

In 2008, the State Library of Queensland asked me if I'd consider writing an eight-part serial for their website, featuring characters from my latest book at the time, *Money Run*. I responded in the same way I have to most of the questions people have asked me in my career: "Sure, why the hell not?"

And so *Freak Show* was born. It was published one chunk per week on the Summer Reading Club Blog, while I frantically tried to write fast enough to stay ahead of the readers. It was a tougher journey than I expected – being a novelist rather than a short story writer, I was accustomed to having more room to evolve my characters. And writing serially was surreal. I couldn't go back and change the beginning so it fit with the end like I usually do – because people had already read it!

But despite these challenges, the story got written. And it somehow became one of the most successful serials in the Summer Reading Club's history. We got lots of great feedback from lots of great readers. It's rare to be part of something that gratifying.

I'd like to thank Bernadette Franzoni, for encouraging me to undertake this adventure. And I also want to thank my girlfriend, Venetia Major, for regularly asking me how the next part was going, and thereby reminding me that I hadn't written it yet.

I dedicate this story to the fans. If you've ever written to me to tell me you enjoyed one of my books, if you've ever recommended one to a friend, if you've ever given one away as a gift, if you've ever bought anything from *jackheath.com.au*, if you're one of those people who checks my blog every single day even though you know I only write two or three times a week, then *this is for you*. Hope you like it.

Jack

FREAK SHOW

by Jack Heath

Ashley Arthur rappelled down the side of the circus tent, feet bouncing against the heavy canvas flaps. She kept one gloved hand behind her, wrapped around the climbing rope, loosening every time she took a jump. The rope made a fizzing sound as it slipped across the carabina attached to her belt.

Jump! *Fizzzz.*

Jump! *Fizzzz.*

She had nearly reached the bottom. The entrance to the big top was only a few metres to her right, bathed in the sodium glow of the security light. It was chained shut, but Ash was betting there'd be enough give in the canvas to squeeze through.

Jump! *Fizz, crunch.* She was on the ground. Crouching, she scanned the moonlit horizon. No cops, no circus security trucks, no pedestrians. So far, so good.

Ash ran over to the entrance, temporarily exposed by the light. She stretched the fabric aside with one hand, clenching the chains with the other so they didn't rattle, and slipped through the gap.

The inside of the big top smelled like hay and sweat. The punters had long since gone home, but the performers were still hanging around – on the opposite side of the big top Ash could see a hulking strongman and two acrobats in sparkling leotards watching the lion tamer tell an anecdote, twirling his fake moustache and licking his yellow teeth. Faint laughter drifted over to her.

She hit a switch on her watch, which activated the microphone sewn into her collar. 'Benjamin,' she whispered. 'I'm in.'

There was a crooked tent in the corner of the big top, a painted sign hanging over the entrance. The soft wood was starting to rot and age had scraped much of the paint away, but Ash could still make out the words: *Freak Show.*

'Found the tent,' she murmured.

'Can you get to it?' Benjamin whispered. Ash turned the volume on her earphones up to maximum.

'You don't need to whisper,' she said.

'Sorry. It's the suspense. Can you get in?'

Ash watched the performers. The acrobats were arguing, a juggler was guffawing at them.

'Yes,' she said. 'I can sneak past.'

She slipped through the dusty shadows, footfalls soft against the hay. An old-fashioned car was balanced on a pair of wooden crates – she ducked behind it, peering through the windows at the performers. No-one was looking her way.

The last few metres were too exposed – lots of light, no cover. Ash dug around in her pocket, found a coin, tossed it back the way she had come. It struck a metal support strut with a *clang.*

The performers turned as one to face the entrance. Ash ran, a silent dash across the patch of light, heart clamouring in her chest. She shoved the tent flaps aside and ducked into the freak show . . .

Ash peered out through the gap. The performers were chatting again, apparently having dismissed the sound. Ash exhaled, and turned to sweep the inside of the tent.

There was no light, so she opened up her phone, bathing her surroundings in the eerie glow of the screen.

Lots of stuffed animals mounted on the walls – giant fish, rats with colossal fangs, a tortoise with the head of a meerkat. The centre aisle was lined with rows of things in jars – brains, feet, boggling eyes. Ash tried not to be distracted by the montage of horrors. She had a job to do.

She was looking for a bottled hand. Fake, like most of the other props – but wearing a ring that wasn't. 18 carat rose gold, set with a 3 carat brilliant-cut diamond. Worth about \$31,000.

The piece had been stolen from the Sultan of Qumar's underground safe four days ago, when the circus passed through the capital. Benjamin spotted the ring on the bottled hand by chance, in a photograph posted on FaceBook by a tourist.

The light crawled up the foot of a pedestal as Ash approached. It was taller than it had looked in the photo, she'd have to work out a way to climb it to get to –
– the jar. It was gone!

Ash's eyes widened. The top of the pedestal was bare. Someone had beaten her to it. 'Abort,' she whispered to Benjamin. 'It's not here, I–'

She froze. Footsteps, outside. One of the performers approaching the freak show. And if they found the hand missing, she realised, they'd start searching for a thief.

Ash ran towards the shadows in the rear of the freak show tent, searching for somewhere to hide. Maybe whoever was coming would only glance inside. Maybe she'd be okay.

'Ash!' Benjamin was panicked. 'What's happening?'

There – a fake corpse on a table up ahead, surrounded by glimmering autopsy tools. Ash ducked under the tablecloth and crouched on the dusty floor.

Her phone was still glowing. She snapped it shut.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she saw that the tablecloth was semitransparent. She could still make out the pedestal and the heads on the walls. But she hadn't been able to see through it from the other side – she was concealed well enough.

'Ash, what's going on?'

'Shut up,' she whispered. 'I'm hiding.'

Light fell into the tent as the flaps were pushed open. Giant shoulders cast thick shadows on the straw.

The strongman, Ash realised, heart in her mouth. If he finds me, I'm dead.

Clomp. Clomp. The strongman's clogs thumped across the ground.

Was he moving towards the pedestal? Ash couldn't tell. What if he saw that the hand was gone?

What if he was the one who took it? What if the circus thieves were turning on each other?

Ash stared through the cloth. The pedestal was about 3 metres tall, too high for most people to reach the top without a stepladder – but this guy would have no trouble. His arms were as long and thick as the tentacles of a giant squid.

He was approaching the autopsy table. Ash held her breath. Watched as his massive feet thudded closer and closer.

He stopped.

She waited.

And then he bent down to look under the table.

Ash scrambled backwards, away from the strongman, no longer caring how much noise she made. Her sneakers kicked up an explosion of brown dust. The strongman stumbled back, startled, then recovered and lunged forwards to grab her – but she was just out of reach.

Ash climbed to her feet and started sprinting towards the tent wall. Can't fight him, she thought. He'd tear me in half. I have to run. Run and hide.

'Stop!' the strongman yelled. 'Police!'

What the hell? Ash was shocked, but she didn't stop. She snatched her pocket-knife out of her jeans as she ran, and flicked out the blade. She was nearly at the wall.

The knife tore through the canvas with a sound like a giant zipper and she dived through the slit. Her ankle got caught and she slammed down onto the ground, the impact firing shocks of pain up her wrists. She pulled her foot free, spat out some dirt and kept running into the darkness of the big top.

She couldn't hear the strongman behind her. Maybe he'd lost sight of her. Hide, she thought. Got to hide.

There was a platform to the right, a small podium with a hollow underneath it. She dropped to her stomach and rolled sideways, under cover.

The only sounds were her breaths and her frenzied heartbeat. There was a strange odour under here – a dark, sweaty stench. She wondered where she was.

Her arm was pressed against something. She turned her head to see.

It was a hand in a jar.

'Benjamin,' Ash whispered. 'I found the hand!'

'No way! Is the ring on it?'

Ash peered through the glass. 'You bet. Time to get out of here.'

She could hear movement somewhere in the darkness. The strongman was still out there.

Stop. Police. Was he really a cop? If so, why would he take the hand, instead of just arresting the other performers? And if not, why would he say he was?

Ash wrapped one arm around the jar and wriggled out from under the podium. The smell was overpowering – maybe the jar was leaking.

She'd lost her sense of where the exit was. She'd have to find one of the walls of the big top and slice through it. She could see bars in the darkness up ahead, part of a cage – can't go that way. She turned right.

Maybe the strongman wasn't the one who took the hand off the pedestal. But who else could? No-one was tall enough. The acrobats, perhaps, standing on one another's shoulders?

More bars in front of her. Another cage?

No. The same one. She wasn't surrounded by cages – she was inside one. Why was there a giant cage in the big top?

Movement! Ash froze. She'd heard a scuffling sound. Her eyes searched the darkness.

Sniff. Sniff. Growl.

Ash turned around, slowly.

An enormous beast was behind her, snuffling and staring. She took in the golden fur, the pitiless eyes, the teeth as thick and sharp as wooden stakes.

A lion. She was in the lion cage.

The lion reared up like a horse preparing to gallop. Easily two metres tall, maybe two and a half. Cruel claws on the end of massive legs.

Very suddenly, Ash realised how the hand had been stolen, and by whom, and what the smell was. Pheromones. A scent the lion was programmed to respond to. Making it believe the jar was its property, one of its cubs.

The lion tamer. He must have sprayed the jar with pheromones, let the lion out, and waited for it to collect the jar and take it back to their den while he was chatting with the performers elsewhere – a perfect alibi.

His plan unfolded itself Ash's head, daring and brilliant. When the others saw the hand was missing, they'd search the big top, but they'd never dare step in the lion's cage. They'd ask him to check. And when he told them the cage was empty, they'd start looking for an intruder – someone like Ash.

Although the lion tamer probably hadn't expected someone to actually be there. Or that he had an undercover cop in his troupe.

None of that was important right now. What was important was that Ash was holding a jar smeared with lion cub pheromones – in front of a furious lion.

The lion growled. Heart racing, Ash set the bottled hand down on the ground, slowly, and took a big step back.

The lion padded towards the jar. Sniffed it. Scratched the ground with its claws. Then it kept coming, slinking towards Ash.

'I gave it back!' Ash hissed at the lion. She pointed at the jar. 'See? It's yours.'

The lion charged forwards, swiping at Ash's head with a massive paw. She dived aside, and felt the claws scrape across her back. The wound stung as she rolled and scrambled to her feet, whirling around to face the lion again.

The lion *roared*, a rage-fuelled blast of sound that hurt Ash's ears. Hot breath washed across her face. She coughed, choking on the stink of spoiled meat.

'What the –'

A voice from behind her. Ace risked a glance.

It was the lion tamer, staring from behind the bars of the cage.

Ash couldn't outfight an angry lion. Bad guy or not, the lion tamer was her only chance of survival. 'Help me!' she cried.

The lion tamer looked at the lion, then at the jar, then back at her. 'No,' he said. 'I think this solves my problem nicely.'

Ash didn't have time to say anything else. She could hear the lion charging again behind her.

Instead of trying to sidestep, this time she dropped to the floor, curled into a ball. The pouncing lion hurtled over the top of her, panting, and then landed with a scuffle in front of her.

Ash looked around. The lion tamer was gone. There was nothing in the cage she could use – just dirt and rocks that were too heavy to lift. No defences. No escape.

'Hey!'

She looked up to see the strongman perched on top of the wall of the cage. 'Catch,' he yelled, and dropped something.

As Ash saw the bar swoop down towards her, she realised what it was. The trapeze. The strongman had brought her the trapeze!

The lion turned and stared and swung a paw at the approaching bar like a kitten at a piece of string, but it missed. And as the trapeze swept over the big cat's head, Ash jumped, and it slammed into her gut and flung her backwards.

The rushing of wind in her ears sounded a lot like the lion's roar. Ash clung to the bar, knuckles white. The strongman hadn't just dropped it – he had *thrown* it, hard enough that it was carrying Ash across the lion enclosure. The ground swept away beneath her as the trapeze lifted her up and over the rough terrain.

As the bars on the opposite side of the cage rushed towards her, Ash lifted one foot and pressed it against the trapeze, so she was half-crouching on top of it. She tried to keep her breathing steady.

The trapeze was slowing down, metre by metre. Ash saw with horror that it wasn't going to make it over the wall of the cage. She was going to be trapped inside with the lion.

'No!' she grunted, and *jumped*.

The trapeze tumbled back into the darkness as she flew forwards, arms outstretched, a daring dive over the bars. The metal scraped her legs as she shot over the top, then suddenly she was falling, then she hit the ground with a smack. She coughed as the air was knocked out of her.

Looking back, she saw that the strongman was in the cage, circling the lion. He didn't look afraid at all. When he was facing Ash, he called out to her. 'You stay right there.'

'The lion tamer did it,' Ash yelled back. And then she ran for the exit, keen to get as far away from the big top as she could.

She felt bad – he had saved her life. But if he really was a cop, then she'd have a tough time explaining what she was doing there.

'Ash!' It was Benjamin. 'What the hell's going on?'

'I'm getting out,' she said.

'Are you hurt?'

'I'm okay.' She twisted the chains aside and slipped through the gap, out into the moonlight. 'But I don't have the hand. I'm sorry.'

'That's too bad. But there are other ways to make money.'

'Yeah,' Ash said. 'Looks like we're doing the Hammond Buckland job after all.'