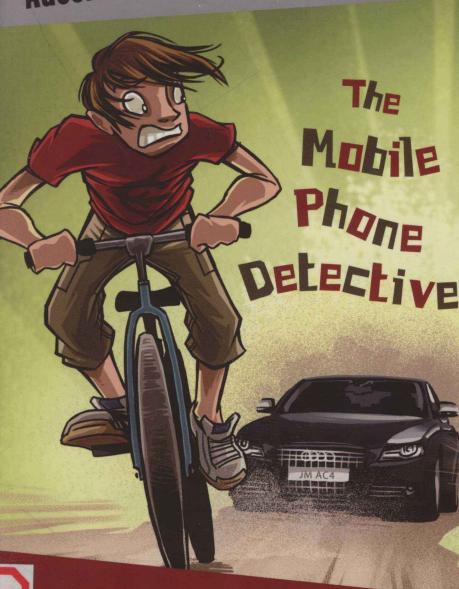
Aussie CHOMPS



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Puffin Books

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The Mobile PARTE HAR

Renton is on holidays with his dad in France and everything is going brilliantly . . . until they stumble across a suspicious meeting by the beach. When his father suddenly disappears, it's up to Renton and his mobile phone to save the day.

But Renton is running out of time . . .



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After a week in the car I was finally getting used to driving on the wrong side of the road. Not that I was driving. That was Dad's job, and since he'd been living in France for the last two years, he was used to the way the French drive on the right-hand side.

On our first day, just out of Paris, I'd squawked like a strangled chook the first time a truck came along the road towards us. I was sure it would flatten us like a steamroller.

'Relax, Renton, enjoy the scenery,' said Dad,

laughing at the way I gripped the sides of my seat so tight that my knuckles went white.

The scenery was amazing. We were cruising through a forest so green it hurt my eyes. It was totally different from the drought-dry countryside I'd left behind.

I'd left Mum behind, too. And my sister. They were back in Brisbane with my stepfather, Dave. You see, Mum and Dad split up when I was five. Dad didn't move far away at first and I used to go round to his place every second weekend.

It was Dad who taught me to kick a football like a pro. Apparently he had been a pretty good rugby player when he was young. Now he was an even better coach, and that's why I was in France. A French team was paying him a squillion bucks to coach them, and since it was the off-season, he'd asked me to come over and join him for a couple of weeks. Just me, all the way on a 747.

Absolutely awesome!

Since arriving in France, I'd hardly stood still. I'd seen enough castles to last me a while. (The Frogs call them *châteaux*.) First we visited some hilltop towns that were entirely surrounded by walls, and then we went north where there had been a lot of fighting during the Second World War. Two days ago we visited a cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach – thousands of white crosses in perfectly straight lines with a dead soldier under each one. It was so quiet, so sad, but beautiful in its own way, too.

Then we drove to Bayeux to look at an old tapestry. I thought – here we go, it'll be boring as dust. But it was actually pretty amazing. The tapestry was a hundred metres long, the whole thing stitched with scenes from a famous battle between the English and the French. It even showed the English king dying with an arrow in his eye.

'I'll bet that hurt,' said Dad.

When I laughed, the museum guy put his finger to his lips, 'Ssshh.'

That made us both laugh. It was great being with Dad again after two years of talking on the phone.

Another amazing thing in France was the food. I couldn't get enough of it. There were hardly any McDonald's, and no KFC's that I could see. Instead, I was gorging on the best bread I'd ever tasted spread with a whole lot of stuff I'd never heard of. Dad tried to tell me I was eating mashed-up goose livers, or even snails, but I didn't believe him. I didn't want to know what it was, anyway. Just bring me another helping!

In fact, as we drove through that lush forest on my seventh day as a tourist, a hunk of Camembert cheese was warming up on the dashboard. We'd bought it in a little medieval village hours ago,

but Dad said it would taste better if we let it soften up in the sun first. I could see the yellow part in the middle turning runny before my eyes. Just looking at it made me hungry.

'Can we stop for lunch soon?' I asked Dad.

'Not a problem,' he said. Almost straightaway we spotted a sign showing a faded picnic table. We turned off the road and on to a dirt track. I knew we were close to the sea and after a hundred metres I caught a glimpse of blue between some low grassy dunes.

'Might go in for a dip,' I said.

Dad laughed. 'That's the Australian coming out in you. From what I've seen, the French do more sunbaking than swimming.'

'Too right, I'm Australian. Jer swee un Australien,' I said, trying my best with the accent. That was one of the three things I could say in French. The other two were 'Jer marpel Renton'

which means 'My name is Renton' and 'Jer ner parl par le fronsay' which means 'I don't speak French.' Dad wrote these out for me so I'd get the pronunciation right. Don't trust me on the spelling.

As we eased round the last bend I saw that another car had beaten us to the picnic table.

'Hey, Dad, it's an A4!' I crowed.

This was a dig at him. The Audi A4 is one of our dream cars. We'd talked a lot about dream cars while we drove, which was a nice change from conversations with my stepdad. Don't get me wrong, Dave's great, but he just doesn't get cars. I mean, he drives an old Toyota Corolla. Bor-ing!

I was hoping Dad would be driving an Audi or a BMW when he picked me up in Paris, but the Rugby club got him a Peugeot 307 instead. It was all right, I suppose, but . . .

The Audi parked beside the picnic table was

black with chrome wheel rims. I took a long jealous look as we pulled up, and only then noticed the two blokes inside. They had turned right around in their seats to stare at us. They didn't seem very pleased to be sharing the picnic area. One guy immediately whipped out his mobile phone and started punching numbers like he was going to complain to the cops.

I didn't want to look like I was staring, so I turned away. At the same time I was thinking, What's your problem? This isn't a private beach.

We climbed out of the Peugeot and followed a track between the dunes – only to discover that it wasn't much of a beach at all, not when you're used to Australian beaches. The sand wasn't white or golden yellow. It was a dirty grey, with rotting seaweed making wavy lines along the shore where the tide had dumped it layer by layer.

'Geez, look at the rubbish,' I said, pointing to

half-buried potato-chip packets and soft-drink cans.

'Yeah, and it's too blowy,' said Dad, shielding his face from the sand. 'You might have to wait a bit longer before we eat.'

As we walked back through the dunes, I saw another car crawling towards us along the track. It was a Citroën, not the type of car I'd ever dream about; more of a family car.

I pointed out the colour to Dad. 'Like a Queensland footy jersey. Go the Maroons!' I called into the breeze, making Dad laugh. I'd seen pictures of him when he was young in his maroon Rugby jersey.

I got out my own mobile phone to snap a picture of him.

It was a top-of-the-range model with a camera and enough special features to fly a space shuttle. It might sound a bit much – a thirteen-year-old

with a phone like that. Mum had certainly thought so. But it was my Christmas present from Dad, you see. And now that I was with him in France, I used it every chance I got.

'Time I got a picture of the 307, too,' I said, grinning. I lined him up beside the Peugeot. By this time, the red Citroën had parked and the two men in the Audi were getting out to meet the new arrival. They must know each other, I thought.

I shifted a little to get the Audi into the background. I could already see the caption I'd send Dad when I got home: 'The car you wanted next to the car you ended up with.'

'Come on,' said Dad, climbing into the Peugeot.
'We'll find a place to eat down the road a bit. And soon, too – I'm as hungry as you now.'

As we drove off, one of the Audi guys was yelling and tossing his arms around like he wasn't happy about something. The Citroën's driver spun round to watch us go, but when he saw me staring back through the windscreen he quickly turned his face away.

Dad took the dirt track fast on the way out. He didn't say a word, and when I looked over, his face was creased and serious.

'What was that guy waving his arms round for? He didn't look very happy with us,' I said.

'I think maybe we stumbled across a private meeting.'

'A private meeting. About what?'

'Could be anything. Harmless probably. No need to worry.'

I must have looked doubtful because he pushed a smile onto his big brown face. 'How's that Camembert? Is it soft and melty yet?'





Back on the main road, we passed a sign saying ten kilometres to a town called Honfleur.

'I've been to Honfleur before. Nice place. We'll have lunch there,' said Dad, and in no time he'd found a spot in a tree-lined car park that was tucked in between the centre of town and a canal that led out to the sea.

We sat beside the canal, watching small boats go up and down in the lock and munching the bread and Camembert. No plates and just Dad's Swiss Army knife to slice off a hunk of gooey cheese. Dee-licious.

'Let's go look around,' Dad said after a while, brushing the crumbs from the front of his shirt.

A small mound of stomach had started to grow under that shirt in the two years since he had left Australia.

'That's a nice beer gut you've got there, Dad,' I said, raising one eyebrow.

He looked down. 'It's all muscle,' he replied. And then, in case I was tempted to tease him any more, he grabbed me in a headlock until I yelled, 'All right, all right, it's muscle.'

Wrestling with him was what I missed most after he left for France. He'd obviously missed it, too.

We'd checked out a few little towns already on our trip, but Honfleur was more beautiful than any of the others. It was built around a tiny square harbour jam-packed with sailboats and

little fishing trawlers. Shops and cafes faced the harbour on three sides with just a narrow street between them and the water. I snapped a couple of pictures for Dave. He might not care about cars, but he loved sailing.

In one of the back streets, Dad found a bookshop that sold English books. I knew he'd be a while because he'd been complaining for days that he had nothing to read. So I kept going along the street. This was one of the best things about being with Dad. He trusted me to roam about on my own. Mum was so used to having my little sister to watch out for every minute, she treated me like a baby, too.

I wandered around the corner. At the end of a dingy lane, I found myself in an open square surrounded by tall houses that must have been hundreds of years old. I'd never seen anything like them back home. There was a market on. Stalls were sprawled across the square selling tomatoes, apples, oysters and strange things in shells I'd never seen before.

I stopped at one stall and pointed to two lemon tarts. It's not hard to buy stuff, even when you can't speak the language. The woman smiled at my bad version of *See voo play* and *Mercee*.

I ate one of the tarts and kept the other for Dad. There was still no sign of him, but I wasn't worried. We'd come across each other soon enough. We always did. I went into a couple of food shops, just for the amazing smells. The Frogs have a reputation for being a bit snooty, but that's not what I'd found. Every time I stepped inside a shop someone would call out, 'Bonjour. Ça va?' It means, 'Hi, how you going?' according to Dad.

I walked along the sides of the little harbour and back across a bridge. Still no sign of Dad. I headed in among the streets, expecting him to