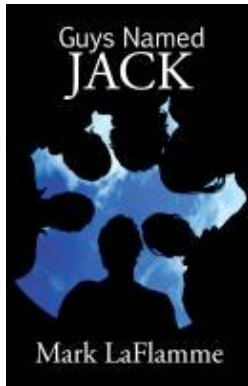


# Guys Named JACK



Mark LaFlamme



*Jack Gordon discovers he is skilled in the martial arts...just when he needs it most. Jack Carnegie has developed a head for numbers. Jack Van Slyke speaks a half dozen languages. Jack Deacon builds things, from self-propelled drones to goggles that can see through walls. All over the country, these teens awake with special skills that appeared out of nowhere. They're confused. Astounded. Maybe even dangerous. And, they're all named Jack.*

## **Guys Named Jack**

**Order the complete book from**

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

**<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6858.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**

**Your Free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!**

**TITLES BY MARK LAFLAMME**

*The Pink Room*

*Vegetation*

*Dirt: An American Campaign*

*Asterisk: Red Sox 2086* (novella)

*Box of Lies* (short stories)

*Delirium Tremens*

*Worumbo*

Find them all at [www.marklaflamme.com](http://www.marklaflamme.com)

Copyright © 2013 Mark LaFlamme

ISBN 978-1-62646-391-2

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2013

First Edition

# **Guys Named Jack**

**Mark LaFlamme**

## Jack Gordon

**M**y name is Jack Gordon. I have never had a karate lesson in my life. Or judo or jujitsu or kung fu, for that matter.

I saw *The Karate Kid* a couple of times and I've watched a few Bruce Lee movies with my favorite uncle, but that's the extent of it. I'm 17 years old and before this weirdness began, I'd been in exactly one fistfight. That happened when I was 9 and Kenny Smotherman referred to the Little League team for which I played as a bunch of pansies.

Pansies! So I had to fight him. We went round and round a little bit on the grass in back of Brookside School, circling each other like the men we'd seen fight on TV. Then we got down to it and it was mostly just an ugly affair witnessed by two dozen kids who cheered us on. When 9 year olds get to brawling, it's mostly a lot of wrestling and shirt ripping and wild punches that land everywhere but on human flesh.

I might have won that fight. It's hard to say, really. Kenny got a bloody lip and he cried. He ran off and the next time I saw him, he was standing at my door next to his scowling mother. Kenny had a fat lip and he just stared at his feet. His mother, on the other hand, was red-faced and fuming. She demanded to speak to my father (my mother wasn't home that day, thank God) and for an hour, Kenny and I sat in my living room, listening to them go at it in the kitchen. Kenny's mom with the voice rising high and out of control. My dad's voice just a low, defensive murmur you could barely hear at all.

Kenny and I made up at once. His lip stayed fat for a whole week so, yeah. I guess I won that fight. But I'm no scrapper. I'm a lean kid, five feet, ten inches tall and I can't get over 140 pounds no matter how much I eat. I have a runner's build, my father would say. And then he'd add: "He who fights and runs

*Mark LaFlamme*

away, lives to fight another day,” because my dad was always saying things like that.

But I didn’t have a chance to run on that Saturday in downtown Privilege. You can’t run when there are three bigger guys surrounding you on the sidewalk and you sure as hell can’t run when your companion is the prettiest girl in school and she’s wearing heels.

I was with Julie Drouin the day it happened. Julie and I were just about always together, but we went around telling everybody – and telling each other – that we were just friends. The best of friends. Nothing romantic here. It’s what teenagers do when they’re falling in love and don’t know how to handle it.

We were in Privilege because Julie, star of the Myrtle High Drama Club, wanted to see the new Kate Hudson movie. In Myrtle, where we live and go to school, there is only one dinky theater and it always seems to be playing movies from the summer before. It’s a crappy place called the Cinema Center. There’s always gum on the floor and some of the arm rests are actually held together with duct tape. Add to that the fact that the theater smells chronically of dirty feet and it’s not the place to go if you’ve got a thing for your “best friend” and you want to get a little closer and see what happens.

So we went to Privilege, which to me has always been a scary place. There are drug addicts there who are always robbing the pharmacies. There are gangs, too. Not Crips and Bloods like you see out west, but local bands of hoodlums who give themselves sinister names like The Folk or the P-City Outlaws. Wannabes, I guess, but you know what? Wannabes are as dangerous as the real thing. More so, maybe, because they try harder.

When I was a sophomore, there was a wave of violence in Privilege that spilled over into Myrtle. A cab driver was

*Guys Named Jack*

slashed across the throat by a gang of punks who had ordered him to drive them to the lot behind the United Methodist Church out on 201, which connects the two cities. The cabbie survived only because he was able to radio for help after the punks had left him for dead on the grimy floor of his cab.

Around the same time, there was a rash of home invasions during which elderly men and women were tied to chairs inside their own little houses as the marauding pukes demanded prescription drugs.

Animals, those kids who call themselves the P-City Outlaws. And so I stayed away from Privilege as much as I could, but I went there on that rainy Saturday because Julie wanted to see the Kate Hudson movie before any of her friends. And about two-thirds of the way through the flick, Julie looked at me and smiled and then she dropped her head onto my shoulder and took my arm in one of her hands. Just like that. I could smell her shampoo, the fragrance of apricots. I could feel the warmth of her on my skin and if I had been believing the lie about us being just good friends, I stopped believing it the moment I felt the weight of her head on my shoulder. While Kate Hudson did her thing on screen, I was sitting and thinking that I would fight every member of the P-City Outlaws just to make this moment last a few minutes longer.

There's irony there, I suppose, because that's kind of what happened.

They came at us between the theater and the parking garage in which I had left my pickup. It was on a short stub of a street where there was virtually no traffic on weekends. We were walking close together, our hands occasionally bumping and sending volts of electricity shooting up my arm. My whole body was tense. I was considering just reaching out and grabbing her hand to take it in my own. The thought was huge



in my head. I remember that inner debate, as complex and important as anything I had tackled in my life. I was going to go for it and it just might be life-changing.

Then the husky man stepped out from an alley, appearing in the mist before us like some kind of grotesque mirage. He was tall and stout, beefy arms crawling with tattoos. He was wearing a grungy white tank top, the kind they call wife beaters if you happen to be watching COPS.

He had a blue bandana over the top of his head and prison-style jeans hanging below his waist. Gangsta through and through. He had one of those pudgy, squashed noses and thick lips. He was smiling a nasty little smile and – somehow worse than that – he was snapping his fingers, like some hipster out of the 1950s.

The thug stood be-bopping on the sidewalk and Julie and I were about to walk right into him. I began to slow and as I did, I stretched my right arm out to hold Julie back, like my mother does in the car whenever she hits the brakes.

I remember thinking: *Well, that was a good thing to do. That's looking out for your lady. Now just give the dude a little nod as you walk around him and everything will be okay. Aces, as they might have said back in the be-bopping 50s.*

But everything wasn't okay. As I tried to veer around the guy, he just sidestepped into our path. Sidestepped and kept on smiling, and that's the moment I knew this was trouble of the big city kind. The kind of trouble that unfolds in Privilege all the time and occasionally on the edges of Myrtle, as well.

"Hey," I said. "We don't want..."

But that was all. Before I could complete the diplomatic line, someone shoved me from behind. It wasn't the big knock-you-down kind of shove, but I stumbled a few steps and as I did, I reached out for Julie again. I got my arm all the way around her and pulled her close. I looked over my shoulder and

there were two more of them; men in do-rags and baggy jeans. One of them was black, one was white. They were smiling or grimacing or whatever it is that thugs do. Their faces were hard and scarred and full of nastiness. They were the kinds of faces you see staring out from the newspaper pages when you read headlines like: YOUTHS CHARGED IN CABBIE SLASHING or SUSPECTS DETAINED IN HOME INVASION.

They were trouble with a capital T and in my head thoughts were whirring, trying to calculate the best course of action, but even more than that, trying to estimate the worst case scenario.

That's what happened in the early seconds, anyway. But the moments that followed somehow grew fantastically long. It felt, I would decide later, like I was watching this drama unfold on a high-quality Blue-ray disc, one I could drop down to super slow motion just by toggling a few buttons.

The squash-nosed punk had moved closer to give me a little shove of his own. At the same time, the pair behind me spread out so that there was one on either side.

I heard one of them say: "Ain't you a sexy little snapper?" and a second later I heard Julie gasp. Not a Hollywood "how dare you!" kind of gasp, but more a fast gush of air, as though she had been punched in the stomach.

"You don't mind loaning us your lady, do you Homes?"

I don't know which of them said that. Next to me, I felt Julie moving closer, trying to get her arm around my shoulders. On the periphery I saw one of the men dart at her from behind, his hand slapping at her backside. I heard Julie gasp again.

And that, as best as I can recall, is when the weirdness began.

I didn't let Julie grab onto me for comfort. Instead, I drew my own arm away from her, placed my hand on her shoulder as gently as I could, and pushed her away. She stumbled a little

bit, off the sidewalk and into the street. I imagine now that her eyes were wide, filled with pain and confusion, wondering why I was casting her off when we so clearly needed to stay together in this problematic time.

But my eyes weren't on Julie then. My eyes were on Squash-Nose as he moved ever closer. From the corner of my eye, I could see the bricks that made up the side of a bank to my left. I estimated it to be four feet away.

Fantastically long, that moment. In it, I had time to judge the distance between myself and each man in this impromptu street party. One was two feet behind me and slightly to the right. The other was closer, perhaps a foot and a half and to the left.

I remember thinking – or rather hearing – *ga*. More of a sound than a word. Completely foreign to me and yet somehow familiar. The strangeness had begun.

I was breathing evenly through my nose. I shifted just slightly so that my left leg was ahead of my right. I adjusted my weight just so. I felt my hands pulling back, rising so that they were in front of my shoulders, palms out. Not a boxer's stance. Not at all. If anything, it felt like I was inviting old Squash-Nose in to do his business.

I thought: *What are you doing? Put your damn hands down, fool!*

But that didn't happen. Instead, those frantic, racing thoughts departed, like fog burning off on a hot morning. I breathed evenly through my nose and before I knew I was thinking anything at all, I thought: *Dragon*.

The word jumped into my brain like it was on springs. And as it did, I felt my knees bending, the rest of me dropping down in a squat. I shifted all of my weight to my left leg and then pulled quickly back. As it happened, my right arm bent at the elbow and shot back so fast I could hear it displacing the air

*Guys Named Jack*

like the tip of a bullwhip. My elbow went back like a dart and I felt it driving into the soft, vulnerable area just below the thug's rib cage. My elbow hit that resistance and kept going, boring into that mushy zone so close to the lungs.

He released a whistle of air that was half gasp, half scream. As it departed his lips, I snapped my hand up and back, striking him between the nose and upper lip with a flat, wet sound. A moment later, I heard him hit the ground with a sound that was like laundry being dumped onto a floor.

My legs straightened and in my head a voice whispered: *Horse*.

I stood and faced Squash-Nose, who didn't appear to have moved at all as his friend was so quickly downed. I faced him, but my focus was to the left. Again, before I knew it was going to happen, I spun in that direction – spun as though my ankles and feet were connected by ball bearings. I twisted to confront the thug moving in from my left and as I did, my arm went up as though I was flinging a hat into the air. The back of my wrist caught him on the inner arm just as he was bringing his fist around toward the side of my head. The blow knocked his fist off target and threw him off-balance. He stumbled dizzily in my direction and as he did, my right hand went out behind my right ear and then shot forth with the air-cutting speed of an arrow. I thought: *Tiger*.

The open hand blow landed square on the end of his nose. I felt it crunch beneath the heel of my palm. It sounded like a fistful of uncooked spaghetti being snapped in two.

Thug number two didn't whistle or scream or much of anything else. There was a fast "guh!" and then he went down, landing on the sidewalk just ahead of the spray of blood from his nose.

I spun back to my original position. *Horse*, I thought again, and the word both soothed and fueled me.

Mark LaFlamme

Squash-Nose was still there. I had time to notice that the greasy smile was gone, replaced by the wide O of numb shock. My eyes flicked from his face to his right hand, which had dipped into a pocket and was now rising with a short stub of dark metal.

There was a sharp click. The knife blade that jumped into play was smeared with grime. It didn't gleam or twinkle in the gray light. It just came at the middle of me as the attacker moved in. I forced myself to look away from the blade, cut my eyes to his wrist and arm instead.

I thought: *Snake*.

I bent at the knees. I twisted to my right, bringing my left hand down to intercept his. My palm came down on his wrist, altering the course of the knife from my belly to the ground. As his arm went down, so did the rest of him. His head dropped a full ten inches. I saw the O of shock morph into a tight-lipped grimace of pain and uncertainty.

My right hand had dropped to my side. Now I brought it up, quick and hard, and the taut stretch of flesh between my thumb and forefinger ripped into his neck. It struck the frail protrusion of his Adam's apple, fracturing it. There a fast, high cry, like a cat when you step on its tail. I pulled my right hand away from his throat and brought the side of my left hand down on the back of his head where the spine meets brain. He offered an oafish grunt and then went down, face-first onto the curb between the sidewalk and the street.

I drew back and thought: *Horse*. I wheeled to my right where the first of the men was rolled into a tight ball on the sidewalk, his arms drawn in against his midsection, the lower part of his face a smear of dark blood.

I spun to my left where the second of them lay on his back unconscious, the center of his face a clot of blood as thick as

*Guys Named Jack*

stew. The bandana had fallen off his head and was stretched across the pavement like a slug that was trying to crawl away.

I spun back toward Squash-Nose, who was down with his arms spread out at his sides as if in surrender. His bandana had stayed put. Good for him.

The spell broke. My legs straightened and I stood, limbs buzzing with adrenaline. Insanely, I found that I was humming softly, down deep in my throat. *Sympathy for the Devil*, I believe it was. The part where Mick Jagger really gets grooving and bragging about how he'd laid traps for troubadours who get killed before they reach Bombay.

I shook my head, literally trying to shake the music out of my brain. I turned toward the street where Julie was cowering, backing away with her hands over her mouth. Her hair was wet with the rain that had started to fall. Her eyes were wide and thin streams of eyeliner were rolling down her cheeks like Alice Cooper tears.

I went to her, getting an arm around her waist and walking her down the street, toward the parking garage. She was stiff under my arm, moaning softly as we moved as quickly as we could.

When we reached the cave-like entrance to the garage, she softened. Her body seemed to go limp and she fell into me, reaching out blindly for balance. I caught her in both arms and helped her stand again.

"Oh, my God!" she said. "Oh. My. God."

And that was all for the time.

We hurried through the garage and climbed to the second level. I held her with one arm, needing the other to operate the key so I could let her into the Ranger. When she was in, I closed the door and ran around the other side to climb in behind the wheel.

*Mark LaFlamme*

Julie was staring out the window into the dark and gloomy lot. The other cars and trucks parked there somehow looked depressed, like animals left out in the cold.

I started the car and fiddled with the heater levers.

“What just happened?” Julie said, still staring out into the gloom. “What the hell just happened back there?”

I didn’t know how to answer that, so I said: “We’re okay. I’m going to drive us back to Myrtle, all right?”

She grunted something and leaned back against the seat. I backed out of the space and drove through the cavernous lot until I was at ground level. I wished I could think of something reassuring to say to her. Something more helpful. It was going to be a long ride home, full of awkwardness and clumsy attempts to explain by yours truly.

But I was wrong about that. When I got to the exit, it was jammed with cop cars. There were three of them that I could see and more were on the way.

Julie and I weren’t going anywhere.

\*\*\*

We rode together in the back seat of a cruiser. Julie still looked dazed, staring at the cage that separated the back of the car from the front. I was worried about her. But when I picked up her hand with my own, she gave it a squeeze and looked at me. She smiled weakly.

The two officers in the front seat said nothing on the short drive to the Privilege Police Station. When we got there, Julie and I were split up. She was taken into one small room, I was taken into another.

I hated letting her hand go more than anything else.

When I got into the room, I was invited to sit in a plastic chair behind a scarred table. I expected the officer would leave me alone and then a pair of detectives in suits would come in to

*Guys Named Jack*

grill me. Instead, the officer shut the door and took the chair on the other side of the table.

He was a young guy, tall and athletic. He had bushy red hair and a thick mustache. Lip lettuce, we called that kind of facial hair. He reminded me of one of the cops from those old police shows they run late at night. Hill Street Blues or NYPD Blue. All the cop shows seemed to have “blue” in them and cops with bushy mustaches.

The officer told me I wasn’t under arrest. Was free to go at any time, in fact. It sounded like a trick. I just nodded and waited for what was next.

“The sergeant will call your parents,” he said. “Will they come?”

I thought it was an odd question. Then it occurred to me that not every teenager – and maybe in Privilege in particular – has a mother and a father who will drop everything when their kid gets into trouble.

“They’ll be here,” I told him. “My dad, for sure.”

The cop nodded. He flipped out a notebook in a black leather case and told me his name was Officer Tony Dutil. He dug a pen out of the pocket of his shirt and held it over the notebook, as though he were waiting for it to start writing on its own. Then he seemed to become aware that he was doing it and put the pen aside.

“We have two witnesses,” he said, “that say you got into an altercation with three men. Okay? They said in a matter of two minutes or less, those three men were all on the ground, unconscious and bleeding.”

Officer Dutil looked at me. I didn’t know if I was supposed to say something. Was this time to “lawyer up” or whatever the term was?

Dutil didn’t wait long for me to answer. He picked up the notebook and flipped back a page.



“One of the witnesses, an older woman who saw it all from her apartment window, said – and I quote – ‘the young man put a whole lot of karate-type moves on them. Just like in the movies.’ That’s what she said. Word for word. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said. “I guess.”

He put the notebook down. He leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath, letting it out with theatrical gusto. He looked at me. Leaned in and placed his hands flat on the table.

“Back at the scene, you admitted there was some type of altercation between you and these three men. That’s right, isn’t it?”

I nodded. Started to say something, just nodded again.

“Okay,” he said. “That’s good. I’m not saying you did anything wrong. I just want to understand how it went down. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good. That’s good.”

He picked up the pen and scribbled something in the notebook. Without looking at me, he began asking more questions.

“Do you know the men you fought with, Jack?”

“No,” I said. “Uh uh.”

“You just met them on the street then?”

“Yes. After we left the movie theater.”

Officer Dutil nodded and scribbled.

“Why did you fight them, Jack? Did they threaten you or anything like that?”

I told him that, yes, the men had threatened us. Pushed us. I started to tell him about the punk who slapped Julie’s butt and then snapped my mouth shut.

Dutil looked at me with eyebrows raised. “Something more?”

*Guys Named Jack*

“No,” I said. “They shoved us. One of them said they wanted to borrow my lady. Something like that.”

“They wanted to borrow your lady? You mean your friend, Julie?”

“That’s what I assumed, yeah.”

Dutil frowned. And scribbled.

“Jack,” he said. “Do you take karate lessons?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Jujitsu? Kung fu? Anything like that?”

“Nope. Nothing.”

He stared at me, nodding. He made a steeple out of his hands and tapped his fingers together like an evil genius in a cartoon.

“Well,” he said. “If you aren’t some martial arts pro or anything awesome like that, how the hell did you manage to get the best of three hood rats who have been knocking around kids like you since they were in juvenile hall? Can you tell me that, Jack?”

In my head, I heard: *Dragon. Horse. Snake*. But it wasn’t the same as before. They were just words now – memories of a moment that had felt almost spiritual but which now was beginning to fade like a dream in the light of day.

“I don’t know,” I said. And though it was the truth, I still felt like the dipshit in all those cop shows, babbling when I should just shut up. “I have no idea. I was kind of on autopilot, I think. I was worried that they were going to hurt Julie. I mean, I was really worried about that. I just... I just reacted. That’s all.”

Dutil was looking at me. It wasn’t completely a cop stare. I could tell he was trying to pin down whether I was lying or not. And if I was lying, why?

But there was something more in his gaze, something that was more human than cop. He was fascinated. He was looking

Mark LaFlamme

at some scrawny punk who had beat the crap out of three street toughs and who was now sitting here without a scratch.

"So, you're like the Hulk," he said. "Get you mad and all bets are off. Is that it?"

"No," I said quickly. "Not at all. I've never even been in a fight before today."

I had a feeling the matter of Kenny Smotherman probably wasn't relevant.

Dutil shook his head, blew out a breath, picked up his pen and notebook again.

"Did you have any weapons with you, Jack?"

"No," I said. "They did, though. One of them had a knife."

"We know. Were you in Privilege to buy drugs?"

"Absolutely not. We went to the movies. I still have the stub."

"Right. You went to see..."

"The Kate Hudson movie," I finished for him.

His eyebrows went up again.

"That's kind of a chick flick, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "And I was with a chick."

Dutil smirked. It looked like he didn't want to but couldn't help himself. He started to ask another question but was interrupted by a knock at the door. A moment later, the door swung open and a cop with a bulldog face stepped in. The sergeant from back at the parking garage. Directly behind him was my father.

I thought: *Oh boy.*

\*\*\*

You know those mothers who worry about everything? Who fret every time their kids step foot outside? The ones who worry about ridiculous things like roaming bands of perverts,

*Guys Named Jack*

food poisoning, vicious dogs, kidnappers, infections, colds and everything in between?

My mother isn't like that. My dad is.

His name is William and he's a small man with a mostly bald head and a nose that's forever red from sneezing and sniffing. He was trying to squeeze his way around the sergeant, looking smaller than ever next to the big cop's bulk. His eyes were big and worried.

"Jack!" he said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Dad. Perfectly fine."

"Course he's fine," the big sergeant said. "Your kid knocked the snot out of three of our nastiest gang bangers. He's better than fine."

My dad pushed past the sergeant and all the way into the room.

"That's crazy," he said. "My son doesn't *hurt* people."

With the emphasis on *hurt*. My son doesn't hurt people, that sentence was meant to imply, he *gets* hurt. Splinters that become infected, colds that turn into pneumonia, car crashes because the roads are filled with maniacs.

"I'm okay, Dad," I told him again. "I'm just worried about Julie."

The big sergeant, whom I was starting to suspect was always in a jolly mood, put a hand on my shoulder.

"Your girlfriend's fine," he said. "Told us the whole story."

"She's just a friend," I said.

"That so? Funny, she told us she was your girlfriend. Women, huh?"

The sergeant snorted laughter. My father had to push past him one more time to get to my side. Then he was kneeling on the floor, looking up at me with those frantic eyes – eyes I've only seen steady and calm twice in my life – both during New

*Mark LaFlamme*

Year's Eve parties when he'd had more than one rum and Coke.

"Was there a fight, Jack? Is that really what happened?"

"Yeah, Dad. But I'm okay."

"Are you sure? Are you sure you're okay?"

I saw the sergeant roll his eyes at the younger cop. I couldn't wait for this to be over.

In a matter of minutes, it was.

\*\*\*

It worked out this way: The police were going to send their findings to the District Attorney's Office for review. It was pretty much a sure thing that I wouldn't be charged with anything, they said. The sergeant – whose name was O'Malley – said he would personally bet his gun and badge on that fact.

"Two of those guys were already on probation for violent crimes," O'Malley told us. "The other one is wanted in Massachusetts. We've got all kinds of charges for them. Once they get out of the hospital, that is."

The sergeant haw-hawed at that. My father, on the other hand, seemed to wince all the way down to his shoes.

Standing next to me, the younger cop tapped me on the shoulder with his notebook.

"We are going to check around," he said. "Just to make sure you're not lying about your fighting skills. It's not a crime to defend yourself, Jack, but if you're trained to a certain level, it could come into play."

My father was aghast at the insinuation.

"My son," he declared, "does not take part in that kind of activity."

O'Malley went down the hall to retrieve Julie. When he walked her back, she looked better. The Alice Cooper tears had

*Guys Named Jack*

been washed from her face and the dazed, far-away look was gone from her eyes.

When I saw her, my heart began to thud so hard in my chest, it almost hurt. Would she see me as a monster now? Some quick-fisted goon with a fighting streak nested under his skin like some kind of cancer?

But when she saw me, her eyes brightened. She smiled and rushed to me, throwing her arms around me and pulling me tight. I felt the softness of her breasts pushing into me. For the second time that day, I could smell her hair. Apricots. Best smell ever. She sobbed into my neck and whispered “thank you, Jack” so low that only I could hear it.

I’ve got to tell you. I would have taken that knife right in the belly for her. Best friends? That was a crock. We were friends, yeah. I wouldn’t question that. But if there was a preacher hanging around the police station that afternoon, and if my father wasn’t looking like he might fall away in a faint at any moment, I would have asked her to marry me on the spot. Swear to God.

I had gone toe-to-toe with three veterans of the streets and I had won that battle. I had faced down a man with a knife and knocked him out cold. I had withstood an interrogation – albeit a gentle one – from the Privilege police. And all I could think about on the awkward ride home was that I was in love and in love real hard.

That first time. It’s a beast, all right.

\*\*\*

My father didn’t want to talk about it, but my mother couldn’t get enough. Her brother, too, my Uncle Bondo. A wound-up, erratic fellow, is Bondo, but I love him like a brother. It was Bondo who taught me how to skate and stick handle a puck. Bondo who spent hours on the Brookside ball

field, teaching me how to hit and field a baseball. Bondo wanted to show me the ways of deer-hunting, too, but my father had managed to put his foot all the way down on that one. I never made it out into the woods to shoot Bambi and for that I was privately grateful.

When they heard the blow-by-blow story – from me and then from Julie – of how I had battled the three punks of Privilege, they were agog. I mean, my mother and her brother were half-convinced I was the second coming of Chuck Norris. “A savant,” Bondo kept shouting because Bondo shouts just about everything. “A by-God savant who masters fists and feet instead of numbers and boring equations. That’s my boy! That’s my Jackie Blue!”

His enthusiasm took a hit a day later when he took me to the backyard to fight.

Bondo is a big man with a barrel chest. He’s got a wild, fly-away beard and hands the size of catcher’s mitts. For an hour, he threw soft jabs at my face, bobbing and weaving around the backyard in a way that made Mike Tyson seem serene.

“Come on, Jack. Come on, Jacky, defend yourself. Take me down, you bad mutha!”

A light slap against my left cheek. A hard finger poking my chest like a bullet. Poke, poke. Jab, jab.

I waited for it to come. I even tried to summon the voice.

*Cobra*, I thought. *Horse*. *Snake*, godammit. *Where are you?*

Nothing. It was late Sunday afternoon and I kept telling him I had to give it up. I had homework to do before the onslaught of school. Uncle Bondo looked more fired up than ever. I was worried that his disappointment would be so great, he’d end up in a bar somewhere – possibly in Privilege – looking for someone real to fight.

“Come on, Uncle,” I said for the fifth time. “I’ve got nothing. Whatever it was is gone.”

*Guys Named Jack*

“You’re killing me, Jacky,” he said, still bobbing and still weaving. “You’re killing an old man here.”

But I could tell that he was ready to admit defeat. He had failed to evoke the magic.

Then Julie stopped by.

She came in through the gated fence that surrounds the backyard. She started toward us, ducking under a clothesline, her hair falling in delicious waves over her face. My heart fluttered painfully again and I wondered if that was going to be a permanent condition.

She wore a white blouse and black jeans. She looked curvy and beautiful. She was smiling as she closed the gap between us. I waited, smelling apricots through some mysterious, anticipatory sixth sense.

Then Bondo sprang into action. He jumped into Julie’s path before she had reached me. I saw a bemused expression cross her face. Not fear by any stretch of the imagination. Julie knew Bondo well and she liked him. But as Bondo started in on his next act, her smile morphed into a look of puzzlement and it pissed me off a little. I love my uncle, but the idiot never knows when to stop.

“Oh ho!” he cried, dancing about like some drunken elf. “It is our hero’s lady friend, the damsel in distress! Will you fight for her, young Jackson? What if I wish to kiss her?”

Bondo twisted into a deranged crouch and stalked toward Julie, who had stopped in her tracks. The bemusement was still on her face, but it was giving way to outright confusion and (I fancied) a dim anxiety.

“Come Julie!” Bondo cried, ambling around her like a fairytale ogre. “Let us go away together and leave poor Jack to pine. We will marry, you and I, and live in the woods!”

He hooked his fingers into claws, making as if to grab her. Julie shied away from him, playing along and yet at least



vaguely apprehensive. Again, it pissed me off that my uncle would pursue this game for so long.

"Knock it off, Uncle Bondo," I said, taking a step toward them.

"Oh ho! Seems the lad doesn't favor the notion of his girl running off with a woodsman. Well, tough titty, as the kitty would say. She's mine now, master Jack. All mine."

He continued to stomp around her, hands jabbing the air. Julie shot me a look. She was trying to smile, but that look said *what the hell IS this, Jack? What's going on?*

I walked to her and reached for her arm. Sometimes you just have to remove the game to make Bondo stop playing it. I would walk her inside where my mother would kick her brother in the ass if he kept it up.

"Come on, Julie. Let's go in..."

Bondo swatted my hand away as I reached for Julie's elbow. Then he took her other elbow in his own hand and began to pull her away.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Knock that shit off."

Leering, cackling, still dancing from foot to foot, Bondo bounced in between Julie and I and shoved me with both hands.

I stumbled back, feeling my face going red, both with rage and embarrassment. Glancing up, I could see that the smile had withered on Julie's face. Now she just looked uncomfortable at best, genuinely concerned at worst.

Bondo came for me again, lunging with both hands out to knock me on my ass.

Unbidden, the whispered voice returned.

It said: *Ga!*

I twisted slightly and threw my right shoulder at my oncoming uncle. With my left hand, I reached for his wrist and grabbed it. My right hand shot up into his armpit, fingers

digging into the sweaty underside of his shirt. I planted my right foot. I felt power surging up from my feet. I twisted at the hip and hoisted my uncle into the air, using my shoulder as a sort of fulcrum. I heard him go "Wah?" and saw his feet come off the ground. I shifted my weight, lifted him higher and I flung him, as easily as I would have flung a bag of fertilizer. He went up over my head, flipped end for end and sailed across the lawn. He came down five feet away with a terrible thud. It sounded like snow falling off a roof.

Uncle Bondo lay on his back, arms out at his sides. I took a few steps toward him, moving like a cat stalking a bird. My right hand had pulled up to my shoulder, fingers bent, ready to strike. I stayed at his blind side, bending in, focusing on the center of his face. My right arm felt like the string of a bow, pulled taut and ready to unload all of its energy in one precise spot.

"Jack!" Julie cried from behind me. "Don't!"

The spell broke. The intense focus was gone as though someone had pulled blinds over a window.

I knelt in the grass next to Bondo. His lips were pulled back against his gums so that I could see every one of his teeth. He looked like a man desperately trying to pass gas. Only he wasn't trying to rid himself of air but trying to take some in. The wind had been knocked out of him when he hit the ground and now he was frantically trying to get oxygen to his lungs.

"Smoke on the water," I mumbled into the face of my uncle. "Fire in the sky."

Uncle Bondo blinked, comprehending that line no more than I did.

Julie appeared on the other side of him. She cupped her hand behind his head and lifted it slightly. Bondo continued to grimace, looking at Julie and then at me. His eyes were wide.

*Mark LaFlamme*

He started to breathe again, short little sips of air at first and then magnificent gulps.

"Threw me," he wheezed. "Holy crap, Jackson. You threw me."

I heard the back door squeak open and then slam shut. My mother was with us a second later. I looked up at her. Her eyes were gleaming, not with anger or even concern. She looked delighted.

"That was amazing," she said in a flat, far away voice. "You threw the big idiot like a bag of crap."

Uncle Bondo sat up. He was sucking in air as fast as he could, but he was grinning, too. He looked pleased. For the first time I could remember, I saw the similarities between Bondo and his sister – my mother. There was a touch of lunacy in each of them, I thought. In that moment, I understood why, when they were together, my father was relieved of any semblance of household power.

I looked at Julie and she was looking at me. Her eyes were narrow; troubled. I opened my mouth to say something to her. I'm sorry? I'm really not like this?

I don't know. Before I got a chance to say anything at all, my mother and uncle were babbling all at once.

"Jackie Boy," Bondo said, laboring to his feet. "You're going to be a star."

\*\*\*

I got a call from the District Attorney's Office on Tuesday. The man introduced himself as an Assistant D.A. He wanted me to come in to see him at the courthouse in Privilege. Just a routine follow-up, he said. Nothing for me to be concerned about. The D.A. wanted to round out their investigation before the grand jury met in a week. They did not intend to seek an indictment against me.

*Guys Named Jack*

Whatever that meant.

The man I knew only as Squash-Nose was actually a convicted felon named Conan Teixeira, known as "Lace" in his circle of hoods. He had two previous convictions for assault, one of them with a weapon. There was also an unlawful sexual contact on his record and a handful of drug trafficking convictions.

"We want to go after him for assault and carrying a concealed weapon," the assistant D.A. told me. "I wish like hell he had pulled a gun."

I tended to disagree on that matter, but didn't say so. I told the prosecutor I would come talk to him on Thursday, but it would have to be after school. Thinking about driving back to Privilege and walking into the courthouse made me feel sick. I didn't want my parents to be there, but I didn't want to go alone, either.

I asked Uncle Bondo if he would go with me, feeling a bit like a guy who dumps gasoline on a fire in an attempt to put out the flames. Bondo agreed to go with me – was happy about it, in fact.

"That's great," he said. "Works out beautifully because there's somewhere else I'd like to take you."

Yup. Gasoline. Such an apt analogy, I could almost smell the fumes.

\*\*\*

The story of my scrap in Privilege had not made it into the halls of Myrtle High School, a small miracle for which I was profoundly thankful. Julie had said nothing about it. My friends did not ask about my weekend at all. As far as they knew, I went to see the new Kate Hudson movie and who wanted to hear about that?

My life was getting back to normal. The last thing I wanted to do was walk into Varto's Karate classroom on Main Street and mess that up.

Bondo had squeezed his big hog of a car into a space in front of the building – a little strip mall along the main drag. There's an Ace Hardware store in there; a pet shop; a parlor where you can get your nails done – both hands and feet – for just \$39.99; a stinky little place called Joe's Smokes and Varto's Karate.

I realized at once where Uncle Bondo was taking me and my reaction was one of horror and betrayal. I felt, I supposed, like a dog that has been promised a day in the park but who finds himself being dragged into the vet's office instead.

I knew a few kids who trained at Varto's. They wore black coats with the Varto's emblem (a sketched tiger in profile with one upraised paw) on the back of them. They knocked books out of your hands in the hallways or pulled the chair out from under you in the cafeteria. If you weren't one of them, they would bump your shoulder when you passed them in the hall and then they would glower at you, waiting for any sign at all that you wanted to make something of it. The Varto kids were worse than the football players because the football players at least had to worry about doing something that would get them kicked off the team. The karate clique, on the other hand, were part of a sport not sanctioned by the school. They could do anything they wanted and what they wanted was to hurt somebody.

"I'm not going in there," I told my uncle. I was sitting on the passenger side with my arms crossed like a defiant child.

The visit with the Assistant District Attorney had been a breeze. I had looked at some pictures, did my best to point out the three thugs from outside the movie theater and answered some basic questions. I met with the district attorney himself, a

*Guys Named Jack*

roly poly man named Croteau, and he had offered assurances that the three hoods I had tangled with wouldn't be looking for me. They had bigger problems, Croteau said. Along with two broken noses, one fractured windpipe and three badly bruised egos, each was looking at significant jail time, mostly due to probation violations.

It had been a good day. In an hour, I was going to meet Julie at her house and I was hoping that this would be the day we verbally acknowledged that our relationship had climbed to a new level. A good day that had the potential to be great.

And here was Uncle Bondo trying his hardest to wring the goodness out of the afternoon and soak it in crap.

"I just want you to talk to the man," he told me, putting his hand on my shoulder and giving me his best *do-it-for-good-old-Uncle-Bondo* look. "Bobby Varto is an old friend of mine. A real good guy. He might be able to shed some light."

I held him off for a good fifteen minutes, but in the end, he wore me down. My uncle was like a horsefly, one of those tenacious bloodsuckers that will buzz around your head no matter how many times you swat at it. When he got excited about something, he just wouldn't let go.

We went inside. Varto's was about what I expected. There were fifteen or so kids, mostly teenage boys, standing on red mats in the center of the long room. They wore white robes with a variety of colored belts. A mirror ran the full length of a back wall.

Several of the boys were facing me when we walked in. A few of them smirked when they saw me. I recognized at least four. Most notably (and most distressing) was Randy Nichols, a senior who still thought it was the height of funny to trip a kid who was crossing the school cafeteria with a tray loaded with lunch.

Randy was a tall guy with broad shoulders. As far as I could remember, he had been sporting a beard since he was in the eighth grade. He was mostly clean-shaven now, although there was an unruly patch of hair below his lip; the so-called Soul Patch.

Randy was smirking more viciously than anyone.

And there stood Bobby Varto, two times the size of the biggest of his students. He wore a sleeveless black shirt with the Varto symbol on the back. He shot a look over his shoulder and saw us standing near the door. He offered a quick grin at my uncle and then turned back to his class. He clapped his hands twice and shouted something in what I assumed was Japanese.

“Ki o tsuke!”

His students snapped to attention and stayed that way.

Varto came over to talk to us. He had a surprisingly boyish face for one whose career is based on the distribution of pain. But his arms were huge and ripped with muscles. Tattoos crawled up each of them – snakes, Japanese symbols and, of course, the tiger with upraised paw.

He shook my uncle’s hand and the two of them bumped chests. They grinned at each other for a few moments and I wondered about their history. Then Varto was looking at me, leaning down a bit as he did so. He smelled of cologne and sweat.

“This your little prodigy, Bondo?”

“This is he. This is Killer Jack.”

Varto was still looking at me, sizing me up. I felt his students doing the same and willed my face to not go red. I felt it filling with heat anyway.

“Heard you’ve been kicking ass and taking names, Jack,” Varto said.

I shuffled my feet and tried to look him in the eye.

“Not really. Got a little lucky.”

“Huh. I’ll tell you what, kid. There’s no such thing as luck in self-defense. You’ve got it or you don’t. And even if you do, you’ve got to know how to deploy it. Osu?”

It sounded like *oast*. I had no idea what it meant. I just nodded.

Varto nodded back.

“Okay, then. Let’s see what your boy has, Bondo old buddy.”

Varto went back to his class and began shouting commands at them. His words bounced off every wall.

I turned to my uncle and whisper-screamed at him.

“You said we were just going to talk to the guy!”

Bondo shrugged and gave me that *aw shucks* look. I was fuming, mostly at myself for falling so naively into this trap. I swore that if I made it out of this alive, I’d never talk to my conniving uncle again.

Now Varto was looking at us once more, holding one arm out, inviting me to come closer. I thought of the door behind me – thought of how easy it would be to just do an about-face and walk back outside. I’d be free of all those smirking bullies and of my scheming, self-serving uncle as well.

But what about tomorrow? And the day after that?

I sighed inwardly. I felt Bondo’s hand on my shoulder, nudging me toward his friend. I felt all those eyes, inquisitive and hateful. I felt the grins and heard the snickers.

I walked up to the edge of the mat. My uncle’s hand was replaced by Bobby Varto’s as he guided me into the center of the dojo.

He shouted one word to his students. Again, Japanese. Then he addressed them in plain English, his voice booming out like boulders rolling down a hill. Listening to what he had



to say, I kind of wished he'd just kept talking in a language I didn't understand.

"This young man is Jack Gordon. I'm told he has a special gift in the art of self-defense. We're going to take a look at his skills and compare them to our own. Understand?"

The class yelled back: "Hai!"

"Above all, we're going to welcome him here. Do you understand *that*?"

"Hai!"

He shouted at them one more time and they stood at attention. None of them was smirking. Not for the moment, anyway.

Varto turned to me again.

"Jack, I'm going to put you out there with one of my better students. This isn't a fight. Nobody is going to hurt you, okay? I'm just going to have Randy demonstrate some of his techniques and you respond in whatever way feels right to you. Are you all right with that?"

Oh, the things that can go through your mind at a moment like this. No, I was not all right with it. I didn't want to spar with Randy Nichols. I could think of a million things I'd rather do, in fact. If given the choice, I would have opted to let Bobby Varto himself punch me unconscious if that meant that all of this would be over.

I took my sneakers off, trying to calculate the variety of ways this could go down. I could go up there and do absolutely nothing at all. Let Randy kick and jab and spin and do all of that crap he sometimes did in study hall when the teacher wasn't in the room. I could just stand there and quietly demonstrate that I had nothing of interest to them. Or I could try to cover up and block his blows, which would basically demonstrate the same thing.

*Guys Named Jack*

There were no whispered words in my head as I glumly nodded to Varto and allowed myself to be ushered toward the center of the dojo. No *ga! No horse, snake or leopard*. Not so much as a sea monkey up there in the mysterious channels of my brain.

Varto spoke quietly with Randy for a half minute, the student nodding enthusiastically as he listened. I stood in stocking feet with my arms at my sides, feeling the glares. I watched as Randy pulled white, padded gloves onto each hand. They weren't as puffy as boxing gloves but they were padded at the knuckles. Then Randy stepped into the center and Varto stepped out with a few quick parting words for me.

"Just remember, Jack. Do whatever feels right."

I nodded and stepped in. The room went quiet. Eerily quiet, I thought. The other students had stepped back and were simply standing and watching. No shuffling of feet, no clearing of throats. That silence seemed to go on forever. I stood looking at Randy's throat, which for me was at eye-level. The silence spun out. Was I supposed to be doing something? Was there a word or phrase that needed to be uttered so that this whole horrific scene could begin?

Then Varto spoke from behind me. Barked, actually, loudly enough that I jumped. It sounded like "Oh-tay-gay-nee-ray!"

Randy bowed quickly in my direction. He was smiling slightly. I bowed back, feeling like the town drunk who is ordered to sing and dance for his nightly rum.

We stood facing each other. Varto barked "Yoy!" and Randy jumped into position. Both hands curled into loose fists, the left slightly ahead of the right. His left leg, bent considerably at the knee, was ahead of his right.

More heavy silence. I waited for guidance from the inner whispers, but of course they weren't there. My arms hung at

my sides. My heart was beating so hard that I could feel it in my eyes.

The room was so quiet.

*Do something!* I thought. *Do anything at all!*

Randy was watching me. Reluctantly, I pulled my hands up, curling them into fists in a half-assed boxer's stance. I heard a few titters and sensed eyes rolling all over the room.

Varto yelled: "Oy-zoo-key!" And while the syllables were still bouncing off the walls, Randy lunged with a short, sharp cry. It wasn't exactly "kee-ya!" like you see in the cartoons but it was close. And as it flew like a sword from his mouth, one of his fists shot out in the direction of my chest. There was no slow motion like there had been outside of the theater. Randy's fist was a blur.

*Block it!* my head screamed. But before the scream reached the nerves that control my arms, Randy's fist bore in. It blazed between my fists and struck me on the breastbone. He pulled it at the last second, but I took some of its force anyway. There was dull pain and I felt my upper body parting ways with my lower. My butt went back but my feet stayed put. A second later, I was landing ass-first on the mat. I heard it go "whee!" as air escaped it and then I heard a rumble of laughter around me.

Varto silenced them. I sat dazed and looked around the room. I could see Uncle Bondo standing at the edge of the dojo, watching me with fascination. Not compassion or concern, but a kind of patient interest, like a man waiting for an animal to perform a trick.

Varto leaned in to help me up.

"That's okay, Jack. Let's give it another try."

I got to my feet. If I could have been sure no one else would hear, I would have pleaded with him to call it off. *I've got nothing*, I'd tell him. *I'm really just a punching bag out*

*there.* But the room was still quiet and even the softest whisper would have been a roar.

I was up again and Varto had an arm around my shoulder.

“Randy won’t make contact like that again,” he said, loud enough that Randy could surely hear him. “But you need to do something out there, okay? You don’t have to do much. Just try to block his blow.”

Again I nodded like an idiot. *Yessir, sensei. Whatever’s best for the team. Crane technique? Sweep the leg? By golly, I’ll do it.*

I stepped back in. A few seconds later, Varto barked a command. Then another. Roughly a half second after that, Randy cried out and brought a gloved hand around to the side of my head. Again, he backed off at the end and yet still managed to strike the side of my ear hard enough to make it ring high and bright.

I stepped back, shaking my head. *Okay, fellas? Surely that’s enough. Enough to convince you that I’m not Bruce Lee and enough to ensure that I’ll get harassed at school every day until the day I graduate and leave the state.*

Varto put his hands on my lower back and urged me back into the center of the dojo.

“Come on, Jack!” Bondo yelled, like a big-betting fight fan at ringside. “Show ’im what you got. Don’t be afraid to let loose like you did with those punks in Privilege.”

I saw Randy’s eyebrows go up just slightly at that. Then his face was neutral again and we were bowing at each other.

Another command. Another war cry. Another blow, this one streaking in toward my belly button. Randy pulled the punch again yet still there was enough impact to make me lose my wind for a few seconds. I stumbled back and Randy flung his gloved hands in the air.

“This is stupid,” he said. “The kid’s like a mannequin. It’s like fighting a snowman up here.”

Guffaws all around the room. Varto yelled at them and they went silent. Randy, though, was still grinning, pleased with his clashing similes. He nodded at his classmates, smirking in that self-congratulatory way.

Varto stomped past me. He moved toward Randy like he was going to knock him down. Instead, he bumped his mirthful student with his chest and then stood breathing fire into his face.

“You want to say something else, smart guy? You want to question my command some more?”

Randy’s eyes got very big. Then he dropped them and looked at his feet. His whole body seemed to sag. He looked sad and ashamed, like a boy sent to his room by a hot-tempered father. I’d never seen him look deflated before and never wanted to see it again. Somehow, the scolded Randy Nichols was uglier than the bully version.

“No, Sensei,” he muttered.

“What? What did you say?”

Louder: “No, Sensei!”

“That’s right, no.”

Varto breathed fire a little longer and then stomped back out of the dojo. His face was red and he was huffing and puffing.

“Get ready, Jack,” he barked. “Knock him on his ass this time.”

The class tittered wildly, uninhibited for the moment by the fact that they were simply responding to something their sensei had said. There would be no scolding for that and they knew it.

Randy, on the other hand, was burning with shame and rage. His face was crimson. I could see a vein, thick and blue, zigzagging down one temple like a lightning bolt. When Varto

barked for us to begin, Randy snapped into position as though he had been goosed. His fists were out and I could see that they were shaking. His eyes were on mine and they were angry. More than angry, they were like burning coals.

*He means to hurt you, I thought. For real this time.*

Varto shouted his command. “Oh-tay-gay-nee-ray!”

Randy bowed quickly, barely perceptible. It was an angry, perfunctory gesture and I was sure that everyone had seen it, too. Would Varto intercede and, finally, call the whole thing off? Would Bondo recognize that genuine violence was at hand and bail me out, like a good uncle?

Varto yelled his next command. In the fraction of seconds that followed, it seemed that every muscle in Randy’s neck, face and arms sprang to life all at once. His fists were clenched more tightly. His battle cry – his *kiai* – was louder, more forceful.

*He’s going to hurt you, I thought. And on the heels of that, a pronouncement rather than a cry, I heard: Ga!*

It began. Randy rushed forward, but to my eye there was nothing rushed about it. That strange slowing of time; objects moving through space almost dreamily. When Randy’s fist moved toward my chin, it seemed astoundingly slow, like a piece of driftwood moving lazily toward shore. I could read the writing on the wrist of his glove: Warrior Sports. I had time to measure its angle and the speed of its approach. I felt my own arm sailing up and then coming down, like the blade of a windmill. I saw our wrists collide as if in slow-motion, the force of my blow knocking his away.

I thought: *Spider* and felt my right foot come off the ground. I spun on the left foot and kicked with the other, the lower portion of that leg catching Randy in the midsection. He folded in half, bowing like a stage actor at the end of a show. I pulled my leg away and he crumbled to the floor.

*Horse.*

I stepped back. I didn't hear the gasps or the murmurs around us, although they were surely there. I waited, knees bent, fists out. I watched as Randy crawled along the mat, one arm holding himself up, the other clutching his belly. When he crawled toward my feet, I simply took a few steps to the side, circling him.

Varto did not intervene. None of the other students entered the dojo. After a few more seconds of crawling, Randy got to his feet. His face was the color of a brick. His teeth were clamped together. He snarled like a vicious dog and got his fists up in front of his face.

He charged and threw a fist, aiming for my head. I knocked his hand away again, hooked a foot behind his legs and flipped him. He went down with a thud. I heard his teeth clack.

He got up, red as a fire truck now, and came rushing back. This time, he led with his foot, kicking out at the area just below my beltline. I simply stepped to the side, hooked a hand under his knee, and dumped him on his ass.

Again, he got up. And again and again. Each time he did so, his form became sloppier. He began to lumber, his blows flying wild. I blocked each of them and countered by knocking him off his feet. My thoughts were calm, a placid lake on a windless morning. I delivered no blow that was meant to disable. I purposely steered clear of his most vulnerable areas, choosing to disrupt his balance instead. After several minutes of this, Varto was in the ring, stepping between us and holding Randy back.

I thought: *Ga!*

I moved back into what I had come to think of as the horse position. I paused, bowed and then silently stepped out of the dojo. As I stood next to my back-clapping uncle, listening to the buzz of the other students and watching Varto try to calm

*Guys Named Jack*

his star pupil, I realized I was humming. *Riders on the Storm*, the tune was. That old Doors song that sounds like a suicide note put to cocktail music.

How curious, I thought, and just kept humming.

\*\*\*

“It’s not karate,” Bobby Varto said. “That’s about the only thing I can tell you for sure.”

It was two hours later. We were sitting in a booth at a pizza place called Gollum’s, a few blocks away from the karate studio.

Julie had met us there and was now sitting next to me, eating a sloppy slice of pepperoni pizza with a fork. I had insisted that she come. Uncle Bondo’s experiment had caused me to miss our date at her place. This at least ensured that I wouldn’t miss seeing her altogether.

Uncle Bondo had already finished a Boromir Burger – a massive hunk of food that boasted a half-pound of beef – and was washing it down with his third mug of beer.

“What the hell is it then, Bobby? It’s obviously some form of martial arts. I don’t know much, but I know that what Bad Ass Jack does looks like every Steven Seagal movie I’ve ever seen.”

Varto shook his head. He had ditched the sleeveless shirt in favor of a button-up dress shirt and now looked like just another pizza fan having lunch with friends.

“Seagal practices Aikido,” he said. “And it ain’t that, either.”

“What then?”

Julie was listening with great interest. Before the food had arrived, she had been sitting with one of her hands on my knee, a sensation that made any blow to the head seem like child’s



play. We still hadn't had *the talk* yet, but that gesture, to me, was better than anything that could be put to words.

"Martial arts," Varto went on, "implies training. By its nature, that's what the martial arts are – a system of practices and traditions of combat that are practiced for the purpose of self-defense and spirituality. It's not something you're born with, Jack. And it's sure as hell not something you just wake up and know how to do. Capiche?"

Bondo swiped a french fry from Varto's plate. "Okay, Mr. Wikipedia. I get the definition. But you saw with your own eyes what the kid can do. And he's never stepped foot in a class like yours. I give you my personal guarantee on that."

Varto stuffed a wad of crust in his mouth and mulled it. I found that I liked him, which was wholly unexpected. The kids in his class tended to be assholes, but for the most part, asshole was a pre-existing condition. On the ride over, Varto insisted that the strict spiritual side of karate often displaces the behavioral issues with which many of his students come to him.

"Not all of them," he had said. "Some of them will be pricks all their lives and there's nothing I can do about that. If I come across somebody with a true streak of violence, I drop them; give them a refund and send them packing. I don't want to be the one to give a black belt to a sociopath."

Varto had received a great deal of his own training in Japan. He described himself as a student of all of the martial arts, though his expertise was in karate.

"I'm baffled," he said. "I truly am. Jack's stuff seems to be a little bit of everything. I saw a little bit of San Soo Kung Fu in there but with obvious variations. Closest thing that comes to mind is a fighting system called S.C.A.R.S."

"The hell is that?" Bondo said, bits of chewed french fries flying from his mouth.

Varto looked at me. He grinned and rolled his eyes.

“S.C.A.R.S,” he said, “is a fighting system taught to soldiers who want to become Navy Seals. Pretty rugged stuff. It’s not for ceremony or organized contests. It’s taught so that a soldier can defend himself and disable his opponents as quickly and efficiently as possible.”

“Aha,” said Bondo. “But Jack obviously knows how to use restraint. Didn’t bust my face after hurling me across the lawn and he obviously let your boy off the hook today. I wouldn’t call that quick and efficient disabling.”

“Right. I know. That’s why I don’t think it’s S.C.A.R.S. I don’t know *what* the hell it is. I only know that it’s damn impressive. I’m pretty sure I’ve never had a student who could compete with your nephew and I’ve sent some pretty skilled fighters out my door.”

Bondo was beaming. When I looked at Julie, she was gaping a little bit, too. I was glad about that – not because I craved admiration as a fighter, but because I was afraid she might be ogling Bobby Varto, who clearly wouldn’t have any trouble with the ladies.

Bondo broke the mood.

“How about you, Bobby?” he asked in a taunting, sing-song kind of way. “You’ve been training since you were a little pipsqueak. Could you take him? If you and Jacko were to go round and round, could you put him down?”

If Varto was bothered by the question, it didn’t show. He thought about it a long time, dragging a piece of pizza crust through a small puddle of sauce as he did.

“You know what?” he said. “I don’t know.”

My uncle was floored.

“No shit,” he blurted. “Seriously?”

Mark LaFlamme

Varto shook his head, slowly and thoughtfully. I got the idea that the question had occurred to him long before Bondo had asked it.

"I don't know," he said again. "I only got to see a small sample of what he can do. He was deploying moves that wouldn't have occurred to me. Or if they would have occurred to me, he was doing them before they could occur, if you get my meaning. Jack conducts himself with the kind of poise you only see in the very best. Everything is instinctive.

"It's as though," the karate instructor went on, "he's got a voice in his head telling him what to do at the precise moment he needs to do it."

All three of them were looking at me now. All three were nodding with silent consideration. It made me uncomfortable, but I didn't say anything. In the silence, I realized I was humming again.

*Into this house we're born. Into this world we're thrown.  
Like a dog without a bone, an actor out on loan. Riders on the Storm...*

\*\*\*

They asked me to write about my experience in fifteen pages or less. I just counted. I'm at closer to 20 and I'm not finished.

I'll try to be more concise.

What happened next was this: I went back to school and the news of my triumph over Randy Nichols was all over the place. I mean, it was a barn fire. In high school, news spreads like a cold that mutates with each new person it infects. That is, it typically morphs into something that has a kernel of truth but which is mostly bullshit.

*Guys Named Jack*

This wasn't like that. The story that went up and down the halls of Myrtle High School, like the janitor's push broom, was pretty much dead-on even by the end of the day.

"Hey, Gordon. Is it true you beat the crap out of three guys in Privilege and then dumped Randy Nichols on his ass?"

"The kids from Varto's say you're better than anyone there? Is that true? Oh, my God. Is it true?"

It didn't help that the newspaper in Privilege ran a brief story about the three thugs beaten outside the movie theater. The smaller Myrtle paper ran the story a day later and, though I wasn't named in it, the kids at school made the connection.

"Hey, Jack. The way I hear it, Chuck Norris is so afraid, he's handing all those jokes about him over to you."

Okay. Not a hundred percent accuracy, but by high school standards, not bad.

I was afraid that my new status as a martial arts pro might tempt some of the other sociopaths to come looking for a fight. You know how that goes – everybody wants to fight the biggest guy in the bar to prove his mettle. I'm not the biggest guy, by any stretch of the imagination, but my reputation was growing by the hour.

It might have happened, too, but suddenly I had a guardian angel. Specifically, Randy Nichols.

The way I hear it, Randy made the rounds of shop class, gym, the wooded area behind the football field where some of the kids go to smoke and goof off. And Randy made it clear to the rest of the knuckle draggers that anyone who wanted a piece of me had to tangle with him first.

Strange days indeed. I wanted to believe that he was motivated by simple respect. I had put his ass on the mat fairly and squarely after all, and that was something about which no other student at Myrtle High could brag.

But it wasn't respect or anything like it. Bobby Varto and my always-scheming uncle had put the order out because they wanted something from me – they wanted me to fight in the Tri-County Martial Arts Tournament that was coming up in a couple weeks.

"No," I told them when they asked me directly. "This time, I've got to put my foot down. And not on anybody's face."

We were at my house. It was after dinner and I was moping around waiting for Julie to call. Varto and my uncle waited until my father wandered out into the garage (my dad doesn't work on cars or lawnmowers or anything like that. He just likes to clean a lot and especially when there are burly, loud guests in the house) before springing it on me.

"Jack," Uncle Bondo said, as solemn as he could be. "This is something you need to do. You can't ignore a gift like this. And besides that, do you know how much tail a thing like this could get you?"

Varto was a little more philosophical.

"It would be damn good for my business, I won't lie to you there," he said. He was sitting on the edge of my dad's recliner, leaning toward me with his hands clasped together, as if in prayer. "But it's bigger than that, Jack. Much bigger. We need to find out where your skill set came from and the best way to do that is to draw attention to it. You might not know it, but these tournaments are big business. People scout them the way they scout kids who can throw a ball a hundred-and-five miles per hour down in Guadalajara. You have a chance to wow the martial arts community. I mean, you'll drop their jaws. And by doing that, maybe we'll get some insights into how it came to be."

Varto wasn't the only one eager to discover how I had been transformed into the Karate Kid without ever painting a fence

or waxing a floor. My father was pushing for a full CT scan at Privilege General Hospital.

For starters.

“Anomalies like this aren’t always a blessing, son,” he had said, looking at me with those forever wary eyes. “What looks like a gift is often the result of something gone horribly wrong in another part of your brain. I’m afraid... Well, I won’t beat around the bush here. I’m afraid you might have a brain tumor.”

My dad. If anyone could find the cancerous growth buried in that silver lining, it was him.

Varto’s argument was a little more enticing. In the end, I agreed to take part in the tournament, but only at the county level.

“No states, no regionals, no National Kung Fu Kick-a-Thon,” I told him. “I’ll compete for that one weekend and then I’m out. Hopefully, the first guy I face will knock me out cold and then we can all go back to our lives.”

Varto smiled and nodded. He put a hand on my shoulder.

“If anyone in that place knocks you out,” he said, “I’ll give you my Harley. I kid you not. We’re talking about a spanking new Forty-Eight with not so much as a pebble stuck between the treads. I’ve been to every one of these tournaments for the last 25 years, Jack. If I was allowed to bet, I’d put every penny I have on you.”

It was a nice sentiment, I thought, but it troubled me. It was like he was ready to plunk down all of his savings on a racehorse without ever examining its muscles, its legs, all the things that make a good horse go.

Bobby didn’t have all the information.

\*\*\*

I never told anyone about the voice. I didn't know why then and I don't fully understand it now.

That voice – the whispered *ga*, *snake*, *leopard*, *horse*, etc. – felt like a secret, and a precarious one at that. If there was any real gift in all of this – and that was the word just about everybody chose to describe it – the gift was the voice, and to share it would have felt like a sin. A betrayal. That's the best I can describe how I felt.

Of course, there was also the fact that hearing voices is a hallmark of mental illness. And when you got right down to it, there was a part of me that feared my father might be on to something. Maybe all of this was the result of a tumor growing by the day and pressing up against a region of my brain that controls motor skills or coordination. Maybe when the tumor got bigger, those voices would start telling me to kill my parents or set things on fire.

I didn't actively believe it, but it was always there, just a nugget of possibility to be taken out now and then and fretted over. At any rate, I kept the matter of the leopard, the cobra and all the other jungle creatures to myself.

I did, however, spend some time on the Internet.

As far as I could tell, words like *cobra* and *horse* are a part of several different branches of the martial arts. I didn't find any one in particular that jibed with my experiences; I could rule them all in or rule them all out.

*Ga* was even more elusive. According to Google, that one important word, which had guided me to prepare and ready myself for combat, was either an abbreviation for the state of Georgia or for Gamblers Anonymous.

Not very helpful.

When I was done searching the web, I closed my bedroom door and plopped down in a bean bag chair next to the window. I pulled on a set of headphones and scrolled through my Ultra

*Guys Named Jack*

music player song list. I had won the Ultra by filling out an online survey a year ago. That was a blessing because the Ultra cost roughly double what an iPod was going for at the time. Who the hell pays that kind of money for a glorified record player, I've always wondered?

One-by-one, I scrolled to the songs that had come to me during the bouts going all the way back to the street fight in Privilege. I listened to *Sympathy for the Devil*, but by the time Mick Jagger started screeching fiercely enough to make his throat bleed, there were no revelations.

I played *Smoke on the Water* loud enough to make my ears hurt and found that it was nothing more than a simple song about a music festival that went up in flames.

I only got halfway through *Layla* and *Riders on the Storm* almost put me to sleep. There was nothing. It was just music. Why had those particular songs come to me in the aftermath of all those scraps? No idea. Maybe it was just adrenaline knocking random memories around inside my head.

I searched for answers and found none. I think I was half convinced that the voice would vanish on its own, with no explanation forthcoming. Maybe it would happen at the tournament. I would find myself in the dojo facing a kid I didn't know and one who had been training for this for ten years. He (or she, a possibility I didn't like to think about much) would come at me with the full expectation that I would try to defend myself. But if that voice never came, where would I be? Standing on a mat in front of hundreds of mothers, fathers and younger brothers all screaming for blood and broken bones.

If the voice never came, I would be punched, kicked and flipped until someone stepped in to put an end to it. It would be inexplicable and disappointing to those who had fastened onto



*Mark LaFlamme*

my mysterious talent with zeal that bordered on greed. It would be a catastrophe in some ways, a blessing in others.

The voice is what made everything work. I had no real understanding of how it worked, but I knew it to be true. The voice was everything.

So I kept it to myself.

\*\*\*

I talked to Julie about the tournament on Saturday. We had picked up a bunch of sandwiches at a place called Luigi's, loaded them into a cooler with some sodas and chips and drove 45 minutes to a place called Pemaquid Point.

Pemaquid is a rocky peninsula that juts out into the Atlantic like a thumb. One of Maine's famed lighthouses is there and in front of it, nothing but cliffs and the blue ocean as far as the eye can see.

We sat on the rocks peeling our sandwiches out of white paper. Seagulls flew around us in clouds, like noisy mosquitoes. It was a little cool on the ocean that time of year, so there weren't many people out. Up on the grass near the lighthouse, a few of them stood snapping photos. Some had paid \$2.50 each for a tour of the lighthouse. The wind carried their voices down so that we could hear them murmuring as they climbed the narrow spiral to the top. Tourists. In a month, they'd be everywhere.

On a large rock close to the water, an older woman with gray hair blowing from beneath a purple kerchief sat with a framed photograph in her hands. She didn't move much, but when the wind shifted just right, we could hear her weeping softly.

We ate our sandwiches. I snuck glances at Julie whenever I could. She was wearing blue jeans and a bright yellow

windbreaker. Her hair was up at the back of her head. The sun was on her face and to me, it looked like she was glowing.

Love on the rocks. That's what this was.

"So, you think you're going to do it? The tournament, I mean?"

"Yeah," I said. "I told Bobby Varto I would. And my uncle. It would be kind of classless to change my mind, I guess."

"But do you really want to? Or are you just doing it for them?"

I thought about it. I watched a seagull as it circled, no doubt eyeing the incredibly soft bread Luiggi's uses to make its sandwiches.

"If it was up to me, I wouldn't do it. I'd rather just forget about all of it and let everybody else forget, too."

Julie nodded. I didn't think it was the kind of nod that implies "I agree," but something more non-committal. "I understand," perhaps.

"Does it matter to you?" I asked her.

"Does what matter to me?"

"The tournament. Whether or not I compete. Does it make any difference to you one way or another?"

I thought she might laugh and joke her way out of it. It was loaded, that question. I might as well have asked: *do you like me enough to care?*

But she thought about it. I could see her thinking.

"I don't want you to get sucked into that world," she said. "Do you know what I mean? I don't want you to become one of them."

"Are you kidding? I would never –"

"Never be like that," she cut in. "I know. And you're probably right. But I'll bet you that last half sandwich that all those mouth-breathers – Randy Nichols and his ilk – weren't like that when they started, either. They were probably just

little boys who wanted to learn how to defend themselves, or maybe to just make their daddies happy. Then they got better and better and, what do you know? It's actually fun to go around flexing your muscles and knocking the books out of other kids' hands. I'll bet they just got sucked down by – Oh, I don't know. Macho guy gravity."

"Yeah," I said. "I see your point. But Julie, I don't even like it. I take no pleasure in knocking somebody down or throwing a fist at their face. No pleasure at all."

She thought about that, too. She caught a greasy sheet of sandwich paper before it could blow away. She balled it up and put it back in the cooler.

"I'm glad," she said. "I don't want you to like it. I don't like it, either. But do you ever think about what would have happened if you didn't have this... knack?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," she said. "That day outside the theater in Privilege. What would have happened to us – to me – if you hadn't been able to fend those bastards off? I mean, how bad could it have gotten?"

The thought made me feel sick. I could feel the blood draining from my face. The sandwich I had eaten, affectionately called The Fergy, suddenly felt like it was sloshing around in a stomach full of Pepsi.

"Hey," I said. I wanted to reach out and lift her chin with my fingers. Something romantic like that. Instead, I just looked down at my hands. "I would have fought them even if I didn't know how, you know. Even if there were ten of them instead of three. I would have taken them on and I would have done my best."

I tried to swallow and it seemed to take forever, like I was swallowing a golf ball. When I looked up, Julie was staring at me, the softest of smiles on her face.

*Guys Named Jack*

“I know,” she said. “I know you would have.”

She leaned in until our noses were touching. She shook her head back and forth so that the tips of them rubbed together. I thought it might be the greatest thing I’d ever experienced. Then she leaned in a little more and our lips touched. When they did, she drew me in and kissed me for a long time. She closed her eyes. I kept mine open, having forgotten how to operate the lids.

I felt her hand on the back of my neck as the kiss went on. I reached for her and my own hands found her face. We never had *the talk* that day, nor any day after. It was an important lesson, I thought. When it happens for real, there’s no real need for words.

Words would have just gotten in the way.

\*\*\*

I could bore you with a blow-by-blow account of the tournament, but it wasn’t terribly exciting.

The tournament was held in the Myrtle Armory, not far from the high school. The place was packed an hour before the fighting got underway.

In the first round, I faced off with a boy from Lewiston who was about my size but whose face was significantly harder. He looked like a boy who was always angry – who might fight rats for scraps of food just to be fighting something. He had a little mustache and a tiny tattoo in the shape of a teardrop under his left eye.

I beat him easily with a series of flips and a leg sweep.

I won the next round, as well, and the round after that.

Bobby Varto had spent the previous afternoon with me, going over rules and techniques. There was a lot of “if anyone asks this, say this” type of instruction. I got the feeling he had pulled some strings and bent some truths to get me into the

tournament. I was listed as one of his students. The problem was, beyond the pre-tourney pep talk, he really hadn't taught me a thing.

"Stick with the kind of moves you pulled on Randy Nichols," he told me. "These aren't guys out to grab your girlfriend. You don't need to bust any noses or break any limbs. Capiche?"

I hoped it was *capiche*. The fact was, I had no idea how I would respond once things got underway. I still had fears (and hopes) that the voice might just pack up and leave town – town being my head in this scenario – once I was in the dojo.

It didn't happen that way, though. The voice was there all along, whispering *ga* at the start and again at the end of each fight. In between there was *leopard* and *horse* and *spider*. And all along, I kept hearing Bobby saying "*These aren't guys who are out to grab your girlfriend. Capiche?*"

They weren't out to grab my girlfriend but they weren't there to shake my hand, either. The boys I fought got increasingly larger. And the larger they got, the louder they screamed and the harder they came. These were fighters who wanted to eliminate me, from the tournament if not from existence altogether.

So I flipped them. And kicked them and punched them when it was called for.

I beat everybody. And at the end of each fight, I glanced up into the audience and searched for Julie. When I found her, invariably she was standing by herself with her hands up under her chin. She looked like someone who is watching two cars that are about to violently collide.

Julie didn't like this stuff. And I loved her for it.

\*\*\*

*Guys Named Jack*

At the end of the day, everybody wanted to talk to me. They pumped my hand until my shoulder hurt. They said things like: “Boy, you’ve got some skills” and “Where has Mr. Varto been hiding *you*, kid?”

Two of these men handed me business cards while they were shaking my hand. Each was from a martial arts school, one in Privilege, the other way the hell down in Portland. I gave the cards to Bobby. He grinned as he took them.

I had bruises on my outer arms from blocking and my shins were sore. The muscles in my lower back ached, but I was otherwise no more or less abused than those weekends when I played street hockey in front of Rusty Vigue’s house over on Hazelwood.

Sunday was more of the same. I won the first two fights and then got to sit out a round, waiting to see who my next opponent would be. As it turned out, it was a gorilla of a kid from Crabtree named Hank Cogswell.

He was a full foot taller than me and clad in a bright red robe with a black belt. He had curly hair and his front teeth were missing. He had scars beneath each eye and his nose was horrifically bent. He grinned constantly and licked his lips when he looked at you. To me, Hank Cogswell looked like a predatory bird, albeit a very large one.

Ten minutes before our fight, I passed him at the edge of the dojo. He wasn’t looking at me, but he was grinning. And when we passed one another, he stepped to the side just enough to bump my shoulder with his arm.

“You’re dead, bitch,” he said as I stumbled back.

He kept on walking, and the next time I saw him, we were face-to-face and bowing at each other, preparing to do our business.

That fight was an ugly one. Cogswell came at me with a variety of punches and kicks, each of which I blocked with

arms and legs that seemed to fly away from me without anything that resembled forethought. Each time I thwarted his attacks, the crowd went “awwww,” as though they were disappointed rather than impressed. They wanted to see the gorilla make minced meat out of the little monkey in the cage.

The more his blows failed to land, the more flustered Cogswell became. In the end, he came at me with a straight-arm punch that was meant to separate my head from my body. I knocked his hand away with a flick of my wrist. I stepped to the side and planted a knee in his belly. I heard him go “Ungh!” But above that, the guardian voice inside my head was louder. It said: *leopard*. The voice came with authority, still a whisper but also a command. I had not heard it spoken in such a way since Squash-Nose and his merry band came to ruin my date.

Knee still sunken in Cogswell’s midsection, I drew my left arm across my body and rammed the elbow into the side of his head. There was a dull crack, the sound a pumpkin makes if you drop it from a considerable height. Cogswell went down. At the same time, the referee’s arm went up and he was yelling something. Penalty. Points deducted and so on and so forth.

It was okay with me – the fight was over and I hadn’t figured out how the point system worked to begin with.

By the end of the tournament, everybody knew who I was. There was none of my back-story listed in the tournament guide so everyone I was introduced to asked the same questions. Where had I come from? How long had I been training? They wanted to hear my personal fighting philosophy and they wondered how far I thought I could go.

Little kids in robes wanted my autograph. They gaped and held out pieces of tournament literature, their T-shirts or just scraps of paper they had scrounged up at the last minute.

I was a star and I hated it.

Uncle Bondo had sneaked in a bottle and by the end of the day he was roaring drunk. He kept yelling my name from the stands and pumping his fists in the air. I could see my mother trying to hush him but she was grinning as she did so. She was having a great old time. I suspected she had been tipping Bondo's bottle as much as he had.

My father had not come. I didn't blame him at all.

Before the last fight, Varto wanted to go over some things. We really didn't need to discuss technique, he said, because as far as he could see, mine was flawless. He only wanted to talk about what I would say during the interviews when it was over.

"Be vague," he said, rubbing my shoulders and looking around like a man who suspects that spies are everywhere. "Don't let them draw you into specifics. Capiche?"

"Capiche," I said. "I have to go to the bathroom."

To get to the men's room, I had to leave the gymnasium and walk down a long hallway painted putrid green. The hallway was empty. There were posters on the walls advertising benefit basketball games and weekend bingo. It smelled of industrial cleaner.

I went into the bathroom and dribbled out a few drops. I hadn't really needed to go, but it was good to get away. I was thinking about the police in Privilege and what they might think if they were to learn about my involvement in the tournament. I had told them I hadn't studied karate at all, which was the truth. But if I was to do well in the tournament, would they still believe it? Would it matter to them at all? It was something to ponder. Maybe.

I washed my hands and looked at my reflection in the mirror over the sink. Other than the black robe, I didn't think I looked any different. Same bookish expression, same skittish eyes I'd picked up from my dad.



I walked out of the men's room and there was a man standing in the hallway, just outside the door. He was leaning against a wall as though he'd been waiting for me. He was an older man, distinguished looking. He wore a dark suit and a red beret. Quirky, I thought. I nodded in greeting when I passed and started back down the hall.

"Are you having fun, Jack? Are you enjoying all this?"

I stopped and turned back. Surely this was some old school teacher I had failed to recognize. But when I looked at his face again, there was nothing familiar. He was smiling a little.

"I guess so," I said. "Be glad when it's over, though."

The man nodded. He stepped away from the wall. For an absurd moment, I thought he was going to pull a gun and shoot me, perhaps to alter the course of the tournament so he could collect on a big bet. But that was crazy, right? People didn't put big money on a bunch of kids in robes.

"It wasn't meant to be a fun thing, Jack. You know what they say: with great power comes great responsibility. You'll remember that, won't you?"

I thought it an odd comment; cryptic and vague like a line from a spy movie. I glanced behind me, hoping somebody from the tournament would be coming, perhaps to hurry me back to the dojo. But there was no one. I was alone with the strange dude in the beret.

"I guess I don't know what you mean," I said to him.

Another nod. He adjusted his beret. When he was done, it looked the same as it had before.

"Course you don't. But you will, Jack. As long as you don't get carried away with this kind of tawdry exhibition, you'll know plenty. May I make a suggestion?"

The urge to just walk away was huge, but I didn't feel my legs taking me anywhere.

"It's a free country," I said.

*Guys Named Jack*

At that, the man winced. I thought it was an odd reaction to a light remark.

“For now,” he said. “Yes. And my suggestion is this: don’t get carried away with the tournament. Have some fun, sure. Maybe even win yourself a big trophy. But don’t go too far, Jack. Walk away sooner than later. If you get caught up in the roar of all this, these people will own you, do you understand? The excitement might carry you off and you’ll miss other opportunities. Far more important opportunities.”

So cryptic. And more than a little presumptuous.

“What do you know about any of this?” I asked him. “Who are you?”

He started to answer – an answer of riddles, no doubt. Then his eyes cut to the space over my shoulder and he smiled again in that unsettling way.

“Perhaps another time,” he said. “Your handler has come for you. Just remember, Jack. Great responsibility.”

He adjusted his beret once more and walked away, headed for a pair of doors with an exit sign above them. I meant to shout after him – Who are you? What do you know? – but before I could utter a word, there were hands on my shoulders and they belonged to a harried Bobby Varto.

“Let’s go, buddy,” he said, leading me away. “The tournament people don’t like it so much when the star shows up late.”

We started back to the dojo; to the screaming fight fans and all those flying fists and feet. I heard the doors at the end of the hall slam closed and when I snuck a peek behind me, the man in the beret was gone.

\*\*\*

I won the tournament with little drama, not a single plot twist to be found. There was no evil sensei ordering his student

to take me out with an illegal blow. No Rocky-style comeback or anything like it.

My final opponent was a big block of a guy named Van Blaisdell. From what I could tell, he was an excellent fighter. But I beat him. The voice was there with me the whole time, guiding me with such spooky efficiency it felt like a cheat. I felt like a Vegas swindler, getting tips through an earpiece from an observer in another room.

There was nothing that felt like victory when the tournament came to a close. Not for me, at any rate.

When the hoopla ended – and there was a lot of it – Bobby Varto took us out to dinner at a Bugaboo Steak House. Julie was there. So were my friends Kevin and Rusty. Bondo and my mother came along, each of them getting drunker by the minute.

My dad met us at the restaurant and said little while he ate skinless chicken. He left before everybody else.

Later, Varto and Bondo took me for a long ride and spent three hours trying to convince me to take things further. There would be a state tournament in three months, Varto told me. The New England competition would follow and after that, the national championship in Los Angeles.

“You’ll go all the way,” he kept saying, driving his Mustang fast along the back roads. “I have no doubt about that.”

Bondo sat in the back seat, sucking down a six-pack and mostly slurring his encouragement. He was proud of me; I knew that. Bondo had been a part of my life as long as I could remember. He had been there to take up the slack when my father found that he just couldn’t bring himself to teach his son the things a boy needs to know. I was grateful to Bondo and in a vague way, I felt I owed him a little.

*Guys Named Jack*

But as he grumbled and cajoled and needled me from the backseat, I couldn't shake the feeling that in this matter, there was something unseemly about his interest. Something greasy. Maybe he was only trying to live vicariously through me – to glob on to the kind of celebrity status he had never attained. It happens to adults, I think, when their own vitality fades away and there's nothing left to do but watch from the bleachers.

But I found that my sense of obligation went only so far. I wasn't willing to give away a chunk of my life – and an important chunk at that – to satisfy his craving for glory. I got the feeling that if I let Uncle Bondo put me on a leash and take me for a walk, I'd never come back. I'd find myself 30 years old and fighting in warehouses around the country for sweaty fistfuls of cash.

Thanks, in other words, but no thanks.

Bobby Varto? I liked him, it's true. But in the long run, I didn't owe *him* anything at all.

"I've got to separate myself from this," I told them. "I don't want this to be my life, you know? There are other things I want to do."

Varto, to his credit, seemed to understand. He was disappointed, sure. But after three hours, he let it go.

"You know where to find me," he said. "If you ever change your mind. Or if you ever need anything. You... Well, you know where to find me."

I was touched by that.

My uncle, on the other hand, just went on whining in the backseat until he passed out.

\*\*\*

I gave up organized fighting after just one weekend of it in large part because I wanted people to forget about me – to

forget about this thing that had grown inside me like some exotic new organ.

But that didn't happen. Winning the tournament had achieved exactly what Bobby Varto had foreseen. It brought attention to my story and for a while it seemed like everybody wanted a piece of it.

The reporters were the worst. They called or knocked on my door at all hours. A couple of them came by the school and accosted me as I walked Julie home. Most of them were nice enough, but a few of them absolutely dripped with the kind of eager self-indulgence that reporters tend to be scorned for.

They tried to be my friends. When that didn't work, they questioned the validity of my abilities, suggesting that I might be a fraud who was ducking out before I could be exposed. They challenged me to prove them wrong by submitting to interviews.

Nasty little people, those reporters. They reminded me of the school bullies, only with pens and notebooks instead of muscles.

I gave an interview to one young woman who wrote for my hometown paper. I was vague about everything. I wouldn't provide details about the incident in Privilege and I probably declined to answer two-thirds of her questions. They ran the story on the front page, anyway, and above the fold.

For every reporter who wanted my story, there were two others who wanted me for different reasons. More than a few universities wanted to study me. A handful of callers wanted me to endorse their products – athletic sneakers and a sports drink are the two that come to mind – but only if I'd agree to continue fighting in the tournaments.

I was approached by hostile fathers who wanted me to train their kids and I got calls from the leaders of two hate groups who wanted me to join their cause.

*Guys Named Jack*

Gift? I don't think so.

But the buzz did start to fade and if anyone was happier about it than me, it was my dad. His nerves were rattled by the clamor that followed my win in the tournament. He was still convinced there was a tumor – probably the size of an egg by now – growing in my brain.

And when the noise started to subside, I started hearing about other kids with experiences similar to my own. They were just stories that appeared in my news feed reader at first. Then there were email forwards from friends and from a few people I didn't know. The first two or three stories were strange. They lifted my eyebrows a little bit, but that was all.

The stories kept coming. Julie started keeping a file on her laptop, organizing each new story by date and location. She scoured newspaper websites all over the country looking for more. She found the connection – the really obvious one – before anybody else.

Two or three guys named Jack, that's a coincidence. Three or four, that's more startling but still a fluke.

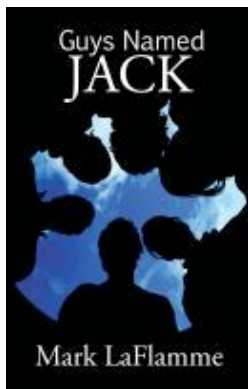
"But six guys? Six guys named Jack?" Julie said, roughly two weeks before I packed up my stuff and flew across the country. "Honey, that's not a coincidence. That's a statistical improbability. And that means that none of this is arbitrary. Something or someone is behind it all and I think you owe it to yourself to find out who or what."

The fact was, I didn't want to go anywhere. I wanted to stay where Julie was. I wanted her to keep resting her head on my shoulder so I could smell her hair. I wanted to keep taking her to see corny movies or to just sprawl with her on the grass somewhere.

Leave? Why would I want to do that?

*Mark LaFlamme*

It was the story of Jack Carnegie that finally convinced me, I think. Jack Carnegie probably couldn't knock out three punks from Privilege, but man, he could do some cool stuff.



*Jack Gordon discovers he is skilled in the martial arts...just when he needs it most. Jack Carnegie has developed a head for numbers. Jack Van Slyke speaks a half dozen languages. Jack Deacon builds things, from self-propelled drones to goggles that can see through walls. All over the country, these teens awake with special skills that appeared out of nowhere. They're confused. Astounded. Maybe even dangerous. And, they're all named Jack.*

## **Guys Named Jack**

**Order the complete book from**

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

**<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6858.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**