

## Mad Jack and the BMX Boys

The boys stood at the gate, shuffling in their oversized basketball shoes. The tallest one, next to the shiniest BMX, pushed the skinniest one forward.

‘Go on then,’ Jai said as he manhandled Keegan.

‘No way, I’m not going in there.’

Jai leant his forehead against Keegan’s . ‘But we made a deal. If Mad Jack is living in there, you’ll be one of us and you’ll get your bike back.’

Keegan looked to the pine plantation. He shivered. ‘But he’s a full on crim. He’s never been caught, so how am I supposed to do it?’

‘You’ll think of something. And remember, no photo, no bike,’ Jai laughed. As they headed off, Jai grabbed Keegan’s old Huffy and dragged it away with him, leaving the younger boy to wonder what his mum would say if he was late home for tea. And without his bike.

The pine needles turned from green to rust as he trudged out of the shafts of sunlight and deeper into the trees. He put his hood on and breathed in the dank scent. He debated aloud whether trying to find Mad Jack’s shack was really worth entry into the gang, or whether life on the outside of cool was a better prospect.

Deep into the plantation, Keegan was about to double back. Even if he found the shack, it was too dark to take a photo. He heard a shuffling noise followed by the crack of a branch. He felt the icy reach of fear grabbing his guts and decided that instant, that joining the gang was so not what he wanted to do, that he broke into a run.

At the first junction of tracks, Keegan hesitated. Which way? He looked from path to path. Behind him, the spongy carpet pounded and he turned to see a giant, hair-covered man standing with his hands on his hips.

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'Lost your way, sonny?'

Keegan's mouth opened and closed like his goldfish.

'Come on, boy,' the man yelled. 'Left fork or right?'

'I don't remember. I wasn't going to do anything, honest,' he squeaked.

The man's face twisted in and his mouth sprung open. He shuddered before addressing Keegan again. 'Supposing I'm armed?'

Keegan couldn't see anything on the man other than a leather Drizabone overcoat so worn that it was shiny. 'You'd have killed me already.'

'Maybe.' The man stepped closer revealing his tobacco-stained teeth and crusted lips. Keegan caught a whiff of his stale breath and wondered for a micro-second if he should take a photo now, before death, so that there might be some kind of evidence left behind.

Keegan span round and dashed off, taking the right fork and scrambling through the trunks, feeling the splinters of bark stab him as he hit tree after tree. He could hear the man behind him. He tripped on a grasping tangle of roots and spilled headlong into a trunk. Before he could collect himself, the man's boots filled his vision and the last thing he remembered was being hauled from the ground.

The sound of hissing brought Keegan to consciousness but he clenched his eyes shut, rolling escape plans through his head. He didn't get much past running off again. Or maybe climbing a tree and waiting. Or even swinging through the branches like Cheetah in Tarzan. His mum always said he was like a monkey.

'You with me yet?' The man's voice was gruff.

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Keegan pulled himself up and was presented with a bowl of steaming soup.

‘Take it, it’ll do you good. You’ve scuffed your face up.’ The man thrust the bowl into his hands. His face contorted into that strange grimace again and he let out a series of guttural grunts. ‘Go on.’

Keegan took a sip, looking around him at the makeshift camp. Constructed between four sturdy trunks, the shelter was roofed with thick thatches of pleated pine branches. The sides were whittled lengths of branch, held together with thick rope. A canvas awning was tied back with washing line. There was an array of cutlery and crockery hanging on other lengths of line, some grubby clothes, a couple of old crates for seating and a pile of dirty, crumpled linen in the depths of the shelter.

‘It’s no palace,’ the man grunted, swigging his own bowl of soup, ‘but I built it all myself.’

Keegan eyed the man’s forearms covered with black tattoos, cuts and grazes. ‘Are you Mad Jack?’ When the words were out he thought of his mum’s continual nagging – engage brain before mouth. Too late.

‘Ha! Time’s have changed. One time I was a hero, Captain Jack. Then I was a criminal. Bad Jack. Now I’m just a lunatic. I like it. Michael Jackowski. But you probably knew that.’ His mouth growled again as he proffered his hand.

‘Why do you keep doing that?’ Too late. Again.

‘Nosy, aren’t you?’

‘My mum says it’s curiosity.’

‘Curiosity killed the cat.’

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‘Are you still going to kill me? Or is the soup poisoned?’ Keegan felt his stomach churn.

The old man cackled. ‘No poison. No killing. I’ve been there, done that.’

Keegan swallowed. Was he being taken in? ‘You’ve really killed someone?’

‘Said you were nosy. Why don’t I ask you something instead?’

‘Okay. But I’ve never killed anyone. Or nicked anything. Apart from that one can of coke and that was all Jai’s idea.’ Keegan heard the shrill note to his voice.

‘Whoa, slow down, motor mouth. I was going to ask you your name.’

‘Keegan Mitchell. Sorry. Mum always tells me off for jabbering too much. I can’t help it. It just all comes out. Maybe I shouldn’t have told you my name. I shouldn’t talk to strangers.’

‘You can’t get anything right, can you? Why were you wandering about in here?’

‘I wasn’t looking for trouble, I was just ... My bike...it’s kind of a test...’

‘Test?’ the old man tugged on his matted hair and pulled that face again.

The man walked in circles, hissing and cursing and stamping his feet.

‘I want to go home.’ Keegan felt the tickle of tears. He cuffed his nose and realised he was shaking. ‘I’m scared.’ His voice was puny and the old man laughed. Everyone always laughed. He knew he sounded like a girl when he was nervous. He thought about his mum’s kind face and briefly

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wondered what had happened to his bike. He wished he hadn't argued with his sister and he wished he had told Emily Carter how much he fancied her.

'Come back and sit down. I'll tell you some things about me, about Mad Jack, shall I? I reckon that's what you're here for, isn't it? To find me? To see if I'm real. Well, have a feel of me.'

He took Keegan's arm and rubbed it over his coarse face, just as it broke into that grimace.

'Real enough, aren't I? Scary, too. Tourettes. That's what I got.'

'Tourettes?'

'Tics and twitches and outbursts of foul language. Can't help it, see?'

Keegan looked at his feet, guilty, relieved, ready to confide. 'I've got ADHD. I can't help that, either.'

Mad Jack held out his arm, ready for shaking, a grin spreading his dirty brown face wider. Keegan cracked a half-smile.

'You been sent out here to spy on me and report back to your mates so that you can be part of the gang, is that it?'

'Pretty much. I should be going back now. Mum will be worried.'

'Your mum's good to you?'

'Course.'

'That's good. You're going to need a good mum.'

'Didn't your mum look after you, then?'

Mad Jack scratched his head. 'She tried. She did. I was a terror, though. No names, no labels back then, see. She sent me away. To an uncle. He signed me up to the army. I got some focus then, see. Tics didn't

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bother me so much. They kind of stopped. I had other things in my mind. I was needed. Part of a team. I was good, too. A good soldier.'

Keegan watched his face soften. 'Did you go to war?'

'Nam.' His face contorted again. He hung a billy over a flame and lit a cigarette.

'Why don't you have a real house and a job?'

'Stuff happened.'

'Like?'

'Why should I tell you?'

It seemed obvious to Keegan. 'Cos we're kind of alike. We're both on the outside.'

Mad Jack grunted. 'Your mum told you that, I bet. Well, if you want to know. When I got back from Vietnam, life wasn't the same remember much, but I ended up going to jail and when I got out, I had nothing.'

'So you're not on the run?'

'Not from the law, no.'

'But how do you survive out here?'

'You ask too many questions.' His eyes disappeared under the smoky weight of his brows. 'Now you know all about me, how about I find out all about you? Do you know how to light a fire in the bush?'

Keegan shook his head. 'Our caravan's got an oven.'

'Pah! You know about bush tucker?'

'No.'

'You know how to make a shelter?'

'No.'

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'What can you do?'

Keegan pulled a long face. 'My mum says I'm next to useless.'

'She's right. Now, this gang of yours. Are they worth joining?'

'I suppose so. I'd get my bike back for starters. Jai took it and he stole a flash one for himself. The girls like them too.'

'And you think the girls will like you if you hang with them?'

'Maybe.'

'And they call me mad. You need to impress. You need to stand out.'

'How do I do that?'

'You set the challenge. Make your mates come in here. They sent you 'cos they're scared themselves. You need to go back to them and lay down the gauntlet. A night in here. Each boy builds his own shelter. Each boy is allowed a flashlight, a knife, a box of matches and a bottle of water.'

'I don't think my mum would let me.'

'You don't tell her, idiot. You tell her you're staying at Jai's. He tells his mum he's staying at yours. Get it? And believe me boy, with my training, the girls will be falling over their heels to hang off your arm. But the BMX stuff. Forget it. Stealing is stealing.'

Jai contemplated Keegan's challenge. 'You're serious aren't you?'

'Just one night. If anyone leaves before dawn, they have to give their bikes to the charity shop.'

'No way,' Jai snickered. 'My bike stays.'

'It's not your bike. You stole it. If anyone leaves before sunrise, that's it.'

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‘And what does the winner get, Keegan?’

‘Just the glory,’ he smiled, realising he was actually feeling confident. It was new. He liked it.

Jai looked dubious. Mad Jack had reckoned right - he wasn’t used to being challenged. For a split second, Keegan imagined holding Emily’s hand.

They checked each other’s pockets for items that weren’t supposed to be taken in. All clear, they set off. Each found a spot in the plantation, not too far out of each other’s patch, but far enough away to feel alone. Keegan quickly found his supplies and set about making his shelter, tying even lengths of branch together with the stripped back tree fern leaves. He gathered more fern leaves to make the flooring and the roof and he cut back the trunk of a tree to dig out the drier bark for kindling. He giggled as he listened to the others cursing and scratching around for material to use.

Night descended thick and cool. Pine scent drifted high in the flames of his camp fire. Night birds hooted and nocturnal creatures scratched. Keegan knew what to expect. He’d listened to Mad Jack. His focus had been total, to his utter astonishment. He’d found the whole discussion fascinating and had remembered the minutest details of what Jack had told him. His mum would have been totally impressed.

He laid down on the soft pile of leaves he’d mounded up and heard footsteps. Jack crept under the shelter, and even in the darkness, Keegan knew he was twisting his face. His stale odour overpowered the light scent of pine.

‘Your mates are scared.’

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Keegan giggled. 'Do you think they'll last?'

'Not after I play my tricks. You wait.'

He crept back out. A half-hour later and Keegan heard a strange sound, a guttural honking noise, unlike any description Jack had given him. He sat upright, heart thudding, before he realised what was going on. He recognised Jai's squeal as the noise got louder and more urgent. Keegan laughed into his fleece.

A while later, after the flurry of activity from the other camps had died down, Keegan's eyes were heavy. He dropped off to sleep without too much bother, knowing that Jack would protect him. He couldn't make out the time when he woke to a scream from Jai's pitch and the sound of running water. He checked outside his shelter, but there was no sign of rain. He made a mental note to ask Jack what he'd done when he saw him next.

Sometime in the early hours, Jai exploded into an almighty scream and Keegan heard a whining voice say something about 'drop bears'.

Not long after, the old man returned, his light tone giving away the smile on his face. 'They're off. You've done it, my boy. The drop bear got them.'

'There's no such thing.'

'You know that and I know that,' he said sweetly, 'but when a dead possum lands on your shelter and takes the roof down with it, what's a boy supposed to believe?'

Keegan grinned at the thought. 'What was the water, Jack?'

'Man's got to relieve himself sometime.'

## **Mad Jack and the BMX Boys**

Jai didn't make it to school on the Monday. Keegan heard that his mother had told the principal that he was covered in some kind of rash. Keegan remembered the ant hills that were right by Jai's chosen spot in the plantation and almost broke out in the itches himself.

When Jai did come back, he refused to surrender the BMX.

'A bet's a bet, Jai,' Keegan said. 'And I could always tell your mum that you didn't win it in a raffle.'

Keegan escorted Jai to the local Salvo's but when they got to the door, Jai stormed off, kicking the bike over. Keegan picked it up and wheeled it through the door. An old lady with pink hair smiled at him and called him a lovely boy as he offered her the bike.

Mad Jack walked out from behind the men's woollens and pulled Keegan aside.

'What are you doing here?'

'Need new clothes.'

'You're moving on?'

'I tend to outstay my welcome.'

When Mad Jack left the shop, the pink haired lady walked over to Keegan.

'You shouldn't talk to that man, love. He's no good.'

Keegan smiled to himself. 'Oh, I don't think he's that bad.'

He left the shop and waved to Emily Carter over the road. She actually waved back.