

THE JUST & UNCLE MYSTERIES

2

Scam

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CHAPTER ONE

My name is Just, short for Justine. I'm not as short as I used to be, because I grew five centimetres over the Christmas holidays. I also turned fourteen and a half. Uncle gave me a half-birthday present, to cheer me up after my friend Brett went back to Sydney.

Brett and I missed each other but we could handle that. We weren't sure how Uncle and Brett's parents would handle the phone bills, though. I didn't want Uncle to stop me from ringing Brett every day, so I tried to phone while he was working.

My uncle writes crime novels about this tough private eye called Jake Hackett. He can't concentrate properly, unless he shuts his door and his window, stuffs a draught-stopper along the bottom of the door and sticks foam plugs in his ears. When our neighbour Phil Macy's kitchen exploded last year, Uncle didn't hear a thing.

(About the explosion - Phil reckons that secret agents blew his kitchen up, because he told the truth about them in his TV program, *Men in Suits*. But Kara, who's Phil's wife and Brent's sister, reckons that Phil must've left the gas on.)

Anyway, when I got home from school on Friday, Uncle's study door was still shut. I said, 'Yes!' and headed straight for the downstairs phone. Before I could dial Brett's number, I heard voices.

A deep voice growling, 'Are you Sam Wedgwood?'

Uncle's voice going, 'Hang on, I just have to pull my ear plug out ...
Yep, got it. Hello, Sam Wedgwood speaking.'

I should've hung the phone up then. But I didn't. For some reason, that growly voice really scared me. I grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl, sat down on the kitchen stool and listened.

'I read about you in the newspaper,' the growler said. 'They reckon you're planning to write a true crime book about Rob Hobson, the Wombat Valley farmer who disappeared late last year. Is that right?'

'Well, it was my agent's idea, really,' Uncle said. 'My new agent, Lindii Frome. She's helping me to sell even more books and she thinks I need a

second string - that means she wants me to write two different kinds of books, okay? I was telling her how I went to primary school with Rob Hobson and Lindii snapped her fingers and said, "There's a book in that. True crime's really big right now." Then she told a newspaper reporter about it, the very next day. You like the idea, do you?"

When Uncle's on a roll, it can be hard to get a word in. The growler had been trying to interrupt for ages.

'No!' he shouted, so loudly that my ears hurt. 'As a matter of fact, if you write that book, I'm going to kill you.'

'Really?' Uncle said, sounding interested. 'How?'

'Um,' said the growler, sounding surprised. 'I'll shoot you, I suppose.'

Uncle started humming the theme song from *Top Cop*. (He usually hums when he's thinking extra hard.) 'If you want to stop me from writing about Wombat Valley, you're probably one of the farmers,' he decided. 'And farmers are allowed to own guns, so you'd probably be able to shoot me. All right then, I won't write the book.'

There was silence for twenty seconds. (I counted.) Then the growler said, 'What?!'

'I. Won't. Write. The. Book,' Uncle said, speaking very clearly.

More silence, ten seconds this time. 'Are you sure?' the growler said finally. 'In the movies, when the heroes get death threats, they always say it'll take more than that to scare them off.'

'And I always think that's silly,' Uncle told him. 'I mean, the heroes can't go on investigating once they're dead, can they?'

Five seconds of silence. 'So you really mean it?' said the growler. Then he changed his mind and said, 'Nah, I don't believe you. I read some of your Jake Hackett books over the holidays. Jake wouldn't back down, just because someone tried to frighten him.'

Oh no. If the growler was a Jake Hackett fan, Uncle was in trouble. Jake Hackett is ninety-two centimetres tall, covered with muscles and wears sleeveless black t-shirts, even in the middle of winter. Uncle is seventy centimetres tall and skinny. He wears a beanie and a long woolly scarf, even in the middle of summer, because he's terrified of catching cold.

'Stop it!' I yelled, spitting a mouthful of apple into the phone. 'Okay, Uncle writes the Jake Hackett books but no way is he like Jake. Actually, he's a total wuss.'

The growler made a noise that was more like a squeak than a growl. 'Who's that?' he said to Uncle.

'My niece Justine,' Uncle said. 'She's been living with me ever since she was four, when her parents were killed in a car accident.'

'Fair dinkum?' said the growler. 'You sound like an all right sort of bloke. You serious about not writing this book, then? That's bonzer. I'm glad I won't have to kill you.'

'I'm glad too,' Uncle said politely. 'Goodbye, Mr Wombat.'

The phone buzzed in my ear. I dropped it and raced upstairs to Uncle's study. The door wouldn't open. For a moment I was scared that the growler was in there, pointing his gun at Uncle. But then I kicked the door hard and

the draught-stopper went skidding across the floor. (It's brown velvet and shaped like a sausage dog. I bought it at our last school fete.)

Uncle rescued the draught stopper and tucked it into the dog basket beside his desk. 'Just, why did that man say I was an all right bloke?' he asked.

'Because you're looking after me,' I explained and Uncle frowned.

'But I don't look after you,' he said. '*You* look after *me*, most of the time.'

It was true, in a way. I'm more sensible than Uncle. Like, for example, I knew we should be worrying about that phone call, not arguing about whether Uncle or me did the looking after.

'Maybe we should get a burglar alarm,' I said. 'Phil Macy has this state-of-the-art security system, to keep out the Men in Suits. He could help us choose the best one.'

'Why?' said Uncle. 'I mean, why get a burglar alarm, in the first place?'

I sighed. 'In case that guy comes around, of course.'

'What guy?' he asked, like he'd forgotten all about it. I pointed at the phone and he said, 'Oh, right. Mr Wombat from Wombat Valley. Don't worry, Just. We won't hear from him again. After all, I told him I wouldn't write the book. That reminds me - I'd better tell Lindii as well, so she can think of something else for me to write.'

Uncle wasn't being brave. He wouldn't know how. It's just that he's more interested in writing than anything else. I decided to lay off and let him talk to Lindii. Maybe she'd be able to convince him to be careful for a while, just in case Mr Wombat was still keeping an eye on him.

Lindii Frome lives in the next suburb from us. She came zooming straight over in her new turquoise Rav. Lindii is tall and blonde, with a silver ring in her eyebrow and a diamond stud in her nose. She's more interested in selling her writers' books than anything else, so she loved the Mr Wombat story.

'Wicked!' she breathed. 'A genuine death threat! What great publicity. I'll phone that reporter again, as soon as I get home.'

'Hold on,' Uncle protested. 'We don't need any more publicity. I said I wasn't going to write about Wombat Valley.'

'Smart move, Sam,' Lindii said, winking at him. 'That ought to keep Mr Wombat quiet, while you get started on the book.'

She patted Uncle's arm and Uncle patted her hand. Oh, great. It looked like I wasn't going to get any help from Lindii - and plus I wouldn't be able to talk sense to Uncle, till he'd finished flirting with her.

I hung around for five minutes but they were still flirting like mad. They didn't even notice when I backed to the door, tiptoed downstairs and went across the road to visit Kara and Phil.

CHAPTER TWO

I wanted to talk to Kara about Brett but it wasn't my lucky day. Phil and Kara were in the middle of a major argument.

'One ostrich,' Kara was shouting. 'We only saw one ostrich, Phil.'

'No, sweetheart,' Phil said patiently. 'There were lots of ostriches.'

I don't know much about ostriches but I know they aren't Australian birds. While Kara took a deep breath, getting ready to shout louder, I said quickly, 'Hang about. Don't you mean emus?'

Phil turned and frowned at me. I used to be totally terrified by his frowns. Fair enough, too - Phil's incredibly tall, with this long pale face and a Frankenstein crew cut and intense dark eyes. But even though he looks like something out of an old horror movie, he's actually more like one of the guys from *Dumb and Dumber*.

'Not emus, Just,' he said. 'Ostriches. They're the latest money-making idea. I found a website advertising this ostrich farm, eighty kays from Melbourne. Did you realise that every single part of an ostrich is worth serious money? The bride business uses heaps of ostrich feathers. People eat ostrich meat and pay hundreds of dollars for ostrich skin shoes and handbags. I invested in an ostrich straight away - and then I bought Sweetheart a surprise ostrich for her birthday.'

His eyes were shining, like Dracula after a good feed. Phil believes everything he reads on the Internet. That's where he got his wacky ideas about the Men in Suits. (He reckons they're secret agents working for this gang of rich people who are trying to take over the world.)

Then again, Phil's now the head writer on a TV series called *Men in Suits*. Maybe the ostrich idea would work for him as well.

Kara didn't look too impressed, though. She sniffed and said, 'Phil drove me up to the ostrich farm as a birthday treat. The owner wheeled out this grumpy-looking ostrich and said it was Phil's bird. Then Phil asked to see my bird ... and the guy freaked.'

'Sorry, I don't agree,' Phil cut in. 'Mr Sand wasn't freaking, Justine. He just told us that ostriches are very sensitive, so we'd have to wait while the

other ostriches calmed down, after my bird went back to the pen. He brought your ostrich out five minutes later, didn't he, Sweetheart?

'He brought *an* ostrich out,' Kara snapped. 'But I reckon it was the same one. It looked really grumpy too.'

'All ostriches are grumpy,' Phil said, as if he was a world famous ostrich expert. 'See, Just. Here's the picture from Mr Sand's website.'

He waved a computer printout at me. Three ostriches, with their noses (I mean, beaks) in the air. Their long necks and little heads were all facing exactly the same way.

'That's a computer-generated image,' I said. 'Like, it's one photo, reproduced in three different sizes.'

I wasn't planning to buy into the argument but it was too late now. Kara jumped up and gave me a big hug and a blonde smile. Kara's a blonde too. She went out with Uncle for a while, before she married Phil. Uncle has a thing about blondes, same as Jake Hackett, but none of Uncle's blondes ever last, except for Blondie, the doll I gave him when I was four. Blondie sits on his desk and helps him to write his novels. (Well, Uncle thinks she does, at any rate.)

'Thanks, Just,' Kara said, scowling at Phil over my shoulder. 'I knew the ostrich farm was a scam, right from the moment when that guy wouldn't let Phil take a photo of our ostriches together.'

Phil shuffled his feet. 'Mr Sand explained that,' he muttered. 'He said ostriches aren't very friendly. And the computer-generated image doesn't prove anything, either. Sure, Mr Sand used his best ostrich picture for the website. But he could still have dozens of ostriches on the farm.'

'And it could still be a scam,' Kara added. 'What do you reckon, Just?'

I thought for a moment. 'Okay, when you bought the second ostrich, did you give the guy your name or Kara's name?' I asked Phil.

He blinked. 'Sweetheart's name, of course. It's her ostrich. I ordered them by email but Mr Sand wanted me to send him a bank cheque, both times. He says it's too dangerous, posting your credit card number online.'

That was triple bad news. For one thing, Kara kept her own surname when she married Phil. For seconds, bank cheques don't have your name on them, like regular cheques. (I knew that, because I do Uncle's tax accounts.) And for a third thing, it's harder to cancel a bank cheque.

So Mr Sand couldn't have known that Phil had paid for two ostriches, till he asked to see Kara's bird. If he only had one ostrich on the spot, he would've definitely freaked, like Kara said. It also sounded as though he might be planning to take the bank cheques and run.

Oh, no. Poor Phil. I had a feeling he'd just lost a lot of money.

Kara had obviously worked this out as well. 'Phil Macy, you've been scammed,' she said.

She'd won the argument but she didn't sound too happy about it. I was starting to feel sorry for both of them, when I had this genius idea.

'Uncle's heavily into true crime these days,' I told them. 'Why don't you ask him to check out the ostrich farm?'

Five minutes later I was on my own in Phil and Kara's kitchen, flipping through the printout from Mr Sand's website and feeling pleased with myself. I'd solved everybody's problems at once. Uncle could investigate the scam, which would keep him busy. Lindii could make him write a book about it, which would make her happy. Phil was happy too, because he thinks Uncle has a brilliant mind. (Like I said, Phil isn't very smart.) Kara was happy, because Phil was happy. And I -

Just then, the phone rang. I made a grab for it and said, 'Brett?'

'You guessed it,' he said. 'Funny, I just spoke to Kara at your place and now I'm talking to you at Kara's place.'

Brett has a really cool voice. I could practically hear the grin on his face.

'I stayed here because I thought you might ring,' I said, grinning back. 'How's things?'

He sighed into the phone. 'Would you believe, my mum and dad are both getting married again next week. My new stepdad has two boys called Anakin and Luke and my new stepmum has two boys called Luke and Anakin. It's very confusing. I wish I could go on living with Kara and just visit my folks in the holidays.'

I could hear his mouth turning down at the corners, so I told him about the scam, to give him something else to think about. Brett likes detecting. He got me to read out all the stuff from the website. There was a long story about how Mr Sand used to travel round the world, looking for adventure. Apparently, he'd been on safari in Africa when he found out that ostrich farms could make you rich.

'He reckons he brought twenty ostrich eggs back to Australia and started Dunroamin Farm,' I said. 'Weird name, huh? I've never heard it before.'

'I have,' Brett said. 'My grandparents live in Dunedin Street, so they called their house Dunroamin. "Done roaming" - get it? It's meant to be a joke.'

'But it isn't funny,' I pointed out and Brett giggled.

'No, my grandparents' jokes usually aren't. When I was little, Granpa used to tell me this story about how ostriches stick their heads in the sand when people are hunting them, because they figure that if they can't see the hunters, then the hunters can't see them. Granpa thought that was really funny too.'

I jumped. The printout slid off my lap, before I could read the last page, but I didn't bother to pick it up.

'Brett!' I yelled. 'You found a clue! I bet "Mr Sand" is a false name. I have to go and tell Uncle. Talk to you tomorrow, OK?'

We said goodbye and I went racing back home. Uncle was in his study with Phil and Kara and Lindii, checking a big road map of Victoria. I explained about ostriches and sand and Mr Sand's name.

'That absolutely proves it's a scam,' I finished up. 'Forget about that stupid true crime book. You have to do something about this.'

Uncle drooped his eyelids at me. (He thinks it makes him look like Sherlock Holmes.) 'No need to convince me, Just,' he said. 'I'm on the case already. We're going to Wombat Valley first thing tomorrow morning.'

Wombat Valley? That was where the disappearing farmer lived. Uncle must've got mixed up. I was starting to say, 'No, we're not,' when Phil beamed and rubbed his hands.

'Neat, isn't it?' he said. 'That's one of the reasons I got interested in the ostriches, because I knew your uncle went to school in Wombat Valley.'

Oh, turtles. I should've read the last page of the printout. If I'd seen the farm's address, I wouldn't have been so keen on investigating the scam. Mr Wombat was going to be seriously annoyed, if Uncle turned up in Wombat Valley the day after his death threat. Now I'd have to think of a way to make him back off.

It's hard work, keeping Uncle out of trouble.

CHAPTER THREE

Uncle took Lindii out to dinner that night, while I watched the latest *Men in Suits* tapes with Phil and Kara. I fell asleep before Uncle got home and dreamed about ostriches pecking my toes. That woke me up. The room was still dark, so I was getting ready to go back to sleep when I spotted something at the end of my bed. A shadowy figure with a thick neck and a lumpy head.

‘Yow!’ I squawked. ‘Mr Wombat!’

The shadowy figure giggled and turned into Uncle. He was wearing a beanie and his autumn scarf, which isn’t quite as woolly as his winter scarf.

‘Come on, Just,’ he said, tweaking my toe. ‘We’ve got work to do. It’ll take at least two hours to drive to Wombat Valley. I’ve made us some sandwiches - salad and bean curd, because it’s hard to find proper health food out in the country.’

I groaned and pulled a pillow over my head but Uncle started tickling my feet. I rolled out of bed and sleepwalked into the shower. By the time I staggered downstairs, Uncle was lining up his vitamin pills on the kitchen bench.

‘I haven’t caught a single cold since the naturopath gave me these pills,’ he said proudly. ‘You really should try some ginseng and vitamin C, Just. Then you’d be bright and cheerful in the morning, like me.’

‘I don’t want to be cheerful in the morning,’ I grumbled. ‘I want to sleep.’

Uncle smiled brightly, swallowed six pills and steered me out to the car. We were heading down the freeway before I remembered that I’d been planning to make him stay away from Wombat Valley. It was too late now. Uncle’s a hopeless driver, so I wasn’t going to argue with him while he was in charge of the car. I decided to ask him about the Wombat Valley mystery instead. At least that way I’d know what to watch out for.

‘So, okay, tell me about this disappearing farmer,’ I said.

Uncle turned towards me, opening his eyes wide. ‘Why?’ he asked. ‘We’re looking for ostriches, not Bob Hobson.’

Three cars honked and Uncle swerved back into the left lane. 'All right,' I said, gritting my teeth. 'Tell me about growing up in Wombat Valley, then.'

'I was only there for a year,' Uncle said. 'My parents were going through their hippy stage. They wanted to live on the land and grow organic vegetables, only they kept forgetting to water the seedlings. Then a tree fell on their greenhouse, so they gave up and went back to town. I'll never forget Wombat Valley, though.'

I've hardly ever been to the country but I've read books about it. Kids always seem to have a great time there.

'You missed Wombat Valley, did you?' I asked.

Big mistake. Uncle's hands clenched on the wheel and the car swerved again.

'No,' he said. 'It was the worst year of my life. The kids at school used to follow me and Bob Hobson around, singing "Fat and Skinny" songs. I was Skinny and Bob was Fat.'

I saw this picture in my mind - a small skinny Uncle in grey school shorts, being bullied by a gang. 'That was mean,' I said, trying to stop myself from giggling at the shorts.

Uncle giggled too. 'Oh, I just turned round and yelled "Four Eyes" or "Spaghetti Legs" straight back at them. Kids always call each other names. It's no big deal. Bob didn't seem to mind either, except -'

Five cars bipped at us, very loudly. Uncle had slowed down while he told me the Fat and Skinny story, so he was holding everybody up. I waited till he was driving at the right speed again. Then I said, 'How did Bob Hobson disappear?'

'Suddenly,' Uncle said, which wasn't much help. He hummed for a few minutes and added, 'No one knows exactly when he vanished. Apparently, Bob wasn't the world's best farmer. To begin with, his neighbours thought he'd just given up and taken off somewhere. But that seemed a bit strange, because the local cop's twin brother wanted to buy the farm, only Bob was refusing to sell. So -'

'So people started wondering whether the cop's brother might've actually murdered Bob or whatever,' I guessed. 'But when the police were called in, the cop covered up for his brother, right?'

'Not bad, Just,' Uncle said kindly. 'You've learnt a lot about detecting from living with me. You only got one thing wrong. The cop's brother works as a ranger in a Northern Territory national park, at the opposite end of Australia from Wombat Valley. He couldn't have been threatening Bob ... but the cop could've done it.'

The sun had come up by now, so it was pretty warm in the car. But I was shivering, all the same.

'We'll need to be careful while we're in Wombat Valley,' I warned Uncle. 'Like, if we get into trouble, we can't exactly phone for the police.'

'Why not?' Uncle said. 'We'll be perfectly safe, now I'm not writing that book. I don't understand why you keep worrying, Just. Oh yes, of course! Your blood sugar must be getting low, because you didn't have any breakfast. Here, you'd better eat one of my sandwiches.'

The sandwiches were stuffed with crunchy bean sprouts and squelchy bean curd. (Uncle's naturopath says he's not allowed to eat cheese or eggs any more.) I don't like food that crunches or squelches. But luckily we had to stop for petrol, so I sneaked off and bought a hamburger.

Uncle spent the rest of the drive telling me about all the bad things people put into hamburgers. (I'm not sure what they are, because I didn't listen.) He was starting to explain why cheese and eggs are bad for you, when I spotted a sign saying Wombat Valley. Uncle was in the wrong lane, of course. We got bipped six times while he cut across the freeway.

I hadn't seen much of the country so far. The freeway looked the same as any other freeway, except for some green stuff along the edges. But Wombat Valley was, like, genuine country. Neat green hills, with sheep on them. Long low wooden farm with verandahs all the way around. A small town - just a post office, a butcher, a baker, a church and a cop shop lined up along the main street.

It's hard to get lost in a place that size but Uncle's good at getting lost. He went zooming through the town and charged straight up the nearest hill. We drove round in circles for the next thirty minutes, before Uncle finally admitted he couldn't find the ostrich farm.

'It's not my fault,' he said crossly. 'I checked the map before we left but none of these roads have any signposts.'

'I guess all the Wombat Valley people know the roads' names,' I said. 'How about asking those two guys over there?'

Uncle braked sharply and backed the car towards two farmers, who were hammering a fence post into the ground. He wrapped another loop of scarf round his neck and wound down the window. (Uncle doesn't trust fresh air.)

'Hello,' he called out. 'Where are we?'

The older farmer took off his glasses, polished them with his hanky and put them on again. 'Well, I'll be blowed,' he said. 'It's Skinny Wedgwood. Last time I saw you, we were eight years old. You haven't changed a bit.'

Uncle blinked. 'Oh, turtles, you're Four Eyes Maclaren,' he said. 'You've changed a lot - but your son looks just like you used to look, except for the glasses.'

The younger guy came galloping over to the car. 'Contact lenses,' he explained. 'My name's Josh Maclaren, Mr Wedgwood. I've read all your Jake Hackett books. They're sick.'

'Sick?' Uncle echoed, looking worried. 'Oh, right. Just told me that means "good". So you like adventures and beautiful blondes, do you, Josh?'

Josh ducked his head, like he'd turned shy all of a sudden, and went galloping back to the fence post. His dad frowned at Uncle over his glasses.

'What brings you to the valley, Skinny?' he asked. 'Are you going to write a story about our old school mate Bob Hobson?'

There was a loud bang, like a gunshot. Uncle and I both jumped and looked around. Luckily, Mr Wombat wasn't hidden behind the nearest bush, shooting at Uncle. It was just Josh, lifting his mallet and slamming it down on the post.

'I'm here to buy an ostrich,' Uncle told Mr Maclaren. 'Only, for some reason, we can't find Dunroamin Farm.'

Mr Maclaren grinned. 'That's strange, seeing that you've driven past it three times in the last half hour. Take the first turn to the left and stop at the row of poplar trees. See you later, Skinny.'

Uncle waved goodbye and started the car. We veered to the left at the next corner and jolted along a bumpy road, watching the trees. A few gum trees, for starters. (I recognised them all right.) Then a tangle of bushes and after that, some big trees with chunky grey trunks and leaves like green hands.

'Are they poplar trees?' Uncle asked, squinting through the window.

I shrugged. 'You tell me. I'm a city kid. You're the one who went to school in the country.'

He sighed helplessly. 'But I never remember facts,' he said. 'I just look them up, whenever I need them for one of my books. Oh, turtles. I wish I'd brought my encyclopedia with me.'

We were still studying the trees when a small blonde girl, a few years older than me, came skidding past us on a trail bike, with a basket balanced across the handles. She braked in front of our car and picked up a stone.

'Get out of here!' she yelled.

'Oops, are we in your way?' Uncle flustered. 'I promise we'll be moving along, as soon as we solve this little problem. Hold on, maybe you can help. Would you happen to know whether those trees are poplars?'

That's typical of Uncle. He's always asking other people for help - and the funny thing is, they usually do exactly what he wants. I was sure the blonde girl had been getting ready to throw that stone at us. But instead she bounced it on her palm, then tossed it at the nearest tree.

'They're plane trees,' she said. 'If you're looking for Dunroamin Farm, it's the next one down the road.' She wheeled her bike out of our way and added, 'Sorry I shouted at you. I thought you were journos from the city papers, nosing round the Hobson farm. I'm Jonquil Wordsworth. Me and my dad are keeping an eye on the place, till Bob comes back.'

Uncle beamed and said, 'Thanks for the information, Jonquil. Four Eyes and Josh already told us where to go but I'm hopeless with directions.'

Jonquil went bright red, hopped on her bike and pedalled off at top speed. It looked as if all the kids round Wombat Valley were incredibly shy.

'That's interesting,' Uncle murmured. 'She doesn't seem to think Bob's dead.'

'And *you're* not supposed to be thinking about it at all,' I reminded him. 'You made a promise to Mr Wombat, right?'

We drove a bit further along the road and parked beside some tall skinny trees with pale fluttery leaves. ('Poplars,' Uncle told me, like he'd known it all along.) A few minutes later we were hiking down the track to Dunroamin Farm. No ostriches in sight. Just a farm house and a paddock with a high wire fence and a big old barn. Uncle marched up to the house and banged on the door - and it swung open.

Before I could stop him, he went marching inside. The front room was empty, apart from a desk, a mouse mat and a stack of paper with Dunroamin

Ostrich Farm across the top. And the other two rooms were even emptier. We found a mug with a wombat picture in the kitchen sink but that was all.

'Oh, turtles,' Uncle said. 'It looks like Mr Sand must've run away with the ostrich money. Come on, Just. Let's see if there's any clues in the barn.'

As he bustled out onto the back verandah, I stopped and stared. There was this great view, right across Wombat Valley. Smooth green paddocks, woolly tree tops and a farm like a dolls' house, with a doll-sized Jonquil running up the front steps, carrying her basket.

I watched her disappear into the house and then I went racing across the yard, to catch up with Uncle. He heaved the barn door open and stepped inside.

And something fell on him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Uncle squawked and went staggering forwards, with this big white blob on his shoulders. At first I thought Mr Wombat had set a trap for us. Then I decided that Uncle was being attacked by an ostrich.

Uncle signed up for a kick boxing this year but I had a feeling that kick boxing wouldn't work on ostriches. So I went charging into the barn to rescue him - and someone grabbed me from behind.

The next few minutes were, like, major drama. I was kicking backwards and yelling. The blob was thumping Uncle and yelling. Uncle was staggering round in circles and yelling.

And the person who'd grabbed me was holding tight and yelling, 'Shut up, all of you. This is the Wombat Valley police. We don't like spies, here in the valley. You'd better explain what you're doing or I'll arrest you for trespassing.'

The blob slid off Uncle's back and turned into a young woman, wearing a short white skirt and a long white t-shirt and a floaty white shirt that matched her silvery hair. Oh, great. Another blonde. Just what we needed.

'Hi, I'm Cyndy Jones,' she said, smiling over my shoulder at the cop. 'I work for a city newspaper. Someone told us that Dunroamin Ostrich Farm was a scam, so I came up here to ask the owner a few questions. But he seems to have gone missing.'

'And I'm Sam Wedgwood,' Uncle said, not smiling at the cop. 'I came here to buy an ostrich. I don't think that counts as trespassing, does it?'

'Probably not,' the cop agreed and Uncle snapped, 'Then release my niece!'

The cop let go of me and I glared up at him, rubbing my arm. He glared back and rubbed his leg, where I'd kicked him. That made me feel better.

'OK, we're even,' I told him and we both started laughing.

'Oh, good,' Cyndy said. 'We're all friends now. Can we go - or do you still want to arrest us?'

'Nah, that won't be necessary,' the cop decided. 'Just stay away from Dunroamin Farm in future.'

‘Anything you say, officer,’ Cyndy murmured. She strolled out of the barn and paused to look at the view of the valley, adding casually, ‘By the way, if I was here to investigate the Hobson mystery, what would you tell me?’

The cop’s face changed. One minute he’d looked brown and friendly, with smile wrinkles at the corners of his navy blue eyes. Next minute his eyes narrowed, making him look really dangerous.

‘The police did a proper job,’ he snarled. ‘Unless you can prove there’s something dodgy about Bob’s disappearance, you better keep your mouth shut. And now I think it’s time for you to leave.’

I was thinking exactly the same thing - and Uncle was halfway down the track already. Cyndy passed us as we reached the poplar trees. Her car was parked a bit further along the road. She jumped in and started revving the engine. And she was still revving it when we drove past a few minutes later.

Uncle pulled up beside her and she came running over. ‘Someone’s wrecked my car,’ she gasped. ‘It’s like a warning or something. Can you give a lift back to the city?’

‘Of course,’ Uncle said, looking pleased. ‘Hop into the back seat, will you, Just?’

The back seat was piled with books and stacks of paper, so I pushed them all onto the floor. (Hey, why should I be careful with Uncle’s things, when he wouldn’t even let me have the front seat?) Cyndy settled beside Uncle and gave him a hundred-watt smile.

‘Oh, Sam, I’m sorry I jumped on you in the barn,’ she cooed. ‘The thing is, I was scared. I’d been searching the house ... and suddenly I heard footsteps prowling after me. I went and hid in the barn but I thought the footsteps had followed me there, so I was getting ready to fight for my life.’

Uncle leaned over to pat her hand, which almost made the car swerve off the road. ‘That was very brave, Cyndy,’ he said. ‘I wonder who was in the farmhouse with you.’

Cyndy glanced sideways. ‘Well, Mack Mason turned up at the same time as you did,’ she murmured.

‘Mack Mason?’ Uncle echoed. ‘Oh, the cop. Good heavens, maybe he was watching you, because he’d got the idea that you were spying on the Hobson farm.’

‘How clever of you, Sam!’ Cyndy said, opening her eyes wide. ‘I would never have thought of that.’

Uncle puffed out his chest, bumped the steering wheel and made the car swerve again. I groaned to myself. Blondes can talk Uncle into believing anything. He wasn’t really being smart - he was just thinking what Cyndy wanted him to think. But ... why did she want him to get suspicious about Mack the cop?

It was time to ask a few questions. I leaned forward and said, ‘Your name sounds kind of familiar, Cyndy. Have I seen it somewhere before?’

‘I hope so,’ Cyndy said, smiling at Uncle, not me. ‘I wrote that newspaper story about you, Sam. What an interesting life you have! Is it true that Bob Hobson’s one of your old school friends?’

Uncle wriggled uncomfortably. 'I went to school with Bob,' he muttered. 'He wasn't exactly a mate of mine, though. As a matter of fact, he made me pretty miserable.'

That was news to me. 'Hang on,' I said, tugging at the end of Uncle's scarf, to get his attention. 'I thought the other kids were the ones who bullied you.'

'No, they just called me Skinny,' Uncle said. 'That didn't bother me. But every now and then, when the others had been teasing him, Bob Hobson used to lose it and lash out at the first person he saw, which was usually me. He said things that *really* hurt. For example, he said ...' Uncle stopped and gulped and tried again. 'He said I was a dreamer who couldn't handle the real world.'

Actually, Uncle *is* a dreamer, and plus he's not great at dealing with the real world. Still, I'd never tell him that. Fact is, the truth can hurt worse than anything, if people say it in a nasty kind of way. I tried to think of something nice I could say instead but Cyndy got in first.

'You aren't a dreamer, Sam,' she gushed. 'You're a man of action. Look at the way you rescued me just now. I don't understand why Bob was so awful to you. Did he have a terrible childhood or something?'

'Well, his father was a bit strange,' Uncle told her. 'Mr Hobson was convinced that an enemy army was going to invade Australia. He wanted the government to build underground shelters for everybody, so we could hide if the enemy bombed us.'

'That's fascinating,' Cyndy said, sounding like she thought it was totally boring. 'What else do you remember about the family?'

Uncle shrugged. 'Bob was an only child. He liked licorice allsorts. He was good at English I can't think of anything more.'

Cyndy asked a few more questions but I didn't hear them, because an idea had started buzzing at the back of my brain. Bob Hobson was an only child, right? If he disappeared forever, the farm would go to one of his cousins or something. So ... what if Cyndy was related to the Hobsons? Maybe that explained why she was snooping around the place.

'How come you're so interested in Bob?' I asked, trying to take her by surprise.

It worked. She gasped out loud and her shoulders went stiff and tense. Then, two seconds later, she clutched her head and slumped towards Uncle.

'I'm feeling a bit faint,' she sighed. 'It's kind of stuffy in this car. Do you mind if I open a window, Sam?'

'Of course not,' Uncle said, smiling goopily at her. 'Go right ahead.'

That shocked me right down to my socks. Uncle never, ever lets me open the window, because he's terrified of catching cold. It sounded like he was getting really interested in Cyndy, which meant I wouldn't stand a chance of asking any more questions. This whole trip was turning into a major waste of time. As we drove down the hill to the freeway, I stared gloomily at Mr Maclaren's fence post - and some bunches of sheep - and a tall guy wearing an Akubra hat like Crocodile Dundee, who stared gloomily back at me.

The country was seriously weird. I'd be glad to get back to the city.

CHAPTER FIVE

While we sped along the freeway, Uncle told Cyndy how cheese and eggs clog up your sinuses and make you go all snotty. That didn't seem like a great way to flirt with somebody but it turned out that Uncle was leading up to asking Cyndy if she'd like to have lunch at his favourite health food cafe.

They dropped me off first and Cyndy asked if she could use the bathroom. Uncle went racing round to open the car door for her and knocked her shoulder bag flying. We had to crawl around the footpath for five minutes, collecting Cyndy's make up and pens and tape recorder and camera. Then I pointed her towards the bathroom and went to make myself a giant cheese sandwich.

As I headed out of the kitchen, I saw Cyndy tiptoeing towards the stairs. 'Wrong way,' I told her. 'The front door's over there.'

'Yes, I know,' she said with a big smile. I just wanted to take a look at the room where Sam writes his wonderful novels.'

Cyndy's smiles worked on Uncle but they didn't do much for me. 'Sure,' I said. 'Come on, I'll show you.'

Cyndy toured round Uncle's study three times, like she was hoping I'd give up and go away, but I just stood there and waited. In the end she sighed loudly and walked out. I still didn't trust her, so I went on waiting by the window till I saw her getting into Uncle's car.

As they drove off, I noticed a yellow splotch on the road, where the car had been. A clue? Probably not, but it might be worth a look, all the same. I ran downstairs and raced outside to scoop up the yellow thing. But it wasn't a notebook, where Cyndy was writing about how she was really Cyndy Hobson or whatever. It was just a packet of photos that had fallen out of her bag.

I wasn't interested in Cyndy's holiday snaps, so I dumped them on the kitchen bench and went off to do some Internet detecting. Okay, Uncle was busy flirting but I was still on the job.

I accessed the ostrich farm website and got a message box telling me there weren't any sites by that name. That was interesting, in a way. I mean, if

Mr Sand had shut down his website, he was definitely on the run - although I was more interested in working out how to find him. I tried a few Internet searches, read a lot of useless facts about ostriches and found out that there were millions of people in the world called Sand. Then I got bored and rang Brett, to take my mind off the stupid scam.

The first thing Brett said was, 'Have you caught the scam artist yet?'

'No,' I said crossly. 'And plus I bet we never will.'

I told him all about our trip to Wombat Valley. Brett didn't say anything but I could practically hear him frowning, the way he does when he's listening really hard.

'So Mr Sand didn't actually live at Wombat Valley,' he said, the minute I stopped talking. 'In that case, we just need to find his real address.'

I opened my mouth to say, 'Huh?' and then snapped my teeth shut. Brett was right, of course. Three empty rooms, a wombat mug and a missing computer. It looked as though Mr Sand only went up to the farm, when one of his investors wanted to have a look at their ostrich.

'Very smart,' I said, even more crossly. 'There's only one problem. We don't know a thing about Mr Sand.'

'Yes, we do,' Brett said. 'We know his name - and the name of his farm.'

I shrugged at the phone. 'Big deal. His name's obviously a fake. Like you said before, he got it from that story about ostriches sticking their heads in the sand.'

'Exactly,' he agreed. 'It's obvious, which means the guy isn't real bright. So the name of his farm ought to tell us something as well.'

'Yeah, right. Dunroamin tells us he used to roam all round the world, before he started the ostrich farm. We knew that already from his website, so now -'

'Hold on,' Brett cut in. 'If the guy's lying about everything else, he was probably lying about being a bigtime traveller. What if Dunroamin's an obvious kind of fake as well? Like, it could be the name of his house or his street or whatever. Come on, Just, check it out for me. It'll only take a few seconds to look at the street directory.'

I sighed and tugged at the directory, which was wedged between the phone books and Uncle's health food cookbook. It fell off the shelf and knocked Cyndy's photos onto the floor. I flipped the directory open and ran my finger down the index.

'Dunedin, Dunlop, Dunoon, Dunraven ...' I read out. 'Oh, turtles! Brett, you're a genius. There is a Dunroamin Street, out near the freeway.'

'Sweet,' Brett said. 'Can you get Sam to drive - hey, quit that, Anakin!'

A little kid's voice sang out, 'Hi, Brett's girlfriend.' I heard a lot of scuffling and shouting, like Brett was trying to get the phone back from his stepbrother.

While I was waiting, I leaned down and scraped Cyndy's photos together. A dozen pictures of smooth green paddocks and woolly tree tops and a farm like a dolls' house, with those digital dates along the bottom. There was something familiar about the pictures. I shuffled through them again and squeaked with surprise.

'Hey!' I said. 'Cyndy's been taking photos of Bob Hobson's place from the back verandah of Dunroamin Farm. Not just today, either. According to the dates on the photos, she's been to Wombat Valley before. I knew it! She was just pretending to be interested in the ostrich scam, because -'

The phone made a squelchy wet kissing noise in my ear. Brett snapped, 'Luke, stop it!' and a little kid giggled madly. More scuffling and shouting, for the next couple of minutes. Then Brett said, 'Sorry, Just. Can't talk now. I'll ring you from my dad's place tomorrow. Good luck with tracking Mr Sand.'

I hung up and spread Cyndy's photos across the bench, checking the dates and arranging them in order. Cyndy must've been sneaking into Dunroamin Farm, whenever Mr Sand wasn't around. There were three photos of Jonquil and her basket, heading up the steps to Bob Hobson's place on three different days. A photo of a tall tanned guy in an Akubra hat, pointing a pair of binoculars at Dunroamin Farm. And a photo of Mr Maclaren on a tractor, towing a white enamel box across the paddock behind the Hobson farm.

I was still studying the photos when Uncle came drifting in. 'Look what I've found,' I called. 'Come and help me work out -'

Uncle yawned. 'Not now,' he grumbled. 'It's been a busy day. I'm a writer, Just. I don't usually talk to this many people at once. I need to take my lunchtime vitamins, then lay down and have a quiet nap - I mean, a quiet think about everything we've discovered so far.'

He started to line up his pills across the photos. As he was swallowing the third pill, the front door bell rang. Uncle choked and spluttered and flapped his hands at me, so I went to open the door. Lindii Frome swept straight past me and strode into the kitchen.

'Good work, Sam,' she said. 'My cousin Cyndy tells me you found out heaps about Wombat Valley - and hey, you took some photos as well.'

'Photos?' Uncle said vaguely, reaching for his next pill. He blinked at the snapshot underneath it and added, 'Oh, look. That's my old friend Four Eyes Maclaren. What was he doing at Bob Hobson's farm?'

'Installing a portapotty, by the look of it,' Lindii said, pointing a turquoise fingernail at the white enamel box. 'I guess the farms don't have proper sewerage, so Bob needed a chemical toilet. Except that Bob's been missing for months ... and this photo was only taken two weeks ago. That's kind of suspicious, Sam. Why don't you phone your friend and ask him about it?'

'Because I'm tired,' Uncle whined. 'I'll do it later, okay?'

Lindii whisked up the photo and shook it at him. The last two pills bounced off the bench and went rolling across the floor. Uncle stared at them helplessly, so I chased them for him. When I got back, Lindii was scanning the phone book and tapping a number into her mobile.

'Is Mr Maclaren there?' she said to the phone. 'Oh, cool. Sam Wedgwood wants to speak to you.'

She passed the mobile to Uncle. 'Hello, Four Eyes,' he said. 'No, I didn't buy an ostrich, because the ostrich farmer seems to have vanished, just like Bob. Funnily enough, we found a photo of you at Dunroamin Farm, hauling a portapotty over to Bob's place ... No, no no. I told you I'm not writing

a book about Bob ... Yes, that makes sense. Thank you, Four Eyes. See you later.'

He gave the mobile back and wandered off to the lounge room. 'Well?' Lindii asked, charging after him. 'What did your friend say?'

Uncle made a nest of cushions on the couch and settled into it. 'Oh, Four Eyes reckons he installed the portapotty last year, way before Bob went missing,' he said drowsily. 'The date on the photo must be wrong.'

Lindii went slightly cross-eyed, which made me feel like I was looking in a mirror. I get the same expression on my face, when Uncle's in one of his ostrich moods. Right now, he didn't want to believe that his old mate Four Eyes could be lying to him. So he was sticking his head into the sand, pretending that he couldn't see any problems.

Before Lindii got a chance to yell at him, the door bell rang. This time it was Phil and Kara. They'd seen Uncle's car and come racing over, to ask us what we'd found out about the scam. Uncle blinked at them and snuggled deeper into his nest.

'Tell them, Just,' he said, leaning back and closing his eyes.

I went through the whole story again, except for the part where I found Cyndy's photos in the gutter. Now I knew that Lindii and Cyndy were cousins, I didn't totally trust Lindii either, so I made it sound like I'd found the photos at Dunroamin Farm. After that, I passed on Brett's theory about Mr Sand living in Dunroamin Street.

'It's an excellent idea,' I finished up. 'But I'm not sure how we can figure out which house he lives in.'

Phil said Mr Sand must've taken his ostrich home with him, so we could just walk down Dunroamin Street, looking for an ostrich. Lindii said Mr Sand mightn't be very smart but he wasn't stupid enough to keep an ostrich in his yard, where everyone could see it. Kara said Lindii had a point but we could try walking down Dunroamin Street, looking for houses with a shed in their back yard.

Then Lindii said, 'Sam, you've been very quiet. What do you think?'

Uncle went on being quiet, so we all turned to look at him - and burst out laughing. He was curled up in his nest of cushions, fast asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

The others waited around for a while, then gave up and went home. I was making cheese and bacon sandwiches for my tea when Uncle stumbled into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes. He stole two of my sandwiches, told me that cheese was bad for me and spent the next hour trying to work out whether he liked Lindii or Cyndy best. In the end he announced that he'd have to go out with both of them a few more times, before he could decide.

Yeah, right. I could've guessed that an hour ago.

After that Uncle started lining up his evening vitamin pills and I went off to bed. Halfway through falling asleep, I remembered that I hadn't told Uncle where I'd found those photos. At first I thought it could wait till the morning. Then I thought I'd better tell him straight away, in case Cyndy rang before I got up. And by the time I'd done all that thinking, I was awake anyway, so I scrambled out of bed and padded upstairs to Uncle's study.

The room was dark, which meant Uncle must've gone to bed early. Oh well, I could always leave him a note. I took a step into the darkness, aiming for the desk, and bumped into something large and warm and solid.

'Yow!' I yelled.

'Yow!' yelled the large, warm, solid thing.

It backed away from me, knocking a chair over. A torch flashed. A dark figure hurtled out onto the landing and went thumping down the stairs. The front door banged. More footsteps came pounding up the stairs. The study light blazed. I blinked at another shadowy figure.

'Just!' Uncle yelped. 'Justine, are you all right?'

'Yes, of course I am,' I said crossly ... and then my knees went weak and I sat down suddenly on the floor.

'You've had a shock,' Uncle told me. 'I'll give you one of my valerian pills. The naturopath says they're great for calming your nerves.'

He bustled over to the desk, then stopped and squawked. I jumped up and saw a hunting knife stuck into the desk top. It was pinning down a sheet of paper, with words scrawled in red biro.

Stop poking your nose into other people's business or else ...

'Lindii's going to be very annoyed about this,' Uncle commented. 'She wants me to write another book soon. But first Mr Wombat made me stop writing the Wombat Valley book - and now someone else wants to stop me from writing about the ostrich scam.'

'Are you sure?' I asked. 'What if the note's another death threat from Mr Wombat? Maybe he thinks you were lying to him. After all, you did go to Wombat Valley the day after he phoned.'

'I never tell lies,' Uncle said patiently. 'Everyone know that. No, Just, Mr Sand's trying to scare us off. Oh turtles, I'd better phone Kara and Phil, in case he's planning to break into their house as well.'

Luckily, Phil was still awake. (He usually stays up late, writing his *Men in Suits* scripts and talking to his cyberfriends.) He came speeding over and took charge straight away.

'No need to worry about me and Sweetheart,' he said. 'I installed a topnotch security system, to make sure the Men in Suits couldn't sneak in and look at my files. That's what you need now, Sam. Let me phone my mate Gavin. He works for a firm called Safe and Secure. I met him online, swapping information about the Men in Suits.'

Gavin arrived fifteen minutes later. Uncle tried to explain what had happened but Gavin just winked and said, 'Hey, always happy to help people beat the bad guys.' Then he and Phil zoomed round the house, installing this enormous deadlock, because Mr Sand (or Mr Wombat) had busted our old lock - plus alarms on all the downstairs windows - plus an infra-red detector in the front hall that would pick up any blobs of moving heat. (Like Mr Wombat or Mr Sand, for example.)

'You'll be fine now,' Gavin told us. 'If anyone tries to break in, it'll register on the computers at Safe and Sound and we'll send a security guard over, quick as.' He punched Phil on the arm and said, 'Great TV show, mate. See you online,' and off he went.

Meanwhile, Phil was flicking through the photos on the bench. 'I've seen that bloke before,' he said, holding up the man in the Akubra hat.

'No, you haven't,' Uncle told him. 'He just looks like the actor in *Crocodile Dundee*.'

'Is that a movie?' Phil asked. 'I never watch movies. Must've seen him somewhere else,' and off he went.

That was interesting. As I stumbled back to bed, I wondered whether Phil had spotted Mr Akubra hanging round our house, working out how to break in - or whether Cyndy had cased Uncle's study this afternoon and sneaked back to steal his old school photos or whatever - or whether a Martian had landed on our lawn in a spaceship and stuck its glowing fingertip in our front door lock.

The Martian turned up in that sentence because I fell asleep in the middle of wondering. When I woke up, the Martian spaceship was still going *whee-ah, whee-ah, whee-ah*. I blinked and rubbed my eyes and listened for a few more seconds. Oh, turtles! It was Gavin's security alarm. Mr Wombat (or Mr Sand) must've come back again.

I fell out of bed and went skidding into the hall. Uncle was hovering by the door with a finger stuffed in his ear and another finger jabbing at the alarm's control panel. He tried one set of numbers, then a second set and a third set. Finally the siren stopped hooting.

'Oops,' Uncle said into the silence. 'Sorry, Just. I came out to make breakfast and forgot about the alarms.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Uncle raced into the kitchen to phone Safe and Secure and tell them that it was a false alarm. After that we made breakfast - tofu on toast for Uncle, scrambled eggs for me. Uncle went out to collect the Sunday paper from the front lawn and set off the alarm again. Then he opened the kitchen window, to let out the cooking smells, and set off the window alarm.

When the front door bell rang, I said, 'Be careful this time, okay? I'm going deaf from all the noise.'

'Not a problem,' Uncle said airily. 'Gavin told me what to do.'

Apparently, the infra-red detectors won't notice me, if I crawl across the hall.'

'Seriously?' I said with a grin. 'Wait a minute. I have to see this.'

I lurked in the kitchen doorway, watching Uncle drop onto his hands and knees and shuffle across the carpet like a giant baby. After he'd covered a few metres, the bell rang again, so he started crawling faster. His knee plonked down on the end of his scarf, jerking his head forward. He flung his hands out, to steady himself, and yelled like a baby who'd been speared by its nappy pin. Uncle told me later that his hand had landed on a tack that Gavin must've dropped the night before. But at the time, I just saw him jumping up and flapping his hand wildly.

And setting the alarms off for the third time ...

He flung himself at the control panel and I headed for the phone to ring Safe and Secure again. Halfway there, I realised we weren't safe yet. What if Mr Sand (or Mr Wombat) had decided that he'd just ring the front door bell this time, instead of breaking in?

I swung round to warn Uncle that he'd better look through the peephole first. But it was too late. He was already turning the keys in the deadlock and opening the door.

'Hi,' said Lindii Frome. 'What was that awful noise?'

I was so relieved to see Lindii that I forgot to phone Safe and Secure. Gavin turned up while we were telling her all about our midnight visitor. Luckily, he just laughed a lot and said that some people stuffed up even worse

than Uncle, which was nice of him. (I bet it wasn't really true. Uncle's a world class stuff-upper.)

After Gavin left, Lindii gave Uncle this flirty smile. 'What a wonderful story, Sam,' she breathed. 'None of my other writers have such exciting lives. Your scam book's going to be a winner. I want to see some of the action, so I'm coming to Dunroamin Street with you.'

'Oh, good,' Uncle said, flirting back. 'Let's get going straight away.'

Uncle's idea of 'straight away' can take a whole hour. To start with, he had to change his scarf and line up his morning vitamins. Then the phone rang, while he was swallowing the third pill. It was Cyndy, calling to ask about the scam investigation. Uncle managed to flirt with her, keep on smiling at Lindii and take the rest of his vitamins, all at once. (Uncle's hopeless at most things but he's good at flirting with blondes.)

After that, he crawled down the hall to switch off the alarm. It worked, for once. We actually got out of the house without being deafened by the *whee-ah* noise. Mind you, as we were scrambling into the car, I realised that Uncle hadn't turned the alarm on again, so I had to send him back inside. But finally we were pulling out from the curb and heading off towards the freeway.

Dunroamin Street turned out to be a row of brand new houses on the edge of the city. We parked at the far end and walked down the left hand side of the street, looking for ostrich-sized garden sheds. It was easy to spot the sheds, because they were brand new as well, so they shone silver in the sunshine. I counted them, Lindii listed the addresses in her personal organiser and Uncle went on flirting with Lindii.

By the time we'd checked both sides of the street, we had a list of five sheds. The door of one shed was open and another shed was too small for an ostrich, so Lindii crossed them off her list. That left three sheds. As we started on a second tour of Dunroamin Street, a guy came bustling into his back yard and hauled a lawn mower out of his shed.

'Sweet,' I said. 'Only two sheds to go now. And it's Sunday, which means lots of people will be working in their gardens. If we hang around for long enough -'

'Someone will probably think we're burglars and call the cops,' Lindii said, finishing my sentence. 'We need to come up with a reason for looking at those last two sheds. Sam, you're a writer. Think of a good story for us.'

'Um,' said Uncle. 'Let me see ... Well, we could say we're inspectors, come to check the sheds. Is there such a thing as a shed inspector?'

'No,' Lindii and I said in chorus.

'Too bad,' he sighed. 'All right, I'll try something else. Just give me a moment. Hmm, what would Jake Hackett do in this situation?'

He paced down the street and leaned on somebody's fence, scowling at the second shed. He was still muttering, 'What would Jake do?', when the somebody came wandering out. A small guy with brown eyes and a brown fringe and a brown wombat on his white t-shirt.

'G'day,' he said to Uncle. 'Can I, like, help you or whatever?'

'Yes, please,' Uncle said happily. 'We want to know whether there's an ostrich in your neighbour's shed.'

The guy's eyebrows shot up so high that they disappeared into his fringe. 'An ostrich?' he said. 'I don't think so.'

'But you're not sure?' Uncle said. 'In that case, could we have a closer look at the shed through your lounge room window?'

Five seconds later, we were crowding into the small guy's lounge room. (Like I said before, people generally end up doing what Uncle wants.) The guy was a total wombat freak. There were wombats everywhere - fluffy toy wombats, wombat posters all over the walls, pottery wombats and a wombat screen saver on the computer. I had this crazy thought that we'd found Mr Wombat at last ... but then I remembered we were looking for Mr Sand this time.

Uncle strode over to the windows and studied the shed, while Lindii asked the guy about his neighbours. He reckoned he didn't see much of them, because they were a husband and wife who both worked as stewards on those big international jet planes. I heard a tapping sound and when I turned round, Uncle was walking out. Lindii and I thanked the small guy and went racing after him.

'That wasn't a very good story,' I told him. 'The wombat guy must've thought we were complete fruit loops.'

He shrugged. 'Who cares? We got what we came for. Mr Sand couldn't possibly run the ostrich scam and keep flying off overseas for a couple of days at a time. That means the ostrich has to be in the fifth shed. Let's go and check it out.'

Uncle was really steamed up by now. (He gets like that, when he's trying to impress one of his blondes.) He marched back to the last house on our list, pushed the front gate open and marched in. And he probably would've gone marching right up to the shed, except that someone called out, 'Don't bother. Fred's gone away for the weekend.'

I spun round and saw an old woman sitting on the porch of the house next door. She had a little table with a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits, like she'd settled in for some serious people-watching.

'Fred?' Uncle said, sounding disappointed. 'Oh, dear. We're looking for our friends, the Simpsons.'

That was a better story. The old woman obviously believed it, because she nodded and said, 'A couple? No, Fred's a single bloke, just like Roy Dalton, the chap you were talking to before.'

Lindii laughed. 'Hey, Roy Dalton's got a girlfriend,' she said. 'I could hear her high heels, tapping round his kitchen.'

'Really?' the old woman said, getting excited. 'How interesting! I hadn't noticed any young ladies coming to visit Roy - apart from you, of course.'

Uncle grabbed Lindii's arm. 'It looks as though our friends' house must be in the next street,' he said loudly. 'We better hurry up or we'll be late for lunch.'

'Why did you do that?' Lindii whispered, as Uncle hustled her away. 'That old lady's an A-grade gossip. We could've got heaps more information from her.'

'Maybe,' Uncle said. 'Or maybe she would've started to wonder why we'd gone to two houses at opposite ends of the street, looking for our friends'

the Simpsons. Besides, we don't need any more information. We've found Mr Sand. We can come back later, when the old lady isn't on guard duty, and take a look inside the shed. Once we've actually seen the ostrich, we'll have enough proof to call in the cops.'

We piled into the car and headed for home. Uncle and Lindii sat together in the front seats, telling each other how brilliant they were. I was stuck in the back seat, as usual, but I didn't mind it this time, because it gave me a chance to think.

Something was bugging me, like an itch at the back of my brain. When I tried to focus on it, I kept getting the word 'wombat'. That wasn't much help. I mean, there were millions of wombats in this case. Wombat Valley. Mr Wombat. Roy Dalton's wombat collection. The wombat on the mug in the kitchen sink at Dunroamin Farm ...

My brain itched harder. I frowned down at my hands and thought about the wombat mug. At the time, I hadn't exactly been surprised to see a wombat mug in Wombat Valley. But what if Mr Sand bought the mug because he was a full-on wombat collector? What if the old woman was right and Roy Dalton didn't have a girlfriend? What if the tapping sound in his kitchen had actually been the sound of ostrich claws clacking on the lino?

What if Roy Dalton was Mr Sand?

I looked up, getting ready to test my theory on the others. But the front seat was empty, the car was parked outside our house and Uncle was waving Lindii through the front door. I tumbled out of the car and went racing after them. As I burst into the kitchen, three things happened at almost exactly the same time.

I yelled, 'Guess what, I've solved the scam!'

The phone rang. Uncle listened for a moment, then said, 'Just, it's Brett for you.'

And a voice growled, 'Shut up and put that phone down, unless you want me to shoot you.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was the man in the Akubra hat. He was standing in the far corner of the kitchen, fanning a rifle across us. Would you believe, the first thing I thought was: *great, now we've solved both mysteries. I've found Mr Sand and this has to be Mr Wombat.*

Lindii backed away from the rifle and clutched Uncle's arm. 'I thought you had a new security system,' she wailed. 'How did that man get in here?'

Uncle blushed. 'I got sick of the sound of the alarm,' he said. 'So I just pretended to set it, when we went out this morning.'

I didn't have time to tell Uncle what an idiot he was, because Mr Wombat swung his rifle towards me. 'Okay, kid, get some twine from the drawer and tie up Sam Wedgwood and his girlfriend,' he growled. 'And tie their hands together tightly, right? I'll be checking to see whether you've done it properly, so it wouldn't be smart to play any funny little games.'

I found the string Uncle uses to bundle up the newspapers and cut off two lengths. Lindii's hands were icy cold and she was shaking so hard that I started to get scared as well. But when I moved on to Uncle, he made a V-for-victory sign behind his back. Oh, clever Uncle! We'd done this before, trying out an idea for one of his Jake Hackett books.

The bad guys had forced Jake's latest blonde to tie him up and push him off a bridge into the river. Uncle thought Jake would be drowned, for sure, till I'd told him that the blonde could tie Jake's hands with a special knot that came undone fast. I did an Internet search and found this thing called a slipknot, so we'd tried it out, to make sure it would work. And luckily I could still remember how to do it, even with Mr Wombat's gun pointing at me.

When I finished tying up Lindii and Uncle, Mr Wombat pulled two big hankies out of his pockets and made me blindfold them. Then it was my turn. Mr Wombat used proper knots, not slipknots. He blindfolded me, poked the gun into my back and prodded me towards the back door. I could hear Uncle and Lindii, shuffling along beside me. We must've looked pretty funny ... but I didn't feel like laughing.

We shuffled out to the driveway at the side of our house. Mr Wombat gave me a shove and tipped me into the back of a van. I landed on top of Lindii, who turned out to know some really bad swear words. The van doors slammed and the van rattled off down the road.

Uncle kept telling us how we should relax and keep calm, till Lindii snarled, 'I wish that guy had gagged you, as well as blindfolding you.' After that we rattled on in silence for a while. In the end I did what I always do when I'm really, really scared.

I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I was slung over Mr Wombat's shoulder, like Santa's sack of presents. He bounced down some steps and dumped me on a cold cement floor. I heard his footsteps clattering up the steps - a loud bang, like a door closing - and a loud click, like a lock slamming shut. Then more silence.

'Where am I?' Lindii murmured faintly.

'You can't say that,' Uncle told her. 'When Jake Hackett said, "Where am I?" after the bad guys knocked him out, you made me cut that line, because you reckoned it was too corny.'

'Well, I've changed my mind,' Lindii snapped. 'Besides, I really want to know where we are.'

'Oh, all right,' Uncle sighed. 'I think we're in the underground room beneath Bob Hobson's farm - the one his father built, so he could hide if an enemy army started bombing him.' He wriggled around a bit and added, 'Yes, I'm sure we are, because I can see Fatty Hobson chained to the wall opposite us.'

Uncle must've wriggled out of his slipknot, because next minute he was pulling my blindfold off. While he picked at the knot tying my hands together, I looked round the cellar. A small windowless room with a portapotty in one corner and a bed by the wall. A circle of light from a kerosene lamp, shining on a stack of books, a bundle of paper and a basket of food.

And a man sprawled on the bed, eating licorice allsorts. He was wearing a green tracksuit, stretched tight across his round stomach, and a pair of long chains, attached to his wrists.

'Skinny Wedgwood,' he said gloomily. 'What on earth are you doing in my cellar?'

'Yes, and how did you get your hands free?' Lindii added, as Uncle started to work on her blindfold. When he explained about the slipknot, she got even angrier than before. 'You're such an idiot, Sam,' she spat. 'Why didn't you untie us in the van, instead of rabbiting on about keeping calm? We could've jumped that guy, as soon as he opened the doors.'

No one's allowed to call Uncle an idiot, apart from me. 'Yeah, right,' I said. 'That way, the guy would've shot us. This way, we've still got a chance to escape.'

Bob Hobson laughed nastily. 'If you believe that, you're an idiot too,' he said. 'But then, judging by Wombat Valley, most people are idiots.'

He launched into this long rave, telling us what was wrong with all the people in Wombat Valley. I had to admit Bob was smart, in a bent kind of way. He seemed to know about everybody's secret fears - like, one kid was scared

of the dark, another kid was scared of dogs and Josh Maclaren was scared to tell Jonquil that he was in love with her.

When Bob finally paused for breath, Uncle looked at him thoughtfully. 'So you're still badmouthing everyone, Fatty,' he said. 'Is that why they locked you up? I suppose the adults in Wombat Valley had got used to you. But when you started getting stuck into their kids, they must've decided to teach you a lesson.'

Bob glared back. 'What's so special about kids?' he demanded. 'I was only a kid when you and the others nicknamed me Fatty. No one cared whether I was hurt by that, so why should I care whether I hurt other people? The Wombat Valley mob reckon they'll let me out as soon as I say I'm sorry - but trust me, I'll never apologise for telling the truth.'

He stuck his chin out and squared his shoulders, which made his chains clank. Lindii sighed. 'That's so brave,' she said. 'You've got a way with words, Bob. Have you ever thought of writing a novel?'

Bob looked pleased. 'As a matter of fact, I always wanted to be a writer,' he said. 'I've been working on a novel about Wombat Valley, ever since they shut me in here. Would you like me to read you some of it?'

Uncle and I said, 'No' but Lindii said, 'Yes, please,' so Bob picked up a wodge of paper and began to read. He went on reading for the next two hours. Terrible things kept happening to the people in the novel and Bob described it really well, which made it even more depressing. I don't like small, dark rooms and the cellar seemed to be getting smaller and darker with every page that Bob read. It was a relief when Uncle leaned over and whisked the next page out of Bob's hand.

'Time for a break,' he announced. 'I'm hungry. Is there any food in that basket?'

Bob shrugged. 'The Wombat Valley farmers are pretty mixed up. On the one hand, they're keeping me prisoner. On the other hand, they bring me all my favourite meals - cheese and onion pie, egg salad and three-cheese pizza. Go ahead, Skinny. Help yourself.'

'Eggs and cheese?' Uncle said, sounding horrified. 'I can't eat that! It'd clog up my sinuses. There's a draft in this cellar too. I bet I'm going to catch cold.'

Lindii glanced at him scornfully, whisked the page away and handed it back to Bob. 'Have you finished, Sam?' she asked. 'If you don't mind, I'd like to find out what happens in Chapter Nine.'

As Bob's voice started droning on again, I wriggled closer to Uncle. 'Do you really think there's a draft?' I whispered. 'I was afraid the air might be running out.'

Uncle frowned. 'Just, I'm sorry,' he said. 'I forgot how you feel about small, dark rooms. This is too much! It's time I got us out of here.'

He went storming up the steps and aimed a kick at the door. Bob Hobson glared at him and Lindii said, 'Ssh!' But Uncle didn't take any notice. He just landed another kick next to the lock. His kick-boxing classes must've been working, because the door creaked and clunked and flew open.

'Ouch,' said Uncle, hopping on one foot. 'That hurt.'

Fresh air drifted down the stairs. Daylight shone through the door. I hadn't realised how much I'd hated that cellar, till I had a chance to escape. I went racing up the steps, dodged past Uncle ... and two seconds later I was being hugged by Brett and Kara and Phil.

'What are you doing here?' I gasped, as soon as they let me go.

Brett beamed. 'When Sam hung up on me, I guessed there was something wrong. I, um, borrowed my dad's credit card and caught the next plane to Melbourne. I was sure Mr Sand had kidnapped you, so I got Phil to drive me to Dunroamin Street. We knocked on all the doors and the second last door was opened by a small guy and a grumpy-looking ostrich. Mr Sand - I mean, Roy Dalton's answering questions at the local police station right now.'

'After that we went home and found this blonde girl searching your house,' Phil continued. 'I pounced on her, because I thought she was your burglar, but it turns out that she's a reporter called Cyndy, who wants to write a book about the Wombat Valley mystery. Sweetheart asked her some clever questions and sorted everything out.'

'Cyndy dropped some photos when Phil grabbed her,' Kara explained. 'I recognised the man in the Akubra hat, because Phil and I had seen him hanging around your house, and Cyndy said he'd been hanging around Bob Hobson's place as well. We drove her up to Wombat Valley - apparently she'd left her car there, to con someone into giving her a lift back to the city. And we found Mick Mason - that's the Akubra man's name - at the Hobson farm.'

'But Mick wouldn't tell us where you were,' Brett said. 'Cyndy reckoned she'd talk him into it, while we searched the farm. We couldn't find you anywhere and when I listened at the door, Cyndy was just interviewing Mick for her book. We'd almost given up. I got a real shock when some shelves fell off the kitchen wall and you came walking out.'

'Thanks, team,' I said, hugging them again. 'Come on, let's give Mick Mason a shock as well.'

I charged into the next room, with Uncle limping along behind me. Mick Mason was sitting close to Cyndy, talking into her tape recorder. He took off his Akubra hat, rubbed his forehead and grinned at us.

'Stone the crows!' he said. 'You escaped. All right, it's a fair cop. I better take Bob's chains off now.'

We all crowded down the steps into the cellar. (I stayed near the door, to make sure I didn't get scared again.) Bob Hobson was still reading and Lindii was still listening. When Mick started to unlock the chains, Bob scowled at him, like he was annoyed at being interrupted.

'I haven't changed my mind,' he snapped. 'You can't make me be nice to everyone.'

'Dead right,' Mick said. 'You're as grumpy as a koala with a gumleaf hangover. But too many people know what's going on, so I'll have to let you go.'

'Who are you, anyway?' I asked. 'I thought the Wombat Valley farmers locked Bob in here.'

'They did,' Mick agreed. 'I only got in on the act a few weeks ago. The Wombat Valley cop's my twin brother, Mack. Everyone seemed to think he'd

topped Bob Hobson, because Bob wouldn't sell me his farm, so I came down from the Territory to prove Mack was innocent. But when I worked out what had happened, I felt sorry for the Wombat Valley farmers, so I told them I'd keep my mouth shut, till Bob apologised. Then my favourite writer Sam Wedgwood announced that he was investigating the mystery - and the farmers asked me to scare him off - and everything got kind of complicated.' He sighed and added, 'Sometimes it's hard to know what's the right thing to do.'

'Isn't Mick amazing?' Cyndy breathed. 'That story's going to make the best book. I want to call it *Natural Justice*. Will you be our agent, Lindii?'

'Of course!' Lindii said, whipping out her personal organiser. 'When do you think you'll finish it? I'd like to launch it at the same time as Bob's novel.'

I frowned at both of them. So much for my brilliant theory about Cyndy and Lindii being related to the Hobsons. They weren't after the Hobson farm at all. They were just after a couple of books, like there weren't enough books in the world already.

Uncle was frowning at Lindii and Cyndy too. He'd been rubbing his sore foot and groaning hopefully but neither of them had even bothered to glance in his direction.

'Mick won't have much spare time in the next few months,' he said nastily. 'When Fatty Hobson gets out and goes to the cops, Mick's twin will have to send him to jail, along with half the Wombat Valley farmers.'

'Um, actually I'm grateful to the farmers,' Bob said, blushing. (I guess he felt embarrassed about saying something nice, for once.) 'If they hadn't locked me up, I wouldn't have started my novel. And I want to keep Mick out of jail, so I can sell him my farm. You can move in any time you like, Mick, because I'll be staying with Lindii while I finish my book.'

'Bonzer, mate,' Mick said, looking pleased. 'Cyndy, how about staying here for a few days and making a start on our book?'

Uncle looked at Cyndy, who was hanging onto Mick's arm. He looked at Lindii, who was hanging onto Bob's arm. Then he looked at Phil and Kara and Brett and me.

'Let's go,' he said grumpily. 'I've missed my lunchtime vitamins already but if I take my evening vitamins, it's just possible that I mightn't catch a cold.'

CHAPTER NINE

Uncle didn't catch a cold, which was lucky. He's even more impossible when he's sick. Brett stayed with us for a week, before he went back to his mum, his dad, the steps and Luke and Anakin squared. But we still ring each other every day. (Phil promised to pay our phone bill for a year, as our reward for catching the scam artist.)

Cyndy's true crime book *Natural Justice* and Bob's novel *Darkness over Emu Gully* were published last week. At the launch, Cyndy got married to Mick and Lindii got married to Bob. I thought that was pretty cool but Uncle refused to go. He's got a new agent now - this dark-haired guy, because Uncle says he's sick of working with blondes.

Uncle's written a new book as well, called *Scam*. He got the idea when he started visiting Mr Sand - I mean, Roy Dalton - in prison. Roy's a total wacker. He's been running scams for years but something always goes wrong with them. All the reviewers reckon *Scam's* the funniest true crime book ever.

Four Eyes Maclaren came down to the city for the book launch and dropped in to visit us. He said that Josh had finally got himself together and asked Jonquil out. So everything's fine now. I would've totally forgotten about the whole deal, except for two things.

The first thing is our security system. We don't switch it on any more but every now and then the alarms go off, all the same. Still, it doesn't bother Uncle, because he can't hear them through his ear plugs. And I've got used to sleeping through the *whee-ah* noise.

The second thing is the ostrich. Uncle promised he'd look after it while Roy was in prison. Ostriches like deserts, so Roy's ostrich has turned our back yard into a desert by eating all the plants and making ostrich messes all over the grass. Sometimes it escapes and chases our neighbours down the street. Sometimes it gets into the house, pecks holes in the cushions, steals Uncle's Blondie doll and then falls asleep on Uncle's bed, with Blondie under its wing.

But Uncle loves it, almost as much as he loves Blondie. He reckons he'll be really sorry when Roy gets out of prison and takes the ostrich back. Me, I can hardly wait.

Except that Uncle will probably just find a new way of getting into trouble.

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