

Chapter 8

Rochelle

If a thing looks hard it's not worth doing! Why can't I ever take note of that advice?

It's been the week from hell. Jack was put in isolation because of the magazine his dad gave us to deliver. CYFS was all over us like a rash accusing Mum of lacing the magazine with drugs and the more she tried to explain that the magazine came from Jack's dad, the more confused everybody seemed to become. We had to sit with Jack in a family conference at the detention centre which scored me a day off school so that was okay. Because nothing can be proved, no charges are being laid. However, whenever we visit Jack we now have to be supervised. Jack lost his good behaviour credits so he can't use his skateboard and I think he's already lost his new Pumas because he was wearing the crappy old Slazengers again. He says he's hidden the Pumas in a safe place but I don't believe him. It suits me better to have something to be pissed off about. Of course, nothing is said about Jack's dad. Is he untouchable? Mum's in the black pits of depression again. Oh, and just as a minor matter, I'm at the Oceania trials in Wanganui: trialling for the national team to represent New Zealand in Brisbane next year. And true to form, it's not going well.

"Watch out for that skank from Auckland," Drew panted as she came off. "She's got it in for us because we're the charity beneficiaries. Even by my standards she's a dirty player."

Now that is an admission from Drew but I appreciated the advice. The two from Christchurch ahead of me in the line-up went on. I'd be next. And Drew was right. It's rough out on the rink. There are no friends in a trial. Everybody's out for themselves but we were at a particular disadvantage.

To get invited to play in the national trials, you first have to be chosen to play in the inter-regional tournament. The selectors will then invite the stars from those games to play in the national trials. Me, Tama and Drew were cut some slack because of Methsy's death and this has pissed everybody off. You only get this sort of treatment for serious medical conditions. So, when we arrived on Saturday morning all ready to go the crap hit the fan. Some of the officials began waving the rule book and a special

© Ken Benn. 2007

3 Hardie Street, Palmerston North, New Zealand
Tel/Fax: ++64 6 359-5024 Mobile 021 406-636
e-mail: kenbenn@paradise.net.nz

emergency meeting of the selectors was held to reassess our welcome. Skye was with us, thank God. She'd driven us to Wanganui and was going to drop us off at the stadium and then rush away but fortunately she decided to come inside. "Why the tragic faces?" she asked.

When we told her, she snatched my invitation letter from me and stormed into the committee room without knocking and left the door open. There was lots of shouting but Skye's voice can carry over a Boeing 747 on take-off.

"Is this the example you set for kids? Invite them, build up their hopes and then tell them you've changed your mind. Where's your integrity?"

Somebody said something and Skye shouted over him.

"Nobody's asking you to *give* them places in the team. Let them try-out like everybody else and if they are good enough give them a place. If not, flick them off. But let them at least see that you are people of your word."

In about five minutes the meeting was adjourned and it was announced that Tama's, Drew's and my special dispensations to trial for the national teams were ratified. The other kids and their parents let out a collective groan and we've been treated like butchers at a vegetarian convention ever since.

"Go!" The up-herself cow from New Plymouth punched me in the small of my back, sending me through the gate and onto the rink unbalanced. I recovered quickly but the damage was done. I saw the selectors exchange looks and write something on their clipboards. How badly stuffed was I? While I pondered this, the puck came screaming my way and I lunged for it. I had no idea what the strategy was nor where my 'team mates' were positioned. My hesitation cost me because I got slammed against the boards and left to die while the puck disappeared between three cursing bitches leaving drops of sweat the size of saucers behind them.

This was not going well.

There was no point to the game. It wasn't really a game. We'd spent the morning showing off our skills in various passing, stopping, attacking ... exercises. We were all stuffed by lunch time and had an hour's break, but after lunch, the selectors had us play. But it wasn't a game of sides or anything. Just a gladiator battle to check out endurance

and resilience. Tomorrow we'll be put into trial teams and have to play some real games, if any of us are alive.

I picked myself up and vaguely heard Drew screaming abuse at me. It seemed like chaos but as I watched, I sussed out some sort of pattern. There was something going on between the two girls from Christchurch that could be regarded as teamwork while the New Plymouth and Auckland girl seemed to have an understanding. The others were all playing loose and wild. I decided to split up the Auckland/New Plymouth alliance.

The selectors had created a blind spot for themselves. They sat in the second row of the stand and to their left was a thick column. I worked out that I had about a metre of protection from their vision and I was about to use it. Auckland/New Plymouth looped around the back of the goalmouth juggling the puck between them. I came at a tangent to them keeping a watch on the column. Because of my shallow angle of attack I had even more cover than if I were travelling directly up the rink parallel to the side wall. I hit into Auckland, a glancing shot so that I was a metre away from them by the time I'd cleared the pillar and back under the selectors' scrutiny. Auckland slammed into New Plymouth who had the puck but lost it. Being a highly strung prima-donna and knowing that Auckland couldn't be trusted at the end of the day, New Plymouth retaliated with a stick chop across Auckland's arm and then all hell broke loose between them. I snatched the puck and performed the best bit of speed dribbling in my life, weaving between the stunned mullets flopping around the rink. Along the way, I shouted to a girl from Nelson to support me. This was strategic on my part because she'd been a loner throughout the day. She responded beautifully and backed me up all the way to Tama's goal net. I blasted the puck at Tama but he knows my play and blocked. Nelson was behind me and I cleared the circle immediately after shooting leaving her to pick up Tama's save and score with ease.

"Good play, Rochelle," Tama called as he picked himself up off the rink.

Nelson came around the back of the net to give me a high five and a sweaty grin.

The selectors' heads went together again but this time with their eyebrows touching the back of their knees.

When I came off the rink, I felt I'd done a good ten minutes' work. I had two good allies, one from Nelson and the other from Hamilton. It was all over between

Auckland and New Plymouth and the Christchurch pair was in need of mediation. The selectors were watching me carefully. What could go wrong?

Because we were trialling out for nationals, we were fronting up as individuals to the event. There was no club support and very few people came to actually watch the trials. All the kids came down with parents or had flown in from other centres and there was clearly a lot of money about. Except for the three stooges.

One of the Dragons' parents had arranged for us to stay at the Alma Motel which is just around the corner from the Jubilee Stadium where the trials are being held. "Even though it's not a club event," she lectured, "it's a good idea for the Dragons who are trialling to stick together and at least give each other support." She wasn't exactly supportive of Tama, Drew and me trialling but we helped to make up the numbers so she could get a better rate at the motel. What's the bet she got herself and her spotty brat rooms for free and split the charge against the rest of us?

Drew and I shared a room. Tama was next door with another guy and they seemed to be getting on all right. Tama's like that. He gets on with anybody. I must say it was good to stay in Wanganui overnight and be able to step into a hot shower rather than face an hour-long drive in sweaty gear after a day in hell. I don't know who would've driven us back anyway. Skye wasn't available and Drew's folks aren't interested. Tama's dad has to work the night shift.

But we are the outsiders. We weren't asked to join the other hockey players and their families for dinner. They simply told us they were going 'out for a bit'. Tama's room-mate got all shy and there was an awkward moment as he backed away holding up a hand in a pathetic wave and then spun around to leap into a waiting car. We got the message and soon worked out that we needed to make up our own dinner party. Much as I hate to say it, the fifty Jack's dad gave me was much needed.

Our motel was well situated and it took us about fifteen minutes to walk into the city centre. Of course, we'd changed. Drew changed twice because there's no way Tama and I would walk with her in the first outfit she had on. Fortunately, she had a spare disguise that wasn't too bad. Once we were on our own we realised it was just as well the others had dumped us. We had fun. Obviously our first need was food, like urgently. So

there wasn't much argument about where to eat. Subway was what we encountered first and so Subway it was: foot longs with everything on the side. Tama had a six incher to follow and I finished the last third of Drew's.

With food in us our energy was restored. I hadn't been to Wanganui often and then it was only to drive through on our way to somewhere else. Drew led us up some hill towards a building with this massive stone staircase. It turned out to be the museum and it didn't matter that it was shut because the stairs was all we needed. Three fantastic flights of stairs leading up to a massive door. Okay, so maybe they'd look ordinary in the cold light of day but to us they were the Vatican, the Palace of Versailles ... the Taj Mahal. And we were royalty.

Drew decided we had to act out Shakespeare and I was amazed at what she remembered. We'd been watching a DVD in English and also reading sections of a play. Most of the dialogue goes over my head but I get the message how Romeo and Juliet just want to be left to get on with their lives and not be kept in separate cages by the madness of their families. Drew had us performing on the stairs. Tama was amazing.

"What light through yonder window breaks?" he throws up at me when I walk out onto the wall separating one of the side staircases from the central flight. Tama has one foot two stairs above the other and is reaching out to me with this look on his face that makes me check his chin to see if there's honey dripping off the end of it. "It is the east and Juliet is the sun!" I nearly wet myself several times as he proposed to me and then spun around pointing an imaginary 32 special at Mercutio or ... whatever the other hoods in the story are called. And did I mention the amazing poncy accent he used to bounce his voice off the front wall of the museum and fill the parking lot. For a guy of economic mumbled speech, he can turn it on when he wants to.

Our death scene was beautiful. Drew became Romeo and the two of us lay sprawled over the stairs with throats slit and multiple gunshot wounds. Well, we died a couple of times until we had just the right touch but if anybody was passing by they would've found the giggling corpses disturbing while Tama posed on the top step summing up.

"A glooming peace this morning with it brings;
The sun, for sorrow, will not show his head:"

My God, I understood it! Tama spun his magic and I actually got it. I mean, when crap goes down it's not always better the next day. There's that cold morning light that has no source but creeps in under your misery and helps you see how bad your situation is. It's funny how quickly my mood can change. Drew sensed it because the moment Tama finished his speech she grabbed me off my death bed and we took the top step. God knows how we got there but all of a sudden we were doing the finale from Chicago. We knew it backwards because it's Drew's and my favourite DVD that we watch over and over again.

"You can like the life you're living; you can live the life you like."

We blasted it out into the twilight. There's was an old guy walking past at the time with his wife and they stopped to watch with huge grins on their faces but they moved off when Drew and me vamped down the stairs towards the old man singing, *"You can even marry Harry but mess around with Ike."* We had our mouths kiss-ready and our boobs pushed out so I guess granny got jumpy. Doing the dance solo was a challenge. Our dancing sucks but we did it anyway with lots of shoulder, arse wagging and knee bends. We just couldn't keep in sync and ended up sprawled across the stairs resuming our laughing corpse act.

And then Tama stunned us again. He took up where we left off: arriving on the top step by sliding on his knees from backstage somewhere and then gracefully rolling back onto his feet straight into a jazz box step. *"I don't care about expensive things, cashmere coats, diamond rings ..."*

Drew and I came up on our elbows. We weren't looking at somebody playing Billy Flynn. Tama was Billy. His voice was perfect and he could hold the tune. Tama's face glowed and ... it was so good to just be somebody else and leave our problems behind. Drew and I crawled up those stairs and played the bimbo chorus girls worshipping at Tama's feet. He took each of us by the hand, still singing and led us down the stairs into the night. We sang our way through the streets regardless of the juries glaring or grinning at us from the café tables and pubs. God, I can't remember being so happy for a long time and wished it could've gone on for ever. That was a stupid thing to do.

We passed a liquor outlet.

“Let’s liven the party up!” Drew screeched and jumped ahead of us, spun around and grabbed Tama’s and my shirt fronts. “C’mon. What do you want?”

“They’re not going to sell anything to us,” I laughed.

“We don’t need it,” Tama murmured. “We’re having good fun already.”

“Dorks,” Drew sneered. “Look at the surrounds. This is the cheap side of town. They don’t ask for ID in a place like this.”

“Drew, don’t,” I pleaded.

Tama walked ahead.

Drew went in.

Do you just walk away when you know your friend is about to stuff everything up or do you stick around and help her stuff it all up? Tama stopped and turned around. His shoulders were stooped again and his face had returned to its expressionless mass production look.

When Drew came out clutching two four packs of Vodka cruisers we tried to share her excitement. I won’t say that I didn’t enjoy the one I drank as we sat on the river bank together. Tama also got chatty again but Drew got real bitchy when we said no to the second and by the time she was on her third the evening was well and truly over. She was throwing her empty bottles into a kids’ play area. One of them broke, sending glass all over the slide. Tama cleaned up the big pieces.

“You tosser!” Drew opened her fourth in just over half an hour. It took a few attempts for her to get a good grip on the lid. “What are you? Some kind of gentle woman. Our goalie the cleaning lady.”

“Shut up, Drew,” Tama growled. “You’ve had enough. Let’s go back to the motel.”

I agreed. “You coming, Drew?” The way I was feeling I could’ve left her there on her own and I know Tama was thinking about it too.

“There’s still two cruisers left!” Drew was having to move her feet constantly to stay upright. “Either you’ve got to drink them or I have to.” She held out the half full carton towards us.

Tama snatched one out of the box and threw it far out into the river. “That’s mine finished. Do you want to finish yours, Rochelle?”

“Bastard,” Drew shrieked snatching the carton away. She couldn’t keep her balance and landed on her bum. Clutching the spare cruiser behind her she skulled the open one. When it was finished, she took aim and hurled the bottle at Tama. He ducked and it smashed onto the cycle track behind him. “Dick!”

I helped Drew up while Tama scraped the glass off the cycle track with a piece of cardboard. It would’ve taken very little for me to leave her where she was. Getting her walking was a mission but once she was moving she got her second wind and balanced on the edge of the sidewalk, shrieking loudly when she missed her footing. The more we told her to shut up the louder she became. She even tried restarting the singing but that was well and truly over for Tama and me.

The big job was to get her back into the motel without the others noticing. That was made simple for us because they hadn’t yet returned. Tama went straight to his room and I managed to get Drew to watch TV while I had a shower. I’d taken the last cruiser from her and stuck it in the fridge so all was under control and maybe the sun would show it’s head in the morning with a smile on its flaming face.

Hot water running through my hair has to be one of the most relaxing therapies in the world. I take ages in the shower. Mum nearly goes mad screaming at me to hurry up. It’s been even better now that Jack’s out of the house. He used to turn the hot water off at the cylinder to get me out and that would have me nearly tearing his eyes from their sockets. The motel shower was better than home. The jet was strong and it spread out wide. When I turned my face into it I could feel the little scalpels cutting out the warts of the day.

The bathroom door just about came off its hinges she was banging so hard. For God’s sake. “It’s not locked, Drew.” I suppose four drinks in means four drinks to be peed out. Two more hard bangs had me swinging the shower door open and screaming. “What!” The door opened about ten centimetres.

“Would you get dressed and come outside, please?” It was the Dragons mum who put together our unofficial club booking.

“I’m getting ready for bed,” I called. The water was getting cold on my bum. I guess the shower had run its course.

“Now!” she snapped and shut the door.

When I got outside, Tama, in his boxers and a T-shirt, was cleaning up glass again. The 'other' Dragons were standing in a semi-circle watching. Drew was kneeling next to a flower box that she'd thrown up into and sobbing her eyes out. Ribbons of stomach slime hung from her bottom lip and nose giving off a sour stench that drifted my way on the light breeze. Why hadn't I thrown the other cruiser away instead of storing it in the fridge?

"How many did you have?" Camp mum stalked over to me with her nostrils just about sucking the gravel up. "Very clever. Just like the other one over there," she pointed to Tama. "Brushed your teeth."

"They didn't drink anything," Drew wailed and retched again. "It was only me. I'm sorry, okay."

"We will talk in the morning," said the organiser of our unofficial club group booking that was now fully official.

Those words Tama spoke on the stairs last night couldn't have been better chosen. Things looked a lot worse in the morning. We were reported to the committee and before any trials took place the three of us had to front up. Drew looked like hell. Tama had his chin on his paws and I hadn't slept all night. I created and *lived* all the worst case scenarios in my bed.

"Just what the hell do you kids think you were doing?" one of the selectors began. The usual start.

It's funny how we had to all look after ourselves as far as accommodation goes. It was made quite clear to us in the original letters that the Association was in no way responsible for us outside of the hours of actual trials at the stadium. But now every minute of the night had to be accounted for. I was so pissed off I couldn't even speak. But Drew did and she told most of the truth.

"They shouldn't be here," she began. Drew had decided on not sticking her hip out and looked as apologetic as Drew can get. "I bought the alcohol against their advice."

"Where?" the selector snapped. "You're a minor."

Drew told him about a shop on completely the other side of town to where we were and I don't even know if there is a liquor outlet there. "They didn't have anything to

drink even though I tried to make them. I'm sorry. Punish me but don't take it out on them. I let Rochelle and Tama down and they shouldn't pay for my mistake."

I wanted to cry and hug Drew and say its okay and that I would go down with her but I didn't because I was still pissed off in the other half of my brain and that's a bigger half.

Drew was dismissed from the trials immediately and Tama and I were allowed to continue but could still be excluded after a full committee meeting. There wasn't time for that until after the trial games and the day was getting old.

I played like a demon. I don't know if it was good or bad play; I just went mad. Nelson, I'd learned her name was Maddy, and I teamed up. She'd also had a bad night but wouldn't say what it was. We'd agreed to work together and make the world pay. Tama dived at everything he could and very little got past him.

Drew sat alone on the stand texting and when she joined us for lunch she blew me away by saying I could have all her gear. "I'm done with the game," she announced. "It's yours, Rochelle. You're going to need it for Brisbane."

"I've got to get picked first! And the committee still has to decide whether I can be selected. Maybe Tama and I are gonna be washed up with you."

Drew reached into her bag and pulled out her new Bauer skates. "You'll be going, Rochelle. I know it. I've taken all the bad karma out of the situation. That's what I do. There's only good left now and it's yours. Yours and Tama's." She pushed the loose laces into the skate. "What doesn't fit you, sell."

I took the skate from Drew letting my tears flow freely with hers. The skate still had a new leather smell to it. "I can't, Drew. You'll play again."

"I'm moving on," she whispered. "Other interests. Take my stuff. You've got to raise nearly three thousand dollars to get to Brisbane."

I hugged her. I wanted to kill her last night but now she was my best friend again. And she's right. If I get chosen to play for the National team it's the start of a whole new set of challenges.

And Jack should be here with us.

