

An excerpt from:

JACK AND JILL

by

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“No nursery rhyme exists on the subject of murder.”

—Derek Hamilton

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PROLOGUE
JACK ELGIN

The tip of Jack Elgin's index finger shopped the stack of photos, his fingernail catching the edge of each one and sliding it aside. The long, curving beach above Puerta Vallarta came into view, with his wife, Jill, boyish still in a two-piece bathing suit with a tiny vertical stripe. Was it eight years ago? He flipped it over. The back showed no date. Smiling over her shoulder at the camera, Jill ran toward the surf, her stride long and eager. He had frozen her perfectly in motion; neither of her feet touched the hot sand.

Next, the two of them appeared at dinner, the shot taken by someone else—was it the waiter?—possibly on the same day. Jack wore a silk Tommy Bahama shirt with a palm tree print. Jill relaxed in a raspberry-colored sundress with spaghetti straps. A trace of sunburn lit her shoulders and the bridge of her nose. It was a better time.

The next photo was a possibility. Jack could use this one, with Jill emerging from her small white Mercedes, her hand on the door, looking up at him not quite surprised, but with a typical expression. That's what the killer would want, Jack thought. The picture he was searching for would have to be recent, and this one would fit; she had shortened her hairstyle at the beginning of the previous summer. The expression on her face was so typical; it was one he'd seen a thousand times. With this picture in his hand, an unseen person watching for Jill could pick her out of a crowd and follow her, an important point, since Jack didn't want the murder to happen anywhere near the house. He set the picture to one side.

Yet, when he studied the next one, a shiver of sadness went through him: Jill's fortieth birthday, two years ago. Here she raised her hand to show the ring he'd given her, but the detail didn't come through clearly in the photo. Only the smile on her face did; she was happy then.

Jack shook his head, lifted another stack from the box, and flipped through it. Passing over the photos of himself, he paused at one showing Jill's parents, turning it over to see the date. It had been taken two months before they died, both in their mid-sixties, victims of a tour bus rollover on a mountainside in Greece. Everything had gone to Jill, the seven-figure brokerage account, the warm-weather condo in Chicago, the winter

condo in Boca Raton. She had no siblings to divide it with, and no heir but Jack, her loving husband of thirteen years.

How quickly they had grown accustomed to the money, buying this house in México within months, even before the first one had sold. They didn't need to worry about things like that now; they didn't need to worry about anything. Well, Jack was a *little* worried; perhaps nervous was a better word. Who wouldn't be, given what was coming? Selecting the photo of Jill exiting her car, he slid it into a five-by-seven-inch manila envelope. Later in the day he'd pass it to Jesús Rocha, the man he'd hired to kill her.

Two mornings later, Jack kissed Jill goodbye with a sense of finality as the airport shuttle stopped before their house. The softness of her lips on his remained with him with an almost unfamiliar feeling. At the doorway, the driver lifted his suitcase into the back of the van, and Jack looked at Jill with a genuine sensation of regret, knowing he'd never see her again. He found the thought both devastating and exciting; he would be at once heartbroken and free to pursue his other interests. He knew it was unfair, but it was in motion now, and it could not be undone. Jack didn't want to undo it; it had taken too much nerve to launch it. Was he only imagining that Jill was trying to read his face, staring into his eyes? Rarely did she look at him that closely.

He was surprised at how much he still felt for her, so close to the end. He was also surprised that he could bear to look at her, knowing what was coming. Now that she was about to exit his life, and her own, he found it was easy to think of her fondly again. He had already begun to dwell on the good times, as he was sure he would once she was gone. It really had been a great run, and Jack had already forgiven Jill for her shortcomings: her impatience, her sudden selfishness, her fits of temper. He was almost relieved at his own generosity of spirit; it made him think he'd be able to live with himself quite well afterward.

Jack Elgin was, after all, basically a good person, and arranging Jill's death was no more than a single lapse in an otherwise decent life.

Couldn't anyone have a lapse?

Standing in the doorway, Jill gazed at him with an almost knowing look, as if she sensed their separation would be permanent. This was the way he wanted to remember her, like a final photograph. The pressure of her hand on his was firm, but quick, and, to his relief, his own hand was not shaking. He gave nothing away. This was the kind of coolness he'd need later. She said no more as the door closed. It was working, it was all

happening around him. For more than three months he'd been planning this, and now it was in motion.

Jack was nearly blind to his surroundings as he settled into the back of the van. Someone slid over on the seat to make room, but other than a nod, he did not acknowledge the man. He could only think; that was the last time, the last time for everything. He would never touch Jill again, they would never speak, even to say goodnight. He forcibly directed his mind away from picturing her face in death. When he returned from Chicago in three days, it would be over. He had not wanted any detail from Rocha, only insisting that it happen on Monday afternoon, but not in the house—he had to live there afterward. He found he couldn't look out the window as the van pulled away, even though Jill had gone inside. Instead, he sat behind the darkened glass staring ahead at the soft gray leather of the back of the passenger seat in front of him. His feet moved on the carpet below as if to define the limits of this new space. Jack felt like he'd been locked and bolted into a world apart from his old world, where Jill was about to die. He had set it in motion, but was no longer part of it. He was already moving on. It's wonderful, he thought, how the mind works, at its flexibility in times of change.

The Chicago trip was an event that happened every year at this time. When Jill's parents' money came, she and Jack had divided responsibilities. Tracking performance, Jack dealt with the money manager. Jill controlled the expenditures. Lately she'd been doing this with a little too much enthusiasm. She had said this was an equitable division of the tasks, since Jack had a business background, and hers was in design. Once a year he went up to the money manager's office that had a long view of Lake Michigan, and they drank better coffee than he could get in San Miguel as they looked at charts and printouts, talking strategy. Jack had been doing this for three years and at each visit he understood more of it. This meeting would come on Monday, tomorrow, the second of the three-day absence. Jack would be sitting at the money manager's desk when Jill died. What better alibi could he have? His shock at her abrupt and inexplicable disappearance would be boundless.

During the meeting on Monday, he couldn't concentrate on the money manager's presentation, and went away recalling virtually nothing about it, except that in the present trend of the stock market, they had moved temporarily into cash two weeks earlier, something that happened three or four times a year. The manager didn't believe in riding the market down, even short-term, and he relied on a specific set of patterns to determine whether and when to be fully invested. Fortunately, as always, he also gave Jack a written analysis.

Afterward Jack sat in a bar on Michigan Avenue and had two martinis, his eyes blurred even before he touched the first one. He had to concentrate in order not to snap the glass's stem in his fingers. The conversation around him was an incoherent mumble, but Jack had only a single thought. Jill was gone now; she was dead. A cold tranquility stole over him. He had not been part of it, but he genuinely did hope it had happened quickly. It was not like he was a monster. He sat with both hands flat on the marble bar top, feeling the coolness of the stone invade his palms. What would it be like coming home to that empty, echoing house?

This was real grief, Jack told himself. You take it one step at a time. Maybe, after a decent interval, he could join some support group for the bereaved, if there was one in town.

Approaching San Miguel the following afternoon, Jack found himself on the road from the airport in the same van with the same driver. The man nodded to him, but Jack, dreading the return home, didn't respond. He hardly remembered anything about Chicago. His teeth were clenched as they came in on la Cieneguita road and crossed the railroad yard.

He was beginning the second act of this family tragedy, and he was about to make his entrance. Jack was deeply aware that this was where he could blow it; his first moves were critical. Should he wait four or five hours before raising an alarm? Then make a few calls to friends, not too concerned at first, but surprised at her absence, because Jill knew he'd be coming back today. Then, around midnight or 1 A.M., call the police. Inquire about any car accidents involving an American woman. Let the conversation show he was starting to worry. Make sure to get the name of the officer he talked to, and then leave both his cell number and his landline. An hour later, call them back. Apply a little more pressure with urgency coming into his voice, but staying polite. He didn't think they were that competent anyway. He'd observed early on that most crimes went unsolved here. This would be easier than trying to do it back in the States.

On Privada de Grillo, Jack's feet felt as inert as two blocks of wood when they landed flat on the stone pavement before his house. He could hardly make them advance toward the door. The driver set his suitcase next to him, waiting for a tip, but Jack didn't notice. The man disappeared from his life before he got back in the van. As he let himself into the house, an empty feeling expanded in Jack's stomach, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. The vacant house rebuked him, a symbol of what had happened, of what he had set in motion. He nearly staggered as he came through the door. It was going to be a nightmare to live there for a while. Should he move into a hotel? That wouldn't look right if he was pretending to await her return.

For a moment he even thought he could smell Jill's death, and it burned his lungs. The details were still, and would always be, unknown to him—thank god he had displayed the foresight to set it up that way—but her absence was a brutal fact, and it would never change.

Standing in the entry, he noticed that the side door to the garage was standing open, showing the rear quarter of her car. It was jolting, and he dropped his suitcase, but there was no reason her car shouldn't be next to his van. In town they usually walked anyway. Chucho Rocha must have picked her up on foot, far from the house, subdued her, and taken her into the country to kill her. Jack had provided him with a small revolver that he'd bought for too much money on the street in México City. It was an anonymous gun.

Jack moved to close the door; he couldn't stand to look at her car. He'd have it towed away and sold later; he couldn't bear to drive it himself. But as he reached the doorway and put his hand on the knob to pull it shut, the car door beyond opened and Jill got out, her hand on the rim just as in the photograph he'd given the killer, the same unsurprised look on her face.

“Hi, darling!” she said. “What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost. How was your trip?” She moved into his horrified embrace and pressed her cool cheek against his. Her skin felt dry and powdery, like ashes gone cold.

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