

THE JUST & UNCLE MYSTERIES

3

# Death by Water

JENNY PAUSACKER

**DEATH BY WATER**

**JENNY PAUSACKER**

## CHAPTER ONE

My name is Just, short for Justine. Most kids live with their parents - or one of their parents - or their parents and some steps, like my boyfriend Brett. But I don't have any parents at all, so I live with my uncle.

That's fine by me, most of the time. Sure, Uncle's a hopeless dreamer who can't handle the real world. But luckily he dreamed up this tough guy detective called Jake Hackett and he's just about to start writing his twenty-fourth crime novel about Jake. So Jake Hackett pays our bills and I change our light globes and organise things, because of Uncle being hopeless at it.

Oops, after calling him 'hopeless' two times in three sentences, I better explain that I'm really, really fond of Uncle. It's just that sometimes he really, really annoys me. Like when he's starting a new book, for instance. He always tidies the entire house, because he says it helps him sort out his ideas, and he puts my stuff away in weird places. I found my portable CD player in the bathroom cupboard last week and I can't find my new runners at all.

Also, Uncle reckons he gets some of his best ideas in the bath, so he has two or three baths every day while he's in novel-starting mode. We only have one bathroom. I hadn't got a chance to wash my hair for nearly a week.

Also, while he's gearing up for a new Jake Hackett novel, Uncle doesn't listen to a thing I say. I told him I was over Crunchi-Pops and I wanted Mello-Crunch for my breakfast now - but wouldn't you know, he brought home *another* packet of Crunchi-Pops from the supermarket. I just wish he'd let me do the shopping when he's thinking about his next book.

So, as I turned the corner into our street on my way home, I was already wondering what sort of annoying things Uncle would've done while I was at school. I didn't have to wait too long before I found out. As I poked my key at the lock, the front door swung open. I looked up and saw a woman with long, floaty black hair, wearing a long Indian dress and lots of silver chains with silver symbols on them - ankhs and five-pointed stars and zodiac signs.

‘Your uncle is going on a journey,’ she said in a floaty voice. ‘Help him along his way, child. Help him to solve life’s mysteries.’

She stared deep into my eyes. I couldn’t stare back properly, because her eyelids and eyelashes were coated with this incredibly thick black make-up. But I said, ‘Yeah, right,’ which seemed to make her happy.

‘Go in peace, child. Blessed be,’ she said and floated off down the path.

I was annoyed to find a floaty woman on our front doorstep but I wasn’t totally surprised. The thing is, Uncle gets these crazes. Last year, he went on a health kick. The year before, he did an acting course at the CAE and kept talking in funny voices for the next few months. And this year he read a book called *Discover Your Psychic Powers*.

The book reckoned the universe sends us special messages all the time, except that most people don’t know how to read the messages. Uncle loves getting letters and emails, so he wants to learn how to get messages from the universe as well. He’d already been to an astrologer, to find out about his star sign, then to a guy who reckoned he could read your future in the lines on your palm.

I figured the floaty woman must’ve been another one of the universe’s special messengers.

I headed down to the kitchen and dumped my school bag by the bench, looked out the window and saw a guy in our back yard. It wasn’t Uncle. I could tell that straight away. For one thing, the guy wasn’t wearing a woolly hat and scarf. (Uncle’s terrified of catching cold, so he never goes outside without his hat and scarf, even in the middle of summer.) And for another thing, the guy was hugging the ostrich.

The ostrich has been living with us for a year, ever since Uncle and I solved the ostrich scam, but no way would it let us hug it. When it wasn’t trampling on our garden or making ostrich messes on the lawn, it spent its time staring moodily at us through the kitchen window or pecking Uncle, if he went out to say hello.

Oh, and sometimes it escaped and chased our neighbours down the street. I’d never seen it be nice to anyone before, so it wasn’t hard to work out who the guy was.

‘G’day, Roy,’ I called through the kitchen window. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘G’day, Just,’ Roy Dalton called back. ‘They let me out of prison today and your uncle said I could stay here, till I find a place for me and Ostrich.’

A floaty woman *and* an ostrich-owning con artist. Suddenly, our nice, quiet house seemed to be full of people. I got annoyed all over again.

‘Where’s Uncle?’ I yelled. ‘I need to talk to him.’

Roy ruffled the ostrich’s feathers and the ostrich nipped him happily. ‘Um,’ he said, sucking his finger. ‘I think Sam mentioned something about taking a bath.’

*Another* bath? Yeah, that’d be right. I stormed down the hall to the bathroom, flung the door open and peered through the lavender-scented steam. The bath was full of bubbles and rubber ducks. Uncle was standing beside it, fully dressed, frowning at the water.

‘Why did you say Roy Dalton could stay here?’ I demanded. ‘Okay, you wrote that true crime book about his scams, so I guess you owe him - and I’m not worried that he’s going to scam us, because his scams always go pear-shaped. But -’

Uncle turned slowly and frowned at me, instead of the bubbles. ‘Fear death by water,’ he said in a hollow voice.

Oh, great. I was trying to have a discussion with Uncle and he was just trying to think of a title for his novel. Okay, if he wasn’t listening to me, I didn’t see why I had to listen to him.

‘But I live here too,’ I went on. ‘You could at least ask me, before you invite people to visit.’

‘Fear death by water,’ Uncle repeated. ‘That’s what she told me, Just. Do you think she meant I’m going to drown in the bath?’

His eyes went big and round, which meant he was seriously worried. I sighed. It looked as though I’d have to calm him down, if I wanted to get any sense out of him.

‘Who’s “she”?’ I said patiently. ‘Do you mean that woman who -?’

Then I stopped, because the first four notes of Beethoven’s symphony were playing over and over, at full blast. That’s the dial tone for Uncle’s mobile phone. He looked under his towel and in the bathroom cupboard, then found the mobile in his back pocket.

‘Hello, Sam Wedgwood speaking,’ he said. A voice crackled through the phone and Uncle listened to it, while his eyes went even rounder. ‘Amazing!’ he said finally. ‘The universe warned me about this, only a few minutes ago. Would you mind telling my niece what you just told me, so I can make sure I’m not imagining it?’

He shoved the mobile at me. ‘Er, hi,’ a woman said into my ear, sounding startled. (People often sound like that, after they’ve been talking to Uncle.) ‘My name’s Jessica Palmer. My husband Simon and I run mystery weekends, on a houseboat up in the country, and Mr Wedgwood has won a prize in a raffle that gives him two free tickets for our next weekend, starting tomorrow. Could you ask him to let us know, as soon as possible, whether he’ll be taking up the offer?’

‘Yeah, sure,’ I said, thinking fast. ‘I bet he’ll be interested.’

When I handed the mobile back, Uncle looked at me reproachfully. ‘Justine!’ he groaned. ‘How could you say that?’

‘Easily,’ I told him. ‘Mystery weekends are where people dress up and pretend to be the suspects in a murder case, aren’t they? And you’re trying to sort out the plot for your next detective story, right? Can you think of a better way to get ideas? It’s perfect for you.’

Actually, I was secretly thinking that it’d be perfect for me, as well. I could pack Uncle and Roy off to the mystery weekend and have the house to myself. Two whole days without anyone to annoy me! I was feeling less stressed already.

‘But -’ Uncle began and I cut in, ‘It’s okay, I’ll be fine on my own. Kara and Phil are just across the road, remember. They’ll look after me, if I need looking after, which I won’t.’

I thought Uncle would give in, once I mentioned our neighbours, but no such luck. 'You're not listening to me,' he complained. 'I can't do this, Just. Madame Sosostriis told me to fear death by water.'

'Madame Sosostriis?' I said, puzzled, and then it clicked. 'Oh, right. Is she the weirdo with the Goth eye make-up?'

Uncle sniffed. 'You don't understand about psychic powers, do you?' he said. 'Madame Sosostriis is a door-to-door tarot reader who was drawn to our house this afternoon, because the universe had an urgent message for me. She turned up three cards - the Two of Swords, meaning "death by water"; the Knight of Pentacles, meaning "an important journey"; and the Six of Cups, meaning "help from a friend".'

I gasped - not because I was impressed by Uncle's tarot reading but because something had just poked me in the ribs. I swung round and saw Ostrich in the doorway, with Roy close behind.

'How thrilling!' Roy said, while Ostrich tried to peck me again. 'I used to read tarot cards in a travelling fair, ages ago. I wasn't a *real* tarot reader, of course - it was just one of my scams - but I learned the meaning of all the cards. Your cards are terribly significant, Sam.'

'I know,' Uncle said gloomily. 'They mean I'll end up significantly dead, if I go on this mystery weekend.'

I scowled. It wasn't fair. That stupid tarot reader was wrecking my chance to have a weekend on my own. While Uncle explained the mystery weekend to Roy and Ostrich, I stared at the rubber ducks, bobbing between the bath bubbles, and thought about ways to make Uncle's tarot cards say what I wanted.

'Got it!' I said, interrupting him. 'Madame Sosostriis didn't actually tell you to *fear* death by water, did she? She just said you'd go on a journey to this Death By Water weekend and - um ...'

'And be a helpful friend,' Roy said helpfully, just as I ran out of ideas. 'Oh, Sam, this is an invitation from the universe. You can't say no!'

'Yes, I can,' Uncle said - but he was starting to look more interested.

Roy helped again, by asking what costume Uncle was supposed to wear for the murder game. When Uncle told him that Death By Water was set in the nineteenth century and his two free tickets were for a trooper and a squatter's niece, Roy turned pink with excitement.

'That settles it!' he said. 'You'll look wonderful in uniform, Sam, and Just will look adorably cute in a frilly white dress. I know a great costume shop. Just mention my name and - no, on second thoughts, perhaps you'd better not. But you'll certainly find the right costumes there.'

Roy had obviously scammed the costume shop at some stage, so I was grinning to myself, as I glanced across at Uncle. He was adjusting an imaginary trooper's hat and stroking an imaginary moustache. My grin got even wider. It looked like Uncle was prepared to risk death by water, if it meant he could dress up in a fancy uniform.

Then I caught up with the rest of what Roy had said - the part about me looking adorably cute in a frilly dress - which wiped the grin off my face.

'Hold on!' I yelled and Roy beamed at me.

'Don't worry, Just,' he said. 'Ostrich and I can look after the house, while you're away. It's perfect. I just know you're going to have a fabulous time.'

## CHAPTER TWO

'It's a disaster, Brett,' I said, for the third time in five minutes. 'I hate my costume. It has millions of frills all over the dress - and a big blue sash that ties in a bow at the back - and long frilly pants underneath - *and* I have to wear this revolting wig of gold curls.'

My boyfriend is a great guy but he has one annoying habit. He always sees the good side of everything. I frowned at the phone and waited for him to say something annoyingly positive.

Sure enough, Brett laughed and said, 'Sounds good to me. Get Sam to take a photo, so you can send it to me. The houseboat sounds pretty cool too, Just. I don't know why you're so grumpy about it.'

'I'm not grumpy,' I grumped. Then I giggled and said, 'Oh, all right perhaps I am. Sometimes I just wish my life was - y'know, a bit more ordinary and normal.'

That shut Brett up for a few seconds. No way could he say that living with an ostrich and a con artist and Uncle was ordinary and normal. But it's impossible to stop Brett from being positive, when he's on a roll.

'So maybe the other people on the mystery weekend will be ordinary and normal,' he said. 'You can study them and see how it works. Give me a call when you get back and tell me what happened. Gotta go now. I have to take the Anakins and Lukes to the ice skating rink.'

He hung up and I sighed at the dial tone. Both of Brett's parents got married again last year and they both married people who had kids called Anakin and Luke. That's not exactly ordinary and normal but Brett seems to be coping okay. Perhaps I ought to try being positive, same as him.

I stayed positive while Uncle hunted all through the house for his raffle ticket. He couldn't even remember buying it but I finally convinced him that they'd let him onto the houseboat without it.

After that, we headed up the highway and stopped for lunch, halfway to the town of Coolibah on the Billabong River, where the houseboat was. We sat on the bench outside Hamburger Heaven and Uncle unwrapped our salad

sandwiches. (He's over his health kick now but he still won't buy hamburgers, worse luck.)

'Remember, we have much more experience with mysteries than the other people on this weekend,' he told me. 'We'll have to hold back and give them a chance to solve the crime.'

'You *write* murder stories, that's all,' I pointed out. 'It's not like you actually go around solving crimes in real life.'

'That's not entirely true,' Uncle said, looking hurt. 'I - well, *we* solved the ostrich scam. And I - well, *you* found Blondie, when she was kidnapped.'

Blondie is a doll, in case you were wondering. She's Uncle's lucky mascot. I gave her to him when I was four and now she sits on his desk while he's writing. He reckons he couldn't write a word without Blondie helping him, which tells you a lot about my uncle.

'The Blondie kidnapping wasn't, like, a major case for the Crime Squad,' I told him. 'Then again, I don't suppose this murder game will be any big deal, either.'

'Aha!' Uncle said in the deep, growly voice that he learned in his acting course. 'You've forgotten about Madame Sosostri's warning. We may well find ourselves dealing with a real murder, Just.'

'Sorry,' I said, getting annoyed all over again. 'I don't believe in that psychic stuff. If you ask me, Madame Sosostri was just a con artist, like Roy.'

That was a big mistake. For the rest of the drive to Coolibah, Uncle lectured me about how some gifted people - like Madame Sosostri, for example - could take one look at you and know all about you, including what was going to happen to you in the future. After that, he went on and on about how even ungifted people - like me, for example - could develop their psychic powers, if they learnt to trust their intuition.

Trust me, it was a relief when we arrived at Coolibah. The town was surrounded by - guess what, coolibah trees. They have broad, dark green leaves, bunched close together, so they cast the deepest shade ever, and they grow underneath the tall Red River gums, which makes them even shadier.

The minute he spotted his first coolibah tree, Uncle started singing.

*'Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong  
Under the shade of a coolibah tree  
And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled,  
"You'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me".'*

He was still singing the chorus at the top of his voice as he jumped out of the car and bounced over to the jetty where the houseboat was supposed to be parked. I followed ten steps behind him, so people wouldn't think we were related, but I was close enough to hear someone call out, 'Good heavens, are you psychic?'

'Yes, I am,' Uncle said, sounding pleased. 'Or at least I'm trying to be. Why?'

I checked out the jetty, in case Madame Sosostri had followed us to Coolibah. The woman who came striding towards us was wearing a black

dress and a frilly white apron but apart from that, she looked pretty ordinary and normal - like, red hair and serious freckles and an extra large smile.

'I'm Jessica Palmer,' she said. 'And you must be Sam and Justine. I can't tell you why I think you're psychic, without spoiling the mystery, but you'll find out soon. Come on board and meet the other guests, before they change into their costumes.'

The houseboat was kind of disappointing, at first. I thought it'd be like Noah's ark but it was just this flat raft with a huge caravan-thing stuck on top. Then Jessica led us into the main room and I squeaked in surprise.

It was like a set from one of those historical series on TV - furry cream wallpaper with gold stripes, a chandelier hanging from the ceiling and old-fashioned portraits on the walls. Oh sure, the portraits were just posters in gold frames and Uncle bumped his head on the chandelier, because the ceiling was so low. But it looked impressive, all the same.

There were four people sitting around in some red velvet armchairs. Jessica introduced us to them, one by one.

'This is Lucy Calzone, who's a computer programmer.'

Lucy jumped up and shook our hands. She was the same height as me and she looked as if she was the same age too, although she had to be older. It was just that she had a smooth no-make-up face and messy black hair and faded jeans, like the big sister in my fave sitcom

'Murray Jones - he's an editor at a major publishing company.'

If Lucy looked like a kid in a sitcom, Murray looked like the hero from a romantic movie, with a long, straight nose and a solid jaw and thick, dark, Hugh-Grant-type hair falling over his forehead.

'And the other guests are Wendi Wilson and her husband Toby. They haven't told us what they do for a living,' Jessica said with a grin.

The Wilsons were older than the others - in their forties, I guessed. Wendi had grey bubble-curls and a plump, friendly face and Toby was tall and skinny, with triple strength glasses that made his eyes look really far away.

'I'm afraid we're not going to talk about our jobs for the whole weekend,' Wendi said, grinning back at Jessica. 'We came here to get away from all of that. Toby's been working too hard, so I insisted that he took a break.'

'Absolutely,' Toby said vaguely. 'Ah, is this game starting straight away ... or can I slip upstairs to our cabin? I had an interesting new idea on the drive to Coolibah. I made some notes on my laptop when we arrived but I'd like -'

'Stop it!' Wendi commanded and Jessica said, 'Sorry, Toby, it's afternoon tea time. My husband Simon's in the galley, preparing it now.'

I turned and saw a guy over in the far corner, hoisting a heavy tray off the bench in a small kitchen area. He was really pale, with slicked-back dark hair, which looked good with the black and white dinner suit he was wearing. And the tray looked even better, loaded with a big silver tea pot and flowery china cups, a giant fruit cake and puffy scones and bowls of jam and cream.

I was edging towards Simon, when Uncle grabbed my arm and dragged me into the opposite corner. 'Madame Sosostriis was right, Just,' he

whispered. 'I'm picking up a strong sense of danger but I can't tell where it's coming from. What do you think?'

'I think I want one of those scones,' I hissed back. 'And plus, I think you're imagining things.'

'No, I'm not,' Uncle said indignantly. 'You heard Jessica say I'm psychic. That means my powers are improving. I'm sure that at least one of those people has a hidden secret. I just wish you could trust your own psychic powers and help me work out who it is.'

He frowned and rubbed the spot between his eyebrows. (*Discovering Your Psychic Powers* reckons everyone has an invisible third eye there, which lets them see the real truth about things.) I glanced longingly across at the tea tray. Wendi was buttering a scone for Lucy and Murray was chatting about football with Toby. They looked as ordinary and normal as a family in a margarine commercial.

'Quit it, Uncle,' I said. 'I don't have any psychic powers - and neither do you. Come on, or we'll miss out on afternoon tea.'

I marched back to the chairs, hauling Uncle with me, because he'd forgotten to let go of my arm. Wendi buttered some scones for us and Murray tried to include Uncle in the football conversation but Uncle just stared at him blankly, so he shrugged and gave up.

'Well, Sam, what line of work are you in?' he asked instead.

Unfortunately, Uncle had just taken a bite of his scone. While he chewed fast, Wendi clasped her hands together and said excitedly, 'Oh, I can tell you that! Sam Wedgwood's a famous author. He writes the Jake Hackett books about that tough, sexy private eye. Are they based on your own experience, Sam?'

'Sure, babe,' Uncle growled, flourishing his jammy scone.

The jam flew off and plastered itself across his front. Uncle yelped and dipped his hanky in his tea cup and started scrubbing at the jam stains. I groaned quietly. Tough and sexy? My uncle?

I don't think so.

\*\*\*

After we'd polished off the scones, Jessica bustled over, straightening her maid's uniform. 'Now I want you to go upstairs and get changed,' she said, as she piled plates onto the tray. 'We'll start with a walk through the old part of Coolibah, so you can get used to your costumes, before we play the first round of the game over dinner.'

There were four little cabins on the second storey of the houseboat. I thought I'd be in the same room as Uncle but it turned out that Jessica and Simon had put me in with Lucy. That was fair enough - after all, she and Murray wouldn't have been too keen on sharing a room. And plus, I always wanted a sister, so I liked the idea of getting to know Lucy better.

We didn't say much at first, because we were busy changing into our costumes. I wriggled into my stupid dress and jammed my stupid wig onto my head, then turned round and gasped.

'Oh wow!' I said. 'You look great, Lucy. Like Cinderella before she went to the ball or - um, the heroine in this old movie that Uncle made me watch ages ago.'

Lucy patted her hair, which she'd smoothed back into a bun, and spun round in a circle, swirling the long skirt of her plain grey dress. 'Was the movie called *Jane Eyre*?' she asked.

'Right first time,' I told her. 'How did you know?'

'Well, Jane Eyre was a governess - and in the game I'm supposed to be a governess called Tilly Malloy, so I copied Jane's outfit,' she explained. 'What's your character's name, Justine?'

I pulled a face. 'Angelica Chomley-Fawcett,' I said. 'Angel, for short. It's a dorky name but hey, it matches this dorky gear.'

'In that case, I'm your governess,' Lucy said with a grin. 'I better start by tidying you up.'

She fluffed out my wig and tweaked my dress, just like a big sister would. By the time she pushed me over to the mirror, I looked like ... well, like an angel. I floated angelically down the stairs - which wasn't easy, because they were just iron steps bolted to the aluminium wall of the houseboat - and joined the others on the deck.

Uncle was polishing the gold buttons of his trooper uniform with his sleeve. Murray seemed twice as handsome in a ruffled shirt and an old-fashioned coat but Toby looked like he hated his costume even more than I'd hated mine, before Lucy fixed it.

He was standing next to a woman in a dark green dress who looked down her nose at me, the way my English teacher looked when I told her that the ostrich ate my homework. She was too old to be Jessica and too unfriendly to be ...

'Hang on, you *are* Wendi!' I said. 'You're ace at dressing up. I didn't recognise you at first.'

'Angelica dear, have you forgotten my name?' Wendi said in a bossy un-Wendi-ish voice. 'I'm Mathilde Chomley-Fawcett but you can call me Aunt Hilda. Would you like to walk between me and your uncle Roderick?'

As we strolled down the road, with Jessica leading the way, Wendi kept chatting on like she really was my aunt Hilda. After listening to her for a while, I figured out that Toby was meant to be this rich squatter, Roderick Chomley-Fawcett, who owned half the land round Coolibah, and Murray was a famous poet called Ukulele Mawson, who was visiting the Chomley-Fawcetts. (Okay, I should've known that already but I'd been too annoyed to read the fact sheet that Jessica and Simon had emailed to Uncle.)

We wandered past a row of old stone houses and headed into the bush outside Coolibah, following a track that wove around a swampy billabong. With everybody in their costumes and Wendi talking like a squatter's wife, I felt as though we were walking back through time, into the nineteenth century. It was weird but cool. I was actually starting to enjoy myself, when somebody screamed.

It was Uncle, wouldn't you know. He was standing in the middle of the track, pointing at something with a shaky hand. To begin with, I thought he

must've seen a spider or a snake. (Uncle's terrified of spiders and even the word 'snake' sends him ballistic.)

Then I looked in the direction that he was pointing and - well, I didn't actually scream but I sort of squawked. On the far side of the billabong, a man was lying on his back, under the shade of a coolibah tree. A brown felt hat was tipped over his face. He was wearing patched brown trousers, tied at the knees with string, and a shabby brown coat. His shirt might've been brown too but it was hard to tell, because it was covered with bright red blood.

'Death by water,' Uncle breathed. 'I knew it. Madame Sosostriis warned me - and now it's happened.'

## CHAPTER THREE

Okay, it only took me five seconds to realise that this was part of the murder game. But they were five freaky seconds, all the same. My heart was still making a noise like a road drill when Lucy gasped and went running over to Uncle.

‘Merciful heavens!’ she said. ‘A man has been foully murdered. How lucky that we have Trooper 123 here with us. Please, sir, will you examine the corpse?’

Lucy was almost as good an actor as Wendi. Uncle blinked at her, looking totally thrown.

‘Chill, Uncle,’ I snapped. ‘It’s not a *real* murder. We’re playing a game, remember.’

‘I knew that,’ Uncle said quickly. ‘But my trooper’s boots’ll get wet if I have to wade through that muddy water.’

Jessica sighed and nudged him towards a narrow path that ran through the billabong. When Uncle marched up to the coolibah tree and lifted the hat off the man’s face, sunshine glinted across slicked-back black hair. I grinned to myself. It looked as if Simon must’ve taken a shortcut and got here ahead of us, so he could play the part of the corpse.

‘Well, Trooper?’ Wendi called out in her Aunt Hilda voice. ‘What’s going on? Who is this fellow?’

Uncle stared down at the corpse, tilting his head to one side, the way he does when he’s thinking. Then he held the hat out and shook it like a tambourine, to show us the corks on strings dangling from its brim.

‘Corks to keep the flies away,’ he growled. ‘That’s an old swaggie trick - and swaggies also tie string round their knees, to make sure nothing crawls up their trousers, like s...s...snakes.’ He paused for a moment, to recover from saying the s-word, then added, ‘What’s more, this man’s camped by a billabong, under the shade of a coolibah tree. Something tells me we’re about to investigate the murder of a jolly swagman.’

Jessica laughed. 'Congratulations, Sam,' she said. 'Now you know why I told you that you were psychic.'

\*\*\*

Uncle searched through the swagman's roll of blankets, the way Jake Hackett would've, but he couldn't find any more clues, so we headed back to the houseboat. On the way, Lucy and Murray got into an argument. It started when Murray dropped out of his football conversation with Toby to stop and tie his bootlace, then jumped up as Lucy went past.

'So you're a computer programmer, are you?' he said, striding along beside her. 'What do you think of the new Emix programme?'

'Groundbreaking,' Lucy said. 'Original ... Would you mind not stepping on the hem of my skirt?'

Murray blushed, which made him look slightly less handsome. Uncle must've felt sorry for him, because he stopped hassling Jessica for her fruit cake recipe and came to the rescue.

'Lucy Calzone ... I've heard that name somewhere before,' he said, trying to take the heat off Murray.

'It's a very common name,' Lucy sighed, like she thought Uncle's rescue mission was way too obvious.

'No, it isn't,' Uncle said and Lucy added quickly, 'In Italy, I mean. A very common name in Italy.'

I sent Uncle a psychic message, to say, 'Stop carrying on about my new friend's name.' But he didn't get it, of course.

'I've never been to Italy,' he said. 'So I couldn't have heard your name there.'

Lucy fiddled with the white collar of her grey dress. 'It's very common on pizza menus too,' she said, starting to sound a bit desperate.

I gave up on the psychic messages and just glared at Uncle, mouthing, 'Lay off.' He did what I said, for once, but then Murray decided to butt in again.

'Oh yeah, calzone,' he said. 'They're the folded-over pizzas with ricotta cheese inside, aren't they? Me and the blokes often pick up a calzone when we're working all night on, um, some hot manuscripts.'

'Well, you won't get a chance to pick up *this* Calzone,' Lucy snapped. 'I'm sick of hearing sexist jokes about my name. But I suppose that's what I should've expected from an editor at an all-male publishing house.' She narrowed her eyes at Murray and said, 'Funny, most editors in Australia are women. What sort of books does your company publish?'

'Um,' Murray said, blushing even harder. 'Cars. Books about cars. And sport. Very blokey things, cars and sport.'

Lucy snorted and speeded up and started talking about football with Toby, while Murray and Uncle walked along, side by side, discussing fruit cake recipes. I was kind of bothered by the argument, till I remembered the *Jane Eyre* movie where the little governess argued like mad with handsome Mr Rochester, right up to the point when they fell madly in love.

It was starting to look as though Murray and Lucy fancied each other, which meant they were still just as ordinary and normal as I thought.

I'd been right about Simon's shortcut. When we got to the houseboat, he met us at the door of the main room, dressed in his butler clothes - although his slicked-back hair was ruffled, because he'd had to change out of his swaggie clothes at top speed, and he was a bit breathless from running all the way back.

'Dinner will be served in half an hour, ladies and gentlemen,' he said. 'Jessica will explain the rules of the game, while you have a pre-dinner glass of sherry.'

Jessica glanced across at the kitchen bench. 'Oops, I left the cards in our cabin,' she said. 'Can you start explaining, Simon, while I race up and fetch them?'

She went bouncing out of the room. Simon sighed and went to check the oven, then sat down with us on the couches. I got the feeling that he was the organised one, like me, and Jessica was the bouncing-around one, like Uncle.

'As you've probably worked out by now, Jessica and I won't actually take part in the murder game,' he began. 'The idea is that I'm your butler and she's your maid - although, of course, we'll be there to help you from the sidelines. You know a bit about your characters already but now we're going to give you a card that fills in some more of your character's background.'

He glanced at the door but Jessica still hadn't turned up, so he sighed again and continued.

'I've invented a very tricky mystery for you. You'll have to work pretty hard to guess who murdered the jolly swagman. So, to keep you motivated, we're giving a prize to the person who guesses the right answer - a portable CD player and a CD of bush music, donated by Jessica's brother, who works for Magnum Electronics. You can see them over there on the bench.'

All of a sudden I was a hundred per cent more interested in the murder game. My old CD player was about to cark it, after Uncle left it in the bathroom, and plus Brett reckons Magnum is the best. When Jessica bounced in with a handful of typed cards and started handing them round, I grabbed mine and read it three times in a row. It said:

'You are Angelica Chomley-Fawcett, known as Angel. Your mother was the sister of Reginald Chomley-Fawcett but she died of a fever, just after she arrived in Melbourne on a ship from England. Reginald and his wife Mathilde (Aunt Hilda) adopted you, because they are unable to have children of their own, and hired a governess called Tilly Malone to give you lessons at home. At dinner tonight, you have to mention the following things:

- (1) You saw Tilly talking to a swagman down by the shearing shed.
- (2) Tilly doesn't seem to know much about history or geography or, indeed, anything except poetry.'

I was reading the card for the fourth time when Wendi jumped up and said she had to fetch something from her cabin. Toby offered to go but she laughed and shook her head.

'I know you, Toby,' she said. 'If I let you go anywhere near your laptop, you'll think of something you want to check - and hours later, you'll still be working away.'

She bustled out and came back with a big patchwork bag. When she dumped on the kitchen bench, it instantly toppled over and spilt across the kitchen floor. While Simon gathered up the rest of the stuff, Wendi rescued a huge bundle of paper, tied with a pink ribbon, and carried it over to Uncle.

'This is for you, Sam,' she said shyly. 'It's a crime novel that I've written. When I heard you were coming to the Death By Water weekend, I just couldn't resist bringing my manuscript along. If you have a spare moment, you might like to take a look at it. I'd love to know what you think.'

She dropped the bundle on Uncle's lap but it was so heavy that it slid straight off his knees and thudded onto the floor. Uncle heaved the bundle up, while Wendi stood and smiled encouragingly, as if she hoped he'd start reading right that minute. I giggled quietly. It'd take more than a spare moment to read all those pages, that was for sure.

'Thanks, Wendi,' Uncle said politely, dumping the manuscript on the coffee table. 'I'll leave it here, shall I? I'm sure some of these other crime fans would like to read it too.'

Instantly, Lucy and Murray and Jessica all turned to look at the CD player on the sideboard, like they were avoiding Wendi's eyes. Luckily, just then Simon announced that the dinner was ready, so Wendi turned back into Mathilde Chomley-Fawcett again. She herded us across to the table and made us start talking like our characters in the game.

'Angelica, hasn't your governess taught you to sit up straight at meal times? ... Mr Mawson, would you be so kind as to recite one of your wonderful poems to us, after dinner? .... Roderick dear, could you help Tilly to some of our cook's marvellous roast lamb? ... Now, Trooper 123, please tell us whether you found any clues that'll help you to solve this terrible murder.'

My brain started racing. Clues. If I wanted to win the CD player, I'd have to concentrate really hard, to make sure I was listening when the others mentioned the clues that were written on their cards. Toby was the easiest. He put his card down on the bread-and-butter plate beside his elbow and the minute Wendi stopped talking, he picked it up and read it out.

'I recognised the dead swagman,' he said in a flat voice, like a talking robot. 'His name was Bill O'Boungh. He had tried to steal my sheep before. I told him that if I caught him again, I would make an example of him, to discourage other sheep-stealers.'

Then he tucked the card into his coat pocket and tuned out, probably thinking about his work again. While we ate our roast lamb with mint sauce and roast vegies, Wendi - I mean, Aunt Hilda - went into a long rave about how she was a decent Christian woman who didn't approve of drunken louts like the swagman. That gave Murray his chance.

'As a matter of fact, Bill O'Boungh wasn't just a drunken lout,' he said, sneaking a look at his card. 'I met him in the city, when I was delivering my

latest poem to a literary magazine. He told me that he wrote poetry too, while he was camping under the stars, and he even recited some of it for me. He wasn't a great poet like me, Ukulele Mawson. But he was more than just a simple swagman.'

Jessica bounced over to clear the plates away. While we all got up and helped her carry the plates to the bench, Murray fanned himself with his card.

'Phew!' he said. 'That was hard. Would you mind if I step outside for a cigarette? I've been trying to give up but I've always found acting stressful, ever since they made me be a sheep in the Christmas play at school.'

As he hurried out through the back door onto the deck, Jessica picked a hairpin out of the leftover potatoes on Lucy's plate and handed it to her. Lucy patted her bun, which had unravelled into messy hair again, and went racing out through the other door, heading upstairs to our cabin.

While Jessica and Simon brought us coffee and chocolates, Wendi and Uncle talked about the zillions of crime novels they'd both read. That gave me a chance to sit there quietly and figure out to drag the information on my card into the conversation.

'Aunt Hilda,' I said, when Lucy and Murray came back, 'I think you ought to know that there's something suspicious about my governess. She doesn't know much about the things she ought to be teaching me, apart from poetry. And plus, I saw her talking to this daggy old swagman by the shearing shed.'

Lucy clutched the collar of her grey dress. 'Oh no!' she groaned. 'I can't hide it any longer. I'll have to confess that Bill O'Bough was my husband. We'd separated, because I wanted to make a better life for myself, but he followed me here to read me the manuscript of the long poem he'd just finished - as if I cared.'

She buried her face in her hands and started to sob. I felt terrible about telling on her, until she opened two of her fingers and winked at me through the gap, which reminded me that she was only acting. After that, Uncle told a long, boring story about how he - meaning Trooper 123 - had been chasing the swagman for ages but he could never catch him stealing a sheep.

'Oh, and one more thing,' he added, just when I thought he'd finished. 'While I was keeping an eye on Bill O'Bough, I noticed young Miss Angelica Chomley-Fawcett talking to him by the shearing shed, although I couldn't get close enough to hear what they said.'

My card hadn't warned me about that but I thought fast and said, 'Hey, be fair. I was just giving him some of my pocket money, because he said he was totally broke.'

Wendi patted my hand. 'What a sweet, generous girl you are, Angel,' she said. Then she glared at Uncle and added, 'As for you, Trooper 123, if you can't come up with anything better than accusing my innocent niece, I think it's time we stopped discussing the murder and went to bed.'

Simon and Jessica started clapping in the background, like it was the end of a play. While the others went off to their cabins, I drifted over to take a last look at the Magnum CD player, running through all the clues in my mind. The governess could've killed the swagman, because she'd been trying to get away from her husband - but maybe that was too obvious. The trooper or the

squatter could've killed him to stop him stealing sheep - but that seemed like a bit of a stretch. And I couldn't see why the poet or the squatter's wife would've wanted to kill him at all.

It felt like I was light years away from solving the mystery. As I sighed gloomily, I heard two people gasp behind me, so I swung round to see what had happened. Uncle was standing by the magazine rack, flicking through a magazine called *Writers' Rights*. He was gasping because Wendi had just stumbled in, wearing a long flannel nightie and gasping for breath.

'Sam!' she said, staggering over to Uncle and clutching his arm. 'Sam, you have to help us. Someone's stolen the project Toby's been working on.'

## CHAPTER FIVE

Toby arrived a few seconds later, still in his costume, and explained what had happened. Apparently, he'd talked Wendi into letting him do half an hour's work, before he went to sleep - but when he went to put the disk into his laptop, he couldn't find it anywhere.

'Maybe it fell on the floor and you kicked it under the bed, by mistake,' Uncle suggested but Toby shook his head.

'We've searched the whole cabin,' he said. 'It didn't take long, because the rooms are so small. Besides, I remember leaving the disk on the bed next to the laptop, before I locked the door and came down to dinner. It should still be there ... but it isn't.'

His face was white as paper and his hands were shaking. I couldn't see why he was getting so stressed about some old computer disk.

'So why would anyone want to steal your project?' I asked.

Wendi looked round, to make sure no one was listening. 'Toby designs programs for computers,' she whispered. 'He's developing a program that's going to be really big ... if he can make it work. He's been having a lot of trouble with it, though. That's why I told him he needed a holiday - and I was right, because he had a breakthrough while we were driving up to Coolibah.'

Toby's eyes went all dreamy. 'It was one of those perfect moments,' he sighed. 'I could see exactly what I needed to do next, as if I'd had a vision or something.'

Uncle nodded excitedly. 'I know what you mean,' he said. 'That happens to me too, when I'm starting a new novel. I have to write it all down straight away, to make sure I don't forget it.'

'Yes, I did that when we got to the houseboat - but then Wendi made me go downstairs for afternoon tea,' Toby grumbled. 'Now I can't remember what I wrote, so I'm in serious trouble ... unless you can find the disk for us, Sam.'

He and Wendi gazed trustingly at Uncle, like they were convinced he was a genius detective. I wasn't so sure about that.

'Um, why do you want Uncle to help you?' I said. 'Like, why don't you just call in the cops?'

'No, no, no!' Toby yelled, flapping his hands at me. 'That's impossible. I can't do it. I really can't.'

'Toby's writing the program for MacroHard,' Wendi explained. 'He signed a contract promising to keep his idea off the record. There's a lot of money involved. The other computer companies could make millions of dollars, if they stole Toby's idea and got in ahead of MacroHard, so they wouldn't think twice about hacking into the police files.'

I gulped. Millions of dollars? Now I could see why Toby was so upset. I didn't want to believe that big-sister Lucy or handsome Murray or bouncy Jessica or organised Simon was a thief - but I couldn't help noticing which of them had the best chance to steal Toby's disk.

'You told us you locked your room ... but Jessica and Simon would have a master key, wouldn't they?' I said reluctantly.

'No,' Wendi told me. 'I checked that out when I made the booking, because security's so important for Toby's work. They assured us that we'd have the only key to the cabin - and before you asked, I didn't just take their word for it. I checked again, while we were collecting our keys, and there was only one key to each cabin on the board in the kitchen.'

'Still, Jessica and Simon could've got an extra key cut, just for your cabin,' I said, even more reluctantly. 'Although, come to think of it, that'd mean they knew about Toby's computer program in advance - and you haven't told anyone here about Toby's job, have you?'

Wendi shook her head, which made me feel better. I liked Jessica and Simon and the others. I didn't want to go poking around in their lives. So it was annoying when Uncle butted in.

'The key's the first thing we'll need to investigate,' he announced. 'We may find that they had another key cut on the sly - but I have a feeling in my bones that tells me this is a locked room mystery.'

I scowled and Wendi beamed. 'So you'll take the case, Sam?' she asked.

'Sure,' Uncle growled in his Jake Hackett voice. 'When it comes to locked room mysteries, I'm your man.'

There's no point arguing with Uncle, once he gets a feeling in his bones. If I tried, he'd probably tell me it was a message from the universe and make me even more annoyed. So, after Wendi and Toby went off to their cabin, looking much happier, I found a biro and tore a few sheets off the notepad stuck onto the fridge, in among Jessica's collection of fridge magnets.

'Means, motive and opportunity,' I said, repeating the things Uncle had taught me. 'We have to work out who had a chance to steal the disk, how they could've done it and why they'd want to.'

Uncle waved his hand, brushing his old ideas aside. 'Too logical,' he said. 'That's left-brain thinking, Just. I want to get in touch with the right-hand side of my brain and use my new psychic powers to solve this mystery.'

Sometimes Uncle makes my brain hurt. 'Okay, you do that,' I said. 'Is there anything else we can do, while you're waiting for a message from the universe?'

'Good point,' Uncle said seriously. '*Discovering Your Psychic Powers* says that the universe helps those who help themselves. I suppose we ought to start by searching everyone's luggage - oh, and the clothes they're wearing - to see whether any of them has a key to Wendi and Toby's cabin.' He smiled dreamily and added, 'And if we don't find a spare key, then we're definitely looking at a locked room mystery.'

He launched into the lecture on locked-room mysteries that he gives to schools or libraries or whatever, when they ask him to come and talk about his books. I'd heard it all before, so I leaned back and closed my eyes and tried to work out how on earth we were going to search people's clothes, while they were wearing them.

Ten minutes later, Uncle poked me in the ribs, even harder than Ostrich does. 'You were snoring,' he said crossly. 'If you're not listening to me, I'll go to bed now. Dreams are a traditional source of psychic wisdom, you know, so the universe might send me the answer to the mystery in a dream.'

## CHAPTER SIX

When I woke next morning, the cabin was bright with sunshine and the other bed was empty, so I jumped up and went to search Lucy's suitcase. It wasn't my idea of a fun job. I mean, yesterday I'd wished Lucy was my big sister and today I was treating her like a criminal.

It turned out okay, though. I didn't find anything worth mentioning in her suitcase, apart from a stack of typed paper hidden under her clothes. I giggled when I saw it, because I thought Lucy must be writing a crime novel and planning to dump it on Uncle, same as Wendi.

But after I'd checked a few pages, I realised it was the manuscript of a non-fiction book about dinosaurs. There were editing marks in the margin, to show where the grammar was wrong or the sentences didn't work, but they stopped halfway through. It was a weird thing to find in a computer programmer's suitcase - but hey, it had nothing to do with the missing disk. I shoved the manuscript back under Lucy's clothes, searched the rest of the room and wandered out into the corridor, where I was nearly run over by Uncle.

'So you're awake at last,' he said, skidding to a halt. 'About time, too. I've been up for hours.'

'How come you're so bright and cheerful, first thing in the morning?' I grumbled. 'Did the universe send you a special dream or something?'

Uncle's jaw dropped. 'That's amazing, Just!' he said. 'See, I knew you were psychic too. How else could you have known that I dreamed about catching the thief?' He frowned and added, 'All right, in my dream the thief turned out to be Godzilla, which can't be true. But it gave me a lot of positive energy, so I've done all sorts of useful things.'

'Like what?' I asked, while I sniffed the air for breakfast smells.

'Like examining Murray's suitcase, while he was having a shower,' Uncle said. 'If he's the thief, he's done something very clever with the disk, because it's not anywhere in our room. Then Wendi talked Jessica and Simon into taking Murray and Lucy for a swim in the river before breakfast, so we could search their clothes while they were in the water.'

'Did you find anything?' I asked and Uncle's face lit up.

‘No,’ he said, like it was the best thing that’d happened since his birthday. ‘Nobody had a disk stashed in their pockets and they certainly couldn’t have hidden it under their swimsuits. Oh, and Wendi compared all their keys to the key of her cabin. None of them matched, so Jessica and Simon were telling the truth when they said there was only one key to the room. It’s a locked room mystery, for sure!’

That explained why Uncle was looking so happy. I couldn’t get too excited about it, though, because I was practically starving by then. I told Uncle I was going downstairs for breakfast but he didn’t hear me, because my voice was drowned out by the first four notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. I thought it was Uncle’s mobile at first but then I realised he was whistling, which is always a sign that he’s done something wrong.

‘What else did you do?’ I asked sternly and he shuffled his feet.

‘I borrowed Simon’s keys,’ he admitted. ‘I was on my way to search their cabin, when you bumped into me.’

*I bumped into him?* Actually, it was the other way round. Still, I was too hungry to argue properly, so I just followed Uncle down the corridor to Jessica and Simon’s cabin. I watched him fumble with the keys, then grabbed them from him and found the one that fitted the lock.

‘It’s a pity we’re looking for a computer disk, instead of a manuscript,’ I said, a few minutes later. ‘Look, there’s another stack of paper in the chest of drawers.’

Uncle snatched the manuscript from me and riffled through it. ‘Oh help, Simon’s writing a crime novel too!’ he said. Then he relaxed and added, ‘It’s all right, though. He’s not going to ask me to read it. I suspect he must have writers’ block, because he just keeps writing the first chapter over and over again.’

We searched the rest of the room and backed out into the corridor. Uncle rubbed his hands together enthusiastically.

‘Isn’t this exciting?’ he said. ‘The disk was stolen from a locked room *and* hidden in a place where no one can find it - oops, unless it’s in Lucy’s suitcase. Have you looked there yet, Just?’

‘Yep,’ I said. ‘No disk. Only a manuscript of a book on dinosaurs. But ...’

‘But you sensed something strange about it, didn’t you?’ Uncle said, like I’d just proved his theory about psychic powers. ‘Come on, Just. Let’s see whether I can use my powers to read the aura round the manuscript.’

He trotted down to my cabin, tipped Lucy’s jeans and underwear out of her suitcase and started flipping through the pile of paper.

‘Hmm,’ he said after a while. ‘I can tell you one thing. Lucy Calzone was lying about her job. She’s not a computer programmer. She’s an editor for a publishing company.’

The big sister in my favorite sitcom is always totally truthful, so I wouldn’t have believed Uncle, except for one thing.

‘Quite right,’ Lucy said from the doorway. ‘You’re a writer, Sam. I’m not surprised you recognised the symbols that an editor uses to mark up a manuscript. But I *am* surprised to find you going through my private belongings. When Jessica and Simon said they were giving me “special

terms” for the weekend, I didn’t realise they meant I’d have to put up with this sort of thing. Would you mind explaining?’

I was totally embarrassed but Uncle seemed to be more worried about keeping Toby’s secret. ‘Um,’ he said, fidgeting with the bundle of pages. ‘The thing is, something’s been stolen and, um, the person who owns it wants me to find the, um, stolen thing. We’re looking for anything suspicious and -’

‘And you thought I was a thief, just because I didn’t tell everyone I was an editor?’ Lucy snapped. She snatched the manuscript from Uncle, before he totally mangled it, and said, ‘Think about it, Sam. This is a murder weekend. I was sure there’d be at least one budding crime writer with a manuscript they wanted to get published. If Wendi Wilson knew I was an editor, she’d have dumped that enormous stack of paper on me, instead of you. Now do you understand why I said I was a computer programmer?’

Uncle nodded meekly. ‘But I still think I’ve heard your name somewhere before,’ he added.

‘That doesn’t mean I’m a thief, either,’ Lucy said irritably. She swept over to the bedside table, collected her sunglasses and swept out again, saying over her shoulder, ‘If you’re looking for liars, take a look at Murray. There aren’t any companies who only publish books about cars and sport. He’s not an editor, any more than I’m a computer programmer.’

I was just about to relax, when Lucy peered back through the door. ‘Oh, and *don’t* steal any of my underwear,’ she said and disappeared again.

Terrific. Uncle’s story had been so weak that Lucy thought he was some kind of sicko, in which case she thought I was a sicko’s assistant.

‘Thanks, Uncle,’ I said. ‘Now Lucy’ll hate me, for sure. Can we stop playing detectives and go down to breakfast?’

‘Don’t worry, I had scrambled eggs half an hour ago,’ Uncle told me. ‘And I arranged to meet Wendi in her cabin, so I can examine it thoroughly. You’ll want to be there, won’t you?’

Actually, I wanted to be downstairs, eating scrambled eggs. But Uncle gave me his cocker spaniel look, so I sighed and followed him to Wendi and Toby’s cabin.

‘What are we looking for, Sam?’ Wendi asked, as we came in.

Bad question. Uncle launched straight into his locked-room lecture. He told Wendi how people can open locked doors by drilling a hole and sticking a wire through the hole and pulling the bolt open. (Except that the cabin door had a lock, not a bolt, and plus we could see that nobody had been messing around with the lock, because there weren’t any scratches or whatever.)

After that, Uncle told us about the murderer who said he’d seen a dead body in a locked room, then broke the door down and quickly stabbed the guy, who’d actually just been sound asleep. (But that didn’t help us to find the computer disk, either.)

‘And sometimes a room can *look* as if it’s locked, without actually *being* locked,’ Uncle went on. ‘We need to see whether there’s any secret panels in the ceiling or the walls or the floor.’

‘As if,’ I said. ‘This isn’t some old castle. It’s just a modern houseboat.’

So I was peeved when Uncle wheeled Wendi’s suitcase sideways and found a trapdoor underneath. It wasn’t exactly a secret panel, just an access

channel leading to the houseboat's engine. (I know that, because Uncle made me crawl along it.) But it fitted Uncle's theory, just the same.

'I could see a door on the far side of the engine, opening onto the deck,' I said, when I hoisted myself back into the cabin. 'It looks like you were onto something, after all. The thief could've sneaked out onto the deck and past the engine, then climbed up through the trapdoor.'

'There's only one problem,' Wendi said apologetically. 'After Jessica told me you'd be here, Sam, I packed all my copies of your twenty four Jake Hackett novels, hoping you'd be prepared to sign them for me. And I never travel without twelve pairs of shoes - I love shoes - and my winter coat, in case it gets cold. That means my suitcase is - ah, rather heavy. I could wheel it across the deck but it took Toby and Simon and Murray to heave it up the stairs. So I don't think the thief would've been able to lift the trapdoor, not while my suitcase was on top.'

It was true. Uncle made me crawl back into the access channel and crouched down beside me, while Wendi shut the trapdoor and wheeled her suitcase onto it. We heaved and shoved but the trapdoor wouldn't budge.

'No way could any of the others have moved it, unless they're weightlifters,' I said as we scrambled out.

That was meant to be a joke but Uncle doesn't always get jokes. He started explaining that he'd seen the others in their bathers and they definitely weren't weightlifters. When he turned to ask Wendi if she agreed, she was piling books onto the bed and waving a biro hopefully. I sneaked out and left him there, signing Wendi's Jake Hackett collection.

'You're such a wonderful writer,' she was saying. 'I have terrible trouble with grammar myself. I keep getting confused about "its" and "it's". I hope that hasn't bothered you while you've been reading my manuscript, Sam.'

'Oh, you can get an editor to fix those things,' Uncle said. 'That's what they're for. And speaking of editors ...'

I grinned as I tiptoed off down the corridor. Uncle's ace at getting other people to do things for him. It looked as though he was about to tell Wendi that Lucy Calzone was an editor, so he could make Lucy read Wendi's manuscript, instead of him.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

By the time I arrived in the kitchen, Simon was loading the breakfast plates into the dishwasher but he let me make myself a cheese sandwich, which is my favourite food, anyway. While I munched the sandwich, I read Jessica's collection of fridge magnets - 'Life's a bitch and so am I' and 'Magic happens' and 'Wake up and smell the coffee.'

Then Jessica went past and gave me another card, so I read that instead. It said:

'Today we will be having a lunch at a historic home, further down the river. Over lunch, you have to confess that you are not Angelica Chomley-Fawcett. The real Angelica died of a fever on the boat from England to Australia and her mother caught the same fever and died in a Melbourne hospital.

You are, in fact, an orphan who has been living on the streets and picking pockets. When you fainted from hunger, you were taken to the same hospital as Angelica's mother, who was still grieving for her dead daughter and talked a lot about her. After her death, you decided to use your street skills to pose as Angelica.

Unfortunately for you, when the swagman Bill O'Boungh turned up at the home of your 'aunt' and 'uncle', he recognised you and threatened to expose you, unless you gave him a hundred pounds. But, although you would have eventually inherited the Chomley-Fawcett estate, at present you don't have anything like a hundred pounds ...'

I stared indignantly at the card. It wasn't fair. I wanted to win this game. It had never occurred to me that I might turn out to be the murderer. I stomped

upstairs to change into my white dress and gold wig, wondering whether Simon and Jessica would still give me the Magnum CD player, if I told them I'd committed the murder myself.

When I came downstairs, the houseboat was chugging towards a jetty. We walked a few metres along the road to the historic home, which was a long, low house with a verandah running around it, plus an enormous garden with Australian gum trees and English-type bushes - azaleas and hydrangeas and all that.

We couldn't actually have lunch inside the house, of course, but Simon spread out a white linen picnic cloth and Jessica produced chicken sandwiches, asparagus rolls and an egg and bacon pie. As usual, Wendi got straight into the playacting.

'Ukulele Mawson, you still haven't told us about your latest poem,' she said in her Aunt Hilda voice. 'I'd love to hear you recite it in this beautiful bush setting.'

Murray obviously hadn't thought much about the game, before he came here. Otherwise, he could've brought some Banjo Paterson poems and pretended that he'd written them. Still, he was a quick thinker.

'As a matter of fact, I haven't written anything new for a while,' he said. 'I've been suffering from writers' block.'

'Oh, you poor thing!' Uncle exclaimed. 'That's the worst thing that can happen to a writer. I know exactly how you feel.' Then he remembered that he was supposed to be Trooper 123, not the author of the Jake Hackett books, so he added quickly, 'It reminds me of how frustrated I got, when that jolly swagman kept on escaping from us troopers.'

'Exactly *how* frustrated did you get?' Lucy said, sliding a nasty look at Uncle. 'Frustrated enough to kill my husband Bill? That was cruel of you, Trooper, especially when he'd just finished the long poem he'd been working on for years. It was about the girl he'd loved and lost - he called it "Waltzing Matilda, the Girl Who Broke My Heart".'

It looked like Lucy was getting her revenge on Uncle, by tagging him as the murderer in the game. Uncle's usually pretty mild-mannered but he can do bitchy, if people stir him.

'Tilly's short for Matilda,' he said thoughtfully. 'So the poem's about you, is it, Tilly Malone? Did you stab your husband in his heart, as well as breaking it?'

Lucy's eyes slid on towards Wendi. 'I'm not the only person here who was christened Matilda,' she said. 'Waltzing Matilda could just as easily be Mathilde Chomley-Fawcett.'

Wendi gasped and grabbed her husband's arm. 'Oh, Roderick!' she said to Toby. 'I hoped you'd never find out about my sordid past. But alas, it's true. I met Bill O'Boungh at a country dance, when I was an innocent young girl. He recited poetry to me and told me that he loved me, so I ran away with him to the city - although I left him as soon as I discovered that he was a drunkard and a criminal. Then I met you, Roddy, and thought I could live happily ever after ... until Tilly Malone turned up and started blackmailing me.'

'Aha! You're not a real governess, are you, Tilly?' Uncle said, going after Lucy again. 'Miss Angelica told us you don't know much about the sort of

things that governesses usually teach - but then, as a blackmailer, you'd only need to know Mathilde Chomley-Fawcett's secret. On the other hand, if Bill O'Boungh had published his poem, Mathilde's secret love wouldn't be a secret any more. You killed the swagman and burnt his poem, so that you could keep on blackmailing Mathilde, didn't you? That explains why I didn't find the manuscript, when I searched his body.'

He leaned forward and snaffled a chicken sandwich, looking pleased with himself. I'd almost got over being annoyed with Uncle but that set me off again. He'd gone and solved the murder, halfway through the picnic, which wrecked my chances of winning the Magnum.

I was still sulking when Lucy said sweetly, 'That's a very clever theory, Trooper 123. But why pick on a poor governess, when Mathilde had a much better motive for murdering Bill? Her husband wouldn't have been too pleased, if he found out that his respectable wife had once run away with a swagman.'

We all turned and looked at Toby. He had his card balanced on one knee, with a piece of pie on the other knee, but this time he didn't even bother to look at the card.

'Don't be silly,' he said. 'That wouldn't bother me. I love my wife. I'd do anything for my darling Mathilde.'

That was so cute. Toby had sounded like a talking robot, in the first round of the game, but now he sounded like he really meant what he was saying. (He probably did, too. After all, he'd even stopped working and come to the mystery weekend, just because his darling Wendi asked him.)

Wendi smiled lovingly at her husband but Murray wasn't impressed. 'You'd do anything for Mathilde, would you?' he said. 'Would you have murdered the swaggie, to protect her?'

Toby had got all fired up for a moment but basically he was still a lousy actor. He glanced helplessly at Wendi, who went into a long rave about how her beloved husband Roderick couldn't possibly murder anyone. After that, Lucy and Uncle got stuck into each other again. Uncle was ahead on points, when Lucy suddenly turned on me.

'And Miss Angelica's no angel, either,' she snapped. 'Bill O'Boungh told me a few stories about her, when I met him by the shearing shed. Apparently, she's just a little beggar brat who picks pockets and -'

'Hang about!' Uncle cut in. 'You can't say things like that about Just - I mean, Miss Chomley-Fawcett.'

It was nice that Uncle had tried to defend me but I had to tell the story on my card. When I'd finished explaining that I wasn't really Angelica Chomley-Fawcett, the others stared at me blankly, as if they'd heard one fact too many for their brains to handle.

Jessica laughed. 'You look exhausted!' she said. 'You've all done a great job. Why don't you go for a walk round the garden now, then come back here for a cup of tea?'

We jumped up and headed off in different directions, like we needed time on our own to let all those new facts sink in. I was spinning out, because I was trying to think on three levels at once. There was the murder game, where every character had turned out to have some kind of secret. There was

the mystery of the missing computer disk. And then there was real life, where everybody was totally ordinary and normal - well, except for the thief, at any rate.

Oh, and Uncle too. While I was strolling along one of the gravel paths, I saw him sitting under a hydrangea bush in a special yoga position. A couple of the tourists visiting the historic home noticed him and backed away, looking nervous, which was fair enough. I mean, normal, ordinary people don't usually sit cross-legged under bushes, dressed in a trooper's uniform, with their eyes shut, humming to themselves.

I accidentally-on-purpose kicked a bit of gravel at Uncle and his eyes flicked open. 'Go away, Just,' he said. 'I'm waiting for a message from the universe.'

Uncle can be one of the most annoying people in - well, in the universe. As I stormed off, I heard the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. That made me mega-annoyed. Maybe the universe had figured out how to send its messages via Uncle's mobile - but I was pretty sure that Uncle had been making phone calls about the mystery, without consulting me.

Okay, if Uncle could investigate the mystery on his own, so could I. When I spotted Murray in the distance, I dodged round another tourist, who was taking a photo of Uncle, and chased after him. Murray strode up to the house and waited on the verandah, looking handsome and poetic, till a big man in a tight suit sidled up to him.

Actually, I'd only been tracking Murray because I was annoyed with Uncle but it was starting to look as if he'd arranged to meet someone at the historic home. I trailed after them as they walked across the lawn, wondering how I could get closer to them and wishing I wasn't wearing that stupid frilly white dress.

Then Murray and the big man stopped next to an azalea bush covered with frilly white flowers. It was perfect. I sneaked round to the other side of the bush, wriggled under the branches and crouched down among the flowers, listening hard.

'I told you, I had it all set up,' Murray was saying. 'When I found out that Toby Wilson's wife was a crime fan, I contacted my old school friend Simon, who promised to help me - for a fee, of course. He sent Wendi Wilson a leaflet about his next mystery weekend, offering her a special deal, and he gave me a spare key to her cabin.'

'Sounds good,' the big man said. 'What went wrong?'

Murray snorted. 'Everything. I heard Toby and Wendi making a terrible racket in their cabin after dinner, so I followed them downstairs and found out that someone had got in ahead of me and stolen the disk. Don't worry, I threw the spare key overboard straight away, in case the cops were called in. But now I'll have to work out who the real thief is, so I can steal the disk from them.'

## CHAPTER EIGHT

I sat in the bush, pretending to be an azalea, while Murray and the big guy tried to work out who'd beaten them to the disk. The big guy thought Jessica and Simon had the best chance but Murray just laughed at that idea.

'I can sell the disk straight to you,' he said. 'Simon doesn't have any contacts in the computer industry. He couldn't phone one of MacroHard's rivals and say, "Hi, I've got this stolen computer program, are you interested?", without risking a few years in jail if he picked the wrong guy.'

'True, there's a lot of honest people in the world,' the big man agreed, like he thought that was a problem. 'What do you reckon, then?'

'It has to be a professional thief,' Murray said. 'My money's on Lucy Calzone. She claimed to be a computer programmer but she thought the Emix program was groundbreaking and original, when it's actually just a rehash of Amix. I reckon she picked the computer programmer identity as a way to get close to Toby Wilson and suss out the scene, before she nicked the disk.'

Then they headed back to the house, so I went racing off to find Uncle. I tried to tell him the news but he wouldn't listen to me.

'Wendi told Jessica she got a headache from sitting in the sun,' he said. 'She and Toby have gone back to the houseboat. I'm going to meet them there and search the main room, while the others are finishing their picnic. You can come too, if you like.'

He set off towards the road, walking so fast that I had to run to keep up. By the time we arrived at the houseboat, I was too breathless to tell him about Murray, so I collapsed into a chair and watched him and Wendy and Toby get to work on the room.

Uncle made them use his special searching method, where you divide the room into squares and check one square at a time, instead of just wandering round. There were a lot more places to search this time - behind the pictures, in the magazine rack, under the table and so on - but the result was exactly the same.

‘Sorry, Wendi,’ Toby said miserably. ‘We can’t find the disk and I can’t remember my notes. I’m afraid we’ll have to forget about that holiday in Europe.’

Wendi hurried over to give him a hug, then leaned forward to look under her big patchwork bag, which she’d plonked on the coffee table beside her manuscript. Nothing there, of course.

‘And you’ve checked the manuscript, haven’t you?’ she said to Uncle. ‘Tell me, are you enjoying it? Do you like my detective? Have I given the readers enough clues?’

‘Er,’ Uncle said. ‘I haven’t *quite* finished reading it yet and I never comment on a novel, till I’ve read the whole thing. Maybe I can take it up to my cabin before dinner and -’

‘No, no,’ Wendi interrupted. ‘I had a little chat with Lucy before lunch and she’s reading it, as well.’

I’d got my breath back by then, and plus I didn’t want to hear any more of Uncle’s fake excuses. ‘Can we talk now?’ I demanded. ‘I’ve got something important to tell you.’

When I explained that Murray was a secret agent for a rival computer company, Wendi sighed. ‘Murray seemed like such a nice boy,’ she said. ‘I was hoping he and Lucy might get together. He’s so handsome and she’s so smart. It would’ve been a perfect match.’

‘Ha!’ Uncle said, so loudly that we all turned to look at him. ‘It’s still a perfect match. They both lied about their jobs and I suspect they both had a reason for stealing the disk. Toby, you’ve never told us what your computer program actually does. Could you explain it to me, please?’

Toby shrugged. ‘It was an excellent idea,’ he said sadly. ‘It came to me while I was listening to Wendi talk about her writing. She isn’t very good at spelling or grammar. The Spellcheck on her computer helps, of course, but it can’t tell the difference between an adverb and a possessive pronoun or between a possessive pronoun and a pronoun and verb synapse.’

‘Huh?’ I said and Uncle looked shocked.

‘I don’t know what they teach kids in schools these days,’ he complained. ‘Let me give you an example, Just. T-h-e-i-r is a possessive pronoun and t-h-e-r-e is an adverb. “It’s” with an apostrophe is a pronoun and verb synapse and “its” without an apostrophe is a possessive pronoun. They sound the same but they’re spelt differently - and, like Toby said, no one’s come up with a computer program that can tell you whether you’re using the right word in the right place.’

I hate it when Uncle starts giving me lectures. ‘So?’ I said. ‘What’s that got to do with Lucy Calzone?’

‘A lot,’ Uncle said smugly. ‘Lucy’s an editor, remember. My psychic powers kept telling me I’d heard her name before, so I phoned my agent this afternoon. He rang back and told me that Lucy had written an article for the *Writers’ Rights* magazine, complaining that publishers were trying to replace editors with computers. Murray was wrong when he thought she was a professional thief - but if she found out about Toby’s program, I don’t think she could resist the chance to destroy it.’

‘That’s a big “if”,’ I said. ‘And plus, I hope you’re wrong. If Lucy threw the disk in the river, we’re stuffed.’

Toby whimpered and Uncle said hastily, ‘Murray had a motive too, of course. We can narrow things down by working out who had the opportunity to steal the disk.’

‘That isn’t going to help us much,’ I pointed out. ‘Almost everyone went out of the room before or after dinner last night. Jessica went to get the cards for the game. Murray went out for a cigarette. Lucy went to fix her hair - oh, and Wendi went to get her manuscript.’

‘Oh, turtles!’ Uncle said, which is his idea of swearing. ‘Motive and opportunity aren’t much use, are they? That leaves us with means - and I still can’t work out how anyone could get into that locked room.’ He glanced round at the rest of us and said, ‘Toby, you look as though you’re thinking about something. Do you have any ideas?’

‘Sorry, I was thinking about my computer program,’ Toby mumbled. ‘Would you mind if I -?’

‘I give up,’ Wendi said, smiling at him. ‘Go on, Toby, get back to your work. At least that might cheer you up.’ She watched him scuttle out, then straightened her shoulders and said, ‘All right, now Toby’s gone, I have a confession to make.’

I giggled. ‘That’s a funny thing to say,’ I told her. ‘It sounds like you stole the disk.’

‘Yes,’ Wendi said. ‘I did. I thought you’d guessed that already, Just.’

I stared at her, so hard that it hurt my eyes. I couldn’t believe what she’d just said. I would’ve sworn Wendi loved Toby, just as much as he loved her.

And actually, she did. She sighed and said, ‘I wanted Toby to have a proper rest but I knew he’d try to keep working - so, while I was upstairs collecting my manuscript, I tucked his computer disk into my patchwork bag. I let Toby think the disk was stolen from our room, because I was ashamed to admit that I’d been so stupid ... but as a matter of fact, the disk must’ve been stolen while my bag was sitting on the kitchen bench.’

‘How wonderful!’ Uncle said enthusiastically. ‘This is a completely new kind of locked room mystery! Thank you, Wendi. I’ll have to include it in my next lecture.’

Wendi looked startled. (Like I said, people often look like that, when they’re talking to Uncle.) ‘I’m glad I’ve helped with your lecture, Sam,’ she said politely. ‘But I was hoping my confession might help you to identify the thief.’

I fast-forwarded through a mental video of last night’s dinner. ‘Sorry, Wendi,’ I said. ‘It only makes things harder. *Everyone* went over to the kitchen bench, while we were clearing the plates away.’

Wendi slumped down on the couch. ‘Oh dear,’ she sighed. ‘This is hopeless, isn’t it?’

‘Not at all,’ Uncle said cheerfully. ‘We’ve got one more round of the game to play, so there’s still time for the universe to send me a message. I might go and have a nap before dinner - I mean, meditate and clear my mind.’

## CHAPTER NINE

The houseboat chugged slowly back to Coolibah and two hours later, we all gathered in the main room. We'd had a big lunch, so dinner was just ham and salad. While we ate, I kept sneaking glances at the others. Lucy the liar. Murray the secret agent. Jessica and Simon, who took bribes. I'd been convinced that they were all so ordinary and normal but it looked like Wendi and Toby were the only ordinary, normal ones.

After we finished eating, Jessica told us the rules for the last round. 'You've got all the clues now,' she said. 'So I want you to take it in turns to explain who committed the crime and why you think they did it. And remember, the person who guesses the right answer wins the Magnum CD player. Okay, which of you would like to go first?'

I gazed longingly at the Magnum. I still wanted it but I'd been too busy thinking about the missing disk to think about the murder game. The others didn't seem too keen to volunteer, either. Toby was staring at his plate, probably brooding about his work. Murray was staring at Lucy, either because he was wondering whether she was a professional thief or because he fancied her. And Wendi was asking Lucy whether she'd read her manuscript yet.

'All right, I'll start the ball rolling,' Uncle announced, pushing his chair back and standing up. 'The first person I suspected was Lucy Calzone.'

That got everyone's attention. 'You've made a mistake, Sam,' Simon said with a grin. 'In the game, Lucy's name is Tilly Malone.'

'Stop interrupting,' Uncle said irritably. 'You asked us who committed the crime, didn't you? I'm trying to explain that I suspected Lucy of stealing the disk with the data for Toby's new grammar-checking computer program, because she thought it'd put her out of a job.'

Lucy blinked. 'What a ridiculous idea,' she said. 'Editors do a lot more than checking people's grammar. Our main job is to see whether a book works for its readers. No computer could ever do that.'

'I know,' Uncle said. 'That's why I crossed you off my list. The next person I suspected was Murray, after Just found out that he was trying to steal the disk for a rival computer company. He told his contact that someone else got in ahead of him ... but he could've decided to keep the disk and sell it to a third company for a bigger fee.'

'Oh, great,' Murray said sarcastically. 'You've made my day, calling me a double traitor. By the way, everything you just said applies to Jessica and Simon, as well. They knew how much Toby's program was worth, because I told them.'

'Yeah, sure,' I cut in. 'But you also told the big guy that they wouldn't know how to go about selling a stolen program.'

'That's not necessarily true,' Uncle said. 'Murray forgot that Jessica's brother works for Magnum, which makes all kinds of electronic goods ... including computers.'

'So what?' Jessica snapped. 'It's just a coincidence. It doesn't mean a thing.'

Uncle pushed his chair back and stood up and started to pace around the room, the way Jake Hackett does in his novels, when he's explaining how he solved the crime.

'Maybe not,' he said. 'There's quite a lot of coincidences, though. For instance, you and Simon happened to put the Wilsons in a room with a trapdoor, although Wendi accidentally blocked it with her suitcase. What's more, Simon would've seen the disk in Wendi's bag, when it spilt on the kitchen floor. And you offered Lucy a special rate for the weekend, after you read her article in *Writers' Rights* - it's in the magazine rack over here - which meant you could blame the theft on her. It seems pretty clear that you were planning to steal the disk, right from the start.'

He paced back to the table and frowned down at Jessica and Simon. 'The only thing I don't understand is why you invited me here,' he said. 'Jessica told me I'd won two places in a raffle - but I don't remember buying a ticket and I couldn't find it anywhere.'

As Jessica opened her mouth, Simon shook his head. 'Let me handle this,' he said. 'If we set the whole thing up, Sam - and I'm not saying we did - we would've invited you when we realised that Toby might decide to call in the cops. We figured we could prevent that by having a detective on the spot - someone who couldn't possibly solve the crime. I read a lot of detective stories, to help me work out the clues for our mystery weekends, and the Jake Hackett novels are the stupidest books I've ever read.' He laughed and added, 'I admit I made a mistake there. You're not as stupid as I thought, Sam. But it was my only mistake.'

'Simon's very clever,' Jessica said proudly. 'You can't prove any of this, unless you find the disk - and it's hidden in a place where no one would ever look.'

I was getting annoyed again, for about the twentieth time that weekend, only this time I wasn't annoyed with Uncle. I was annoyed with Simon, because he was being horrible about Uncle's books.

Maybe my brain works better when I'm annoyed. At any rate, I suddenly realised where the disk had to be. I leapt up and raced over to the coffee table, grabbed Wendi's manuscript and shook it.

And a computer disk slid out from between the pages, into my hand.

Toby yelped and charged out of the room, then charged back a minute later with his laptop. While he plugged it in and inserted the disk, to check it, Simon lounged back in his chair, looking pleased with himself.

'If I'd handled that disk, I would've picked it up with a tea towel,' he drawled. 'There won't be any fingerprints on it, so you still won't be able to prove a thing. You're not completely stupid, Sam, but you're still not smart enough to catch me. I bet you haven't even managed to guess the solution to my murder game.'

Uncle opened his eyes wide. 'Oh, that was simple,' he said. 'Even someone who writes stupid books could work that out. The poet, Ukulele Mawson, killed the swagman and stole his poem, in order to pretend that he wrote it. I suspected that, as soon as Murray said that Ukulele had writers' block - and I was sure of it, once I remembered seeing twenty drafts of an unfinished novel when we searched your cabin.'

Uncle doesn't mind people insulting him but he can't stand people insulting Jake Hackett. He'd got his revenge, though. Simon didn't look pleased with himself any more. Actually, he looked as if he'd rather go to prison than admit that he couldn't finish his novel. Don't ask me why - I don't understand writers, even after living with Uncle for twelve years - but oh well, it worked.

'All right, you win,' he snarled, marching over to the sideboard and practically throwing the Magnum at Uncle. 'Take your bloody prize and get out of here, okay?'

\*\*\*

Simon and Jessica shut themselves in their cabin, while we all packed our suitcases - well, all of us except for Toby and Uncle, who were playing with the computer program. As Murray and I helped to heave Wendi's suitcase down the stairs, Wendi told Murray he was a nice boy who should get a better job and ask Lucy out. I don't know whether he did - but he took the MacroHard card that Wendi offered him, and plus I saw him talking to Lucy, while they were getting into their cars.

After I'd collected Uncle's suitcase and stashed it in our car, I went to collect Uncle. He was sitting on the couch beside Toby, reading Wendi's manuscript.

'This is good,' he said, looking up as Wendi and I came in. 'Can I borrow it, please?'

Wendi's round, friendly face went pink with pleasure. 'Of course, Sam,' she said. 'I'll even forgive you for not reading it, when you said you had. Although, come to think of it, I'd forgiven you already, because you found Toby's disk. I want to thank you and Justine for that.'

‘Don’t thank us,’ Uncle said. ‘Thank the universe. I wouldn’t have come here, if the universe hadn’t sent Madame Sososttris to our door. She’s the most psychic person I’ve ever met.’

I like being thanked and I hate listening to Uncle talk about psychic powers, so I headed over to the fridge to make myself a cheese sandwich for the drive home. (I figured Jessica and Simon owed me that much.) As I was opening the door, I heard a weird, floaty voice say, ‘Help from a friend ...’

When I spun round, to see whether Madame Sososttris had somehow materialised on the house boat, Wendi was grinning at Uncle.

‘Sorry, Sam,’ she said. ‘In between writing my novel and organising Toby, I work as an actor. I happened to be playing a fortune teller in a cop show last week. So, when Jessica told me she was going to ask you to the mystery weekend, I couldn’t resist dropping in on my way home from the TV studio and, um, encouraging you to come along.’

I looked at Wendi, swirling the skirts of her Mathilde Chomley-Fawcett costume and saying, ‘Death by water’ in a Madame Sososttris voice. Then I looked at Toby, who was working away on his laptop, like he didn’t even realise he was still on the houseboat. After that, I looked at the magnet stuck beside the fridge handle, right in front of me. It said, ‘The only normal people are the ones you don’t know well yet.’

Yeah, right. It was a pity I hadn’t noticed that on the day I arrived. That would’ve saved me a lot of hassle.

As Wendi and I herded Toby and Uncle out to the cars, Wendi said, ‘Goodbye. You are going on a journey ...’, still in her Madame Sososttris voice. Uncle stood there with the car key in his hand, looking slightly dazed, so I prodded him in the ribs, like Ostrich.

‘See?’ I said. ‘There’s no such thing as psychic powers.’

‘Yes, there is,’ Uncle said instantly. ‘How else did you know where Toby’s disk was hidden?’

Good question. I thought about it for a while and then said, ‘I guess I noticed lots of little details, then put them all together.’

‘Exactly,’ Uncle told me. ‘That’s what psychic powers *are*, Just. Here, take this CD player, as your reward from the universe.’

I hugged Uncle, who looked surprised, then plugged myself into the Magnum and listened to bush music for half of the way home, until Uncle slammed on the brakes and pulled over to the side of the road.

‘I just got an idea for my next novel,’ he said urgently. ‘I have to write it down now, in case I forget, like Toby.’

He found a sandwich bag in the glove box, spread it across the steering wheel and started scribbling like mad. I could’ve got annoyed but instead I sneaked the mobile out of his pocket and rang my boyfriend.

‘So how did the weekend go?’ Brett asked. ‘Are you still grumpy at Sam?’

‘Not any more,’ I decided. ‘All the ordinary, normal people on the weekend turned out to have hidden secrets. With Uncle, what you see is what you get.’

Okay, when I glanced across at the driver's seat, I saw a guy wearing a trooper's uniform and a woolly hat and scarf, making notes on a sandwich bag.

But - oh well, I could live with that.

Copyright © 2003, 2016 by Jenny Pausacker.

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Jenny Pausacker asserts her moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

Ebook produced in Australia.