

## CHAPTER 1

# *Jack*

The door burst open again. 'Do you have any family in Auckland, Jack?' This one had been in several times before.

'No.'

'Are you sure? An aunt or a nana? Cousins, maybe? What about Christchurch?'

Jack kept his eyes fixed on a tiny hole in the table and shook his head.

The door shut. Voices churned on the other side. Flat shoes squeaked away and high heels approached, stopped a moment, then clipped off.

'Juvenile murderers all go to Auckland or Christchurch,' the security guard grunted while adjusting shiny trousers clinging to his bum. 'Don't think because you're only fifteen this is going to end up with a family conference and five minutes of community service. The judge is going to put you away for a hell of a long time. You'll be using a Zimmer frame when you get out.'

'Will I be sent away tonight?' Jack asked.

'You're gone, matey.' The guard licked his lips, tasting his own importance. 'They don't want murderers at the Palmerston North facility. That's for decent thugs who limit themselves to burglaries and assault. A murderer will lower the tone of the place.'

Jack sipped his water. It stayed in his mouth for a long time. When he tried swallowing, his throat constricted. He tried again. Fluid trickled into his windpipe making him cough and gag.

'You won't drown yourself with a cup of water, Jack.' The guard placed his hand over Jack's polystyrene cup and crushed it. 'Not while I'm watching you.' He wiped his hand along the back of Jack's chair. 'You're gonna pay for what you did to that harmless old bum.'

Jack slid a tissue from the dented box and blew his nose. He wiped his eyes, which were still streaming from the coughing. Or were they

tears? Jack didn't know what he felt. The guard across the table hated him. His mother said she loved him but she probably hated him, his sister as well, his friends. He hated himself for pleading guilty but not as much as he hated his father for making him plead guilty.

'Okay, Jack.' A new face appeared in front of him. A take-no-crap face. This guy sat on the edge of the table with his back to the guard and opened a file. 'To be honest, Jack, you pose a problem.'

'Sorry, sir.'

A long silence compressed the room.

'I'm Ted Burrows from Child, Youth and Family Services. We're worried about you.'

Jack tried to look up at Burrows, but his head had turned to lead and his neck was wet string.

'Other than shoplifting you've never been in any big trouble before.'

Jack shrugged.

'But this is big, Jack.' Burrows bent down, trying to look into Jack's eyes. 'Did you top Methsy? Are you sure you killed that man, or are you just saying you did so you don't have to go to trial?'

Jack said nothing.

'Are you protecting someone? Has somebody made you take the blame for this?'

Jack shook his head slowly.

'Talk to me, Jack.'

'I killed Methsy,' Jack whispered.

Another long silence followed, broken only by a cough from the security guard.

Burrows slid off the table onto a chair and leafed through the file. 'Normally we'd send you to Christchurch or Auckland Youth Facility because of the severity of your offence. They're both full.' Burrows orbited the table. 'We could do a shuffle around. Bring a smaller offender from there to here and send you in their place. But that can't happen before tomorrow. We think, because you don't seem to have any family elsewhere,' Burrows snapped the file shut, 'it may be best to keep you in Palmerston North. At least until sentencing. I'll talk to the judge but . . .' He sighed deeply. 'I can't promise anything.'

Jack looked up at last.

'You'll be here for Christmas, Jack. Your family will be able to visit you.' Burrows opened the file again. 'Your mum and sister . . .'

'What about my dad?' Jack asked.

'Of course.'

Burrows' smile slid slowly off his face as he held Jack's unblinking gaze.

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The van eased into Main Street. Jack struggled to see through the mesh covering high slit windows. A tight safety belt kept him firmly secured in his sideways-facing seat. Tops of trees catching the last rays of the day slid past the windows. The High Flyers Bar neon sign came into view. They'd cleared the roundabout and were backtracking down Main Street.

How would he be received at the Youth Justice Facility? A self-confessed murderer. Arriving as a newly accused was still raw in his memory. It was at night: the night he was arrested for murdering Methsy. The cop car drove into the brightly lit Sally Port. A steel roller door closed behind them before he was allowed out of the car. Three supervisors, no uniforms, signed for Jack and escorted him into an office. The office door was locked before one of the supervisors pressed a button behind a desk and waved to the cops through a glass wall as they backed out of the Sally Port.

'Locks and keys,' Jack sighed, gripping the edge of his seat as the van braked suddenly. 'Everything locked and no keys.' The top of Murphy's Bar slid across the slit window and then there was a big gap. That had to be Work and Income.

They stopped.

'Main and Princess Street traffic lights,' Jack muttered to himself. He said it again. Aloud this time. He was alone in the van. The first bit of privacy he'd had in weeks and probably the last for a very long time. He'd learned about Youth Justice privacy on his first night in detention.

He'd been made to shower while his clothes were searched. Not a private shower. Somebody watched him the whole time. He was even watched while he peed into a jar labelled with his name and the

date. Everything was removed from the pockets of his clothes and placed in a zip-lock plastic bag which he had to sign. Jack was given a T-shirt and jeans to wear while his clothes were laundered. Then his documentation was processed. Endless questions about his life. His head was soggy mush when he was eventually led down a long series of disinfectant-scented corridors. At a T-junction he was directed to the 'A' passage lined with closely spaced closed doors on each side. A pair of shoes was neatly positioned to the right of each door apart from one, which was open. A supervisor stood outside the open door, waiting. He introduced himself briefly then told Jack to remove his shoes and place them neatly in the passage like the others. The room was locked behind him the moment Jack entered and the light left on just long enough for him to pull the foam mattress up onto the raised concrete slab and unroll his blankets. While he did this, a pair of eyes watched him through the rectangular glass observation panel in his door.

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The van moved on: a right and then a left. Church Street! There were only trees to see apart from the tall red cone with a big ear on it, the Hearing Centre. Jack gripped his seat as the van veered left. This had to be the Church and Victoria Avenue roundabout.

Jack fixed his line of sight on the top of a large blue gum. Something was wrong. To get to the Youth Justice Facility, they would either take the left into Victoria Avenue at the roundabout or go halfway around to continue along Church Street. They'd traversed a three-quarter circle!

More trees. Darker and closer together. Jack's shoulder banged against the back door of the van as it swerved about searching for a straight path. It sped up and then turned sharply left.

Jack had to drag his right buttock back onto the seat. He strained at his straps to look out the narrow window at the top of the back door. Tsunamis of blood pounded in his ears. Another van was following them. A white one. He could only see the roof but caught glimpses of the black mirror-glass windscreen when the bouncing of the two vehicles was in harmony. He sat back and closed his eyes.

He tried to control his breathing and not be sick.

Jack's van crept around another circle. He opened his eyes in time to see the top of the recycle centre drifting closer to the window. Ferguson Street! The centre would be closed. All the houses opposite had high fences, according to his memory, so their occupants wouldn't notice a Chubb Security van in the parking lot after closing time. They'd also be unaware that Chubb Security move more than money around: clients of the justice system as well.

But Jack knew. Jack was acutely aware of everything that was happening. Steel wires tensioned in his neck and shoulder blades as the back door of the security van opened and a menacing bulk squeezed through. The vehicle's shock absorbers whimpered.

'Hello, Sweetheart.'

The door shut and the van started to roll.

'Uncle Fat Beard has come to ride with you, to give you some encouragement.' Thick wet lips poked through a massive beard, which carpeted a bloated belly. The air in the van turned sour.

Jack tried to squeeze his body through his seat as he strained to get away from the hulk sitting opposite him. Their knees touched rhythmically with the rocking of the van.

The partition between the driver's cab and the prisoners' seating opened.

'You have one-and-a-half minutes,' a guard muttered. He pushed his arm through the partition and held out an open hand. Fat Beard placed a roll of fifties in the hand. It retreated into the driver's cab. 'Don't leave any marks on him,' the guard snapped and pushed the partition closed.

'You hear that?' Fat Beard smirked. 'No marks. Now you and I know that I never leave any marks. Do I, Sweetheart?' Fat Beard lowered his face close to Jack's.

Jack tucked his arms behind his back, away from Fat Beard's joint-crushing claw.

'Daddy said I must tell you that you were a good boy in court today.'

Jack flinched as huge hands rested on his knees.

'What do you say when somebody pays you a compliment?' Fat

Beard sneered.

'Tha-thank you,' Jack stammered. The hands tightened slightly on his knees.

'I'm here to remind you how to continue being a good boy, and why.'

Jack looked towards the driver's partition. It had opened a crack but shut again the moment Jack made contact with the eye peeping through.

'Where are they taking you?' Fat Beard asked.

'Back to the Youth Justice Facility.'

The hands tightened a little more, delivering pressure to the sides of Jack's kneecaps. 'I know that, Sweetheart. But what about tomorrow? Where are you going to be until sentencing?'

'Here,' Jack snapped. 'They're keeping me here.'

Fat Beard smiled. 'Nice. When you arrive at the Sally Port you'll be asked all sorts of questions. It'll be like a whole new trial. What answers do you give them at the Sally Port?'

Jack searched desperately in his mind as the pressure on his knees grew. 'I killed Methsy,' he tried.

'Good,' Fat Beard murmured. 'Or what happens?' He pushed his face even closer to Jack's so that his sweat-glazed nose brushed between Jack's eyebrows as the van gave a lurch. Jack turned his head to avoid Fat Beard's wet garbage breath.

'I say nothing,' Jack blurted.

Fat Beard nodded slowly. 'That's right. You say nothing. You say nothing to your little friends on the inside. You scribble nothing on the walls of your cell. Don't keep any diaries, but that's not a problem is it, Sweetheart?' He released one of Jack's knees and cupped the free hand around the back of Jack's head. 'I'm forgetting. Reading and writing isn't your strong suit. Right, Sweetheart?' The other hand tightened around Jack's right kneecap with such force that it threatened to pop out through the skin.

The partition opened. 'Ruahine Street.'

The van slowed to a stop.

Fat Beard smiled. 'Remember what Daddy told you before the trial? Can you remember that far back?'

Jack's breath came in short bursts and he nodded, trying desperately not to give Fat Beard the pleasure of seeing how much pain he was inflicting.

Eventually, Fat Beard released him. 'If you change your story . . .' The menacing words oozed thickly from his mouth as he eased himself out of the van, '. . . we're going to hurt your mum. Or your sister.' He was standing on the road, one hand gripping the door while his head still protruded into the van. 'Or maybe, Sweetheart, we'll hurt them both.'

The door closed quietly and the lock groaned.