week. (She dumped Uncle after a fortnight, because he kept making her take photos of Blondie.)

Uncle went out with my science teacher for a while but they split up when he asked her to mend our toilet. Now he's dating the duck-woman from Radio MF2, who turned out to be tall and blonde as well. It won't last, though. None of Uncle's blondes ever last.

Except for Blondie, of course.

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