

SPURT

A BALLS AND ALL STORY

Chris Miles



hardie grant EGMONT

One

Jack Sprigley stared down his pyjama bottoms on the first morning of Term Four and realised that his worst fears had come true.

Nothing had changed.

No last-minute dash to the finish line. No final charge across the battlefield to victory. No champagne cork-popping moment that meant he'd joined the rest of Year 8 in all its hairy, pimply glory.

He snapped the pyjama elastic back.

Time had run out. Another school year was nearly over.

And he was still stranded on Pubeless Island.



Jack sat at the kitchen table with a bigger-than-usual bowl of cornflakes. His mum, Adele, glanced up at him from her morning cuppa.

‘First day back,’ she said.

‘Yep,’ said Jack.

His mum took a sip of her tea. 'Must be looking forward to seeing everyone again?'

Jack shrugged. 'Sure.'

Hallie breezed past and grabbed her breakfast smoothie from the fridge.

'It's just that you did seem to spend most of your holidays shut away in your room,' said Jack's mum, not quite making eye contact. 'On your own,' she added.

'Gross,' said Hallie from the other side of the fridge door.

'I was busy,' said Jack.

'Gross,' said Hallie.

Jack could guess what his sister was thinking. A fourteen-year-old boy, alone in his room for days – there were natural conclusions to be drawn.

But that was the problem. Guessing was all he *could* do. Sure, everything Ms Porter talked about in Health Ed made total sense.

In theory.

'Anyway,' said Jack. 'It's not like I had zero contact with anyone for the whole holidays. We just ... hung out online.'

'Right,' said his mum, definitely not convinced. 'So you hung out with Vivi, Reese and Darylyn online.'

'Uh-huh,' Jack said through a mouthful of cereal.

Jack's gran, Marlene, shuffled into the kitchen and switched the kettle on. 'Don't forget to take my script to the chemists today, Jack.'

'I never have forgotten, Gran,' said Jack, relieved at the change of subject.

He finished his bigger-than-usual bowl of cornflakes in silence.



So far, Jack had come up with three possible reasons for his freakish lack of progress in the man-parts department:

- 1) His body was building up to a massive growth spurt. At some point soon he'd turn into an Incredible Hulk of puberty and sprout a pair of really enormous testicles.
- 2) It was a punishment from the gods for becoming semi-famous in Grade 6.
- 3) There'd been a mix-up at the hospital and he was actually a girl.

Jack had already ruled out 2. If gods existed, they probably had better things to do than watch reality TV. If it was 3, and he was a girl, the situation was still pretty messed up because he didn't have any boobs or anything either.

Even if it was 1, and he ended up with gamma-charged super-junk, Jack had a feeling it might be too late. He was pretty sure his friends had already dumped him.

The signs were obvious. Vivi hadn't called or emailed or even messaged since the end of term. Two whole weeks

of silence. To which Jack had responded with ... well, to be fair, silence.

No word from Reese either. Not a single link to a dodgy YouTube clip of whichever obscure 60s garage rock band or scuzzy rockabilly weirdos were rotating highly on his playlist that week.

Ditto Darylyn. Not even a reply to Jack's text asking her to switch his laptop back to how it had been before she'd 'improved' it.

Nothing.

His mum was right. Jack hadn't seen his friends for two weeks.

It wasn't just the freeze-out over the holidays, though. Some time around the end of Year 7, Jack had started noticing the changes. Darylyn's pimples. The hair above Reese's lip and under his arms. Vivi becoming, to the extent that Jack had looked, more 'boobs-having'.

There'd been other things, too. A week before the end of term, he'd caught Reese and Darylyn whispering to each other when they were all hanging out together at the Bernadino Mall after school. He hadn't thought much of it at the time. Now he realised: that must have been the moment they'd started to question if they could really afford to be seen in public with someone who looked more 'kid brother' than 'homie'. At some point the seeds of doubt must have been planted in Vivi's mind too.

Now everything seemed to have come to a head, like the pus in one of the pimples that everyone but him seemed to have on their faces now. Vivi, Reese and Darylyn had obviously got together as soon as term had ended and decided to ditch Jack. Because that was what happened when you didn't measure up.

You got left behind.



Jack jammed his laptop into his backpack and stuffed his shorts, Nike Zooms and water bottle into his backpack.

He'd really hoped his growth spurt might hit by the time school went back. Everything Jack had read on forums and message boards over the holidays said his time would come. Eventually his hormones would kick into action and he'd transform from pubeless weirdo freak-boy to socially acceptable, testosterone-packing man-beast.

But Jack didn't have time for eventually. He'd already passed up his chance to become Mr Popular after being on TV – and now it looked like he'd been ditched by the few friends he *did* have. Complete social rejection was a mere pube's-breadth away.

He had to buy himself some time.

That was when Jack thought of *Bigwigs*. Sure, it had been three whole years since he'd been in front of the cameras. Sure, it was just a dumb game show. But it got him thinking.

Bigwigs had been about pretending you were something you weren't. Teams of kids were sent out into workplaces week after week, doing jobs that adults would normally do. And the better the contestants played at being adults, the further they went on the show.

Pretending. Was the answer as simple as that?

Jack slung his backpack over one shoulder and headed out the back door and down the side passage to the street, spurred by his stroke of genius.

If he wanted to stay tight with Vivi and the others, all he had to do was commit a relatively simple act of deception. All he had to do was convince his friends he *had* hit his growth spurt.

All he had to do, basically, was *fake puberty*.



Two

'Guys!'

Vivi, Reese and Darylyn were just about to disappear through the school gate. As Jack got nearer, he noticed Vivi tighten her grip on the strap of her schoolbag, as if it were a ripcord she could pull to parachute herself out of the situation.

'Hey, Jack,' she said. 'We were going to wait for you ...'

'No need,' said Jack. 'I caught up. *T-o-o-tally* caught up.'

Darylyn swept her fringe out of her eyes.

'I got your text about the laptop.' Darylyn always spoke super fast, as though the act of speech were like ripping off a bandaid. She glanced sideways at Reese, who kept his eyes stubbornly fixed on his black-and-white checked Volleys. 'It would appear I forgot to reply.'

Jack shrugged. 'That's cool. 'Cos, yeah. It turns out I was too busy to use the computer much anyway.'

'Busy?' said Vivi.

'Yeah,' said Jack, staring manfully into the distance and

nodding. He turned back to the others. 'Sorry if I kind of ... dropped off the radar.'

Vivi frowned. 'What kind of busy?'

'Just ... you know,' Jack said significantly. 'Going through a bit of *man* stuff.'

'What does that mean?' asked Vivi.

Jack froze. What *did* he mean? 'You know. Just your typical guy stuff. Reese, you know what it's like.'

If Darylyn Deramo was a fast talker, Reese Rasmus was the opposite. He was inclined to think very deeply about things. In fact, sometimes he thought so deeply about things that listening to him speak was a bit like listening to someone trying to invent the whole concept of language from scratch.

'Um ...' he said.

Jack nodded understandingly in a 'we're both in this testosterone thing together' kind of way. 'Look, it's cool if you don't want to go into detail. You know, with the ladies present.'

'It's not that, dude,' said Reese, frowning. 'I seriously don't know what you're talking about.'

Jack sighed. 'Come on, guys. It's obvious what I've been doing. We're all perfectly normal teenagers going through all the normal changes that normal teenagers go through at this age. You know?'

Vivi frowned. 'Not reall—'

'Masturbating,' said Jack, desperately.

Vivi's mouth dropped open. Darylyn took an involuntary step backwards. Reese's brow crinkled. 'Dude ...' he said.

Jack faltered. It was clear he'd brought out the big guns too soon. But he was committed now. There was nothing to do but keep firing away. 'Y-yeah. Just ... a whole ton of masturbating, really.'

There was a difficult pause. Jack thought he heard Reese say 'Dude' again under his breath.

Jack shrugged and tried to act casual. 'That's pretty normal, though. I mean, we're all growing up so goddamn *fast*, right? Half the time we can't even control what our bodies are *doing*. It's like ... UFOs could land and I'd be concentrating so hard on masturbating myself silly I wouldn't even notice. I'd look up and be all, "Wow, first contact with aliens. Yeah, I get that it's important and everything, but this wanking's not going to do itself!"'

Jack tried to ignore the looks he got from the group of Year 12s who'd overheard him as they walked through the gate. 'So ... yeah. I guess I've been pretty busy with all that. H-how were *your* holidays?'

The electronic chime of the home room bell rang out across the grounds of Upland Secondary.

Saved by the bell, thought Jack.

If the bell had rung at some point before he'd said the word 'masturbating'.