

## Night River

It was my brother's idea to burn the old mill. I wouldn't have been there at all if I hadn't followed Jack's lead. When Mum and Dad started arguing he'd picked up my skateboard as well as his and left quietly by the back door, knowing I would follow. Jack had never wanted to hang-out with me until we had moved to the village – I was still 'the baby' to him even though I was nearly ten. He was fourteen. Most of the other kids in the village were toddlers or old enough to have cars, so he fell in between, and I was better company than none at all, I guess. The lane down to the river was sloping enough for us to coast most of the way. That was the best bit – I could handle straight lines. The traffic had died down, and the mill's café was closed. The veranda round the outside was good for tricks, at the back, on the river side under the trees, where the warden was unlikely to see us and ask us to stop. When we'd first moved here in the first week of the summer holidays the place had been swarming with people every night, but now the visitors were gone. We had seen our chance and moved in. We hadn't meant any harm.

'Me first!' Jack yelled, and ran for the boards. He knew I wasn't fast enough to catch him but he did this every time any way. Jack gathered speed and then jumped just as the veranda came to a dead end. He caught the up-ended skateboard in his right hand and landed perfectly on both feet. 'Now you.' he said.

A couple of hours of this and I was starting to hurt. The sun had almost disappeared and I was hungry too. 'Let's go home.' I pleaded.

Jack looked as if he had forgotten I was even there. 'Not yet.' he said.

He did another eight or nine awesome tricks and I knew he expected me to

load him with respect for every ollie but I just picked paint off the café windowsill and pretended not to notice. Jack sneered. 'You're just sore 'cause you're useless at it.'

The last of the day's light disappeared as the older boys in their cars skidded into the car park gravel. Our heads went up like meerkats. 'Now we should go.' I said, and Jack did his horrible snigger with his teeth showing.

'Why? What they gonna do? Eat us?'

The engines were still running and the music thumping but the boys were getting out of their cars. They had girls and beer with them. The girls scuttled squealing down to the water's edge, chucking beer over each other, and didn't seem to have seen us, but the guys were coming straight over. 'Oi you!' the tallest shouted. 'Let me 'ave a go.'

Jack held on to his skateboard with one hand and ripped a strip of willow leaves off a low branch with the other. 'Are you any good?' he said, cool as anything. The tall boy laughed, but he looked at Jack pretty hard all the same. The other guys stayed a metre or so back, smirking, and I felt I could tell what they were thinking, but Jack snowballed on like he had a death wish or something. 'Cos, y'know, I wouldn't want you to make a prat of yourself.'

The girls were watching, now, and they giggled at that. 'Oh don't be so mean – let Ant have a go,' one said, and the other laughed into her rolled up sweater. Up to then Ant's eyes had never left Jack, but now he looked around to his mates and laughed – or pretended to. His good mood was as thin as skin on custard.

My hands started to shake. 'You can have a go with mine, if you like.' I blurted.

That raised a chorus of laughter from all of them. 'So sweet!' one of the girls gushed. Only Jack looked at me like he wished I'd never been born.

Ant snatched up my board and strode down to the water. 'Tricks here – I

was doing that years ago. I'll show you.' He jumped up on the sluice-gate with a spring from one hand as if it was just a little school bench and set the board down. It was a heavy iron sluice-gate, to protect the village from floods, but the top of it was only the width of the board's deck. There were big signs all over it to say it could open any time, and since we'd moved there even Jack had never touched it. Ant was still trying to look cool but I noticed he made sure the board's wheels were square on the metal frame then stepped carefully on. He pushed off from the upright girder and wheeled expertly over to the mill's tall wall. I thought he would come straight back, but no. Ant stepped onto the gate, balanced himself well, picked up my skateboard quickly in one hand – and made out it was about to slip from his grip. I gasped, which made them laugh, and I knew too late I should have bottled it. He wasn't bringing my board back. Ant stretched up and placed it high, tucking it behind one of the great weather-boards where it met a window. There was enough of a lip on it to hold my skateboard – but not by much. It hung above the rushing water. Ant turned back towards us and looked my brother in the eye.

'You think y'so hard. Come and get it.'

Ant was back along the gate in four big strides, as if the height and the water were nothing, but he was seventeen or eighteen and nearly two metres tall. There was no way I could reach my skateboard and I didn't think Jack could either. I pulled at Jack's sleeve. 'Let's leave it,' I hissed. 'It doesn't matter.'

Jack swore. 'It *does* matter.'

He climbed up on the gate no trouble at all and followed what Ant had done. Everyone was watching in tense silence, not just me, as he pushed off and began the glide towards the mill. I saw him wobble and my stomach knotted up, but at last he hit the black wall and gripped on like a cat. I had been right about the height, though – even at full stretch my fourteen year old brother just wasn't tall enough. Jack looked about him and

saw a hand-hold. There was a door to nowhere – I suppose for lowering sacks onto boats, that hadn't been used in a hundred years, maybe. It was the handle Jack grabbed, and scrambled as if to pull himself up onto the threshold lip for a foothold rightwards. But the door was rotten – the handle came away in his hand. I thought he would fall but Jack kept his head. 'Oh look, it's open,' he said, shrugged, and went through.

I was on my own.

I looked around to the others. Even the girls sympathy was backed by smirks. I guess I'd given up on ever getting my board back. Jack hadn't though. He appeared at a window to the right, leaned out, and got hold of my skateboard with just his fingertips. It was enough – he had it back. Jack came back to the door and stood there like a pirate on a ship. 'You think y'so hard,' he taunted. 'Why don't you come over?'

He looked over to the warden's house, we all did, but there were no lights. The challenge was on now. Ant started across and one by one the others followed. *Mum's gonna kill me*, I thought, but I couldn't stay there alone and leave him with them. I got up on the gate and crept across. My sneakers were wet from the grass and I felt myself slip. I grasped the cold metal and sat down, one leg either side. *Should I just go across like this?* No. Everyone else was watching me through the doorway. I placed my feet carefully and got myself up again. Then I saw the branch sweeping down the river. *If it hits the gate . . .* I imagined the clang, the vibration, me falling to my doom like Wile E Coyote. I got over the last three metres quick as a rat.

Inside the mill smelled of damp wood and ancient dust and flour. Mum had said I would come here, on a school trip, and said there were models and grain you could grind yourself. We had talked with another mum and kid in the post-office about it. Jack had carried on playing with his phone, but I I'd been looking forward to it. At night, though, it was creepy. There were deep shadows behind the wheels, and cobwebs like in

an old movie. The girls were clutching at each other and squealing. 'Rats.' I heard one hiss. One of Ant's mates bumped his head in the dark and swore.

'Losers.' Ant flicked on his lighter with a snap and the space was brightened for a second in an orange flash. He pulled a ready rolled cigarette from his pocket and lit up. The smell was weird. The others all looked to each other.

'Won't the warden see?'

Ant didn't answer, but he pulled the door we had come in by shut. 'Let's go up top,' he said. I saw Jack put our boards by the door, but he followed up the ladder the same as all the others. When we got to the top floor I could see why Ant had brought us up here. It was the furthest point from the warden's house and none of the windows pointed that way. Ant and the others all settled down among the sacks, and shared the cigarette between them.

'You wanna try then?'

Jack looked surprised at being asked. *Lets go*, I willed him, *now*. But Jack just coolly looked back. 'Not my thing,' he said. Was he worried he would cough and make them all laugh? Maybe. Ant shrugged.

They carried on. I could tell Jack was getting bored but for some reason he didn't want to leave. The others all seemed to relax, even Ant, and when Jack picked up the lighter and started to flick it on and off he didn't stop him. I saw Jack take hold of the piece of sack and felt sick. 'Don't,' I said.

'Don't be such a wuss.'

He burnt the sack and everyone watched it fall from his fingers like they were watching a firework. The embers fizzled out on the damp wooden floor. *OK, enough now*. But Jack had seen the pile of paper sacks beneath the real traditional ones. Ant was watching him.

'Go on,' he said. Nothing else.

Jack's defiance seemed to have gone. He laughed like a girl as he lit the edge of the paper. I held my breath – the damp will take care of it. Won't it? The flame sashayed along the paper but it didn't sputter out. Everyone giggled.

Then they stepped back.

Then one of Ant's mates saw sense and started to stamp it out – too late.

The smoke hit the alarm.

We didn't so much run down the stairs as fall. Ant was first out the door. He reached the grass just as the siren started. They scrambled for the cars. 'Jack?'

He was behind me. I turned to see him step on the gate with both our skateboards under one arm. It was just that bit too much – his foot slipped.

'Jack!'

My hand lunged out without a thought and we both fell towards the water.

'What's your name darling?'

A blue light seemed to be flickering across my face.

I felt my shoulder shaken. 'Can you tell me? I think you can hear me now.'

'Chris,' I rasped. My mouth felt funny. 'Jack?'

The paramedic looked behind her. 'Is it Jack you held up out of the water?'

All I could remember was the cold water over my head and being pulled along by the current. I knew Jack was ahead of me. We had been swirled around like driftwood and smashed into the floodgate wall – Jack first, then me into him like a cannon ball. The force of water behind us had pinned us there.

'Is he all right?'

The paramedic looked behind her again. 'He's bumped his head so we're taking him first. '

The siren started up again as the doors closed and the ambulance pulled away.