

“SLINGS AND ARROWS”

“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. He had an unpleasant inkling of what it might be. It had happened twice before when a dead body had washed up against the pier. Both times, as he was doing now, Gulliver 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. When he saw Jack at the window, he ceased howling and started to bark excitedly and rushed towards Jack and then back to the end of the pier.

Jack knew it was futile to yell at the big German Shepherd once he donned his “Call-of-the-Wild” cloak. Even though it was May, 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 cold wind blowing down from the North Tongue Mountain Range and sweeping angrily across the choppy lake, and it had a strong taste of melting ice. He reached for his parka.

“Okay, I’m coming, Gulliver.”

The lake water looked especially dark. Maybe it was just the first ice melting in the mountains bringing down debris and trash accumulated during the winter. It was scary-looking, uninviting water, a black matte, as opposed to the bluish hue of a normal lake.

Gulliver stopped barking when he saw Jack walking toward him and was now looking down at something in the water. 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 mesmerizing blue eyes and then back down at the water. Jack leaned over.

Another body.

Jack’s athleticism was a thing of the past. Piercing and persistent pains in his abdomen 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. She was wearing a blue hoodie, which had snagged on a piling as changes in atmospheric pressure pushed the water from one side of the lake to another. Her upper body was several inches out of the dark water. Her face was turned up towards him. Her eyes were shut and her face blue. Her features were perfectly formed, small ears and slightly upturned nose, and even from six feet away, Jack discerned long eye lashes lying placidly 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 rendered incapable of movement by hypothermia and subsequently drowned," he recalled reading from autopsy reports of the first two bodies, both errant fisherman, who had likely fallen into the water while standing up to make a cast or reel in a catch. But they were older, his age, and, although they had looked at peace as well, their deaths were less tragic. This was a beautiful young girl.

No way could he retrieve the unfortunate girl by himself.

He put a hand on Gulliver's sturdy shoulders and raised himself.

"Keep an eye on her."

He and Gulliver had been together for eight years, and they were now settled-in and fine-tuned to one another. Gulliver's eyes signaled 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 writing deadlines to meet. He wanted no distractions and was disgruntled when Gulliver had summoned him from his desk. He was only a few chapters away from finishing his 12th Damien Hague novel. He was fortunate to have conjured up Damien, a likable private eye whom loyal readers would still pay \$30 to read about. Once he had established the formula for a good P/I mystery, or so he had naively thought as he began his mystery-writing career, it would be easy to grind out sequels. Not so. Each plot was harder to flesh out and research and write to Prescott's exacting standards.

Jack had been coaxing Damien 12 into the home stretch when Gulliver summoned.

Jack walked to his home higher on the lake front to retrieve his cell phone. Even though the builder had called his home a log cabin, it was 6,000 square feet with a 30-foot-high ceiling in the main room. Jack had purchased it 40 years earlier with profits from the first two Damien books, both of which were made into high-grossing movies.

Jack called the local sheriff.

“Recognize her?” Darby asked.

He told the sheriff no and described her.

“We’ve got a missing girl who fits your description. 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 arrive.

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.

Jack testified at the coroner’s hearing, which ruled the girl’s death a suicide, based on a lamentable note she had left behind detailing her inability to cope with her life’s slings and arrows. The coroner, Russell Harris, was one of Hague’s local doctors and a long-time friend of Jack’s. He seconded Jack’s layman diagnosis as to cause of death.

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

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

“When preceded by hypothermia, it’s like going to sleep.”

“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 was six-five and towered over Jack. He had been an athlete of repute in his younger years and still had the muscles to show for it. His face was wide, pleasant, and quick to smile. Not your usual stand-offish doctor. He was 60 now and graying, but still participated in the annual three-mile swim across Silver Bay. Jack was ten years older and just over six feet tall. He, too, had been athletic in the day, but now the wears and tears of age were beginning to show. His hair was white, and he had given up on comb-overs. Despite his many years staring at a word processor, his eyes were still 20/20, blue, and visibly

intelligent. No way, though, were his eyes as mesmerizing as those of Gulliver. And no lake swims for Jack either, even though he had a beach below his cabin. The lake George water was just too cold. He stuck to laps in his indoor, heated pool.

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Gulliver did not find any more bodies, so things went uneventfully 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 the first Damien novel. A junior reader at the publishing house had read the novel first, and, although she personally liked it, did not deem it to be of sufficient merit upon which to launch her editorial career.

The cautious young reader had devoured the novel in a single sitting, though, unusual for a book vegetating in the slush pile, and she found herself shouting out some of the one-liners by its private-eye protagonist to her colleagues.

Sample: “My fee’s \$500 a day,” he told the stripper. “A \$100 more if you want sex.”

Prescott, the elegant and prescient Max Perkins of the publishing house, hearing his reader deliver such humorous shout outs from Jack’s book, grew curious and requested it be exhumed from the slush pile and brought to him. The one-liners were indeed good and the plot, filled with smoke and mirrors and clever sleight-of-hand, was enticing. He contacted Jack and agreed to work with him on the novel. He asked Jack to make the plot more LeCarre and his protagonist less Spillane.

“Let’s shoot for Dashiell Hammett.”

Under Prescott’s guiding hand, Jack Falcon, his nom de plume, was a best-selling author out the gate. A film producer offered the publishing house and Jack \$250,000 and a percentage of the movie gross, near-record recompense for a book in the private-eye genre by a first-time author. By the time Jack published his third Damien book, he was a member of the one per cent who could write a check for seven figures.

An accountant friend whom Jack trusted implicitly recommended Jack divert a portion of his royalties to an investment fund that bought and sold luxury condominiums in Miami Beach. Bernie Madoff was not involved, so Jack agreed and eventually realized more money from people buying Miami Beach than Damien Hague.

Jack gave his Damien books legs, and shapely ones at that, by eventually adding Courtney, a beautiful lieutenant of detectives, who only on rare occasion deigned to sleep with

Damien, the suave and sophisticated P/I. Jack even took cooking courses so he might write more knowingly about the gourmet meals Damien prepared to tempt his illusive lover.

“Know who Courtney reminds me of, old Boy?” Prescott asked one day.

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

“Why Olivia, Jack. Look how she slips in and out of my life. 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 a bewitching smile and those incredibly 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 could not attach a name to belonged to Jack, and one of the places she could scarcely remember was his log cabin in Hague. Prescott professed to be in love with Olivia, but he, like the fictional Courtney, also had commitment problems. Jack had based Courtney on haughty Prescott and the stunningly beautiful Olivia.

Paradoxically, Jack longed for commitment, and, despite the plethora of danger signs posted round Olivia, fell outrageously in love with her. So-in-love with her 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 light years away from commitment, and if pressed, might sever their now-and-then relationship, which was known only to them and his good friend and doctor, Russ. Better to have her on her terms than not at all, as King Solomon might have sagely counselled. So, Jack laughed as if his proposal were but a joke brought on by excessive gin. She studied him for a minute. Discerning only amusement on his poised, poker-player face, she smiled with relief and snuggled up to him as a crackling fire burned beside them in the large fireplace in the main room of his log cabin in Hague.

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

Welcome words, those, but first things first. He reached for his notebook, which he kept near, to jot down phrases and ideas for 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 concocted, such as Mallory, a serial killer he kept killing off, only to cleverly resurrect him later to the delight and consternation of his devoted readers. Still, and despite Jack's deft writing, book sales had begun to wane. His once legions of loyal fans were ageing and dying off with few new readers to replace them.

"Think I'll start writing in text," Jack joked.

Prescott groaned. He, too, knew his job was also on the endangered list.

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The Damien book he had just finished, the 12th, ended with Courtney finally agreeing to marry Damien. As they are returning from their honeymoon, Damien is struck down by the villainous Mallory, who had somehow extricated himself from an exploding aircraft and returned to slay Damien. A grieving but extremely agitated Courtney pursues Mallory, and this time ensures his demise by coldly emptying a Glock into him.

The ending sparked sales, and there was talk of somehow resurrecting Damien in a 13th novel, as Arthur Conan Doyle had done after too hastily killing off Sherlock Holmes via a plunge down a water fall as he savagely fought with his nemesis, Professor Moriarty. Jack was willing and even offered up a plot twist to do so. Mallory, he explained to a doubting Prescott, had a twin brother, Murphy, whom Courtney had unknowingly dispatched instead.

Prescott laughed at the ingenuity of his favorite writer. "But what about the more obvious problem, Jack, the resurrection of Damien? Your readers are grieving not over the death of Mallory, your villain, but the death of your hero. Did Damien have a twin, too?"

Jack grinned as if Prescott were a simpleton, which indeed he was not. He was a genius, to be sure, in matters of editing, but Jack was the writer who invented what had to be edited. A different skillset.

"Damien knew of Murphy," an amused Jack explained. "Mallory was willing to offer him up to get Damien and Courtney off his trail while he concocted a plot to kill them. So, Damien feigned his own death, too."

"Can you give me a hint as to how?"

"Where did Damien and Courtney go on their honeymoon, Prescott?"

"Niagara Falls."

"Surely I can find a spare waterfall there."

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Jack's ingenuity aside, there was not to be a 13th novel. Time and circumstance had decided otherwise. At the insistence of Russ, Jack had undergone a series of tests to determine the cause of his incessant abdominal pains. Russ called to report he had the results of the C-Scan and MRI's and sundry other tests and asked to meet with him at the log cabin that night.

"Is there extra charge for house calls?" Jack inquired.

"Perhaps a whiskey or two."

"Then you are most welcome."

Jack knew Russ would come bearing unwelcome news. If the tests were negative, he could have easily said so over the phone. Jack was an optimist, though, and the worst he expected was a gallbladder or kidney stone prognosis, an operation, and a painful recovery.

"Regrettably, my good friend," Russ informed him, endeavoring to speak professionally and without emotion, as they sipped whiskeys in the main hall, "you have metastatic stomach cancer. I am afraid there is no cure and that you must prepare yourself for even more acute pain and end of life."

A poker-faced Jack displayed no emotion and spoke with his usual aplomb. "Thought we agreed after Olivia, Russ, you'd nuance bad news to me in the future?"

Russ shrugged, but Jack read the pain in his friend's misting eyes.

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

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

Russ knew about the notebook 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 it."

“Are you fond of Gulliver?”

“Indeed.”

“He is my parting gift to you.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. I want him to be in the best of hands.”

Gulliver was on sentry-duty by the floor-to-ceiling windows, keeping watch over a strip of bright moonlight shimmering on the dark lake. The wolf in him made him territorial, Jack mused, and, although he had yet in his years of residency with Jack to pay for a single log, he had assumed co-ownership of the cabin. Gulliver sensed they were talking about him and raised his head attentively.

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

All seemed well, so Gulliver returned his focus to the lake.

“I’ll call Prescott and give him the news,” Jack said, somberly now, as the reality of what Russ just told him had settled in. He anticipated his mentor’s feisty reaction, though, and had to smile.

“Why the smile?” Russ wondered.

“I’m about to be remanded to NYC where Prescott will summon specialists to look me over and concoct miracle cures. Prescott takes ‘Never say Die’ quite literally.”

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

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

“As do I. I’ll give you the test results to take with you.”

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Prescott reacted as Jack anticipated and did emphatically summon him to NYC, where he subjected Jack to the scrutiny of sundry specialists. Alas, all to no avail. If anything, Russ had been 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 73, several years older than Jack, but still tall and handsome in a lean and supercilious and Colonial-British manner. When he had 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 claim, and the well-attended parties he gave and the august way he reigned over them reminded Jack of Scott Fitzgerald and Gatsby.

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 I can proceed without you and your addictive detective tales."

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

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

Russ retrieved Jack at the train station in Queensbury and drove him to the cabin. The pains in Jack's stomach were growing exponentially, as if there were a competition to see which of the affected organs would deliver the coup de grace. His friend took note of his grimacing and handed him two bottles of pills.

"Read the directions," he said in doctor-speak. "One is for daytime, and it is the weaker so that you can wander about. The other is for sleeping. I doubt you could sleep without it. I'd recommend you not drink, but you wouldn't listen and would do precisely as you like."

"I would listen."

"You'd hear, Jack, but you don't listen. 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? Bob Hope did that and lived to be 100."

"It could not have hurt, but he was blessed with exceptional genes. You, my friend, are the victim of a rogue gene that stayed hidden for years only to emerge with insidious intent. Time and circumstance. You were to have your biblical three score and ten and no more."

"I nonetheless count myself lucky," Jack philosophized. "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 from the water. Time and circumstance gave her but half-a-score and six."

"She had some choice in her demise. 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 eight years before. He was mostly silver then and even as a puppy had those bewitching eyes. Jack did not realize at first he was a puppy. He was the size of a grown, medium-sized dog when he abruptly appeared.

Jack dutifully called his neighbors and asked if any had a dog gone missing or were aware of someone who did. He described the dog to them and drew blanks. Where had Gulliver 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.

The theory of him being fully grown, though, was quickly discounted, as he grew inches overnight. Although still in his youth, he seemed remarkably mature and affectionate, never malicious or destructive. One of Jack’s fetishes was expensive English shoes. He never lost a pair to Gulliver needing something to cut his large teeth on. Nor did Gulliver ever try to climb upon him, for which he was especially grateful, as the extra-large dog could have easily bowled him over, given Jack’s slight build. And most amazing of all, Gulliver possessed commendable bathroom decorum, always announcing his needs by positioning himself conspicuously before a side door leading to a densely wooded area. The vet who attended Gulliver was amazed at the dog’s impeccably good manners and placidity.

“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 do not have blue eyes. And only a few German Shepherds do.”

“Do wolves ever mate with German Shepherds?”

“It is possible, but I have 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 Jack was down to weeks. The medicine Russ gave him helped, especially at night when his stomach felt as if he had swallowed 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 visited him daily, and a distraught Prescott checked in on him frequently. And he had Gulliver, who never left his side.

Gulliver was a good listener. He almost shook his great head in compassion as Jack vented to him about the pain, and his concern buoyed Jack's spirits.

Jack had no family, other than obsequious and greedy cousins. He left most of his money to the Salvation Army, a charity he admired for keeping but a pittance of donations for themselves. Gulliver was certainly part of his fortune, and he had already told Russ Gulliver was to be his. Jack owned the log cabin outright and had decided to bequeath it to Russ. The only condition Jack had was that Russ live there until Gulliver lived out 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 cabin. Russ objected to the money, but acquiesced 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. Jack's affairs were settled, except for...

...Except for 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 Martinis, I know now you meant it. If you recall, I never said yes or no. And, because you never retracted your offer, then, by Victorian Law, you are honor-bound to hear my answer. Jack, my love, I happily accept your proposal. When we dock in The Virgin Islands in two days, I will mail you this letter. From there I will fly to San Juan and then to NYC, where I will retrieve my car and drive to Hague. 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 will search your novels for names of the other four, so long as they are not Mallory or any of your other villains. All my love forever. Olivia."

He had but a few days to rejoice before Russ brought additional news.

"I'm afraid I bring ill tidings, Jack."

"Then say them quickly."

"Olivia was killed in a car crash."

"When?"

“A few hours ago.”

“Where?”

“Near Queensbury.”

“Are you sure it was her?”

“I spent many evenings with the two of you.”

Sad news is infinitely worse when following on the heels of joyous.

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

“Agreed, and I know how much you loved her. You have my deepest condolences.”

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 Central Park reserved for such ceremonies. A farewell party followed. Prescott’s eulogy, unsurprisingly, was magnificent.

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Jack purchased two plots sharing a common headstone in the Hague cemetery. One side of the headstone read “Olivia Constance Morgan, Beloved Fiancée of Jack.” His side read “John Falcon Hendricks, Beloved Fiancé of Olivia.” Their dates of birth were five years apart, not unusual for a man and a woman. The woman, though, had died 35 years before her fiancée. A puzzle to those who take time to read tombstone sentiments, but not to those like Russ, who understood that Jack was incapable of replacing the irreplaceable. Prescott never knew, and Jack saw no reason to tell him.

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 appoint it with the dates of Jack’s demise.

Jack’s ability to tolerate pain had reached its limit. He picked a Saturday, as he knew Russ worked the hospital ER those nights. He asked Russ to come by after his shift as he wanted to discuss moving to a hospice, which Russ had been urging.

It was late September and cold. Jack waited until dark.

Wearing his parka, he led Gulliver to the end of the pier. He knelt and pulled the dog's large head close to him. A light shone brightly at the end of the pier, and he could see it reflected in Gulliver's eyes as the dog gazed at him. A gusting wind beat at Jack's ears and tore at his hair. The wind made small ripples in Gulliver's thick fur. Gulliver was impervious to the cold.

"You know I'm hurting, don't you, boy? Russ will be here in a while, and he'll be taking care of you from now on. And, when your canine three-score-and-ten are up, he'll put you, well, your ashes anyway, by Olivia and me. Who knows, maybe you'll get a chance to meet her?"

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 him a final hug, then stood and unhesitatingly dove into the dark water.

It was cold, so cold, but Jack was a good swimmer, although his skills had been honed from 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 would not last. He had on shoes and the parka, now soaked in water, and he could feel the increased weight dragging him down. Looking back, he was surprised at how little distance he had covered. He could clearly see the light and Gulliver beneath it, looking out towards him.

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 the world's largest heater had been switched on and heated the entire lake, he became warm all over. The shivering ceased. He relaxed and basked in the soothing heat. Time to let go. As he began to slip peacefully beneath the dark water, he heard the sound again.

The howling of a wolf.

THE END.

