

If Jason had brought his motorbike to a stop before reaching into his delivery bag for a newspaper his life would have been very different that summer.

As the black Mercedes swept out of the driveway Jason and the driver saw each other at almost the same moment. Jason hit the scrambler's brakes and swung it into a desperate swerve, but the back wheel locked and he went into a skid. He flew through the air and smacked into the towering brick gatepost before landing with a wallop on the grass verge. He watched helplessly as the scrambler slewed beneath the wheels of the car, which screeched to a stop with a smell of burning rubber.

The rear door flew open and a teenage girl scrambled out. Jason found himself looking into an attractive sun-brown face. Silky black hair fell about her face and framed hazel eyes wide with concern.

"Are you all right?" She had a trace of an accent.

"I think so," he managed, reddening when he realised how stupid he must look with blood oozing from his elbow and knee, and his nose and cheeks lit up by blobs of fluorescent green sun block. He'd come straight from the beach and was going back after his paper round.

Tossing the hair from her face, she knelt to help him. He caught her staring at his T-shirt, the front of which was emblazoned 'HELP A HORNY FRIEND'. He was about to explain about the rhino foundation when a middle-aged woman leapt from the car and roughly took the girl's arm.

"Tessa," she hissed, yanking the girl back into the car.

Angry words were exchanged in a language Jason didn't recognise. The woman's harsh angry screech, and the short dark hair scraped back from her face reminded Jason of a crow.

The driver had retrieved the scrambler from beneath the car's wheels and was busy examining the Merc's bodywork for damage. Powerfully built with a square head and droopy black moustache, he looked like an irate pirate as he checked the car's underside. Satisfied that there was no damage he turned his angry attention to Jason.

"Look where you're going next time. This is an expensive car." His heavy accent matched his glowering face.

Jason spluttered a protest, but it was brushed aside as the man turned and climbed back behind the steering wheel. The massive wooden gates swished closed and the car purred off, leaving Jason to struggle to his feet.

The girl was peering through the back window. As their eyes met he was sure she mouthed "Help". Stunned, he raised his hand to acknowledge that he'd understood, but when she tried to wave back the woman put a restraining hand on her arm. He was still staring after the car as it rounded the corner of Ocean Drive and sped towards the freeway.

He stood for a long moment puzzled at the odd and rude behaviour of the older couple. Who was this Tessa and why didn't they want him to speak to her? Did she really ask for help? Had she been kidnapped? If he was wrong, it wouldn't be the first time his imagination had got him into trouble. Still wondering, he bent to pick up his precious scrambler. A searing spasm shot through his right shoulder and he gasped in pain. He must have wrenched it when he collided with the gatepost. Gingerly he moved his arm. Nothing seemed to be broken or dislocated. He gently rubbed his shoulder. He would have to lay off volleyball and surfing for a few days.

A quick check of the scrambler revealed a bent surfboard carrier and deep scratches in the red paint of the petrol tank, but there didn't appear to be any serious damage. He threw his leg over the seat and kicked the starter. The engine spluttered and died. He tried again and this time it burst into life. He let out the throttle, and forgoing his usual wheelie start, set off at a sedate pace to finish his paper round. He winced as he tossed the papers over the high walls and railings that bordered most of the properties on his round. No point in going back to the beach with a painful shoulder. He would head for home and check the computer printout of his deliveries. He was anxious to know who lived at number 69 Ocean Drive.

From what he'd been able to see over the high brick wall he knew it was a double-storey house, almost palatial in size, with a portico over the front door. The rear would back onto the beach, as did all the houses on that side of the road. Only the very wealthy could afford to live on Ocean Drive. Perhaps that was why they didn't want Tessa associating with a newspaper boy.

He was dabbing the grazes on his arm with a dampened kitchen towel when his sister came in.

"What happened to you?"

He explained about the sudden appearance of the car. "But don't tell Mom," he warned. "I'll tell her I was dumped, surfing."

"D'you think that'll make her feel any better?" Caitlin gave him a rueful smile.

"I'd rather she confiscated my surfboard than my scrambler." He grinned back.

"Here," said Caitlin, reaching into the cupboard for the antiseptic cream. "Let me put some of this on."

"Ouch." He winced, smarting with the pain.

"That should do it." Caitlin was used to bandaging up her younger brother. "But you'd better wear a long-sleeved shirt on Saturday."

"Saturday?"

"Jaasonnn," she threatened. "You can't have forgotten. You and Mark promised to be waiters at that 25th wedding anniversary I'm catering."

"Cait," groaned Jason. He didn't mind helping with twenty-firsts and matric parties where there were young people and decent music, but wedding anniversaries were a real bore. Old people were embarrassing when they got tiddly.

"Come on, Jason. I thought you needed the money," Caitlin coaxed.

That was true. The model helicopter he and his Dad were building was proving very expensive. His newspaper money wouldn't even cover the cost of the motor.

"What time do you want us there?" he sighed.

"No later than seven. I want everything to go smoothly. It's important. I'm still relying on word of mouth for business. It's not easy when you start your own catering firm." Then she added pointedly, "And make sure Mark's wearing decent shoes this time, and not those tatty trainers."

"Okay." He reached into the fridge for a slice of leftover pizza. He took it to his bedroom and ate it hungrily while he flipped through the computer printout of his round. The list was printed according to road names. He soon found Ocean Drive. Number 69 was listed as Wilson. J. There was even a telephone number. He tore some paper out of an old maths book and jotted down the number.

He was standing in the hallway with the telephone receiver in his hand when he realised he had no idea what he was going to say. "Hello Tessa, I'm Jason, the idiot who fell off his bike?" He needed a genuine reason to call. Then he remembered the newspaper. He must have thrown 69's over the wall because he did not have any papers left at the end of his round, but Tessa wouldn't know that. He would ask if they had got it.

He started to punch in the numbers, but noticed that for some odd reason his mouth felt dry. He didn't know why. He'd dated plenty of girls. What was so different about this one?

But when he had finished dialling, all he got was the prolonged bleep of a discontinued number. Blast. He dialled Directory Enquiries and a bored voice told him the Wilson's number had been cancelled the previous month.

He tried the subscription department of the newspaper and after an interminable wait he learned that the Wilsons had paid an eighteen-month subscription in advance and had not bothered to ask for a rebate when they left. It would run through to the middle of next year.

There did not seem much else he could do right then. However, tomorrow he would ring the bell at number 69 and ask to speak to Tessa. If the family were new to the neighbourhood he would offer to show Tessa around. If she really did need help, she would tell him.

Mark arrived as they were finishing supper. "Want a Coke?" Jason handed him the bottle.

Mark fetched a glass. He knew Jason's kitchen almost as well as his own.

The boys carried their drinks to the workshop that Jason's father had made at the back of the garage. Jason stepped over the untidy jumble hardly noticing the mess. The shelves were crammed with solar film, model kits, ailerons, engines and drawers marked SERVOS, SPINNERS, SILENCERS, PROPELLERS. There were clear plastic drawers filled with numerous unidentified plastic and metal objects. Propped up against one wall was a graveyard of smashed planes, evidence of the years that Jason and his father had devoted to their hobby. Their latest project - a Jet Ranger helicopter - was standing on the bench amidst tubes of glue, tins of epoxy, drills, heat guns and tiny nuts, bolts and screws. Close-by, next to a dust-coated portable TV, hung three radio control transmitters.

Mark scuffed his feet through the drifts of balsa shavings. "Don't you ever lose anything in this mess?"

"Sometimes," admitted Jason. "But if it's anything metal we usually find it with Dad's electric magnet."

"Is your Dad away again?"

"Yeh, be back Friday night. I promised I'd have this rotor working by then." He found a screwdriver in a drawer and began tightening screws.

Mark noticed the grazes on Jason's elbow. "Fell off the scrambler, eh. Another corner you couldn't handle?"

"Get lost, Mark. It wasn't my fault." He jabbed Mark with the screwdriver.

"What happened?"

Jason told him the story. "And you know what? I think there's something wrong. Tessa could be in trouble."

"Tessa," mimicked Mark. "On first name terms, eh."

"Come on Mark, I'm serious."

"A hot chick, heh." Mark took a length of balsa from a box and made slashing sword swipes at Jason. "A fair damsel in distress. Prince Valiant to the rescue."

"Watch you don't break that," warned Jason, ignoring the jibe. "Balsa wood's not cheap."

Mark tossed the wood back into the box. "Hey, Jase, lighten up. You've been watching too many detective movies. You can't honestly think she needs rescuing? It's just an excuse to get to know her."

"Something didn't seem right."

"Remember the 'dead body' you saw in that car. Turned out to be a shop dummy," Mark reminded him, grinning.

No one would ever let him forget that. An active imagination did have its drawbacks. But this was different, he was sure of it. "She seemed scared."

"That's not exactly evidence of a kidnapping. How scared did she look? Was she hurt - bruises or anything?"

"No," admitted Jason.

"So what made you think something was wrong?"

"The look in her eyes as they drove off. I'm sure she asked for help. And the way they hurried her away, as if they didn't want me to see her."

"Have you looked in the mirror lately?" Mark grunted and made gorilla faces.

"Wise guy, heh." Jason plucked a screw from the mess on the bench and slipped it into a hole on the rotor blade. He was thinking about the child in England who had been murdered and how the witnesses had regretted not acting on their suspicions. "I'm going to speak to her and ask her outright if everything is okay."

"Let me know your mystery lady's answer," teased Mark.

Jason threw a glue-encrusted rag at him. Mark ducked and the rag caught an empty bottle on the end of a shelf. He leapt to catch it, but he was too late and it smashed on the floor."

"No wonder the school didn't want you for the cricket team."

"Now if it had been a volleyball..." said Mark, picking up the shards of glass and dropping them in a bin.

"Are you playing tomorrow?"

"Probably in the afternoon. I'm working at my Dad's in the morning. He's got some more electronic components he wants stripping. You never know, I might be able to make another computer from the stuff they chuck away. Are you going down to the beach?"

"Maybe, later on. I wrenched my shoulder. I'll watch. Besides, I want to do some more work on the chopper."

"Do you really think all this model building is going to help you get into the airforce?" He knew Jason's life-long ambition was to be a pilot.

"I reckon that knowing how a plane operates will help," said Jason. "Take this chopper. The same number and type of controls are needed with this as with a full-sized chopper. If anything, a model is more difficult to fly because you are not sitting inside it and you can't feel its movements, and compensate. And with a model plane, you sometimes can't tell whether it's flying towards you or away from you."

"You can never tell whether you're coming or going anyway," laughed Mark.

"Ha, ha. Very funny."

Mark watched Jason adjust the fibreglass blades until they were balanced. They joked and chatted while he worked, until Mark, who did not have Jason's patience, became bored and decided it was time to go.

"See you tomorrow," he said. "Give my love to your new lady friend. Don't get too carried away!" He blew kisses as he darted out of the door.

Jason sprinted after him down the driveway. "See'ya," he called as Mark swung his scrambler out of the gate and roared off with a cheery wave.

The following morning after breakfast Jason busied himself with the Jet Ranger. He was hoping his father would have had time to pick up some inflatable floats they would use as a sort of training undercarriage to cushion the framework if they made a rough landing. Although he was quite proficient with choppers it still took a while to get used to a new model. But Tessa was never far from his mind.

Later that day he set off to collect the newspapers for his delivery.

Ocean Drive was about halfway through his round and he timed it so he would arrive at the same time as the previous day. Perhaps Tessa's outings were a regular occurrence. This time he was more careful as he approached number 69.

He stopped the bike and cut the engine. There was an intercom on the gatepost. He pressed the button. There was no buzzing sound or indication that it was working. However, after a while he heard a muffled, "Yes." It sounded like a woman's voice. Maybe it was the crow.

"May I speak to Tessa, please?"

There was a long silence, and then a man asked abruptly, "Who are you?"

"Jason. Jason Hunter. I deliver the newspapers. I met Tessa yesterday when I fell off my bike. May I speak to her please."

"You must have the wrong house. There's no Tessa here."

Jason frowned. "The young girl in the black Mercedes. She was here yesterday."

"There's no young girl here."

Jason heard the click as the receiver was replaced.