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**A Jack Staal Mystery**

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Dedicated to the memory of my mother. Her love of reading was surpassed only by her love for her family and friends.

Marilyn Arlene Potter  
March 28 1937-March 5 2009

Hanson, British Columbia, is a fictional town of 100,000 approximately seventy miles east of Vancouver, and nestled between the Cascade Mountains and Lake Hanson.

## Chapter 1

The transit rider was outfitted entirely in black, from his snakeskin boots to the bandanna that held back his hair. In his regular clothes, he felt vulnerable and inept, but when he pulled on his dusky 501 jeans, t-shirt and leather jacket he was unbeatable. The big city gang-bangers had their purple or red, the cops had their blue; his signature was the color of the night.

He sat in the rear seat of the First Avenue South bus as the sluggish vehicle plodded along spewing sooty diesel exhaust skyward. The stench of vomit and body-odor was too familiar to disturb him as he thumbed through the stapled and taped pages of a tattered, coverless book. He knew its contents by heart. He was ready. Ready to pass judgment on the guilty.

His first two judgments had been utterly successful and he was confident this mission would be no different. Still, he was only an apprentice, unworthy as yet to cast off his beginner's code name, Tyro. In time, however, he would replace his teacher and become the greatest soldier of justice in history.

Blue-haired old ladies, street bums, and teenagers boarded and exited the bus. He ignored them. When his stop approached, Tyro tugged on the bell rope and rose to his feet. Could the plebeians around him sense that justice was about to be served? No, he thought with a sneer. They were too caught up in their own little lives.

The bus hit a pothole and lurched as it approached the curb. Tyro staggered, swore, recovered his footing, and glanced left and right to see if anyone had noticed.

He pulled his jacket tight around his shoulders and hurried down the steps, pausing on the street to reach into his jacket pocket and pull out a pack of cigarettes. He fumbled to get a butt into his lips, flicked open his Zippo, and lit it. He inhaled and coughed, his face flushing as he fought to control his breathing. With an angry twitch of his lips, he inhaled again and headed north up First Avenue.

The street was quiet, but he knew it would soon be crowded with moviegoers exiting the late show at a nearby Cineplex. Tyro avoided eye contact with any of the other pedestrians. A soldier of justice should never be noticeable, he told himself. Besides, he hated how vulnerable it made him feel, like anyone looking at him could tell he had never kissed a girl in his thirty-four years. That he still lived at home with his mom, barely holding on to his brainless, loser job.

*Stop it. You are a soldier of justice. No self-loathing tonight.*

Tonight he was Tyro, a man of action and purpose. He had a duty to uphold.

He made a right on Jackson Street and a left on Second Avenue. He dropped his cigarette, ground it out against the sidewalk, then strode straight through the front door of Jim's Diner. A quick glance revealed only two customers, both seated at the counter; an old geezer in an ancient tan suit and a guy in his fifties wearing faded torn jeans and a green t-shirt. They rambled on about Tiger Woods and why he had missed the cut at the British Open.

Tyro knew this type of place all too well. Sixteen tables filled the dining area and a dozen stools lined the counter. He scowled at the stink of stale deep-fryer grease and slid into a booth that could easily hold six people.

The waitress's tag read Kim.

"Coffee?"

"Yeah." He picked up the menu and scanned it. "I'll have a Jim's cheeseburger and fries."

"It'll be ready in two shakes," she said. Her uniform exposed half of her breasts when she bent to fill his cup, and as she walked away her ass wiggled in that sleazy way some waitresses used to entice tips from their male customers. Barely five feet tall with bottle blonde hair, Kim's tired eyes and deeply lined face made her look much older than her thirty-two years.

Tyro lit another cigarette and coughed when the harsh smoke flooded his lungs. At the cash register, Kim bit her lip and looked away. He felt anger build in him, not just at her amusement, but at himself for thinking anyone would be fooled by his act. *Stop it. You are a soldier of justice.* The old man left cash at the counter and limped to the door, a clubbed right foot scraping against the linoleum floor. The geezer's friend went to the washroom and then left through the rear exit out to the back lane.

"Good riddance," Tyro whispered. His task had just gotten easier.

The kitchen door swung open and a man in a filthy white apron emerged carrying a tray of food. The cook slapped the burger and fries

on the table in front of him and turned to go. The patty was undercooked and the fries too greasy, but it had been six hours since Tyro's last meal and he wasn't one to complain. He shook his head when Kim appeared and asked if he needed anything else, irritated at the interruption.

She sauntered away and yelled toward the kitchen, "I'm taking a break before the rush, Jim!"

Tyro nibbled his food and watched her silently. She poured herself a coffee, grabbed her purse from behind the counter, and headed for the washrooms. Instead of turning left for the ladies, however, she continued straight on and out the rear door. He stared at the hall where a fluorescent light flickered as if it was about to expire.

Now was his chance.

Tyro had known Kimberly Angela Walker since he was a teenager. She might not have recognized him, but he definitely remembered her.

For an instant he hesitated, his mind racing. He could bolt from the booth—sprint to the entrance—flee into the street....

No.

His master would never flee. He would stand firm.

*I'm strong. I am law and order's only hope. Judgment will be swift.* Tyro rose from the booth, pulled on his leather gloves, and followed his mark from the restaurant out into the lane. He had waited fourteen years to build up the courage to face her, to confront her with the sins of her past.

Kim leaned against the red brick wall of the restaurant, sipping coffee and smoking. She was probably thinking of her kids, he thought. Bryan and Bradley must be the only bright spots in her pathetic life.

She glanced up at him with a flicker of interest. He knew she was looking him over, trying to figure out why he looked familiar. She gave a little shrug, tossed her smoldering butt, and fumbled in her purse for another one.

The lane was barely wide enough to allow the passage of service vehicles. Despite two dumpsters placed near the door, the alley was littered with trash, old clothes, newspaper, and bottles. He could see the blue flash of television screens in most of the apartment windows that lined the alley and he doubted anyone would be peering out to witness his actions.

He smiled at Kim, stopped a few feet from her, and lit up, managing not to gag as he inhaled.

"Jim doesn't enforce the smoking ban." Kim flipped her hair. "I just come out to get some fresh air." She grinned and looked away.

Her grin angered him. His heartbeat began to increase until it thumped in his chest and pounded in his ears. He took a deep calming breath, held it, and then exhaled.

“Yeah, me too,” he said. He offered her one of his cigarettes. She accepted. He placed it on her lips and flipped his Zippo. Her cheeks furrowed when she inhaled. She grinned at the Bud Light beer label on the lighter and sipped her coffee.

“It’s a good day to die,” he said quietly.

“Pardon?”

“Happy birthday, Kim.”

“What?” She retreated a step. “How did you know it’s my birthday?”

Tyro clenched the lighter in his fist, pulled back and struck a quick blow to her throat. The porcelain cup of steaming coffee burst from her grip and smashed to the ground. Her eyes widened in shock as she clutched at her neck and sunk to her knees. He grabbed her hair in both hands and slammed her face down against his rising knee once, twice, releasing her so that she cracked her head against the wall. He stepped aside to survey the results of his attack.

“You have accomplished a great deal in your thirty-two years, haven’t you, Miss Walker?” he said as he dragged her into the hidden space between the two dumpsters. “Two illegitimate children, a deadbeat boyfriend, and a minimum wage job slinging burgers to the scum of the earth.” He undid his leather belt and pulled it from his waist.

Tyro looped it around her neck and pulled it tight. The pressure on her windpipe woke Kim up, and she fought to get it off, gasping for breath. Tyro straddled her, using his weight to hold her body in place. She bucked like a bull against him, but the more she struggled, the tighter he drew the noose. She gasped and wheezed a shuddering breath, then finally fell still. Tyro waited until he was sure she was really dead.

“How’s that feel? Huh?” He spoke into her ear. “How does it feel, you stupid bitch?”

He finished the rest of his sentence quickly. The entire process took less than a minute. His training left no room for mistakes, and when he was done he paused for one last look.

“I know how it feels. You and your friends made sure of that,” he whispered.

Releasing the belt from around her neck, he stood up and threaded it back through his jeans.

“Kim!” An annoyed voice called from the doorway. “Shit, woman, the movie is over. The rush is on!”

Tyro crouched between the dumpsters and held his breath. He did not desire a confrontation with the cook, but he would deal with the man if he had to. When the door slammed shut again, he escaped along the alley and into the street.

The evening breeze chilled Tyro's sweat-drenched body. Now that the judgment was over, he felt at a loss. It was always that way; the adrenaline, the feeling of absolute control as he took a life, and then the seeping return of normalcy with its agonizing uncertainties. The sidewalk was jammed with movie fans and he pushed his way through them, panicking until he remembered he still wore the outfit; he was still strong. He hailed a cab and left the scene of the crime.

Tyro paid the cab driver and then walked the half block to his car. He hated to remove the outfit, however the mission was over. He did a quick change and then drove his old Nova from the street into the parking lot of the Thirsty Gull. He wasn't a drinker; Tyro visited the pub only to play the old quarter-gobbling arcade games. They were dinosaurs by twenty-first century standards, but they were still his favorites.

Back in civilian gear, his confidence waned, and he felt ordinary. He sat on a stool in front of a *Pacman* machine, allowing the game to consume his focus. After two hours, he pushed his glasses to his forehead and rubbed at his strained eyes.

He had a code name here, too, but he hadn't chosen it; the waitresses had. They called him Retro for his love of the outdated video games.

The Corona beer clock on the wall showed the time was 1:18 AM when he looked up next. Retro shook his head and stretched his back, peering through the dim light at the bar. This place would make him nervous if it wasn't for the owner's hulking presence. The pub was empty except for three men talking loudly near the pool tables, and a woman dancing alone to the music from a juke-box that was as outdated as the arcade box over which Retro leaned. He recognized the tune. The Doors; *Light My Fire*. His stomach tightened as he recognized one of the men, as well. The blue haze of cigarette smoke made it difficult to see, but if he wasn't mistaken, it was his high school nemesis, Sean Moore.

A wash of ice water ran through his veins, and the years slipped away. He could still feel the humiliation; still hear the taunts.

*"Loser. Loser!"*

Sean tripped him in the schoolyard after the dismissal bell rang. His friends joined in, howling with laughter.

*"Loser. Loser. Loser!"*

He got to his feet, but Sean pushed him to the ground again. The circle closed in on him and one of the bigger kids yanked him to his feet, holding his arms behind his back while Sean punched him in the stomach.

*“LOSER. LOSER!”*

“Hey, Retro—you all right?” Sheila asked him. “Can I get you another root beer or something?”

Her smiling face brought him back. “No, thanks. I think I’ll get going,” he said shakily.

As he stood up, Sean looked straight at him from his table across the pub. Surely Moore couldn’t remember him; Kim hadn’t, after all. He’d gained thirty pounds since he graduated at a scrawny 122 pounds, and he’d cut short his long, greasy hair. Hell, he was going bald. These changes had to be throwing Sean off.

*Nope.*

Sean walked toward him with a beaming smile. Retro felt a trickle of sweat run down his back.

“You’re Kelly—right? Kelly Morgan...Myers. Kelly Myers. Am I right?”

Not even close. “Yeah. That’s right.”

“Shit, it is you. How the hell are you, buddy?” Sean asked.

Sean was six-three, but his athletic build had given way to a beer belly and a double chin. He still had the inch-long scar on his right cheek from a fight with Tommy Hawking in junior year. His light brown hair had blond highlights and a goatee covered his square jaw line.

“Hi, Sean. I’m good.”

“Jesus, Myers. What’s it been twelve, thirteen years? Me, Randy, and Byron are having us a little class reunion and we thought you might want to join us.”

“No, thanks. I’m...I’m just leaving.” He tried to edge past Sean, but Moore kept up with him as he hurried toward the front door.

“You’re not still sore about all that shit from school are you? Come on back, Myers, I’ll buy you a beer.”

Retro nodded to Jed Wilkinson the owner and bartender. Jed was taller even than Sean, with thinning hair and a shaggy salt-and-pepper beard. Ten years earlier, he had lost his left eye in a mill accident and the resulting workman’s compensation settlement made a healthy down payment on the Thirsty Gull. Now the eye patch added to his ominous look.

“More quarters, man?” Wilkinson asked him.

“Nah, gotta go,” Retro called over his shoulder.

He paused in the gravel parking lot for a second, trying to remember where he left his Nova. It was in the back of the lot, he remembered, blocked now by an eighteen-wheeler.

“Christ, Sean, he’s still a loser—just like he was in high school.”

Retro recognized that voice and he knew without turning around that Randy and Byron had joined Sean at the door. They must be watching him. Laughing at him.

“Yeah, Moore. Look at him. Running like a baby,” Byron said.

“Grow up you guys. He probably has kids and a wife,” Sean said.

Retro jogged across the Gull’s parking lot toward his car behind the semi. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed Moore and the others were following him. He wasn’t buying Sean’s offer of friendship for a minute, so he quickened his pace, vaulting the connection between the trailer and tractor and hurrying to the passenger side door. He opened a small compartment he knew would be located on the side of the rig, reached inside, and pulled out a fire extinguisher, then moved to the front of the truck and knelt down next to the right front wheel. He didn’t have the outfit on but he could still be strong. He had to be.

“Myers! What’s wrong with you man?” Sean called after him.

He didn’t answer.

When Sean rounded the front of the rig, Retro was waiting for him and he brought the cylinder down on Sean’s head with a resounding CRACK! Moore dropped to the ground.

Startled by the success of his maneuver, Retro was still standing there when Byron and Randy turned the corner and found their friend lying on his back, out cold. Retro dropped the extinguisher and dashed for the Nova, fishing desperately in his pocket for his car keys. With a horrible lurch of his stomach, he realized he’d left them on the Pacman game back in the Thirsty Gull.

Randy Oake had been a star on the high school track team and he hadn’t lost much of his speed over the years. “Come here, you little shit!” he yelled. He caught up to Retro six feet from the door of the Gull, jumped on top of him and rained punches into his face. Byron Becker jogged up and kicked him in the stomach. Retro rolled up into the fetal position, but still the punches and kicks pummeled his body.

“Stop it!” a female voice yelled. Retro recognized Sheila and pulled himself into a tighter ball.

A few seconds later, Jed emerged from the Gull and tossed Becker aside easily. He peeled Oake off of Retro and bellowed at both of them to get the hell of his property. The two of them grabbed Sean Moore, and together they limped away to their vehicle.

Jed helped Retro to his feet. “How do you feel, man?”

Blood trickled from his nose and his eyes were swelling shut. “I’m okay,” he mumbled, although his ribs ached and his head throbbed.

“I’ll help him to his car,” Sheila said.

“Maybe we should put some ice on that?” Wilkinson asked.

At the bar, Sheila wrapped a handful of ice in a bar-rag and held it to his face. Jed poured him a root beer. “You’ll be fine, kid. Just rest awhile.”

Retro pulled away from them and shot an uneasy glance at the front door.

“It’s okay; they’re gone,” Sheila reassured him.

“Why were those dudes after you, man?” Wilkinson asked.

“I knew them in high school.” Retro shrugged. “They were jerks back then. I guess they still are.” He rose from his chair. “I need to get going.”

Sheila led him to the front door. She unlocked it for him, and before he could help himself Retro put his hand out and gripped hers tightly. Sheila looked back at Jed, shrugged her shoulders, and walked out into the cool night air with him. They were silent until he opened the door to his Chevy and swung himself inside.

“Um, thanks.” He felt his face heat, so he kept it turned aside as he turned the ignition on and drove slowly through the lot, but as he reached the street he saw Sheila waving. He smiled, before a vision of Sean Moore flashed through his mind. His hands trembled on the steering wheel and his right foot slammed to the floor.

**END OF SAMPLE**

