

Jack Had Friends

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**‘Walking with a friend in the dark is better than
walking alone in the light.’**

Helen Keller, American
author, disability rights advocate and activist.

Chapter One

As Max makes his way through the fields, he feels a sense of calm from the darkness. The light from the moon illuminates dry grass, yet still green, teased from a summer that can't make up its mind. He checks his watch and then picks up his pace, keeping a drumbeat to a time that cannot change. He's certainly no stranger to stalking his way towards a certain death, but he admits there's a slight shortness in his breath. He's still fit for his age, he thinks, but it's a good reminder of the inevitable end that chases us all.

The truth is that there is an excitement for this particular kill that fuels his every heartbeat, as he looks to the house on the hill. He questions if he needed to park so far away, but caution, he reminds himself, is always the best option when the police could be involved.

Not that tonight will be classed as a crime, he thinks, as he easily scales the fence, his feet landing on a soft, well-fed lawn. He looks around and sees flowerbeds in every corner of the garden, wrapping their way around trees older than this small settlement. He imagines she has tended this garden all her life, sitting in her kitchen, staring out of that big window and admiring her endless, pointless work.

Max walks across the garden, thinking that the sun has finally gone down on this pathetic life. He doesn't even bother to stalk his way through the shadows, because no dog will bark, no lights will come on and no cameras will capture his approach.

Sweet little Betty. She let him in so willingly earlier in the day. She was cautious at first when Max told her he was with a security company, looking to install some perimeter lights. She calmed down when Max showed her some brochures from an actual security company, and was entirely at ease when he said a 'Jack Williams' had put this booking through.

Her dear grandson, always looking out for her. *He's away right now*, she had said. *Perhaps you'd be better off coming back when he's here*, she cautioned, the kettle already building to a boil, two tea bags in the big pot and cakes appearing from nowhere as she chatted away about her precious Jack.

Max nodded and laughed as he walked around unopposed, clipboard in hand as he noted the irrelevant, already knowing nothing would stop him getting in. No sensors, no modern locks, no sense of the end that now stalks her.

And he was right. He saw her bedroom light go out at ten o'clock; predictable for her age, convenient for him. He puts a key in the lock, copied earlier as she had focused on pouring the water into the teapot. He had managed to imprint the key in the mould casing and still get across the kitchen to steady those old hands, smelling sweet talc and lavender as she thanked him for his kind assistance. *Jack normally does this bit, so thankful to have him around, although he travels a lot, trying to find himself. What with all that tragedy for such a young man.*

A tragic youth? Max had nodded at the abstract thought. Betty thought she had told Max more of this sad tale than she had, conversations moulding and warping with age, but don't worry, he knew all about the misfortunes that befell this family.

Max smiles as the key turns perfectly. He takes off his shoes and flicks on a torch to look around the kitchen, firstly checking that the real key is hanging up. *Never leave it in the door*, he had said to Betty, *for safety of course*. He said it twice, making sure it sank in between all the tales of her perfect little grandson. Max could, of course, have forced his way in if needed. The method of entry is always at his discretion, murder his only purpose to be obeyed.

But how many robberies-gone-wrong can one family endure? As he reaches the staircase, he wonders about that. He wonders how often Jack thinks about that fateful night, about the burglary that ended in such awful death. Does he still believe it was a simple robbery from a man armed with a pistol and silencer, who took nothing from him but his family?

Most of all, Max wonders how that young man described him to the police, because Jack is the only victim to ever be able to identify him. A man who has lived in the shadows all his life, killing at will, never a description known and never two murders linked together. A description of someone who doesn't exist isn't particularly helpful to the authorities, but Max still acknowledges the risk he took, which will all be worth it when he gets what he really deserves.

The stairs creak but he doesn't think she'll hear a thing. Although he'd enjoy it a lot more if a light came on and she shouted, 'Who's there?' to the darkest shadows of her home, flooding her mind with fear. She'd shout out, 'Jack, is that you?' Perhaps she'd even venture to the top of the stairs, seeing the nice salesman from earlier, her realities melting into one steady nightmare as Max stalks his way towards her with such devious intent. He hopes she'd run, screaming to the night, never getting far.

But sadly, no lights welcome him to the top of the stairs, and so he moves towards the only closed door and opens it just a little, hearing the inevitable groan of old iron. He takes a canister from his pocket and sprays the hinges, thinking she's lacked the focus of a man about the house for some time. The door quietly swings open; Betty's snoring is the only noise now, as she lies on her back, covered in floral bedding. Max nods to the wallpaper, full of lavender and violet, the lamps sitting on doilies, the curtains as pink as her nightgown.

He looks around the room, breathing in the musty smell of decay, thinking tonight will be a mercy for everyone, triggering a much-needed chain reaction. The funeral will be attended by few, but followed by Jack leaving this hiding place, finally a target in the open. This home will simply become a house to be sold, letting a younger family move in, seeing every memory of Betty stripped away with each wall that's cleansed of this old life.

Max would love to sit on the edge of her bed, waiting for her body to stir, her mind knowing all is not well as it pulls her from a deep sleep. If she didn't die of a heart attack then he would make it quick, knowing those few seconds of horror would be enough for them both.

She frustratingly snores, oblivious to her forthcoming end.

Max sighs, a little louder than he normally would, still seeing no awakening as he pulls out a cloth and vial. He stands over her now, his breathing in sync with hers. When she exhales, so does he, and when she's about to inhale, her mouth wide open, Max pours the contents of the small vial down her throat.

She gags, enough to now wake her up, as Max places the cloth over her mouth before any of the clear liquid escapes. He places a hand over her eyes, offering a mercy so few receive in these moments. He figures that somehow, he owes this lady a small kindness, since her death will grant him what he's waited for so long to receive.

She inevitably gags and chokes, arms flapping and grabbing at her unseen tormentor. Max knows the liquid will be travelling to the depths of her body, racing through her veins as it heads towards its intended target. He counts a few more seconds and then her chest heaves upwards, the poison doing its job as her heart gives way.

Max removes the cloth and his hand, allowing both victim and killer's eyes to lock as her body sucks in air that can no longer offer her life. She instantly raises a hand towards him, begging for help. He smiles down at her, wondering what thoughts rush through her mind, and why she would ask the man who has come to end her days for anything except a peaceful passing.

She holds her hands to her chest now, as Max knows the end is close. A perfect heart attack, he thinks. There will be no sign of any struggle, other than what her body did to itself. The liquid is untraceable, meaning natural causes will be found as the only conclusion to the end of this long and happy life. Liquid forms around her mouth as she takes her last breath, her chest lifting for its final act, and then her body slumps into the bed. He sees some drool drip to her chin, but he doesn't wipe it away, leaving her arms draped over her chest, her body frozen in the exact moment it gave up.

He waits for a few more seconds, seeing this natural death presented on a plate. He then wraps up the vial in the cloth and carefully steps backwards, checking for any marks or indents on the pastel-pink carpet. As he reaches a large chest of drawers, he stops and opens the top drawer. He sees socks and tights, such functional objects, but that's when the smell hits him. The scent of roses is as fresh as the petals spread about the drawer; a trick as old as time which he can only nod to. His own grandmother used to do the same, but he doesn't think of her now. He simply smiles, knowing this is the right place to leave this seed of his future, as he places a small black box into the drawer. He buries it a little, but still leaves the engraved title, 'For Jack,' visible for anyone to see.

He closes the drawer and then he continues to walk backwards, scanning every part of the room until he reaches the door. He takes one final look at Betty and smiles, realising he planned to say, 'Thank you,' before her last breath. She'd wouldn't know why and wouldn't get the chance to ask, which would fuel that sick smile of his. 'You're slipping, Max,' he mutters to only himself, as he closes the door and then retraces every step through the house.

He reaches the back door, his shoes going back on in the garden. He then turns the key in the lock, thinking Jack will find yet another member of his family who has left his world without the mercy of any

final words, without even a goodbye that he must long for. Max thinks the lad will be getting used to the sight of death, knowing there will be no remaining relative to comfort him this time.

The pronouncement of Betty's natural death will probably be a relief to Jack. As far as he's concerned, she will be the first of his clan to not die in pain, the first to not gasp their final, suffering breath. And then there is simply the matter of the will reading and a clearing-out of this place, allowing the past to make its way for the present, letting Max claim what is his.

When that time comes, there will be no more killing on demand, Max thinks, as he makes his way through the garden. He's across the field and back in his car by eleven o'clock, thinking that perhaps he'll take in a strip club to celebrate another perfect mission. It wasn't made complex by the number of targets or personal security, but by the simple passage of time. Max smiles, thinking this intricate past that has haunted Jack for so long is about to show its true colours, and he's about to get a purpose he never expected.

Chapter Two

She shuffles closer and he immediately moves away.

He watches her every move, quietly sighing with every inch of his territory that she claims, pushing herself along the leather bench. This seated dance could continue all night, except that Jack's next retreat will be his last. He's out of room, nearing an inevitable end, which is not the edge he had planned for tonight.

Jack looks around, seeing only a scattering of other couples around the dimly lit bar. He hears piano music playing but there is no such instrument to be seen, and the lights flicker like real candles, but they're all plugged in. He sees other seated whisperers, sharing midnight escapes of their own, but Jack wants no such thing. He eventually turns to the woman next to him, thinking he could talk of appropriate distance, but this isn't the place, and her constant smiles tells him she has other plans.

She makes her final move, sliding close enough to touch him. Her thick coat that had covered every inch of her body has been somehow pulled upwards, exposing flesh that teases against his trousers. She places a hand on the table, her body arched towards him. 'So, what do you like?'

Jack shakes his head because what he doesn't like is this question. It's too broad and has no context. Too many times, he has honestly answered this question, laid himself bare, and been so very disappointed. He thinks he'll answer something stupid, such as he likes fishing, but then she will smile and ask if that's in the bedroom.

She opens her coat further, exposing every inch of her intentions. It's enough to make Jack stand up but she pulls him back down. 'You're not going anywhere,' she says, as she runs a hand down his chest and then grabs his crotch. Jack gasps but he already knows it will have no impact on a night he didn't ask for. She quickly shakes her head, still smiling as her wide eyes stare into his, like a snake trying to seduce a seashell. 'It feels to me like you need a stiffy to help your stiffy,' she says, clicking her fingers towards the barman.

Jack shuffles in his seat, still unable to retreat. 'Look, you're very attractive, but this isn't for me.'

She stares back at him, still smiling, quietly telling him she knows more about tonight than he ever will. She knows why they are sitting together in a darkened hotel bar somewhere in London, when all Jack can do is wonder why someone so attractive would ever talk to him. Her dark eyes and bronzed flesh contrast with everything about Jack, who has always been whiter than white, in every aspect of his short existence. She might have plans for the night, but what she doesn't know is that Jack has plans of his own. He takes another look at her, knowing she won't want to go where he's going.

'Your friend said you'd be nervous.'

'Carter,' Jack mutters, as he instinctively looks around the bar, surveying every dark corner, already knowing that his so-called friend is nowhere to be seen.

A waiter now stands over them, as she casually flicks through the cocktail menu, having seen it all before. She eventually settles her finger on the house specials. 'We'll have two of those.'

'We'll just get the bill,' Jack says.

'Looks like you're warming up,' she says, slamming the menu closed and handing it back to the waiter. 'I like your thinking.'

Jack watches the man walk away, as he takes one final look around the bar, his gaze settling on the one obstacle to his escape plan. 'What's your name?'

'My name is Destiny,' she says.

Jack nods but he doubts the truth of this. He imagines it's something a little blander, like Courtney or Caroline. He imagines her bland parents perched on their three-seater, reclining sofa, in their four-bed semi-detached home in Surrey. He imagines their beige living room filled with oak furniture and paintings of hills they have never seen. He thinks of the moment this young woman stood over them, screaming that she's happy with her lifestyle choices, on the day they found out that their daughter had rebelled against everything they built in their bland world.

If Jack said any of this out loud, he would assure Destiny and her bland parents that he isn't judging them. He has had existence on his mind for some time, and when you think about it for long enough, you realise what an all-encompassing concept it is. He looks to the young woman who has entered his world at a most crucial moment, knowing he already has a date with destiny tonight, and it isn't something Carter could ever have envisioned for Jack.

Her hand touches his leg again. 'Your mate said you'd go quiet, then blush, then make your excuses, so don't worry about anything. I'll do all the driving.'

Jack absently nods, not having the energy to tell her he can't drive anyway, as his focus drifts between the bar and the exit from this place.

She flicks her hair back, staring at him. 'I haven't been with someone so young in a few years. You are legal, aren't you?'

'I'm twenty-six,' he says.

'You look so much younger,' she says, and runs a finger down his leg. 'You won't look so innocent once tonight is over. It's a perfect gift from your friend.'

The bill lands on the table in front of Jack and he looks down at it, this small black folder that demands its dues. He pushes it towards the centre of the table and then pulls his hand away.

She looks down at the leather money wallet and then back up to Jack. 'What do you expect me to do with that?'

Jack follows her gaze, looking down at the half a glass of cola in front of him, and then back to her. 'You freely ordered and drank three glasses of champagne in a five-star hotel.' He turns his glass, flat as the night. 'I had that.'

She pushes the wallet back towards him. 'Just pay the fucking bill. Your mate didn't tip me enough for this shit.'

Jack stares at her as she looks at him. She's shaking, but Jack thinks that might be due to her poor clothing choices for a chilly February in London. She inhales deeply, as her face morphs from pissed to pretty in the same breath. 'Your meter is still running, so how about you just deal with this ugly, irrelevant task and then we can get down to the real business.' She leans forward, kissing Jack's ear, which makes him gasp at this new sensation. Destiny senses Jack's reaction too, knowing it's the first time he has ever been offered such closeness, as he fights all his instincts not to pull away. 'You're using up valuable time for me to do that again.'

Jack looks to the exit and back to her, leaning from one destiny to the other. He accepts he is running out of time because soon this place will be too quiet to go around unnoticed. The bar will announce last orders, pulling the guests to bed as the care of this place is left to the night guards and their many cameras.

Destiny is still talking, whispering into his ear such vivid tales of how tonight will go. He looks to her, knowing that if she could just see beyond his eyes and into the depths of his mind, then she would see another graphic version of how tonight will really unfold. 'Why don't you go freshen up and I'll sort this out,' Jack says, grabbing the wallet.

'Now that's more like it,' Destiny says, smiling as she makes her way to the washrooms.

Jack waits until she disappears and then makes his move. He passes the waiter, handing him the book stuffed with notes as he makes his way into the lobby. He doesn't look for his friends or turn back, as all his focus rests on the lift doors and his real mission for tonight.

When the lift doors open at the highest floor, a dark corridor greets Jack. He quickly walks forward as every step he takes activates an automatic light, guiding his path to the grand finale of this evening.

His left leg aches, but the doorway ahead offers him the comfort of an end so well-deserved. One moment he is confident he can make this final hurdle, and yet with his next breath he has stopped, just for a second, as he rests his biggest burden. He knows he'll get no thanks for this as the inside of his leg almost vibrates, reminding Jack he forgot to take his tablets again.

'Lefty,' as he calls this particularly demanding part of his body, chastises him for his error with a shooting pain that sears through the joint. He can visualise the pill box on the bedside table, back in his room, precariously close to Suzie and Carter. Jack leans down to squeeze the pain with both hands, wondering why his young body should have to put up with such old man's burdens.

He continues his journey, the 'Emergency Exit' sign welcoming him to the escape he so desperately longs for. He finds a certain amount of irony in the sign that greets him, as he pushes the bar and the door swings open. The cold air bites his skin as the wind rushes around him, celebrating his arrival and pulling him into the open space of this dark night. He seems to move with ease now, the wind propelling him forward, as if invisible hands are guiding him to his real destiny.

He willingly moves the final few steps to the ledge, thinking of his brief existence; an optimistic third of a lifetime for a typical Western man, probably less for one with his ailments. With each step, Jack thinks of a different member of his lost family, wondering if this is the end he's always been owed, delayed by nothing more than pointless time. He thinks now of Nanna Betty, the last of his family to pass. It was peaceful, at least, but she left him with only the loneliness that lingers in every part of his world.

He takes his penultimate step of the evening and looks down. Things seem immediately easier on the edge because there's only two options – step forward or step back. He looks down to the streets far below him and studies the moving lights, all going somewhere. They indicate their intention and then they turn, pushing closer to their destination but often blocked by the obstacle of another person, with a purpose of their own. This scene mesmerises Jack, making him feel lucky that there's no more turning for him; no more decisions, no delay in what comes next. At twenty-five floors up in the air, he knows walking forwards has only one inevitable end.

Jack also knows that stepping back is literally going backwards. Back to the same life, closer to the past he must leave behind. Jack lifts his bad leg into the air as he wonders if his life will flash before him as he falls, and what images will it pluck out as being significant? He knows it will likely be murder and loss but accepts they are one and the same now.

Lefty still hurts, still reminds him of that night, as it hovers over the edge, confident in this decision, ushering Jack to get on with it and put them both out of their misery. *Who names a leg?* Jack asks no one. *And why should a leg cause such misery? None of what happened was ever its fault. It didn't shoot itself.*

'So, are you going to do it, or not?'

Jack turns around to see Destiny standing a few steps away. She pulls her coat closer to her body and looks around, barely interested. 'It's not the nicest place to end things, is it?'

Jack looks around, seeing nothing but concrete, as he accepts her honest assessment.

Destiny nods to what they both see all around them. 'Well, I guess height must be the number one consideration when you're planning on ending it all. Do you think you will scream as you travel downwards, or go quietly until the splat?'

That's a good question, Jack thinks, the kind of detail he would ask if he was the witness. 'I'm not the screaming type.'

'I thought not,' Destiny nods. 'If it was me, I would shriek all the way down. I'd want an audience, you know? People lying in their beds, seeing me go sailing past. Hopefully I'd get to see into some of the rooms, maybe even catch some nighttime action.'

'I think it would be over quicker than you expect.'

'Probably,' Destiny says. 'So, you've given it a lot of thought then?'

Jack doesn't answer because no response could give that question the time it deserves. He thinks of the last roof and the person who stood next to him, determined they act before their despair could be numbed, before a pointless life was rolled out in front of them. Back then it was Jack who called time on such ideas, but now he's with a different woman, with the most apt name, standing behind him.

‘If you do go over the edge, just so you know, I’m going to tell people I tried to talk you down. I don’t want to be an accomplice to this.’

Jack nods. ‘I appreciate that.’

‘So, what’s it to be?’ Destiny asks, wrapping her coat tightly around her body. ‘I can still get the last train home, if you’re quick enough.’

‘Where is home?’ Jack asks.

‘Maidstone.’

Jack nods; not quite Surrey, but close enough. ‘And your name isn’t really ‘Destiny’ is it?’

‘Of course not. It’s Tracey. Doesn’t have the same ring to it for this line of work, does it?’

Jack shakes his head, wondering why so many people have such masks. He knows he wears one too; people think he’s calm and cautious, but really, he’s just too tired to offer them anything else, unwilling to be anything noticeable. He wasn’t always like this; he can even point to the moment he changed. If he thinks more about that night, about all that he lost, it only reminds him why he’s standing here now.

Without any more thought, he steps backwards, relying on Lefty to plant him back on solid ground. Pain shoots through his body as the wind howls around him, angry at his inaction, demanding the resolution it was promised. Jack ignores it, spinning as he walks, turning from one destiny to another. He doesn’t know this woman, but he knows he can’t let her witness his bloody end, no matter how calm she seems to be.

Tracey nods. ‘Good for you,’ she says, as they walk away from the ledge together. ‘Maybe you just need a clearer purpose in life.’

Jack nods as he follows Tracey to a new future he didn’t expect from tonight. ‘I think you might be right,’ he says, knowing such endeavours require a suitable deadline, otherwise the pursuit of purpose could waste an entire lifetime. And so, *one year*, he thinks. If he doesn’t have the answers he needs within one year, then he’ll return to a roof. It doesn’t even have to be this one. They have different views, but all offer the same solution.

‘If you break your aims down by month then they are more manageable, like little stepping stones,’ Tracey says, as she opens the door and ushers Jack through.

Jack smiles. ‘So, Tracey, what’s your other job when you’re not being people’s Destiny?’

Jack looks down at them, wondering why tonight ever happened.

He knows how it happened, through Suzie’s relentless requests for a reunion. She pushed and prodded, phoned and begged, until Jack agreed to come to London. From the moment he arrived, he remembered how much he hated the place. It’s really the people he hates. They push and prod too, just like Suzie, but at least she looks him in the eyes when she does it.

Jack stands over the bed and looks down at her, knowing those eyes can't get to him tonight. He's thankful that her mind is locked in a deep sleep, as he notices an arm that calmly hangs over Carter's body. Did she really make him come to London just to humiliate him? 'We haven't seen you in months,' she had said. 'Not since the Cranbrook catch-up. That was a fun night, you remember?'

Jack has never understood why Suzie feels the need to test his every memory, as if he's going to remember their university days any different to her. *She somehow means well*, he thinks. *But why did a prostitute need to be involved? And why did they think it would be funny?* 'Why?' Jack asks, his voice just above a whisper, as he stares down at Carter.

Of course, Carter doesn't answer, no doubt dreaming about what he did for Jack whilst servicing his own desires. The covers are half off him, his prized pecs rising in rhythm with his steady heart. Jack knows those fluttering eyelids hide a pair of delicate hazelnuts, a perfect match to his bronzed skin. He not only looks peaceful; he looks perfect. Jack watches him, remembering those Cranbrook days so very differently to Suzie. She was never there on those rare nights when Carter would drink enough for them both, and then do something stupid that normally involved him getting at least half-naked, before collapsing on the nearest soft surface.

Jack would often sit back and watch him sleep for a bit, finding peace in Carter's presence. He would then roll him safely over and go about clearing up the mess of the evening. He'd gather the unfinished glasses that represented Carter's endless love for Suzie, the plates of chicken bones that fuelled the machine, as Carter called it, and the empty bottles that brought those nights to an eventual close.

Jack remembers those nights well, the good and the bad. He stares at Carter now, his gaze burning with such intensity that he could set that perfect body on fire, and to this day he still doesn't know whether to kick him or kiss him.

He looks at the bedside clock: three a.m. and time for a change. He would say this trip was a waste of time, but that's something he now has in abundance. They hired him a hooker and he got another year, all thanks to Tracey.

He had walked her to the station, and when she said she was hungry, they went to a late-night diner. They both had all-day breakfasts as Jack listened to her life story, to the choices that got her to the moment she was standing on a roof with some strange bloke. She didn't want Jack to jump, and to thank him for a more-interesting-than-usual night she paid for the food, telling him she was keeping the rest of Carter's cash advance. Jack was fine with that, and appreciative that she was a lady of standards.

And so, on that roof a new pact was formed; one year for them both to find a purpose. They didn't exchange numbers and so they would never know if the other had been successful. There'll be no final chapter to see if Destiny has been retired, allowing Tracey's keen interest in herbology take centre stage. As for Jack, he'll be a little older but probably stood a different roof, still lacking a reason to stay.

Jack found comfort in this anonymity as he waved Tracey goodbye, wishing his oldest friends could offer him something similar. He takes one final look at them now, nodding to the change he needs. He goes to his adjoining room and grabs his bag and his pills from the side table. He opens the bottle and

swallows two of them without any water. He then limps to the door, knowing in ten minutes time Lefty will shut up for a few hours. He doesn't look back as he shuts the door, knowing he's done with false promises and finished with friends.