

**Kathy WHITE**Extract from *Sausage Sizzle*

## Chapter One

‘Well, Jack. What happened this time?’ Dr Perkins asked with just a tinge of sarcasm in his voice. ‘Last time you had concussion ... after a man wielding a cucumber hit you on the head in the library.’

‘That man was a nutter,’ Jack reminded him. ‘Everyone thinks they’re safe in libraries but there are probably more nutters there than anywhere.’

Dr Perkins hesitated. ‘I’m sure you’re right, Jack. But there was also the incident with the waxing strips, which was not the work of a nutter.’

Jack was horrified.

‘You’re not going to tell Mum about that one, are you?’ Jack said. ‘We were doing a play at school – you know, *The Last of the Mohicans*. Scalping was a big part of it ... so we had a go with those ‘Wax It’ strips that Mum uses on her legs. It seemed safer than a tomahawk.’

He started fiddling with the shredded drawstring on his shorts. ‘I got all the wax off the bath before Mum got home. And you managed to get it off me without too much damage.’

Dr Perkins looked at him suspiciously. ‘Yes, but that doesn’t explain why your mates were trying to scalp your bottom, Jack.’

‘Wax is funny stuff. It gets all over the place,’ Jack said in a small voice.

His right leg started to shake ever-so-slightly. For a moment, Jack wondered if he should tell Dr Perkins the truth. Underneath that harsh exterior and raggedy beard was probably a caring, understanding man.

‘There’s a good reason for the peanut,’ Jack whispered, looking up.

Dr Perkins was scraping at a jam stain on his tweed coat. ‘Damn it! This was clean on this morning,’ he grumbled.

‘There’s a boy in my street who ....’ Jack began again.

‘Pass me a tissue, will you Jack,’ Dr Perkins said, pointing to the box on the far corner of his desk. He licked the tissue that Jack handed him and dabbed at the stain.

‘There’s a boy in my street ... who ... who ... ‘

It was no use. He couldn’t do it.

‘... who ... offered to sort out my nostril problem.’

‘Your what?’ Dr Perkins said looking up

‘That nose doctor that you sent me to said I have small nostrils and that I might not be able to breathe properly when I’m a fossil like Grandad.’

Dr Perkins glanced up. ‘Mr Lenez said that your sinuses get infected because you have one particularly narrow nasal passage. If I remember correctly, he suggested an operation to widen it.’

‘Yeah, but an operation means knives and scalpels and suction thingies, and I don’t want anyone cutting into something that is magnificent just the way it is.’

Jack turned his head to give Dr Perkins a good profile view of his nose. 'One of my friends thought of an easier way to make the gap bigger.'

'Are you telling me that one of your friends shoved a peanut up your nose so that you wouldn't have to have an operation?'

'Yeah,' Jack muttered.

'And you believed him?'

Jack squirmed. Dr Perkins stared at him.

'Well I thought a vice like my dad has in his workshop would work better, but we didn't have a teeny-tiny one ...' his voice tailed off at the end.

Dr Perkins sighed and reached out for his tweezers. 'Tilt your head back, Jack.'

Jack tried not to notice the pain as Dr Perkins grasped the peanut between the tweezer pincers. He squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth.

For a moment, he was back in the school bike shed with William. Jack snapped his eyes open, hoping he could stop feeling like he was going to be sick. Dr Perkins' huge face was smiling at him, and in his hand was the biggest peanut Jack had ever seen.

'It's actually a macadamia nut,' Dr Perkins said, looking pleased. 'The chocolate-coated ones are the nicest. Why don't you tell your friends to try eating them in future, and leave your nose to the experts.'

Dr Perkins believed him. Jack's secret was safe.

He pushed open the swing doors of the doctor's surgery, and immediately fell over his mate Robert's skinny legs, which were sprawling over the steps like a daddy-long-legs. Robert looked up from his manga comic and grinned.

'Did they get it out or had it already moved to your brain?'

Jack opened his hand so Robert could see and then slapped at his face.

Robert jerked away and grinned. 'You're just lucky I came along when I did. William could have pushed that peanut up your nose and out your ...'

'Yeah right,' Jack interrupted, looking behind him to make sure that no one in the doctor's surgery could hear them. 'You coming to my place?'

Robert nodded and slung his backpack onto his right shoulder.

They darted between the cars on Wolsley Road and cut through Albert Park on their way to the bus stop. Everywhere there were ladders leaning against lamp posts, as people dismantled the hundreds of paper lanterns from the weekend's Chinese Lantern Festival. Paper sheep and a ninja turtle jazz band stared sadly at them from a giant orange skip.

'It's Dad's birthday coming up,' Jack whispered to Robert. 'And I've got stuff-all money. Why don't we nab a couple as gifts.'

Robert looked skeptical. 'I'm not sure that he'd be into ninja turtles.'

'Yeah, but a ninja turtle from a jazz band would send him spare. How special is that?'

'You reckon?' Robert said, eyeing it up.

Getting them down a main street in suburban Auckland was one thing. Getting them on the no. 49 bus was another. By the time they got them home, they had been elbowed, stood on, and baby-spewed on. They were looking a bit worse for wear.

‘Hey Robert, nice girlfriend.’ Aaron called out as they clambered off the bus at the Carlton Dairy. The other boys from Liston Intermediate cracked up along the back seat, like a pack of cackling hyenas.

‘I can’t believe you persuaded me to do this,’ Robert groaned. ‘Why can’t you just buy your dad a pair of socks, like any other self-respecting kid with no money?’

Sick of being doubled over, with a shell on his back, Robert dropped the turtle to the ground and started dragging it by its back leg. ‘What are you going to do about ... you know?’

‘William, you mean?’ said Jack. ‘I don’t know. I’m hoping it’s a phase.’

‘Yeah, but it’s a phase called Life,’ Robert said. ‘What if William picks on you until the day he dies?’

‘That’s a nice thought,’ Jack murmured, pulling the sheep higher on his shoulders. ‘I mean about William dying.’

He pointed down the driveway. ‘Let’s dump these in the shed so Dad doesn’t see them before the big day.’

Jack held all of the other junk in as Robert tossed their bounty on the top of the pile. Together they leaned against the door, while Jack slipped the padlock on the clasp. When they ambled through the back door, Jack’s mum, Julie was at the kitchen bench making a berry smoothie for his sister Nadia.

‘Me too, please’ Jack called out, pointing to the blender. He dumped his backpack on the ground and slid onto a bar stool.

‘Me three,’ Robert echoed.

‘Where did you disappear to after school?’ Nadia asked Jack, passing him the cookie jar. He shoved two biscuits in his mouth. ‘Had thum bithneth wiv a nut.’

‘That’s not a nice thing to call your friend,’ Nadia smirked.

‘What?’ Robert said

‘Never mind,’ she sighed.

Julie placed a tall glass of creamy pink liquid in front of each of them. ‘Did you have a good day?’

‘I think we found the perfect present for Dad,’ Jack said. ‘It’s pretty choice. Original. Funny. Bound to be better than Nadia’s.’

‘I doubt that very much, big brother. I’ve made Dad the sort of present that he will treasure forever. Which sounds nothing like the fart cushion, or the Dracula teeth that you gave him last year.’ Nadia sat up tall on her stool. Jack knew she did it to remind him that she was now a couple of centimeters taller than him.

Jack tried to look smug. ‘Just you wait and see. This is nothing like any other present I’ve ever given him.’

‘You can say that again,’ Robert murmured.

Jack elbowed him.

Robert started blowing bubbles through his straw into his smoothie.

Jack did the same, but when he glanced up, his mum was giving him the evil eye.

‘I popped in at the doctor’s on the way home. Got something in my eye, so got him to flush it out for me,’ Jack said, all casual. ‘Just thought I should tell you ... in case you get a bill for it.’

‘As long as you’re all right,’ Julie said. ‘You are, aren’t you?’

Jack nodded as he slurped on his smoothie.

‘For God’s sake, look what I found in the shed,’ a voice exploded behind them.

‘Daaaadddd!’ Nadia groaned. ‘You nearly made me spill my drink.’

‘Which one of my darling children made this monstrosity at school?’ Michael asked, holding up the ninja turtle. ‘I went out looking for moss killer to try and do something with my dismal lawn, and THIS is what I find. I can’t even get into that shed, it’s so full of crap.’

He dropped the turtle onto the floor, peered into the blender, then drank the dregs of smoothie straight from the blender jug.

He swallowed and looked from Nadia to Jack. ‘Please promise me that this disaster of an art project is not my birthday present.’

Robert opened his mouth to say something, but Jack beat him to it.

‘It needs some work, that’s all ...’

‘It needs ... to be binned ...’ Michael said. ‘Look, most years, I don’t mind getting ugly presents, but this year is special. It’s my 40<sup>th</sup>.’

His smile faded as he looked from one empty face to the next. No one was jumping for joy.

‘It’s okay, Dad. I’ve got you a special present,’ Nadia said suddenly, getting up and patting him on the back. ‘Boys aren’t good at buying presents. Jack can’t help it.’

Jack scowled at her.

Michael draped his arms around Jack’s shoulders. ‘That’s not true. Jack always buys good presents when he goes to the right places.’

‘Can you all stop talking as if I’m not here?’ Jack snapped. ‘I know how to buy a decent present.’

‘Good,’ Michael said. ‘It’s late-night at the mall, Jack. Let’s nip out for a spot of shopping.’

Jack panicked. He knew what was coming. ‘I can’t, Dad. Robert came over to do some homework with me. Didn’t you, Robert?’ He raised his eyebrows at Robert, hoping that he would take the hint.

Robert took a short break from sucking on his smoothie. His face went blank, the way it did when Mr Soppitt, his teacher asked him a question and he had no idea what the answer was. ‘Um ... we can do it another night,’ he suggested.

Jack sighed. ‘What’s the point in having a best friend who can’t read my mind?’ He glanced at his dad and cringed. There was no escaping the trip to Hardware King.

Power tools and gardening equipment had always had a strange effect on Jack’s Dad. When they walked through the door of Hardware King it was like someone pushed a button labeled ‘frenzy’ on his remote control. Michael’s eyes darted from aisle to aisle, and then when they fixed on something, he would pounce on it like he was moving in for the kill. Jack’s cat Goofy did the same thing with leaves and coloured clothes pegs (and the dachshund next door), but she was nearly 18 years old, and her attention span was normally only a few minutes. Jack’s dad looked at everything, from wind speed gadgets, to shade cloth for the gazebo. An hour and a half later, they were only up to the middle aisle.

‘You’ll have to give me more pocket money if you want me to buy a 1400 watt Super Sander, Dad,’ Jack sighed, scrabbling around in his pocket for his money. ‘Right now, I’ve got enough for a Glo-in-the-dark golf ball soap or a box of scorched almonds.’

Michael looked hopeful for a moment.

‘Oh ... actually ... scrub the scorched almonds. I thought that was a \$2,’ Jack mumbled, pointing to a dirty 10 cent piece.

‘Good morning shoppers,’ announced a crackling loudspeaker. ‘We have some red hot specials in the gardening section today. You can have a new lawn ... in two days ... for only two dollars. But you’d better be quick, because the new Energy Plus grass seed is selling as fast as it grows.’

‘That’s it!’ Michael said, slapping Jack on the back. ‘You could give me a new lawn for my birthday – like Richard Payne’s at number 14.’ Michael’s eyes went dreamy. ‘There will be no cricket pot-holes and dog pee burn marks. If we plant it now, it will be ready in time for my birthday barbecue. What do you say, Jack? Want to make an old man happy on his birthday?’

Jack’s face brightened. The hardware torture was nearly over. At the time, ‘yes’ seemed like a wise thing to say.

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‘It must be the stupidest thing I’ve ever done,’ Jack groaned and sank deeper into his car-seat. Every muscle in his body ached from carrying sixty gazillion watering cans of water back and forth from the house to the lawn, because their hose had suddenly sprouted holes as big as moon craters. ‘I’ve gone gray trying to protect that lawn. Isn’t it Nadia’s turn?’

‘Look Jack - I don’t know what you and your friends do to my lawn but it’s always been the worst in the street,’ Michael said. ‘All I’m asking is that you keep this one in good nick ... until the day of my barbecue.’

‘Yeah, like that’s gonna be easy,’ Jack said to himself as his dad indicated that he was pulling the car into the loading zone outside the school. At least there had been a sprinkle of rain overnight, so maybe the lawn wouldn’t need watering after school. The Triumph started to cough and splutter as it slowed down.

‘All the animals in the neighbourhood like peeing and poeing on our lawn, especially William’s mutt. It’s like it has a GPS system programmed to take it to ‘Jack’s place,’” But no one was listening to him. Nadia was already halfway out the door, and his dad was crooning to his dinosaur of a car and stroking her cracked wooden dashboard. ‘Come on old girl, don’t give up on me yet.’

‘That’s right, ignore me,’ Jack said as he clambered out.

The only good thing about the grass seed was that Nadia had shut up about girls buying superior birthday presents. Their dad was so excited about his new lawn that it seemed like nothing else existed. In fact, Jack’s whole history of bad birthday-present buying seemed to have been wiped out in one fell swoop. His dad even seemed suddenly cheerful about the soap-on-a-rope that had been hanging in the shower for what seemed like centuries. He used to say it smelt like a cross between petrol and parmesan cheese, and that it never seemed to get smaller no matter how often he used it. Jack assumed these were good things, but after rescuing it from the rubbish bin twice, he now had doubts about it being

a good buy. Jack had bought it from a garage sale, from a man who sneered and said it came with a lifetime guarantee. It was only later that Jack wondered if he should have asked what was guaranteed. His dad reckoned it had burnt the hairs off his chest, and that he had only used it once on his privates. However the previous day, he had said quite cheerfully that it worked wonders on cleaning out the cat's litter tray.

'Say hello to Anna-Marie for me,' Jack called out to Nadia as she disappeared across the playground.

'In your dreams,' she called back.

The bell rang as Jack was dumping his bag in his locker. He glanced around to check that he was alone, then dug into his pocket and pulled out a padlock the size of a Monsta Burger from Jacko's. "Let's see you get that one off, Dickbrain," he muttered, snapping it into place. Jack yelped as someone grasped his shoulder.

'Gotcha!' It was only Robert. 'Get your books. Mr Soppitt's taking us to the library. Says he's got a headache and can't concentrate on aquatic equations this morning.'

'Aquatic equations. What the hell is that – some sort of fishy maths?'

'Aquatic, quadratic, didactic – I don't know – it was some sort of tic,' Robert said, burrowing in his backpack. He peeled a bit of cheese off the cover of his library book, and popped it in his mouth. 'Anyway, get a move on. Mr Soppitt's in a foul mood.'

Everyone slouched into line, and began snaking their way towards the prefab next to the netball court. It was a comfortable old building, with cracks spreading across the ceiling and buckets positioned under leaks during heavy rain, but if you ignored the smell of rotting carpet, it was cosy and warm, like buttered crumpets on a winter afternoon.

'Watch out for the bucket,' the librarian, Mrs Bucholz called out cheerfully, but it was too late. Glenn booted it into the returns bin and everyone groaned.

'We're not in soccer now, Mr Hulbert. I suggest you get a cloth from Mrs Bucholz and wipe those books dry.' Mr Soppitt saw Glenn take a breath. 'No excuses. No explanations. Just do it before this headache turns me into the three-headed gorgon that Odysseus has to fight in the *Black Ships of Troy*. Over to the story corner, everyone.'

Halfway through the library period, Jack looked up to see Mrs Bucholz the librarian waving at him.

'I nearly forgot to tell you, a book's come in for you,' she said, pointing to Mr Soppitt's cubby-hole.

When he saw the cover, he couldn't believe it. 'I thought you weren't going to get this for the library.'

Mrs Bucholz smiled. 'I changed my mind. Lots of people asked for it so I'm sure it's full of literary value.'

Jack grinned. He was so happy that he didn't watch where he was going, and stepped backwards into William. As always, his mouth worked faster than his brain.

'Even... even you would like this book,' he muttered, trying not to show fear. William narrowed his eyes. 'Books are for girls.'

Jack lifted it up to show him the cover. ‘**Zombie Bums from Uranus,**’ he said, thinking the title would make him laugh.

‘You’re dead, Tisdale,’ William grunted.

The class went unusually quiet. It felt a bit like the moments before a tsunami strikes, when the water is sucked back from the beach, and everyone knows it’s too late to make it to higher ground.

Jack didn’t remember packing up and getting into line. He walked back to class in a daze, the shushing sound in his head growing louder by the minute.

Robert appeared at his side. He had a weird look on his face, like someone had force-fed him his pencil case. ‘Mr Soppitt went loopy at William just before you bumped into him,’ he whispered, looking behind him to check that no one was listening. ‘He said it’s like having a **zombie** sitting in the back row, and that he should get off his lazy **bum** and take part in the class.’” Robert smiled weakly.

‘Zombies and bums,’ Jack mumbled. ‘Talk about lousy timing.’

Robert swallowed nervously. ‘Maybe he’ll forget.’

‘Yeah, right,’ Jack thought. ‘This is a guy who pulls the legs off flies for fun. I’m sure he’ll want to forgive and forget.’

‘Well, perhaps you should hide out after school again ... just in case,’ Robert added, before slipping back into his place in line.

At least Jack didn’t have to scare the birds away when he arrived home that afternoon. He thought they would swoop down from the trees when he went to the bathroom but he watched through the window, and there wasn’t a bird in sight.

Nadia stopped in the doorway. ‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

Jack stood a soggy exercise book on the bench, and spread the pages out to dry. ‘Let’s just say the padlock didn’t work as well as I hoped.’ He tipped the rest of the water out of his backpack and down the sink.

Nadia bit her lip and took a deep breath. ‘Robert told me ... you know ... about the library stuff.’

Silence.

‘Did he follow you home?’ she asked.

Jack shook his head. ‘Mr Soppitt kept him in after school so I got a bit of a head-start. ‘And it’s the weekend tomorrow. Maybe he’ll forget about it by Monday.’

‘Cool,’ Nadia said. ‘Would you like me to do the first hour of your bird watch?’

Jack looked up. ‘Really?’

‘Really. This is just a rare moment of your sister feeling sorry for you. It will probably never happen again.’

‘Wow,’ Jack thought. ‘I wonder if I should try this as a strategy in life. Act downtrodden and make girls fall at my feet? I don’t think so.’

Just then, a young sparrow hit the French doors – THWACK - and bounced off the edge of the balcony onto the grass below. It was lucky that Jack’s cat Goofy wasn’t around. She was too slow to hunt her own food these days, but she always welcomed fresh home deliveries.

‘Poor thing,’ Nadia crooned to the dazed bird. ‘I’ll get a box. You can lie in the hot water cupboard until you’re feeling better.’

Nadia the Bird Rescuer disappeared into the house and soon returned with a shoebox lined with tissue paper. ‘Jack, you look so stupid when your mouth hangs open like that.’ She fluffed up the paper. ‘Can you pick up the bird with these tongs?’

Jack shook his head and stared, wide-eyed at the ground.

‘Why are you acting like such a nong?’ she asked.

That was when she looked down and saw it.

‘Aaaaaarrrrrgggggggghhhhhh!’

Nadia still felt a bit queasy so she lay down on the couch while Jack and his mum took a closer look at the sparrow.

‘Are you sure that you didn’t...?’ Julie began.

‘I didn’t do anything, I swear,’ Jack said.

She lifted the crisp, barbecued bird off the shoebox lid with the tongs.

‘It’s really ... well-done,’ she hesitated. ‘Did you see what happened?’

Jack nodded, and then shook his head. ‘I saw the bird change colour but there was no one near it. It was just on the ground. Hey, do you think it was that spontaneous combustion?’

‘Spontaneous combustion,’ his mum grinned. ‘I doubt it.’

They both stared at the bird.

‘You don’t think it’s anything to do with the new grass seed, do you?’ Jack whispered.

She shook her head quickly.

‘But how do we know for sure, Mum?’

She paused. ‘We don’t. So we’re not going to touch it or water it until your dad gets home.’