

## “DARK WATER”

“German Shepherd, my ass,” Jack muttered. “That’s the howling of a wolf.”

He had come to the window in the boat house to see what Gulliver was howling about, although he had an unpleasant inkling what it might be. It had happened twice before, and both times a dead body had washed up against the pier. Gulliver, at the end of the pier, had assumed his howling pose, sitting on his haunches and directing his snout skyward. He paused between howls and looked back to see if he had attracted Jack’s attention yet. When he saw Jack at the window, he ceased howling and started to bark excitedly and rush towards Jack and then back to the end of the pier.

Jack knew it was futile to yell at the big German Shepherd to shut up once he donned his “Call of the Wild” cloak. Even though it was June, it was still cold in northern New York. The wall chronometer read 60-degrees outside and 75 inside. As soon as he opened the door, Jack knew it was another Lake George weather trick. There was a brisk wind blowing, and it had a strong taste of melted ice. He reached for his down-filled parka.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming, Gulliver.”

The lake water looked especially dark. Maybe it was just the first ice melting in the mountains and bringing down debris and trash accumulated during the winter. It was scary-looking, uninviting water, almost dark-brown, as opposed to a normal lake’s blue hue. Jack’s neck of the lake was called Silver Bay, not that he had ever noted anything silver about it.

Gulliver was at the last inch of the pier. He stopped barking when he saw Jack walking towards him and was now looking down at something below him. Gulliver was indeed more wolf than German Shepherd and came above Jack’s waist when Jack arrived and stood beside him. The big silver-gray looked at him with light blue eyes and then back down at the water. Jack leaned over to see what had excited him.

Another body.

Jack’s athleticism was a thing of the past. An aching stomach and knees shot from years of racquetball precluded him from squatting for a better view. The brisk wind was already making him unsteady. He carefully lowered himself to his knees and studied the body.

It was a girl, a very young girl. She was wearing a blue hoodie, which had snagged on the piling as the tide retreated. Her upper body was a foot out of the dark water. Her face was

turned up towards him. Her eyes were shut and her face nearly blue. Her features were perfectly formed, small ears and slightly upturned nose, and even from six feet away, Jack could discern long eye lashes laying on her cheeks. Her black hair was plastered against her forehead. She looked peaceful, as if she had just drifted off to sleep.

This was the third body he and Gulliver had discovered in the lake, and he didn't need another autopsy to tell him the cause of death. "Victim was rendered incapable of movement by hypothermia and drowned," he recalled reading from autopsy reports of the first two bodies, both fisherman. But they were older, nearly his age, and, although they had looked peaceful as well, their deaths were less tragic. This was a beautiful young girl.

He had to phone for help. No way could he retrieve the girl by himself.

He put a hand on Gulliver's strong shoulder and raised himself. "Stay here, boy, and keep an eye on her. I'll get help."

He and Gulliver had been together for ten years, and they were like an old married couple. Gulliver's eyes told Jack he understood. He laid down, his silver chin on the pier, as close to the drowned girl as he could get.

Jack's office was in the boathouse, but he never brought his cell phone with him when he had serious writing to do. He needed no distractions and was disgruntled when Gulliver had summoned him from his desk. He was only a few chapters away from finishing his 16th novel. He was fortunate to have conjured up a very likable private eye who an ageing and slowly diminishing group of loyal readers would still pay \$30 to read about. He would have thought once he had established the formula of a good P/I mystery it would be easy to knock out sequels. Not so. Each plot was harder and harder to flesh out and research and write to his high standards. He had been coaxing this one into the home stretch when Gulliver summoned.

He walked to his home higher on the lake front. Even though the builder called it a log cabin, for it was indeed made of cedar logs, it was 6,000 square feet with a 30-foot high ceiling in the main room. He had bought it 40 years earlier with profits from his first four books, all of which had been made into high-grossing movies. He had made a fortune when reading was fashionable and invested it wisely. A good thing, too, for, although his books were still technically best sellers, best sellers were netting him far less than they had in the past.

He called the local sheriff.

"Recognize her?" Darby asked.

He told the sheriff no and described her.

“Think I know who she is. We’ve got a missing girl report who fits your description. She’s a local who’s tried to kill herself before. We were afraid of this.”

Gulliver hadn’t moved in the hour it took Darby and the EMS crew to get to the pier.

They borrowed Jack’s skiff and worked quickly to get the girl out of the water.

“Storm coming up,” Darby explained. He shrugged big shoulders and tightened his yellow raincoat around him. He was wearing a baseball cap with the Warren county seal on it, a portrait of John Warren, a hero of Bunker Hill, after whom the county was named. Darby was from Queensbury, the county seat. Jack lived in nearby Hague which bordered on the Silver Bay portion of Lake George.

Jack testified at the coroner’s hearing, which ruled the girl’s death a suicide, based largely on the lamentable note she’d left behind. The coroner, Russell Squadrone, was one of Hague’s local doctors and a long-time friend of Jack’s. He verified Jack’s diagnosis as to cause of death. Hypothermia followed by drowning.

Jack lingered to speak with Russ after the hearing. Russ also happened to be the doctor who was treating him for his bad knees and lately for his persistent stomach aches.

“She looked so peaceful,” Jack said. “I’d think drowning would be a terrible way to go.”

“Not when it’s preceded by hypothermia. Kind of like going to sleep.”

“Come to think of it, the other two bodies looked peaceful, too.”

“Not a bad way to go. Just not at 16.”

“Poor kid,” Jack said.

Russ had paperwork for Jack to sign. He towered over Jack, as he was six-three and an athlete of some repute in his younger years. He was 60 now and graying, but still participated in the annual swim across Silver Bay, which was nearly three miles. Jack was ten years older and six inches shorter, and, although athletic in the day, was beginning to show his age. His hair was now white, and he had given up on comb-overs. He had a good dentist and a flashy smile which he used to charm an occasional interested lady. No lake swims for him, even though he had a small private beach below his cabin. The lake George water was too cold. He stuck to laps in his indoor-heated pool.

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Gulliver didn't find any more bodies, so things went calmly for the next few weeks while Jack finished the novel. He emailed it to Prescott, his editor in NYC. He and Prescott had been together since novel # 1, "A Hint of Murder." A junior reader at the publishing house had read the novel first, and, although she personally liked it, didn't deem it good enough to build her fledgling reputation on. Ergo, to the slush pile.

The doubting young reader had devoured the novel in practically one sitting, though, unusual for a book destined for the slush pile, and she found herself still thinking about the book and telling her fellow readers about it, even quoting some of the one-liners by its private eye protagonist.

Sample: "My fee's \$500 a day," he told the stripper. "A \$100 extra if you want sex."

Prescott, the Max Perkins of the publishing house, hearing his readers laughingly repeating one-liners from Jack's book, grew curious and asked to see it. The one-liners were indeed plentiful and good, but the plot really hooked Prescott. He contacted Jack and offered to work with him on it. He had Jack reduce the one-liners, which first-time authors tended to overly-rely on, and make the plot more complex and his protagonist more circumspect and intellectual.

With Prescott's help, Jack was a winner out the gate. A film producer had a spy ferreting for a book that could be made into a good action movie. The spy alerted him to Jack's forthcoming novel, which the producer read and offered \$250,000 for film rights, a near-record price for a book in the private-eye genre by a first-time author. By the time Jack published his fourth book, he had bought the log cabin on Lake George and was a member of the one % who could write a check for a million dollars.

An accountant friend suggested Jack put some of his royalties into an investment fund that bought and sold luxury condos in Miami Beach. Jack started slowly, graduating to regular and larger investments. Fortunately, Bernie Madoff had no involvement, and Jack eventually made more money from people buying into Miami Beach than into his novels.

Jack gave his books legs by adding Courtney, a beautiful lieutenant of detectives, who only on rare occasion deigned to sleep with Damien, his hard-nosed, sophisticated P/I. Jack even took cooking courses so he could write intelligently about the gourmet meals Damien prepared for his aloof lover with commitment problems.

"Know who Courtney reminds me of, old Sport?" Prescott asked.

“Haven’t a clue.” White lie. Jack had a clue all right.

“Why, Olivia, of course. Look how she slips in and out of my life. Makes outrageous love to me one night, and then disappears for months. When she returns, she just says she had to get away for a while. When I ask her where she disappears to, she disarms me with those long-lashed brown eyes, and says, quite convincingly, “Oh, just different places I can scarcely remember and a splash of faces I can’t attach a name to.”

One of the faces she couldn’t attach a name to belonged to Jack, and one of the places she could scarcely remember was his log cabin in Hague, New York. Prescott professed to be in love with Olivia, but, he, like the fictional Courtney, also had commitment problems. In fact, Jack had based the elusive Courtney on Prescott and Olivia.

Paradoxically, Jack longed for commitment, and, despite the plethora of danger signs posted round Olivia, had fallen in love with her. He was so in love that one night, after too many Martinis, he proposed.

She had touched his face tenderly and looked at him as if he were an abandoned child.

“Dear, precious Jack. You haven’t gone and fallen in love with me, have you?”

He realized she was years, or perhaps an eternity, away from commitment, and that if he pressed it, she might sever their on-and-off relationship. Better to have her on her terms than not at all, as King Solomon might have wisely advised. So, he had laughed as if his proposal were but a joke brought on by too much gin. She studied his face for a minute, not realizing she was studying the handsome features of a skilled writer who made a living by controlling the emotions of his characters, of whom he was one. Discerning only amusement in his amused eyes, she smiled with relief and snuggled up to him on the couch in front of the large fireplace in the main room of his log cabin.

“I’m ready to be bedded, Jack,” she purred, encasing him with long slender arms.

First things first, though. He reached for his notebook, which he kept always near, so he might jot down propitious phrases and ideas to use in future books. And that was the night Courtney Queensbury was born, and she spoke those very lines to Damien Hague in Jack’s next book.

Jack had that and other plot twists he skillfully weaved in, such as a serial killer he kept killing off, only to resurrect later to the surprise and consternation of his devoted readers. Still,

and despite Jack's deft writing skills, book sales had begun to wane. It seemed that the only thing people read any more was messages on their cell phones.

"Think I'm going to start writing in text." Jack joked.

"LoL, hopefully," commented Prescott.

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The book he had just finished ended with Courtney finally agreeing to marry Damien. In the book, as they are packing to return from their honeymoon, a shot rings out and Damien is struck down. The presumably dead serial killer had somehow extricated himself from an exploding aircraft and returned to slay his long-time nemesis. A grieving but determined Courtney pursues the serial killer and this time insures his demise by emptying a 15-round Glock into him.

The ending sparked sales, and there was talk of somehow resurrecting Damien in a 17th novel, as Arthur Conan Doyle had done after too hastily killing off Sherlock Holmes. Jack was willing, but time and circumstance would not cooperate. At the insistence of Russ, Jack had undergone a series of tests to determine the cause of his lingering stomach pains. Russ called to report he had the test results and asked to see him that night.

"Regrettably, my good friend," Russ informed him, as they had whiskeys in the main hall of the log cabin, "you have metastatic stomach cancer. You won't have enough time to write the resurrection novel, even if you choose to do so. I'm afraid I must also tell you to prepare yourself for a lot of pain. Or I can sedate you, and you can sleep away your last months."

"Thought we agreed after Olivia, Russ, you'd nuance bad news to me in the future?"

Russ shrugged, but Jack could read the pain in his good friend's misting gray-blue eyes.

"It's not a nice thing to say, Jack, and there's simply no nice way to say it."

Jack, creature of habit that he was, reached for his notebook and jotted the line down.

Russ knew what he was doing and smiled wryly.

"What does metastatic mean anyway?" Jack asked. "Might as well note that, too."

"It means it's spread to other places in your body."

"How many?"

“Lots. Makes it impossible to treat.”

“Would you permit me a non sequitur, Russ?”

“I’d welcome a change of subject.”

“You like Gulliver, don’t you?”

“Love him. Most beautiful dog I’ve ever seen.”

“My parting gift to you.”

“Seriously?”

“He likes you. I know you’ll take good care of him. A marriage made in Vahala.”

Gulliver was at sentry-duty by the floor-to-ceiling plate-glass window, where he was keeping watch over the dark lake shimmering in a stripe of bright moonlight. The wolf in him made him territorial, Jack mused, and, although Gulliver had yet to pay for a single log, he had assumed co-ownership of the cabin with Jack. Gulliver sensed they were talking about him and raised his great head and turned to study them with mesmerizing blue eyes.

Jack grinned. “Yeah, we’re talking about you.”

Russ marveled at their remarkable chemistry. He had no doubt but that Gulliver understood everything Jack said to him.

“Guess I’ll have to call Prescott and give him the bad news,” Jack said, somberly this time, as the reality of what he’d just been told sank in. He had to smile, though, as he knew exactly what his mentor would say.

“Why the smile?”

“I’m about to be ordered to NYC where Prescott will know a dozen specialists who can look me over and concoct miracle cures for me.”

“Won’t trust the old country doctor, huh?”

“That’ll be the gist of it. No offense, but I hope he’s right.”

“As do I. I’ll give you all the x-rays and test results to take with you.”

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Prescott reacted as Jack anticipated and demanded he come to NYC, where he took time off and escorted Jack to sundry specialists, all to no avail. The country doctor had nailed it. If anything, Russ had been overly optimistic as to how much time Jack had left. One doctor expressed amazement at Jack's lucidity and ability to even walk. He wanted to hospitalize him immediately. Jack declined.

Prescott was a wreck. He was ten years Jack's senior, nearly 80 years old, but still tall and handsome in a lean and somewhat colonial-Britain way. When he'd had a little too much to drink, he would brag that he aged like fine wine, and he found himself saying Brit things like, "Sorry that," and "Old chap". He was to the tuxedo born, he would often claim, and the well-attended parties he gave and the august manner in which he reigned over them reminded Jack of F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby*. If not *Gatsby* himself, then a close relative.

As they parted, Prescott grasped him tightly. "You are the best of my friends, old Chap, and I always hoped I would go first, as I cannot fathom how my life can proceed without you and your Dashiell Hammett tales to look forward to."

"You'll throw a party, Prescott, and make a magnificent toast as you did for Olivia."

They both laughed, or at least uttered sounds like laughter.

Russ picked Jack up at the train station in Queensbury and drove him to the cabin. The pains in Jack's stomach were growing exponentially, spreading, in fact, as if in competition to see which one would deliver the coups de grace, not unlike semen racing to the prized egg. His friend took note of his grimacing as he climbed into the car and handed him two bottles of pills.

"Read the directions," he said in doctor-speak. "One's for daytime, and they are the weaker so that you can wander about. The other is for sleeping. I doubt you'd be able to sleep without them. I'd recommend you don't drink, but I know you'll do precisely as you like."

"I listen to you."

"You hear, but you don't listen, Jack. One of your charms. You politely ignore."

"Do you think it would have helped if I had checked myself into the Mayo Clinic every year for a head-to-toe physical? I read where Bob Hope did that and lived to be 100."

"It couldn't have hurt, but he was just blessed with good genes. You, my friend, are the victim of a rogue gene, perhaps even two or three, that stayed hidden for years only to emerge with murderous intent. Time and circumstance. It gave you your biblical three score and ten and nothing more."



"I nonetheless count myself lucky," Jack philosophized, and he meant it. "As you say, I had my three score and ten, and they were incandescently happy years. I was able to make a magnificent living doing something I loved. How many people can say that? Think of the beautiful little girl we pulled out of the water. Time and circumstance gave her but ten and six."

"She had some choice in that. Hard to characterize it as time and circumstance."

"No, Russ, I disagree. She had a rogue gene, too."

"Point taken."

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Gulliver had appeared ten years before. He was almost all silver then and a puppy with visibly-intelligent, shining blue eyes. Jack didn't realize at first that he was a puppy, as he was almost the size of a full-grown, medium-sized dog.

Jack had the phone numbers of all the people who lived round him, and he dutifully asked if anyone had a dog gone-missing, or were they aware of someone who did. He described the dog to them and still drew blanks. Where had he come from? How had he survived? Where had his travels taken him?

Jack decided to keep him, and, to commemorate his odysseys, christened him Gulliver.

Within weeks, the possibility of him not being a puppy was discounted. He grew inches overnight. He seemed to have been born a mature dog. Friendly and affectionate, never malicious or destructive. One of Jack's fetishes was expensive shoes. He never lost a pair to Gulliver needing something to chew on. Nor did he ever try to climb up on Jack, for which Jack was especially grateful, as the big dog could have easily knocked him over, given his slim build. And perhaps most amazing of all, Gulliver had first-rate personal hygiene. Never did he leave a mess for Jack. When nature beckoned, Gulliver gave notice by going to the door, which Jack appreciated, as he didn't relish cleaning up after such a large dog. The vet who attended Gulliver was amazed upon learning of the dog's impeccably good manners.

"His previous owner must have been a skilled trainer," the vet remarked, as he stroked Gulliver's thick fur. "He looks more wolf than Shepherd, to be honest, but wolves don't have blue eyes. A few Shepherds do."

"Do wolves ever mate with German Shepherds?"

"It's possible, but I've never heard of it happening. Not around here anyway."

"I think it did," Jack mused.

It was a mystery the mystery-writer never solved.

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The time left to him was down to weeks. The medicine Russ was giving him helped, especially at night when his stomach felt as if he had eaten ground-up strands of glass. He could not have slept without the medication. He forced himself to tolerate the pain during the day, but longed for the night and sleep without pain. It was tempting to take the night pills during the day, but he fought off doing it. Russ called on him every day, and a distraught Prescott checked in on him frequently. And he had Gulliver, who never left his side.

Gulliver was a good listener. Sometimes he almost seemed to shake his great head in understanding as Jack vented to him about the pain. Gulliver's soft blue eyes signaled compassion. But what could Gulliver do? Jack chose not to overthink it. It was what it was.

Jack was a millionaire many times over. He had no family, just distant cousins. He left most of his money to the Salvation Army, a charity he admired. Gulliver was certainly part of his fortune, and he had already told Russ Gulliver was to be his. Jack owned his log cabin outright and had decided to leave it to Russ when his good friend agreed to assume responsibility for Gulliver. The only condition Jack had was that Russ live there until Gulliver lived his Canine three score and ten. Then Russ could do with the house as he wished. Jack also left him a sizeable stipend for maintenance of the log cabin. Russ strongly objected to the money, but relented when Jack acquainted him with how much the taxes and insurance and upkeep were on a not-so-simple log cabin. Far more than a country doctor could afford. All was in place. Except...

...Except Olivia's ashes. They were in a box in Jack's writing room in the boat house, together with the last letter he had received from her. It had been a wondrous surprise.

"Dearest Jack. You proposed to me several years ago. Though you blamed it on the Martinis, I know you meant it. If you recall, I never said yes or no. And, inasmuch as you never retracted your offer, then, by Victorian Law, you're honor-bound to hear my answer. Jack, my love, I accept your proposal. When we dock in The Virgin Islands in two days, I'll mail you this letter. From there I'll fly to San Juan and then to NYC, where I'll retrieve my car and drive to your cabin in Hague, where I expect you to be waiting with a ring. Nothing garish, although I confess to a weakness for gold. Fair warning. I want to have six kids. The first boy will be Damien, the first girl, Courtney. We'll search your novels for names of the other four, so long as they're not villains. All my love. Olivia."

He'd had but a few joyous days to revel before Russ brought news.

"There's no easy way to say it, Jack." His somber look told Jack the news would be bad.

"Then say it the hard way, but do so quickly."

"Olivia has been killed in a car crash."

"When?"

"A few hours ago."

"Where?"

"Near Queensbury."

"Are you sure it was her?"

"I spent many evenings with you two. I knew her well."

Bad news is infinitely worse when it follows joyous.

All Jack could say was, "Should you have occasion to deliver me bad news in the future, Russ, can we agree that you will nuance it to me?"

"Agreed."

Olivia had little family. Her will stated only that she be cremated and her ashes scattered in a place where she could be visited by friends. She was cremated in Hague and the ashes delivered to Jack. He requested two urns. He placed her ashes in one and gathered ashes from his fireplace for the other, which he gave to Prescott. It was Prescott's desire to scatter her ashes in Central Park, which was permitted. Olivia was well-known and liked by many, and Prescott, after securing the necessary permits, held a ceremony for her as he unknowingly scattered ashes from Jack's fireplace in a part of the park reserved for such ceremonies. A farewell party followed. Prescott's eulogy, unsurprisingly, was magnificent.

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Jack purchased a plot in the Hague cemetery. Two plots, actually, sharing one large headstone. One side read "Olivia Constance Morgan, Beloved Fiancée of Jack." His side read "Jack Henry Falcon, Beloved fiancé of Olivia." The dates of birth were five years apart, which was reasonable for a man and a woman. The woman, though, died 35 years before her fiancée.

Jack had seen to the engraving of the tombstone himself and had left it to Russ, who was aware of the sleight-of-hand with the ashes, to fill in the dates of Jack's demise.

His ability to tolerate pain had reached its limit. No more. He had decided to end it. He picked a Saturday, as he knew Russ worked the hospital ER those nights. He asked his friend if he would come by after his shift as he wanted to discuss the possibility of moving to a hospice, which Russ had been urging.

It was April and still cold. Jack waited until it was dark.

Wearing his down jacket, he led Gulliver to the end of the pier. Jack knelt and pulled the dog's large head of black, silver, and gray close to him. A bright light was on the end of the pier and he could see it reflected in Gulliver's eyes as the dog looked intently at him.

"You know I'm hurting, don't you, boy? Doesn't make sense just so I can be around a few more weeks. You'd probably just go off somewhere and let it happen if it were you. That's what I'm going to do. You and I have never had any disagreements in our years together, and I don't want any now. So, you've got to just let me do it. Russ will be here in a while, and he'll be moving in to take care of you. And, when your canine three-score-and-ten are up, he'll put you, well, your ashes anyway, right below Olivia and me. She was before your time, but, who knows, maybe you'll get a chance to meet her. You just stay here and let me do what I have to. Okay?"

Gulliver looked as if he had known all along what Jack was going to do, and, if this was what Jack wanted, he understood. Jack gave his beloved great dog a long final hug, then stood and dove into the dark water.

It was cold, so cold, but Jack was a good swimmer, although his skills had been honed from doing laps in a heated pool, not the incredibly cold and dark water of Lake George. He heard Gulliver barking behind him, but he swam on. The water became more tolerable, but he knew that wouldn't last. He had on shoes and the down jacket, now soaked in water, and he could feel the increased weight dragging him down. Deciding to look back, he was surprised at how much distance he had covered. He could still see the pier light and Gulliver sitting beneath it.

His arms were exhausted and numb. He was treading water, but he could sense nothing from his waist down. He could feel the numbness creeping up his chest. His body shivered spastically from the cold. Then, abruptly, as if an industrial-sized heater had been switched on, the shivering ceased and he became warm all over. He relaxed and basked in the warmth. It was time to let go. And, as he began to slip peacefully beneath the dark water, he heard it.

The howling of a wolf.

THE END.