

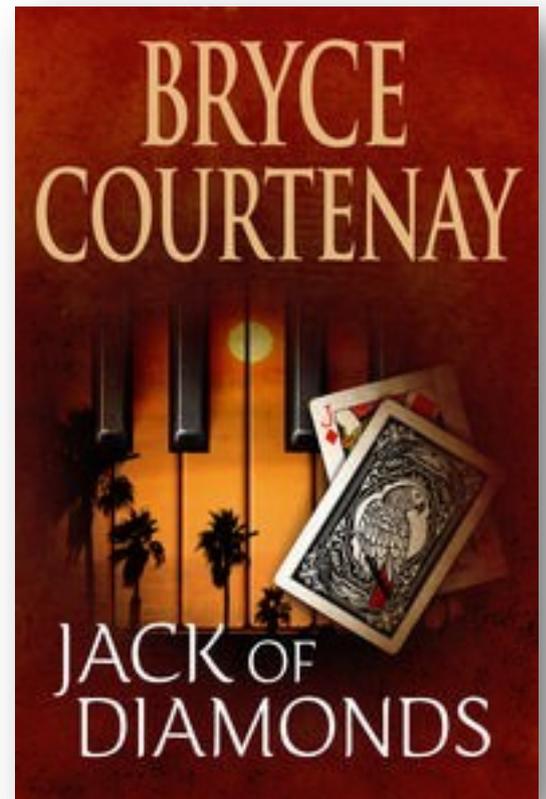
Jack of Diamonds

Author: Bryce Courtenay

Extract

In this sneak preview from Chapter One of Jack of Diamonds, the new – and final – book by Australia's favourite story-teller, Bryce Courtenay, we meet our young hero.

Born into the slums of Toronto at the end of the roaring twenties, Jack Spayd grows up with a set of rules for home, school and the street where the strong rule the weak. Jack is lucky in that he has a teacher who believes in him and a mother who protects him from his drunken father's rages. But then an unexpected birthday present offers him a life-changing turning point. Could this really be his ticket out of Cabbagetown?



Winters always seemed endless, but eventually summer would arrive, with the long summer vacation stretching through July and August. During term, half the class would play truant, girls staying home to mind younger children, boys on the streets learning a different set of lessons from classroom stuff, which was rarely valued. In winter it was the opposite: the classrooms were warmed by hissing hydronic radiators, which were almost too hot to touch. School was packed to the rafters, the girls bringing their preschool brothers and sisters with them to get them away from the bitterly cold cottages. The school principal, Mr Stott, always sent letters home saying babies and little kids were not to be brought to school, but none of the families took any notice. You can't let a toddler freeze, and so the teachers had to give in. Of all the vicissitudes we endured as children, the one we shared with the rest of Toronto was the bitter winter weather. I can't ever recall being totally warm except in a classroom.

The only advantage of winter was that there were fewer fights. Fighting meant partially stripping, and staying warm in the freezing playground was everyone's first priority. My mom would bring newspapers back from the offices she cleaned and mould a thick layer against my skin under my shirt,

jersey and overlarge overcoat from Mrs Sopworth at the Presbyterian Clothing Depot. All the kids did the same in winter and some of us looked like the Michelin man. As soon as warmer weather arrived we reverted to looking as scrawny and malnourished as we really were. With babies and small kids squalling and screaming and generally carrying on in class, there was very little effective learning in the winter months.

The children in our part of town were divided into various categories, mean-spirited and tough at the top, weak or compliant at the bottom, with most somewhere in between. If the attitudes and expectations adopted in childhood carry over into adulthood, then, generally speaking, the kids from Cabbagetown were unlikely to live lives filled with much success or happiness.

That I should fall through the cracks of my childhood world was a matter of sheer luck. I was by nature a loner, but at school I mostly managed to conceal my true feelings with the appearance of an easy going attitude. I was quick with a quip and I used my wit to make the other kids laugh. Strangely enough, I have my father to thank for a piece of good advice that helped me in the playground: 'Son, don't back down from the big guy; fight him and even if yer lose yer'll gain respect. He won't pick on you again and neither will anyone else.'

Fights were how the pecking order was established in the schoolyard, and, in schoolboy terms, they were what decided the future. The toughest guy in my age group was Jack Reading, and he was an inch or two bigger than me. He was virtually obliged to challenge me to a fight, and when he did, I accepted, and though I took a beating, I inflicted a fair bit of damage of my own. He was the one who eventually walked away. 'That's enough,' he growled, unaware that I had just about fought to a standstill. I stood there bleeding from the nose, my lip split and my left eye closing fast, feeling as if Jack Reading had near beaten me to death, but as I looked around at the guys who'd gathered in a circle to watch the fight, I mustered a grin and called out, 'Hey, Jack, come back! You forgot to close the other eye!' This got a big laugh and did a whole lot for my reputation, and I realised then that using humour is generally more effective than using your fists. Although Jack Reading had clearly won, the fight was declared 'evens', an honourable draw. So, I gained the respect I needed to help conceal the fact that I was different and a loner. I knew that isolation or solitude was the single most dangerous situation in which a slum kid could find himself.

Nobody could get away with showing that they really liked learning. Anyone stupid enough to hold up his hand in class in response to a teacher's question would earn the scorn of his peers. It would certainly have blown my disguise to smithereens had I let on how much I loved learning, and I wasn't that foolish. Answering questions in class was left to one or two of the bolder, brighter girls. But I had a secret life in books. Remember, my mom left for

work at four o'clock in the afternoon and so I had the whole late afternoon and evening alone at home in which to read.

I'd borrow books from the Boys and Girls House, which I'd joined at age six with the help of a teacher, Miss Mony. Her name was Shanine, and she was very beautiful and always nice to me. One afternoon after school, she took me on the streetcar to where they had a library that, like its name said, was just for boys and girls. We were permitted to take out two books twice a week.

For the next two years, Miss Mony would take me to the library twice a week on her way home, we'd discuss the books I'd read and she'd give me verbal tests that helped me a lot. I'd get off at the Boys and Girls House streetcar stop, and she'd give me my return fare to the east side and continue on to where she lived. I'd get my two books, jump on a returning streetcar and be home by five, an hour after my mom had left for her work. She would leave my dinner for me: sandwiches in the summer and, when she'd managed to get a bone from the butcher, soup in the winter, which she'd keep warm in our old thermos flask.

On days when Miss Mony and I didn't go to the library, she'd give me my hot evening meal soon after I got back from school. So on weekdays I'd only see my mom for half an hour over breakfast and then for half an hour over dinner on non-library days; my only real chance for us to have a proper chat was when she came home at ten o'clock each night.

In the summer in which I would turn eight, Miss Mony left our school to get married and moved to Vancouver. Because the weather was fine, I could walk to the library, but it took a long time and I'd get there in the last half hour before it shut. By the time I got home, my mom was long gone. Nobody knew I'd become an avid reader except the departed Miss Mony and my mom, who could barely read herself and loved it when I read to her. We would share books at night just before we both fell asleep and at weekends, when we had more time. It didn't seem to matter that they were kids' books, although just before Miss Mony left, I was reading books for children aged up to twelve. My mom had never had anyone read to her, not even, she said, at school. It was like she was doing her life backwards. Sometimes she'd clasp one of my library books to her chest, close her eyes and say, 'I wish, I wish.'

But with Miss Mony now gone, I didn't know what I was going to do when winter came and it snowed. I didn't think I'd be able to make it to the library before it shut. Winter loomed even bleaker than usual, and I puzzled over how I could avert this impending disaster. How do you spend the evenings alone at home if you can't read? Especially after you've been accustomed to reading four books a week. I couldn't listen to the radio, like people did later. Radio was just becoming popular, but only very rich people had one in their homes and no kid I knew had ever seen a radio. I doubt there was a single radio in all of Cabbagetown during the whole of the 1930s.

'Them upstairs' had an old wind-up gramophone and the records were all old songs that sounded as if the singer sang them from the bottom of a deep well. Sometimes the needle would get stuck in the worn groove and keep repeating a single line until somebody came and lifted it. But I didn't mind; it was the only nice thing coming through the ceiling. I memorised all the songs, even the places where the voice got stuck. But they didn't play the gramophone a whole lot, so books were usually my only companions at night. While there was a fair bit of summer left, I couldn't help worrying about the winter to come. At night when I said my prayers, I asked God not to let it snow on library days.

But, as it happened, snow was responsible for the second disastrous incident involving my father, my mom and myself. It was to change my life forever.

It happened on the day of my eighth birthday, the 13th of August 1931, but the seeds of the disaster were sown two days earlier, when my dad returned from the tavern in his usual state. For some reason, my mom and I hadn't yet escaped into our bedroom, and she mentioned to him that it was my birthday in two days' time, adding that she would bake a cake and hoped he might come home sober to share it with his son.

'Birthday? What's this? It's the fucking Depression. We don't have money for fancy cakes, woman,' he'd replied.

'And whose fault is that?' my mom couldn't resist muttering, but then she added quickly, 'I've saved a bit, it'll be nothing fancy, just a small cake. Try to come home sober, Harry.'

'Don't! Don't do it, woman!' he'd roared, then stomped off to bed.

But my little mom could be stubborn and knew how excited I'd been when she'd first mentioned the birthday cake. While I now insisted I didn't need a cake, she nevertheless baked what she referred to as a 'plain cake' and iced it with chocolate icing, saving a bit of white icing to write 'Happy 8th Birthday Jack'. Then she decorated it with eight red, white and blue candles. I got to lick the bowl.

I must say, it looked splendid sitting in the centre of the kitchen table, with a small white doily placed under it. I'd never had a cake for my birthday before and was pretty excited. I'd entirely forgotten my father's drunken warning two days previously.

We waited anxiously on the big birthday night. Neither of us said anything as it drew close to closing time at the tavern. But, of course, he arrived in his usual state. He entered the kitchen and glared, his red rimmed eyes bulging more than ever at the cake resting resplendent on the table with a box of matches beside it.

Lighting the small candles, we'd previously decided, would be his special task. Mom had done the baking, icing and decorating. Dad would perform the candle-lighting ceremony, and I the blowing out and making a wish. (I'd already practised blowing out the unlit candles in a single breath.) Then, wearing her special white lace apron from her grandmother, Mom would cut the cake.

'What's this?' he barked, pointing at the cake. 'I thought I told you, woman!' His anger flared in the familiar way and, if possible, his eyes popped even more. Then he took a step towards the table and drove his fist down hard into the centre of the cake, and kept hammering the broken pieces until the kitchen table was covered in bits of yellow cake, chocolate icing and smashed red, white and blue candles. He even crushed the matchbox, which burst and scattered matches all over the place. 'Jesus Christ, woman! Don't ya ever listen?' he roared, ignoring the birthday boy, who stood in front of his silent mom, frightened enough to piss his pants but attempting to protect her.

I was aware of the backhand that might at any moment drop her to the floor but, even when drunk, he was reluctant to hit me in the face, so if I stood in front of her, I might save her. A wife-beater was one thing; a child-beater was a much lower creature. While, like many other fathers, he qualified on both counts, he'd sometimes be just sufficiently aware to leave me alone. Now, swaying and cussing, he turned towards us, and I stiffened and closed my eyes, expecting his vicious knuckles to crack into my face. But he hesitated, turned again and rinsed his hands under the kitchen tap, then grabbed me by the shoulders. 'Git!' he snarled, hurling me across the tiny kitchen to crash into the wall. Next he dried his big red-knuckled hands on my mom's white lace apron, his ugly, pugnacious face inches from her own. 'Yer don't fuckin' listen, do yer, yah stupid bitch!' he growled, before staggering off to bed, thankfully without his signature goodnight backhand. Never mind the cake, this would turn out to be the best birthday I'd ever had.

Two weeks later, my dad returned from the tavern, reached into his trouser pocket and held out a harmonica, its polished silver shape resting on his huge calloused hand. 'Here, Jack, thought I'd forgotten, eh? Yer birthday present.' Then, seeing my surprise, he added, 'Now, don't get too excited, son. I won it in a card game.' He gave me a sardonic grin. 'Put it to your gob. It'll stop you talking shit. You can blow crap instead.' His great belly heaved as he chortled over his own wit.

I thanked him profusely, though more out of obsequious fear than from delight at the unexpected gift, taking the silver instrument gingerly from his palm. It was obviously not new – one of its silver cover plates bore a small dent and the words 'Johnny's Revenge' was scratched crudely into the chrome – but it still had a metal button that extended from one side that you apparently pressed, though why, I couldn't be sure. But I would later learn it

was a genuine German Hohner and a fairly decent one, with an excellent tone.

I guess there are moments in all our lives we later recognise as turning points. This was mine. The moment I brought the harmonica to my mouth and felt the square wooden holes against my lips, I knew something in me had changed forever.