

Chapter 6

Jack

Jack orbited the rink smashing his stick against the walls. As he approached the Jaguars' kitbags he hoiked and prepared to launch another ball of gob at the pile. Drew's bag was the target this circuit. But he caught himself just in time and slowed to a lazy glide as the team emerged from the Geek's building.

"Where's Rochelle?" Jack demanded.

"She's fine," Methsy wheezed. He took a book from his trolley, opened it to a marked page and held up a diagram. "Form two lines. Person at the start of each line has a puck. Passes it back to the number two of the opposite line. Then ..."

"How do I know Rochelle's okay?" Jack blurted. "I thought this was a team thing. Now you've shafted my sister."

"She fessed up," Drew sneered. "We tried to cover for her but she put her hand up and shouted 'guilty', so don't blame us if she cops it."

Jack prowled around the perimeter of the group idly dribbling a puck and taking regular glances at the Geek's window.

"Jack!" Methsy snapped. "Leave the puck alone while I'm giving instructions. Anyway, you're not part of the exercise. Sit on the side until you apologise to the Geek for your part in the attack. Good time to do that now while Rochelle's still up there."

Jack lifted his stick and knocked the puck into oblivion. “Stuff you, Methsy.”

“No, Jack. Stuff you!” Methsy fired back. “Until you take responsibility for what you do, you’re off the team.”

Jack searched his mates’ faces for support. “Tama! What you grovel at the Geek’s feet for? If somebody has a problem with us, we show them the finger, hey bro.”

“It’s just a word,” Tama mumbled, strapping on his goalkeeping pads. “Doesn’t mean anything. I want to play hockey.”

Jack kicked Methsy’s trolley sending it weaving across the rink. “Who cares? This team sucks anyway.” Snatching up his kitbag he skated to the kids’ playground and pulled up behind the slide. The whispering rumbles of the Jaguars’ roller blades on the rink cut into his pounding head. A sharp stick-on-puck crack made him peer out from behind the slide. He scowled at the two circling lines of players exchanging shots and shouts for the pass. Nobody shouted for him.

The edge of the slide gave Jack good leverage for removing his skates. He popped them off like bottle caps and hurled them into his kitbag. The helmet followed and he slipped on his shoes, pulling the laces tight without tying them. He ripped his skateboard from the kitbag, stole a final glare around the slide and left the park in style.

Jack sat on the corner of Lavinia and Olive Streets allowing a ribbon of foul tasting saliva to fall between his legs. He pinched the glowing head off the

barely smoked cigarette he'd stolen from Methsy's trolley. The cigarette disintegrated between his milling hands.

Using his toe, Jack flipped his skateboard over and inspected the underside. He traced the outline of the back truck with his finger towards one of the new wheels he'd just fitted. A flick from his thumb set the wheel sizzling around the bearing. Satisfied, he mounted the skateboard and cruised down the middle of Lavinia Street.

About a third of the way down the road, Jack veered towards the curb. Being a 'goofy' skater, he had his right foot forward which he slid back a little, bringing it slightly behind the front truck. He gave a hard push with the left foot and then bent down, compressing the board. Just before he hit the curb Jack straightened up, slammed his back foot down on the kicktail and jumped. Welded to the board, he cleared the rim of the curb, notching up another successful defiance of gravity. Midair, Jack slid his front foot up towards the nose, automatically keeping his shoulders in line with the board, and completed the 'ollie' with a perfect landing on the sidewalk.

As Jack straightened up to return to cruise stance, the kitbag shifted across his shoulders and he was thrown off the skateboard into a gatepost, grazing his arm on an old metal mailbox. The wound didn't require too much pampering so he was able to deal immediately with the culprit. He launched a kick at the mailbox and kept on kicking until the last nail tore free sending the battered bit of tin rattling up the old man's path, vomiting junk mail on its way. A torn net curtain

covering the old man's porch window was pulled aside, distracting Jack from his work. The curtain fell back into place without giving any secrets away. Jack launched a final running kick at the mailbox, slamming it into the front door of the unit. It carved off an impressive slab of green paint.

"If you've got something to say about that, then come out and say it!" Jack shouted.

An upstairs window in the neighbouring unit opened and Mrs Wong hung her head out. "You leave old man alone. He done nothing to nobody. Go now or I call police."

Jack showed Mrs Wong some finger tricks and went on his way stopping only to swing the kitbag over his fence onto the front porch. He decided to keep skating towards the city centre. Maybe he'd do some serious boarding at the Railway Land Skate Park, some slides perhaps. It was always a good place to hang out. En route, he performed a series of ego-restoring *ollies* on and off the sidewalk, allowing himself the occasional grin.

A hooter blared out as he shot through an intersection. Jack never checked for cars. It was up to the drivers to get out of his way: that's why cars were fitted with steering wheels and brakes. He heard the vehicle sidle up alongside and somebody shout at him out of a window but he didn't bother to respond.

Ahead of him a courier van reversed out of a drive. Jack thumped on the back of the van as he went past and the driver pulled up sharp. Normally, Jack did give way to courier drivers since they had a similar attitude to operating their vehicles as he did his

skateboard. But he was feeling good again: king of the road! He looked over his shoulder, chuckling at the abuse the courier was shouting at him. It was good abuse! Jack admired the new combinations the courier could weave together using old, well-known words. Jack was still looking behind him when he rode into the side of a black Ford Falcon.

“You should look where you’re going, boy.”

Jack stopped trying to hook his skateboard out from under the car when he heard the voice. His leg froze, the foot suspended in midair.

“Maybe you should get up off the street. Restore your dignity after such a fine display of stupidity.”

The soft, cold voice came from above Jack. He looked up at the arm hanging out of the front passenger window, adorned by a black and grey tattoo of a naked woman on a cross with a snake coiled around her. The hand was crumpling a foil wrapper making the muscles under the tattoo ripple giving life to the woman. It made her squirm on the cross. The effect mesmerised Jack. He didn’t see the elongated thumb with a nail sharpened to a point cock and flick the tightly balled foil. It hit him between the eyes.

“Get up, Jack!”

Ignoring the order wasn’t a good idea. Jack stood wearing his angel boy grin. “Wh ... what do you want?” he stammered.

The man in the car swivelled his head towards him. Jack saw two copies of his own twitching face reflected in the man’s wrap-around mirror shades.

“Is that how you greet your father?” the man rasped.

There was nothing wrong with the sleeves of his shirt but Jack pulled at them anyway. “S.. sorry, Dad. I mean, ... hi.”

The rear passenger door opened. “Get in,” Jack’s father ordered.

“Dad, I ... I was on my way to The Square.” A blue Mazda pulled out of the service station just a block away. It was headed Jack’s way. The driver was hanging out of the window listening to the engine as the car whined its way up the road in second gear. It stopped at the intersection and the mechanic waved to Jack. If he ran he’d make it. Jack waited too long.

“You know better than to make me repeat myself, Jack. Now get in!”

Jack reached down, recovered his skateboard and climbed into the car, behind his father. He pulled down the seatbelt but didn’t engage the buckle. It seemed best to squash as close to the door as possible and ignore the large man sharing the back seat with him.

“A wonderful surprise meeting like this,” Jack’s father sighed. “Very fortuitous.”

The mute driver eased the Falcon forward.

Jack stole a glance towards the man sitting next to him. The man turned and again Jack saw his face reflected in a pair of mirror shades. He dropped his gaze to where the man’s bloated belly prevented the bottom of his t-shirt from ever reaching the top of his jeans. A shaggy beard tickled the top roll of exposed fat. Jack turned away. He’d heard about Fat Beard.

“How’s your mother?” Jack’s father asked.

Hot metal pooled up behind Jack's eyes. The last time his father had ignored the restraining order, Mum had landed in hospital for a week.

A sharp pain erupted in Jack's elbow. Fat Beard was crushing the joint between his thumb and forefinger. "Answer your father. Show the man some respect."

"She's okay," Jack gasped. The pain didn't slacken. "She's got a job now, at McDonald's. She's a night shift supervisor." He tried to wriggle his elbow free. "What do you want to know, Dad? I'll tell you.!"

"Is she seeing anybody?"

Jack cringed as his father swivelled around to study him. He so wished he had a gun! To aim at the bull's eye formed by the smirking lips nestling in a neatly trimmed centimetre-wide border of hair, the only fibres on his father's head. Jack used his free arm to wipe away snot pouring from his nose. "No!" Fat Beard's claw delivered even more pressure. "Nobody," Jack whimpered. "She says ... she'll never ... have another man ... in her life ... again."

The soft laughter from the front of the car acted as a signal and Jack was free to nurse his aching elbow.

"You can't waste your life away on that skateboard." Jack's father shook his head from side to side in mock sadness. "That's no way for a boy to spend the rest of his days. I've told you that before." He gave a slight nod.

Fat Beard grabbed the skateboard, dangled it by one wheel and chuckled.

Jack bit deeply into his bottom lip as Fat Beard opened the window and tossed the skateboard from the moving car. Jack jerked his head around in time to see it

tumbling over and over in the road behind them. One of the wheel mountings broke free and bounced off into the curb just before a van drove over the deck and snapped it. Swallowing hard and blinking furiously he whipped around and glared at the seat in front of him without letting his eyes anywhere near Fat Beard.

“I have another little job for you, Jack.” His father reached around the front seat and patted him on the knee.

Jack’s stomach dissolved.

“The next step in your training.”

“No, Dad. I can’t today. I ...” he let out a shrill cry as the claw closed on his raw elbow joint.

The courier van was two cars ahead of them. They’d followed it for forty-five minutes. It pulled into a service lane next to a gift shop.

“Do you see, Jack,” his father hissed. “The pattern is always the same when he gets a quiet place to stop.”

The courier leaped out of the cab, sprinted around to the back of the van and flung the rear door open. Jack leaned forward so that he could see past Fat Beard. He had to look or he’d be made to look. The courier grabbed a package and sprinted into the shop leaving the idling van open. A few moments later, the courier emerged from the shop, slammed the rear door of the van shut and leaped into the driver’s seat. Ignoring hoots of protest from other vehicles, the courier parted the traffic.

“We’ve seen enough,” Jack’s father announced. “Get the boy into position.”

As the car sped up, Fat Beard tossed a pair of surgical gloves into Jack's lap.

"On!" Fat Beard barked. "Don't want to leave your pudgy little paw prints all over the place, do you? Take your shoes off. They're dirty enough to leave a trail a blind cop could follow." He tossed some brand new river shoes into Jack's lap and pointed a thick finger at his feet. "On!"

They parked at K-Mart, four spaces away from the main delivery area.

"See that cage full of flattened cartons?" Jack's father murmured.

"Yes, Dad."

"Get behind that. Look where you stand. Don't get any oil or residue on your feet. The van will pull up just after that cage and you've seen how the fool operates. He'll be away for at least a minute. You climb in. Don't stop to look around. We'll do that for you. If you hear three hoots, change direction and *walk!*"

Fat Beard clipped the back of Jack's head. "Walk!"

"If there's no hooting, Jack, you climb in and work your way behind the parcels. He's delivered about a third of his load so there will be space for you. Now Jack, listen very carefully. While you are in there, you look around for anything addressed to O'Sullivan's Pharmacy. Have you got that, Jack? O'Sullivan's."

"O'Sullivan's!" Fat Beard delivered another clip and Jack's head vibrated.

"Pharmacies," Jack's father continued, "order things that interest us."

Jack kept an eye on the claw. "Yes, Dad."

“The van will drive from K-mart to Countdown. He always does. He’ll park at the back in the loading bay so the door will be left open. Again, you will have a minute. Get out and *walk*, Jack. Do you understand? *Walk!*”

Fat Beard raised his hand but Jack ducked. The fat man punched him sharply in the ribs. The air left his lungs but wouldn’t return quickly enough.

Jack’s father ignored the exchange. “You walk across the road to the KFC where we will be waiting. Have you got all of that, Jack?”

“Yes, Dad,” Jack whispered.

“Go.”

Jack crouched behind the cage. His hands were slippery inside the gloves and he thought about taking them off, wiping the sweat away and putting the gloves on inside out. He started to pull at one of them when the van arrived. Jack listened to every detail of the courier driver’s ritual. When it was clear, he started to run towards the van and then checked himself, slowing to a walk.

“Please hoot,” he whispered. He looked towards the parked Falcon. The black windows gave nothing away. “Please hoot.” He was still saying it as he crawled behind two large cartons and pressed his back against the side of the van, pulling his knees up under his chin. Jack studied the partition separating the driver from the cargo area. He couldn’t see the top of the driver’s seat so he assumed the driver wouldn’t see him.

Jack breathed a small sigh of relief. Three shoebox sized packages for O’Sullivan’s were at his feet.

Maybe this would be over quicker than he thought. He reached out towards them but jerked his hands back as the rear door of the van slammed shut.

The driver spoke on his radio while performing a three point turn that had Jack's skeleton sitting next to him. He nearly cried out with fright when the driver's arm snaked over the top of the partition to grab a bottle of water resting in a holder. Sweat from Jack's forehead splashed onto his knees.

According to his estimates the drive to Countdown wouldn't take more than two minutes. It seemed as if they'd been travelling for two hours when the van finally stopped. While the driver trotted around the side, Jack took hold of two O'Sullivan boxes and tensed himself to move. His stomach was still tumbling and his clothes felt as if they'd just come out of the wash.

The back door opened. He heard the driver moving packages around. Jack kept his eye on the tops of the two cartons he was hiding behind waiting for them to be snatched away.

"Damn!" the driver snarled. He slammed the back door shut and ran around to the sliding door opposite Jack. Jack toppled on to his side and lay still behind the cartons, clinging desperately to the theory, 'If I can't see you then you can't see me.' The driver scratched around amongst the packages closest to the side door.

Jack's breathing sounded in his own ears like jet engines revving. He thought about sitting up and giving the driver a fright. It was all a big joke! Then he looked at the latex gloves on his hands. It wouldn't be that easy.

“Yes!” the driver hissed, rammed the sliding door shut and trotted off.

Jack slithered to the back door and looked for the release catch. There wasn't one. He searched frantically around the rim of the door looking for anything that would give freedom. Sweat slid down his nose. He was about to crawl to the side door when the courier returned. Jack flattened out on the floor.

The driver took his seat and squealed the tyres. Parcels fell over Jack as he fought to keep his grip.

“This is Bravo-ten clearing Countdown and heading for McKenzie's.” The driver hung up the radio microphone after receiving a static-filled acknowledgement.

Windfall! Jack knew that name but what was it? He studied the parcels around him. Some long objects wrapped in corrugated cardboard were marked 'Bruce McKenzie's Bookshop, George Street.' He knew where that was. A busy street. He could melt away into the crowd if he moved fast. Obviously, the McKenzie parcels would go out the back door because of their length. He slid behind the large cartons where he'd be safe when the back door opened. Quietly, Jack assumed a crouching position so that the moment the driver removed the long parcels he could either dart out of the back door if it was open or use the side door which had an inside latch.

Jack choked back a scream of frustration. The cartons he was hiding behind were labelled 'McKenzie's Bookshop'. “Which door will he open first?” Jack mouthed to himself. He could see the library through the window. They'd turned into George Street! He had to

make a choice. Jack moved slowly towards the back of the van. He crouched at the rear door, poising himself to make a break for it when the door was opened. Everything changed in a teeth-splintering crash that threw Jack forward across the floor and wedged him against the partition along with an avalanche of parcels. The driver cursed and exited the vehicle. Jack hurled packages away from the side door looking for the release catch.

The rear door snapped opened.

“Move!” Fat Beard barked while scanning the packages nearest him. He snatched up two of the O’Sullivan boxes. Jack seized the opportunity, shot past Fat Beard and hit the road running, not stopping until he was inside the library.

Jack stood behind a shelf of DVDs. He carefully removed one and was able to look out onto George Street through the gap he’d created. The courier van had ridden into the back of another delivery truck. The drivers exchanged squares of paper and glares.

About fifteen metres further down the road, Fat Beard was leaning on the Falcon speaking to Jack’s father. Eventually, Fat Beard straightened up and dropped his bulk into the rear seat of the vehicle. Jack tensed when the Falcon pulled away from the curb. As the car slid past the library window, his father pointed his mirror shades straight at the DVD shelf. Jack could feel laser eyes burning from behind the shades, between the DVDs and straight into him. The tattooed arm telescoped out of the moving car and tossed Jack’s shoes onto the road.

Jack rested his head on the shelf. “This isn’t over,” he groaned. “It’s just begun.”