

Leaper Lane

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CHAPTER 1 State of Origin
The lights of Telstra Stadium were bright and blinding. Thousands of fans were cheering for me! I went back slowly to take my kick. There were fifty-two seconds left in the game. Our regular goal kicker had just gone off with an injury. Now it was all up to me and I couldn't let the team down. This was my moment. So I started my normal routine. I went back five steps and stopped. I looked up towards the posts and down hard at the ball. I took two more steps to the left and rotated my right foot ever so slightly. I sensed there was no wind factor. But I had to be exactly right, the scores were tied. This kick would decide the winner of the curtain-raiser before the big State of Origin game. Sweating in the cold night air, I looked directly at the two goalposts. I was on a forty-five degree angle. I made a slight adjustment to my position by moving just a few centimetres to the left. I stood perfectly still and looked straight ahead, the perspiration stinging my eyes. 'Get on with it!' an opposition player yelled. That was the last thing I heard. The clock was stopped and time just didn't matter. I blocked all the noise out and focused on the ball. My heart was pounding and I took a deep breath. *This was it.* I started forward, my head down and my eyes glued to the back of the ball sitting on its angle. *Wham!* Perfect contact. The ball started just right of the posts and then began to swing back. I stared fiercely as it went on and on. Right over the crossbar and smack between the posts. Both touch referees raised their flags. 'Yes!' I said, absolutely stoked and punching my fist in the air. A GOAL! TWO POINTS! We were ahead and the crowd went crazy. The huge screens at opposite ends of the oval blazed the score in gigantic letters: Thousands of fans were waving flags, jumping in their seats and screaming at the top of their voices: 'NEW SOUTH WALES! NEW SOUTH WALES!' 'Mad, Leaper!' 'Sensational!' Now my team-mates were all around me, slapping my back, ruffling my hair and lifting me high in the air. The electronic scoreboards flashed: I couldn't believe it. Me. A real life rugby league player and I'd kicked the winning conversion in the match. Fully sick! And it had all begun months ago with a haircut I didn't want.

CHAPTER 2 The Bald Barber
It's a funny thing about haircuts. I used to tell Mum that I never needed one. Every day was a bad hair day for me. So bad, it was normal. Anyway, who wants to mess with your hair when you're going through so many other changes? And changes had sure been happening to Mum and me. You see, Mum and Dad split up six months ago when we were living in Melbourne. Then Mum decided to come back to Sydney, where she was born, where she got her pharmacy degree. Where her parents still live. Nana and Pop are cool. They live near the beach at Manly and that's great. But we moved to another suburb, North Ryde. Lots of red-brick houses and flats and a long way from the sea. Only, it was real close to where Mum got a part-time job working in a chemist shop on High Street. Right next to Sam the barber's. It went like this. Mum had been nagging me all week about my hair being like, a disgrace. She had trimmed the red tangled mess a few times but given up. She reckoned it was like a cross between yak fur and a mullet. The way I liked it. Anyway, I didn't want to go to the barber. I wanted to stay home on Saturday morning, chill out, and watch MTV. But what do you do when your Mum's on the warpath? Yep, you give in to a scalping. That's when I took my first good look at Sam's. Outside, it had one of those red-and-white candy poles, just like any good barber shop should. But the rest of his shop was like a shrine to the Wests Tigers rugby league club. It was painted black, gold and white. And the window was heaps full of old footies, jerseys and a huge painting of the Wests Tigers team. Inside, it was the same. Tigers team pictures, streamers and decorations, even

balloons, filled up every space except for a big mirror in front of the barber's chair. Weirdly, it looked kind of cool. Then there was Sam himself. He was the first bald barber I'd ever seen. Tall, skinny, wearing a Tigers jersey. *And did I say—bald!* I suddenly panicked. Wow, didn't this mean he was doing something wrong? I felt like racing back next door and letting Mum cut my hair. I was that desperate. 'Hello kid, what's new?' Sam asked, cutting off my exit and guiding me towards the chair. 'Not much,' I said, cursing that I'd missed my chance to hightail it. 'Glad to have you here early,' Sam said, draping a barber's gown over me. 'Place gets busy on Saturdays. I like school kids to come in first thing. What's your name?' 'Jack. Jack Lane.' 'What's your team?' I looked round at the Tigers gear that dominated the room. Well, what could I say? How could I tell a big fan like him that I barracked for Carlton in the AFL? How I used to go to all their games with my Dad. How I badly missed playing kick-to-kick in the park and talking to him about getting the school team to the finals one day. Here, I couldn't say I was an Aussie Rules fan. That I hadn't decided on an NRL team yet. I took the easy way out. 'Um—West's Tigers,' I said. 'Good for you!' Sam replied, snipping great globs of hair off my head and tossing them to the floor. 'So you must be about ten, I guess.' Ten! Where did he get off thinking that? 'I'm eleven!' I spat out. 'Going on twelve. Not ten!' 'Oops, sorry!' he responded. 'It's hard to judge someone's age when they're sitting down, you know.' I calmed down. Honest, he wasn't the first person to make this mistake. I've been small for my age ever since I was a little kid and people always think I'm younger than I am. Though, I've been looking a lot in the mirror recently. I swear on a pile of footy franks that I'm getting taller and stronger. 'So you going to the match today?' Sam changed the subject quickly, flashing me a friendly smile. 'No, wasn't planning to,' I replied. 'Well, you can join me and the family at Leichhardt Oval,' Sam suggested. 'I can take guests into a box owned by one of my good customers. The Canberra Raiders should give us a real test this arvo. You're welcome, if you like.' 'Thanks, but I better check with Mum,' I replied, my brain in a blur. My first haircut in Sydney *and* my first chance to see a major league game. Close up. Things were moving fast. Besides, Mum isn't all that keen on sport. In Melbourne, she didn't take to footy, not the way Dad and me did. Living and breathing it. So Mum probably wouldn't want me to go. She'd want to hang out in the city at the Art Gallery, shop, or see a movie. Something quiet. Only shows how wrong you can be.

CHAPTER 3 Liking Leichhardt Amazingly, Mum was totally cool. She was happy to zip off to Leichhardt Oval, though I quickly worked out that she wanted to go for a different reason to me. Mum was keen to network and get to know some of the businesspeople who regularly came to the games. She's switched on like that. Me? Well, I was interested in pigging out on the free food and drinks in the corporate box. And getting a great view of the game. This was football heaven. But I got distracted before the match even started. By a girl. *And not just any girl.* By Tania Brookes, the daughter of the President of the Wanderers, one of the oldest rugby league clubs in the district. Mr Brookes was a mate of Sam's and this box was for his guests. 'So what school you at?' Tania asked as I sat down next to her. 'The public school on Wicks Road at North Ryde,' I replied. 'Year 6. I'm starting next week.' 'Hey, that's where I go,' she said, 'I can show you around.' 'That'd be great, thanks.' Now Tania is blonde, about the same height as me, which I like, and I reckon she even uses perfume sometimes. And best of all, she was friendly right from the start. So I trusted her and I confessed. 'Look, gotta let you in on a secret,' I said quietly, turning away from Mum, Sam and the others in the box. 'What?' In a few minutes, I told her the whole story. About Dad staying in Melbourne and me and Mum moving here. How I'd played AFL for a couple of years. That I could handle myself pretty well as a rover and goal sneak. Mainly, I told her how I felt guilty about telling Sam I was a Tigers fan. And ending up here in the slick seats and eating all the free snacks. When I really knew almost nothing about rugby league. Tania grinned. 'Don't worry, I'll keep your secret and I'll tell you all you need to know.' I felt better already. 'You will?' 'Sure.' She leaned closer to me. 'First you have to know the rules and then the tactics.' Below us, the game between the Tigers and the Raiders was warming up and the crowd was getting vocal. 'Hey, it might be easier if you tell me who the players are first,' I said. 'And what positions they play.' 'Yeah, all right.' Tania pointed out some of the key players. Five-eighth, Benji Marshall, full-back, Brett Hodgson, lock, Dene Halatau, and half-back, Scott Prince. I'd heard a few of their names and knew these guys were heroes. 'It's like all footy,' Tania explained. 'You try to get more possession than the other

team and take advantage while you've got the ball.' I saw that straightaway. My jaw dropped with admiration as Benji Marshall magically caught a pass, stepped round the Raiders hooker, then outran their full-back to score a sixty-metre try. There were huge cheers from the Tigers fans and the ground was rocking. But the final score wasn't such great news. Sadly for Sam, Tania, Mr Brookes, *and now me*, the Tigers lost. The Raiders scraped home 20–18. 'That was awesome,' I told Tania. The game had been fast and exciting, the tackling tough, the atmosphere sensational. 'You liked it?' 'Sure, it was fantastic.' She looked me in the eye. 'You know, if you like league, you should join us for training.' 'Training?' I stared at her, dumbfounded. 'Do you mean— *you* play?' 'Sure, a few girls at school do,' she said. 'In the ten to twelves. The mod league.' 'You play for the school?' 'No, I play in the juniors at Dad's club, the Wanderers. But we practise at school sport on Mondays, and for the club on Tuesdays and Thursdays.' 'Jack—is Tania here getting you onto the local team?' Sam said, butting in. 'You should have a go. Lot of our champions started there.' I looked uncertainly at Mum and back at Tania. 'I dunno...' 'Why don't you have a run with us at school,' Tania suggested. 'See if you like it and take it from there.' 'Smart girl,' Sam said, nudging Mum. 'Don't worry Vicky, she'll look after Jack. Show him the ropes.' I felt a bit annoyed. I didn't actually want to be 'looked after' and my feelings must have shown on my face. But Mum stared at me and nodded encouragingly. I reckon she wanted me to make an effort to meet some other kids and to get out from under her feet at home. 'Yeah ... OK,' I finally said. 'Cool!' Tania shot out her right fist and jabbed me in the stomach. 'Uhhh!' I spluttered, shocked at the sudden whack. 'We'll soon toughen you up in the ways of rugby league,' she said cheekily. 'Ah ... yeah ... great,' I said, recovering my breath. 'I'll give it a go.' Easy said, I guess, and I'd probably bitten off more than I could chew. But some smart guy once said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with one footstep. And I had a heap of steps, grips, passes, catches and tackles to learn. Just for starters. The highlights of the game were still racing through my brain when Dad made his usual Sunday night call. He did this for two reasons. Sure, he wanted to talk to me, I knew that. But he always chatted with me first and then asked for Mum. A month ago, he had offered to throw in his job as a plumber and move to Sydney, if Mum would agree to have him back. For Mum, it wasn't such a hot idea. She'd never forgiven him for seeing this other lady. I don't know all the details but it's the reason they broke up in the first place. Anyway, I was buzzing with news. 'I went to the rugby league yesterday,' I told him. 'Sam let Mum and me sit in a box as his guest...' 'Sam?' Dad interrupted sharply. 'Sam who?' 'Sam the barber.' 'A friend of your mother's?' 'Kind of,' I replied, not picking up his jealous streak. 'Sam's shop is next to where Mum's working and he cuts my hair. Sam's a big fan of the Wests Tigers.' 'How long's he known your mum?' Now I was getting his drift. 'Dad, they don't know each other that well. He has the barber shop next to the chemist. That's all.' 'Right, right...' Dad said, backing off. 'I saw a great match too, you know. The Blues pipped the Demons at the MCG. I wish you'd been there with me.' 'Yeah, Dad, it would have been great,' I said, really missing him. But I couldn't hold in what I wanted to say. 'I met this girl, Tania. We sat in her father's box and Tania explained the game. And she's asked me out to training at school tomorrow.' 'Really! What for—netball?' 'No, rugby league, she's in this junior team, the Wanderers. I really want to try out with them,' I added hopefully. 'Rugby league! You're starting to sound like a real Sydneysider,' Dad replied. 'That should make your mother happy. Is she there, by the way?' 'She's working,' I explained carefully. 'It's her turn on duty at the pharmacy tonight. She'll be home soon.' 'OK, buddy,' he said. 'Tell her I was asking after her, will you? And give her my love.' 'OK, I will.' 'And be careful with this Tania,' he said laughing. 'Playing with girls can be dangerous, you know.' I could still feel the shock of her jab to my stomach. 'It's cool, Dad. I'll be careful.' I hung up. I felt kind of happy and kind of sad. Glad to talk to Dad but sad he wasn't here. If you know what I mean.

CHAPTER 4 Big Leap Forward The worst thing about Monday was going to school. The second worst thing was going to a new school *and looking like* I was the newest kid there. This was because Mum went totally OTT. She dropped me off at school with my new uniform, new shoes, new socks, new backpack, books, pens. You name it. I swear I even had new undies. I stood out like a dog's bum. Like a fart in a lift. Like a bouncing ball on an empty basketball court. No surprise, as I made it through the gates, a tough-looking bunch of dudes welcomed me. 'What's crackin', new dacks?'

'Take a geek at the freak!' 'Ya look like new spew!' You know, the usual friendly stuff when you walk into a school playground where no one's seen you before. 'Jack, over here!' I spun around and Tania walked towards me, beaming. Wow, relief! At least I knew someone. 'Hey Tania, this freak a friend of yours?' sneered the biggest guy in the bunch. This kid was The Hulk, if you got near him he blocked out the sun. 'Back off, Savva!' Tania said forcefully. 'This is Jack Lane. He's trying out with our team this arvo.' Savva squinted down his nose at me. In the shade, I looked up into his pudgy face. 'This midget!' Savva said mockingly. 'Is that what they call ya?—Midget!' To tell the truth, that stung. In Melbourne, some of the kids in my year 5 class had called me Midget. The kids I never got on with. When would I ever shake it? Tania spoke up. 'Jack's got a much better nickname than that, haven't you?' I looked at her blankly. Did I? She winked at me. 'Go on—tell 'em!' 'Sure, all right...' I struggled to come up with a quick name. No way I was going to be called Midget any more. I thought back to my last few AFL games. I'd kicked a couple of goals but Kicker sounded tame. And I'd thumped a few long punts but Thumper sounded uncool. Like a dumb kangaroo. Then I remembered a big mark I'd taken up forward. I'd run like a maniac to get to the ball, leaped into the air and pulled down a screamer. That was it! 'Most people call me Leaper,' I said. 'Leaper Lane.' 'Jack was a junior champion in AFL,' Tania lied outrageously. 'AFL?' Savva glared into my face. 'Ping-pong for pussies!' 'And they call you Savva 'cos you don't havva brain?' I fired back. Savva raised his fist and stepped towards me. 'Watch it, freak!' 'Sav, Sav, take it easy,' Tania said, stepping between us. She seemed to know how to handle him. Savva shrugged, turned his back on me and moved off. His two mates followed. 'Leaper—not bad,' Tania said. 'They really call you that?' 'Not exactly,' I muttered. 'I like it. Leaper, yeah.' 'But I wasn't a junior champion,' I complained. 'I had a few good games but I...' 'Don't worry about it,' Tania cut in. 'You want those guys to know you've got a bit of a track record. I want them to take you seriously.' She had a point, I guess, and there was no taking it back now. So I changed the subject. 'So why is the big hulk called Savva?' 'His name's Benny Loy,' Tania replied with a twinkle in her eye. 'You know Savva...' 'Loy!' I burst out laughing. Somehow, Savva did remind me of a big snag with fat buns. 'Come on, the bell will go soon,' Tania said, grabbing my arm. 'I'll give you a quick tour.' 'OK, thanks.' Yeah, welcome to wonderful Wicks Road Public School, I thought. One friend, three enemies in the first five minutes. A big welcome to— *Leaper Lane!* How would I ever live up to that? I didn't have to wait too long. Sport was after lunch and I felt nervous. Time for my first run with the rugby league gang and I didn't even know the basics of the game. *Tough gig.* And I was real worried that word had got around I was some kind of champion footballer. 'We'll show ya what footy is,' Savva said aggressively, giving me a 'friendly' bump as we jogged onto the school oval and joined up with about fifteen other kids. Then I met Mr Menetti. 'Tall, lanky and cranky,' Tania had told me earlier. 'Round the oval twice and then push-ups and stretches!' Mr Menetti growled at us. He didn't seem to notice I was there. In the bright sun, I ran around the oval with Tania and the others. I got up a sweat quickly but at least the warm up and loosening exercises were nothing new. The same as for my old school team. But it got harder from there. Mainly, I couldn't get the hang of passing the ball. It was completely different to the Aussie Rules hand pass. My hands felt like blobs with ten thumbs. Naturally, Savva kept laughing at me all the time. That sure helped. Then I stuffed up my fifteenth pass in a row. 'Over here, Jack!' Mr Menetti called me out. He knew my name, guess that was a start. 'Tania, give us a hand,' Mr Menetti said gruffly, picking up a ball and tossing it to her. 'Show Jack how to hold the ball properly.' 'OK.'

Eleven-year-old Jack Lane is a little kid with a lot on his mind - a new city, a new school, and a new football code. Life isn't easy when he moves from Melbourne to Sydney and has to give up Aussie Rules. But things soon get heaps better. Jack gets hooked on rugby league and joins his local club, the Wanderers. After a shaky start the team learns Jack can leap as high as any of them. And he has the best kicking boot in junior league. So it's goodbye 'Midget' and hello 'Leaper'. But will injury

sideline him? Will he make the cut for The Footy Show junior kicking competition? And will he ever get his mum and dad back together again?

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