

Jack the Dreamwalker

by Jonathan Beck

Beep beep beep....

Ahhhh the inglorious sound of the alarm clock, a sound which steals from you the most glorious dreams, dreams which Jack was having up until the party crasher sounded its dirge.

He slowly rolled out of bed, sat up, and took seven steps toward the alarm clock to shut it off. Seven steps, he calculated, was just the right distance to wake himself up. If it were four steps, he would turn off the alarm and crawl back into bed. If it were three steps or two steps, he would be in accurate range to throw a pillow over it. And if it were next to his bed, while stuffing a pillow over his head, he would use his hand as a spy, search for the source of power and unplug it. You might ask why not five steps or six steps?

Not five steps because Jack had a nightmare once about the number five, not six steps because Jack hated the number, but seven steps. Not only is seven the perfect number, Jack thought, but he had a dream once and in it the number seven served as a sign that he would seriously put the whipping on the bad guys. Ever since that silly dream he has worn seven like a cross, faithfully believing that seven will lead him to victory some day. He signs his name with a seven at the end, marks his tee-shirt tags with sevens, wakes up at 7:07 a.m., and even wears his underwear for seven days at a time. Not really. After he tried it once or twice he gave up that idea. But you get the picture, he likes seven. It's not a religion to him, just an overly, overly, huge number preference.

Jack is the sort of character who forgets he is in math class, sitting in church, or eating at a restaurant and loses himself in some imaginary battle, assassins' guild, or alternate reality. The guy you see smiling to himself for no apparent reason is probably Jack. He is the type of guy who starts daydreaming and snaps out of it after staring at a wall for an hour, the type of guy who stares into a mirror pondering life and its mysteries, and the type of guy who prays for an adventure to live besides attending Calculus class. Jack is a daydreamer, an adventure seeker, but a man whose life is becoming more and more boring. He, like many of us, must awaken to the blaring alarm clock beckoning us to a day filled with school or work or some other untimely event but who desires desperately for an adventure to live, a dream to walk.

He dragged his body toward his bathroom and prepared for the day. After eating a seven-minute breakfast, Jack walked out to his car to leave for school. Today is Monday, a day like any other except for one thing. Jack's prayers have been heard.

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Being a college student for Jack has not been the most amusing thing. It's not because the classes are hard, or the professors are boring, or the students are mean, it's simply just not Jack. The classes are easy, the professors are interesting, the students are friendly, and Jack loves to learn. He just does not seem to see the application of most of the things he studies. After all, he said once, "How does math or history or science help you become an assassin, a warrior, or a hero that you dream about all day long?"

To keep himself entertained at school Jack took some of what he calls “real courses” like self-defense for dummies, archery, shooting, and computer concepts. He took cooking as well, not to work with food, but to learn how to handle a knife. What’s ironic is he has not applied any of these skills to real life either, with the exception of some “computer tricks” he has picked up over the years.

When he arrived at school on time, he sat down in his first hour class and took notes as the professor spoke. After making eye contact several times with the professor, he began to daydream. Finally fifteen minutes until the end of class he snapped out of his subconscious world just as the professor was beginning to ask him a question. His other classes generally followed the same pattern. When his school schedule ended for the day, he headed to what he considered his castle.

Jack loves his parents dearly, but after the second year of college he needed a change. So after getting his parents' feedback and searching for an apartment, he found the perfect place. It was located right across from a spacious park where his favorite sport was frequently played, Ultimate Frisbee. His place was in a secluded section of the apartment complex and his neighbors worked during the night and slept during the day.

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“Jack! Catch the frisbee next time!” a teammate yelled as Jack turned around to play defense. Although he was running, jumping, catching, and throwing on the Ultimate Frisbee field, he was in an entirely different place in his head. After the other team scored a point, he started walking toward the opposite end zone.

“Hey man, where are you today? You are not playing your game, Bro,” said Sam, the same guy who yelled at him earlier.

“Yeah, I know, sorry about that drop...I had it...but just lost focus,” Jack said looking off into the distance.

Sam gave his wry smile, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I have heard that one before. So where were you this time? Africa? Antarctica? Mars?” Sam knew his friend well.

Jack smiled back, “Just here.”

“Really?” Sam said putting his hands on his hips and raising one eyebrow.

“Okay, okay, you got me. I was here. But there was some evil assassins called ‘Sigons’ disguised as the other team. When they turned over the frisbee they placed some poison on the inside-outer ring. Even though you picked up the disc, the poison hadn’t spread yet. But when you threw it to me, I couldn’t catch it because the centrifugal force acted as a catalyst for the poison. If I would have caught the frisbee, my skin would have turned pink, and I would have started speaking in an ever-increasing higher pitch. Then my throat would have been so constricted, I would have suffocated to death.” Jack ended his explanation.

“You mean to tell me,” Sam said almost laughing, “that you intentionally did not catch the disc because you had some fantasy that the disc was poisoned by imaginary evil people?”

“Of course. You would have dropped the frisbee, too, if you knew it would have meant death by poisoned frisbee.”

Sam started laughing now, "All right man, you got me there, but let's change the story. How about those 'Sigooons,' or whatever they're called. They are going to kill everyone in the world if this team doesn't win this game."

"What!" Jack said almost hysterically and then in a whispered voice and leaning toward Sam continued, "Everybody knows the 'Sigons' purpose is not to kill all of the people but to make them their slaves."

Sam turned to Jack, "All right, all right, whatever. The point being, let's win this game or you are going to have 'death by teammate.'"

At that comment both started laughing.

Jack began to play with more vigor and after scoring the last three points his team won.

"Hey Jack, was that a great comeback or what?"

"Yeah, it sure was." Jack replied to the passing teammate. "I'll catch you next week."

"Okay, man, I'll see you next week."

"Hey, Sam, you have a good week!" Jack yelled walking toward his apartment across from the park.

Sam replied, "Yeah, you, too. Try not to get too carried away with your dreams."

Jack turned around and smiled and said, "I'll try doing that. No promises, though."

When Jack got home he placed his sweaty clothes in the washer and decided to fix dinner first before taking a shower. While he fixed his favorite college meal, Ramen Noodles, he turned on his computer in his room to work on homework. He was about to sit down and eat his supper when there was a knock at the door.

"That's strange. Who would be knocking at the door this late at night?" Jack said to himself and then yelled toward the door, "One moment please!"

He placed his bowl on the table and walked toward the door. The person at the door knocked again, this time harder. Now he was a little angry for being rushed. He quickly went to the door, threw it wide open, and then wished that he had had a kinder expression on his face.

It was not the fact that the person was a girl, an attractive one at that, which shocked Jack, though it would have on any other day. Nor was it the girl's frightened expression that gave rise to his heartbeat. Nor was it the fact she was wearing a sports shirt with his favorite number seven on the front that gave him goosebumps. No, what scared him the most was the slightly trembling hands that held a cold steel gun which was aimed at his chest.

In the moment Jack had to evaluate the girl and the situation, two actions came to his mind. Attack the girl now and hope to be faster than her finger, or wait for another opportunity to get in control of the situation. He remembered what his old mixed martial arts teacher would always advise, "Son, when you are in the heat of a situation that might escalate toward violence—talk first, fight later." Jack heeded this wisdom and decided to take action two.

"Um, can I help you, Miss?" he said with a splash of anxiety but a ripple of confidence.

Probably thinking to herself what a stupid question to ask; the girl replied with a splash of confidence and a ripple of anxiety, "Yes, you can. Slowly back into the room and sit in the chair over by that table." He obeyed, making sure to move like a praying monk.

After entering the room, she closed the door, and locked it while keeping her gun on Jack. Jack sat in the chair with a forced thin smile thinking to himself, "This is probably some dream I'm having in Calculus class. Any minute now I will be waking up." But this was no dream, this was real.

Looking past Jack with a blank expression the girl mumbled, "I'm...I'm sorry. I uh...I need to stay here for a couple of hours." She focused all her attention on Jack now, "I promise, I won't hurt you."

Jack thought to himself, "Sure, you won't hurt me. Why don't you put the gun down, please?" He couldn't be sure what her plans were or if her apology were sincere. He decided to follow along like a puppy on a leash except hoping he would end up with the leash on the master. Trying to sound relaxed he said, "Yeah, no problem. Stay as long as you like. Is there anything I can help you with?"

She laughed in disbelief, shook her head no, and said, "I wish."

Just then, for the second time of the night, there was a knock at Jack's door. The knock surprised the girl more than it did Jack. She swung the gun toward the door. Jack saw this as his opportunity. He quickly rolled forward toward the woman. In the crouch position from his roll, he swung his leg around parallel to the floor knocking her off her feet and making the gun fly toward his dining room table. When she hit the floor with her back first, Jack grabbed one of her arms, twisted and turned her so her belly was toward the floor and his knee was on the spine of her back. "Help!" he yelled. The only thing that responded was a silenced gun shooting through the front door.

"The situation has changed," Jack thought. No one in his right mind would shoot through a door using a suppressed gun unless it was to kill someone blindly. Change of plans. He lunged for the girl's gun that was by the table, turned and aimed with his back to the floor.

There were three loud shots and only one soft thud.

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Jack sat there stunned, gun still in his hands. For just a moment, he let the fact that he had just possibly killed somebody saturate his mind. He thought to himself that killing in real life was completely different from killing in daydreams. In the former there is a conscience, in the latter there is not. It was only a couple of seconds though, until his mind jumped back to his apartment living room.

He swung the gun toward the girl with one hand and pushed up with the other so he could stand. The girl looked just as stunned as Jack and still kept her eyes staring at the closed door. Jack ordered the girl to her feet. She did so with a blank expression. Then he gave her the command to open the door. When she opened the door she stepped to the side so Jack could have a clear shot at whoever was outside. Jack was no doctor but he could easily tell the man wouldn't do anything again—blood was flowing from his thigh, arm, and chest.

No doubt, Jack thought, the situation has changed tremendously. He walked backward toward his kitchen counter where his cell phone was lying, his gun aimed at the live intruder. With his free hand he grabbed the phone and typed in 911. Before he hit the call button the girl apparently snapped out of whatever she was thinking.

Gesturing she said, "Please do not call the cops; I can explain."

"Like heck you can! You take me hostage in my own house with an apparently loaded gun and minutes later some other bozo starts shooting through my front door with a gun the length of my thigh. That's no ordinary gun and that was no ordinary gunman. No wonder he started shooting through the door. He couldn't have fit through it in the first place. The guy has muscles coming out of his ears."

Very calmly and intentionally as if her next words would determine her future she said, "Listen. Hear me out, it will take a minute or two. A minute or two will not change anything if you call the cops. They will just arrive a minute or two late. But if you don't listen to my explanation, there is a good chance you will be seeing more men like the dead one at your front door."

Whether it was from her threat of more henchmen or from the fact that Jack, in all honesty, was curious about her story, it didn't matter. He closed his cell phone and waved the gun in a circular motion signaling her to give her testimony.

She began her story speaking quickly, "My dad is a government agent. I can't tell you what section of the government or his name or my name for that matter. But..."

Jack interrupted, staring at the girl as if she were a dumb person, "Really? Like you expect me to believe that? You should get a job in Hollywood."

"I know this is strange, like a movie, but hear me to the end. For the last couple of months my dad has been tracking what you would call 'mobsters.' His cover was blown. So he had me sent to a safe house for protection while he cleaned up things. Something went wrong, this morning the safe house was raided by thugs who look like the dead guy—big, bad, and ugly. The place was supposed to be secret. Apparently someone on the inside gave information to the wrong people. My bodyguards held off the raid and sent me through an underground exit." She paused then continued with chopped sentences.

"I have been running from killers since this morning. I came across your apartment. I should not have held you at gunpoint, but I was scared. And I didn't know who to trust. I'm sorry if I ruined your night, your door, and have threatened your life. The dead guy obviously was on my trail, tracked me to your room, and was going to kill me before you 'stuck' him first. Please do not call the cops; this mobster group has spies and agents everywhere."

With a little smile on his face Jack said, "You apologize now that I have the gun. Why did you waste my time? I have had dreams more realistic than your little plot." He picked up his cell phone again to dial 911.

"I can prove it." That made Jack pause again.

"Really, how are you going to do that?" he said with a scrutinizing eye.

She slowly put her hand in her back pocket and brought out what looked like a laminated business card.

"This is how you can verify. Have you heard of the Presidential Seal of Protection?" Jack didn't say anything and let her continue.

"The protection program was set up a couple of years ago for important American operatives in foreign countries. The President would give the agents a special card which would identify them to ex-patriots

in other lands, so the ex-patriots would help them if needed. Of course, anyone who helped someone with a card would be rewarded,” The girl made sure to stress the word “rewarded.”

“I would have used the card earlier but my dad told me to use it only as a last resort. If you want to verify the card you can...”

Jack finished her sentence in disbelief, “Type the verification code found on the back of the card into an online government portal.”

“You have heard of the program?” the girl said with relief.

“Yeah, I have heard of it. I still don’t believe you have an authentic card.”

Jack walked toward her with the gun still raised and took the card from her hand. He had his desktop computer on in his bedroom. After ordering the girl into his closet and locking the door, Jack typed the verification number into the specified website. A validation page was returned to the web browser with only three sentences, “Valid Presidential Seal of Protection. Protect agent at all cost. Reimbursement will be given for all damages.”

Jack still was not convinced. Anyone could easily setup a spoof website. He could not make sure what he was seeing was really ordained by the government. As a result, he traced the website back to an IP address, also known as a cyber-address, then cross-referenced the IP number with known government IP addresses. This took only a few minutes. Sure enough the website was originating from a government server. This meant three things to Jack. The Presidential Seal of Protection was real, the girl’s story was real, and therefore, most importantly, his trouble was real. He blankly stared at the screen for a couple of seconds in disbelief, “I hope I’m dreaming.”

He picked up the gun and unlocked his closet. They stared at each other for a few seconds. Jack was the first one to break the silence.

“You are right, the card panned out. Sorry if it hurt you when I took the gun. I didn’t know who you were or what position you were in.” While he spoke he scratched his chin and looked toward the floor.

She replied, “Yeah, it’s okay. Sorry if I scared you. I was too frightened to think rationally.” Then once again they stared at each other awkwardly for a few seconds.

“Uh, so, if I can’t call you by your real name then I will have to give you a temporary one. Hmmm,” Jack scratched his chin again and when he finished he said, “How about Jill? Does that work for you?”

She laughed, “Sure that works, but why Jill?”

“Well, my name is Jack so it kind of makes sense. Jack and Jill, like the rhyme.”

Jill smiled, “Well, Jack, what should we do now?”

“Hmmm...I had this dream once that I was in Russia as a secret agent. After killing a couple of guards at a secret lab, I hid the bodies to prevent an alarm from sounding. So I say we clean up the body first, then go from there?”

“And you thought my story was unoriginal.” Jill said walking toward the front door to begin cleaning up the mess.

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Dragging the dead man was like dragging a bag of cement, except this bag was spilling its contents. Blood oozed from the corpse as they dragged it into the living room and placed it in Jack's kitchen pantry. The blood trail looked like a slug's gunk after it traveled over a surface. Since Jack was on the top floor and had neighbors who worked the night shift, he was not worried about people reporting gun shots. Instead he was concerned about people seeing the remains of the shootout. So when they finished stashing the body, Jack pulled out some bleach to at least clean some of the evidence in the hall that led to his apartment. They covered the bullet holes with duct tape.

While they cleaned, they talked and while they talked they realized that if it weren't for the current circumstances they might have been friends. Toward the end of the cleanup the conversation steered toward the current situation. Jill explained that her father went incognito to track his enemies and so she could not contact him for help. Apparently, her father was a top operative who specialized in tracking. She figured her father would find her in the next two days. What she didn't know was that her father was already on her trail. Finally they finished.

"Not bad on the clean up, hey?" said Jack.

"It looks better except for the trashy looking door."

Jack laughed, "I agree. If anyone asks we will tell them it's modern art."

They both laughed at that remark.

After closing the door it was decided they both needed to clean up. Jack still hadn't taken a shower since Ultimate Frisbee practice and with the addition of blood, he felt like the type of sludge you might find on a Wal-Mart toilet base. Jill didn't look that good either. It was decided Jill would take a shower first while Jack stood guard and then they would switch. While Jill was in the shower, Jack had time to think of his recent adventure. Although the idea of a real adventure seemed entertaining to Jack, he was still scared.

Jill took a long hot shower, the kind that leaves the bathroom full of steam. As Jack walked toward the bathroom to take his turn, he noticed it was past midnight but he did not care; his current problems were much more important than sleep. Before Jack could close the door to the bathroom Jill stopped the door with her hand.

"Hey, listen, Jack." She stumbled for words, "I uh, I uh, just want to say thanks. Thanks for saving my life. For the hot shower, for helping me, it means a lot. It...it really does." Her words were sincere, the kind of sincerity that's meant to be felt with the heart rather than the ear. The kind of gratitude that can only come from a woman who has been driven from her home, chased from her safe house, assaulted in a stranger's living room, and who has at last found some sort of friendship.

Jack's no mind reader, but he could tell Jill was beaten-up and in more than one way. When Jill began crying, Jack didn't know what to do. He had dreamt of saving a damsel in distress and comforting the wounded thousands of times, but when you are walking in a dream it is completely different from reality. In a dream you are invincible, in reality you are vulnerable.

Jack always thought to himself, "If I'm attacked at school I'll do this...or if I'm in this situation I'll do that." But when you are in a tricky situation, the kind that gets your adrenaline pumping, your instincts

come alive. You don't act cool, do the slick thing, and make the right move. You run, and scream, and pray and hope to God you don't die.

Jack did the only thing he could think of – wrap his arms around her and let her sob on his shoulder. Everybody breaks and it was Jill's turn, but Jack was breaking as well.

Finally, after she calmed, Jack with a hand on each shoulder slowly held her an arm's length away and said, "I know it sounds like a cliché but as surely as the number seven is awesome, 'It's going to be okay.' All right?" His voice was steady trying not to cry himself. Jill slowly shook her head. He turned around and shut the door to take a shower, only later to regret leaving Jill in such a vulnerable mental and physical state.

After he shut the door he sat on top of the sink counter and leaned his head back onto the mirror. He took a deep breath then began to untie his shoes and prepare for a refreshing shower. When he was ready, he turned the hot water on and entered the shower stall.

He stood there; staring at the wall, as the water washed his skin and his anxiety away, letting his thoughts wander through the vast streets of his mind. He wandered to the place where you are only aware of your thoughts and not of your immediate surroundings—to the place where your eyes are open but your vision is gone. If it weren't for a crash and two gunshots, he probably would have stayed in limbo land for a while longer.

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The crash and the first shot were heard in his mind like a thump you hear in a dream; only later to realize it was caused by your dog knocking something over in the darkness of the night. It took only a fraction of a second to snap back to reality when the second shot was heard in his ear. The shots were coming from the living room. He threw the shower curtain open, leaving the shower on, and raced to dress himself with a new pair of clothes, not caring to put on his shoes. His concern was more for Jill than for his own life, so he slammed open the bathroom door with fists up for a fight. But it was too late.

He entered the living room ready for action. He immediately noticed two things, the door was only hanging on one hinge and the second corpse of the night was lying on his living room floor, two holes in its chest seeping blood.

The corpse was not Jill's but another thug's body. Jack sighed in relief, but his relief did not last long. Jill was missing.

Most likely, Jack thought, Jill had fallen asleep from a very long day. While she was sleeping some mobsters kicked in the front door. By the time they reached her she had awakened, shot, and killed the first thug, but was quickly overpowered by others. If this were the case then her captors wanted her alive and Jill should still be in the area.

He grabbed his cell phone, wallet, and keys which were on the kitchen counter and the silencer gun which he had taken from the dead man earlier in the evening. Not bothering to lock the door or close it for that matter, Jack sprinted through the apartment hallway. When he reached the stairs, he immediately began to descend. The staircase was not enclosed so when he was about ten feet from the ground he jumped from the side and continued running toward his car. Not caring that when he landed, the bottom of his feet felt like someone had just hit them with a baseball bat.

When he reached his car, a sound caught his attention. Two black Escalades accelerated rapidly from the apartment parking lot and sped down the road. He was not that far behind.

He unlocked the car door, threw the gun in the passenger seat, backed the car out, and then accelerated toward the apartment exit. The Escalades had turned left. He did the same. If the Escalades were the bunny rabbit then Jack's old 'hand-me-down' car would have been the turtle. His acceleration sounded like a "put-put" rather than a "zoom-zoom." After a few hundred yards, Jack came to an intersection. The Escalades were not in sight.

To the left there would be family neighborhoods for a couple of miles, to the right there would be apartments, and to the middle there would be the highway going west out of town. After analyzing the possibilities, Jack decided to go straight. He did not go straight because it leads to the highway, although that would have been rational, he went straight because of a dream he had had.

In the dream there were three doors. After a couple of nights of the same dream, he found the door to the left contained an evil clown that would eat your hair, the door to the right had a pink ballerina that sang deadly opera, but the door straight ahead contained treasure. So he went straight. Besides, Jack thought, didn't some old guy once say, "Straight is the road that leads to life."

Whoever that old guy was, his advice proved to be wise. Nearly three miles after entering the highway Jack found the black Escalades cruising down the highway at a slow pace so not to draw attention. Ten miles later the Escalades pulled off the highway into a warehouse district, Jack followed several hundred feet behind. His adrenalin from the car chase was gone and the fatigue he felt in the bathroom began to grab at the edges of his mind. He was tired but controlled his mind by another element—adventure.

Several minutes passed while he stalked the Escalades through streets and warehouse after warehouse. Finally, the Escalades pulled into a warehouse parking lot. Instead of stopping, Jack continued past the parking lot to camouflage his intentions. Looking in his rearview mirror he could see Jill exit the vehicle surrounded by what seemed to be a small army of giants. She didn't look hurt, but she didn't look happy either. Though she had a smudge of fear on her face, her back was straight and her head high. Jack watched until the group disappeared into one of the warehouse entrances. He turned right at the next stop sign, drove a hundred feet and parked his car on the side of the road. The car was too dirty to be noticed and too old to be stolen, but at the moment, Jack's car was the least of his problems.

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He quietly exited his car, taking his cell phone and the dead thug's silencer gun. The night was as silent as the dark side of the moon and his bare feet were cold from the chilly air. He could see the warehouse from five-hundred feet away, so he began to think to himself, quietly muttering his thoughts into the night.

"Obviously, they don't want Jill dead or they would have killed her at the house which means most likely they want her as a bargaining chip for her father. Hmmm, sounds like a dream I have had...I can wait and hope Jill's father makes a deal or I can try to help her. Cops are not an option. Jill said they were bought out. What should I do? I didn't sign up to help a girl I hardly know...or did I?"

Jack, with his head bent, began to slowly pace back and forth using his free hand to rub his chin thinking of possible solutions. His mind quickly ran through multiple scenarios and ideas, not to mention the many dreams he held that dealt with saving captured damsels in distress.

Finally, he stopped pacing. Looking straight ahead, resolution spread over his face, he whispered, "It's time I walk out my dreams." At that thought, a fire began to boil in his bones; the type of fire that makes a man come to life. The same fire that inspires courage, inspires love, and inspires victory at all cost was inspiring Jack to live rather than just be alive. The fire consumed his fatigue and his desire for sleep.

"It's time to live my dreams rather than sleep through them."

After retrieving a school paper clip from his car he started moving toward the warehouse. He opened his internet-enabled cell phone and googled the warehouse location. It took a few moments but it was worth the time. Many warehouse blueprints can be found on the internet if one knows where to look, and Jack knew where to look. After studying the schematics, Jack found a back entrance to the warehouse and began to walk toward the rear of the building. He found the door, but it was locked as he had suspected. Using Google once again as a lifeline, he searched for a lock-picking tutorial; and when he found one, he manipulated the paper clip to pick the lock. It took a few times, but eventually he unlocked the door and crept into the warehouse.

Using his cell phone as a light, he found himself in a dark hallway and followed it. A few hundred feet later the hallway ended at another door. After listening, he determined there was no one on the other side. Slowly, he opened the unlocked door, while closing his cell phone, and stepped through without making a sound. This time he was in the main portion of the warehouse. The room was dark like the hallway.

The only lights Jack could see and the only voices he could hear were coming from the center of the warehouse. He walked through what seemed to be a maze constructed of large eight-foot high metal crates anyone would see at a shipping yard or on top of specialized semi-trucks. When he sneaked closer he began to hear the voices more clearly.

"Have you contacted her father yet?...Well hurry it up. I want to make an exchange or drop this trash in the dumpster....right...right...we will do it...ok, talk to you in forty-five." Jack continued to move closer making sure not to be seen. When the telephone conversation ended another voice was heard.

"What did Zach say, Chad?"

"He is working on sending the girl's father a message."

"How is he going to do that? You get a mile from her dad and he can smell you."

"You know Zach, he has his ways. He said he will give us a call back in forty-five."

"What if her father says, 'No,' to the deal?" There was a pause.

"If he says, 'No,' we will have some real fun tonight." Jack heard several chuckles and thought there must be at most three or four guys. His guess was wrong; he was now close enough to see everyone in the light and as he scanned the clearing his confidence melted from his spirit.

There was a table in the center and on the table was a lamp which revealed Jill sitting in a chair by the table. From his position he could see Jill's front, she was emotionless. Her captors were spread throughout the container clearing and while they were waiting for the phone call they chatted about trivial things. However, instead of three or four captors as Jack had guessed, he thought there were about double that number.

In the darkness Jack ran his hand through his hair while shaking his head side to side. Jack checked his gun and realized he had only three bullets. He silently cursed under his breath. In his rush to get out of the apartment he had forgotten to see how much ammo was in his gun. Jack knew realistically there was no way to defeat a group of heavily-armed men with or without three bullets. He chided himself for thinking he could save Jill. He was defeated before there was even any action, and unless Jill's father made a deal with these thugs, Jill would lose, too.

Jack was about to take his chances and call the police but something caught his eye instead. It was Jill's shirt. She had on the same shirt as when he first saw her and if you remember this shirt was different from others; it had the digit seven on it. Jack scanned the clearing again making sure to count his enemies exactly; he counted not eight, nor six, nor five henchmen but seven. Jill's seven shirt, seven henchmen, and when he looked down at his watch it was 1:07 a.m.. What an odd coincidence but to Jack it was no coincidence. It was a sign, a revelation, a commendation, a proclamation of victory. In the dark, he quietly danced around for a few moments. Today would be the day he would, as his dream foretold, put the whipping on the bad guys.

He quickly formulated a seven-step plan 1) psych myself up 2) survey the warehouse for pathways and entrances and exits 3) search the warehouse for other arsenal 4) sabotage the thugs' cars 5) prepare for attack 6) execute the attack 7) save damsel in distress.

After mentally psyching himself up, Jack began to survey the warehouse. From what he could tell there were four entrances to the center where Jill and her captors were, one in each corner of the clearing. Double-layered containers surrounded the clearing, except for the four entrances, and made a square where everyone was located. Outside of the center square was a maze of containers and another doorway to the storeroom which explained how Jill and her captors entered the main portion of the warehouse.

Fortunately, from what Jack could tell the warehouse was used to manufacture huge metal containers which made a labyrinth through the building. This meant there were many tools scattered about. He picked up what he wanted and stashed the contents in the hallway by which he had entered.

When he had finished finding some gear he quickly sneaked to the thugs' cars and put enough punctures in their tires to make them "holy" enough for the Pope. When he returned to his stash pile he started to prepare for the attack. In his search for gear he had found some black spray paint which he used to color his skin, clothes and other gear black so he could blend with the darkness of the warehouse. By the time he was finished painting himself, he looked like a walking shadow. He strapped a construction belt around his waist which contained two hammers and a knife. Lastly, he tucked the gun behind his belt.

By the time he re-entered the warehouse, it was 1:40 a.m.. Nearly forty minutes had passed and Jack knew he had about five minutes to get into position. On his way toward the clearing he found a portable radio. He placed it forty feet back from one of the four entrances to the center corral. He was finally ready. It was game time and this time the ball was in Jack's hands.

By the time Chad received the phone call, Jack was in place and his battle plan was set. Chad went straight to the point when he answered his cell phone, "What did her father say?" The diabolical smile which crept over Chad's face gave away the answer to his question. Jill's father would not be able to help.

After shifting postures Chad continued his conversation, "Well, of course, he would threaten you...no you did fine...make it back here without being followed." He looked toward Jill, smiled widely, and said, "I suggest you hurry; we'll try to leave some for you but no promises."

Snap! The conversation was over. Jill looked straight ahead showing no emotion while stifling some tremors. Chad walked around her eyeing her like a piece of candy, "Well boys, it looks like we all get a bonus this year." Chuckles erupted from the seven. Chad came closer to Jill and stretched out his hand to stroke her cheek but before he could touch her, Jill bit his hand. Chad's scream did not match his body; it was high-pitched—a scream you would hear from a middle school girl. His comrades tried to hide their laughter, but failed miserably.

Chad's pride was shot, his hand was bleeding, and his anger was rising. He lifted his hand to slap Jill when a soft flash and "pt" was heard. Chad felt a sharper pain in his bitten hand and the pain was not the only new thing. A bleeding hole was seen in the center of his hand. Everyone was stunned still, except Jill. She snapped her head up, looking into the darkness.

A voice drifted through the warehouse like fog over a lake, "I wouldn't touch the girl again. I don't think she likes you." Another flash and "pt" was heard. This time a hole could be seen in Chad's head. He slumped to the floor. The six all reached for their concealed guns. By the time they had their guns out and aimed toward each of the four corners, another thug was lying on the floor, this time with blood seeping from his chest.

With each shot Jack shifted to another opening in the corner. His first shot was intended for Chad's head but hit his palm, the second was aimed for Chad's chest but hit his head, the third was aimed at a thug's head but hit his chest. Jack was missing his target, but missing like a professional. After the third shot, Jack dropped his gun and ran for a container.

The remaining five thugs spread to each corner and continued into the darkness to find Jack. But by the time they entered Jack's dark lair, Jack was not on the floor but on top of one of the metal containers eight feet off the ground. When an enemy smaller than the rest began to pass his container, he leapt off the container bringing one of his hammers down on the mobster's head. The third was out cold; four were left.

Feet were heard running toward where he had ambushed the third. Jack ran in the opposite direction and came across the radio he had planted. He turned the radio on and flipped the volume to maximum. The radio was set facing an open container so the sound was amplified. He ran for the clearing, checking for nearby enemies before entering.

Jill turned her head and saw what she thought to be Jack covered in black paint. She said to herself, "Why would Jack be here?" When Jack reached Jill, he quickly took out his knife, cut her ropes loose, and speedily whispered, "Stay here and pretend to be tied up. When I yell, 'Go,' run for the opening in the right corner." Then he was gone again. She looked behind her to see him vanish into the darkness, like a phantom, in a crouched position with a hammer in each hand.

She sat still, very still, hoping her captors would not return but that Jack would give her the signal soon. Jill could hear people walking or running through the warehouse, but could not tell where or how far into the warehouse. She heard a scream and then silence, she heard a thud and then silence, she heard a crack and then silence. At each sound she heard, she looked toward the source hoping it was not Jack being broken. She had to force herself not to flee. Finally, she heard Jack desperately yell, "Go!"

She bolted from her chair like a runner from the starting line. Before she could reach the corner Jack had indicated, a towering thug stepped into her path. She ran right into him, bounced off his chest and fell to the floor. He looked down at her with murderous eyes. He aimed his gun at Jill's chest and was going to pull the trigger when a hammer flew across the clearing from the diagonal opening where Jill was. It hit the gun out of the giant's hand and into the darkness.

Jack emerged into the light, holding a hammer in his left hand and pulling out a knife in his right. He looked as if a small breeze would push him over; he had taken some wounds since the last time Jill had seen him. The giant took a bowie knife, which matched his large frame, from behind his back and stepped over Jill. They faced each other like gunslingers in the Wild West. The giant was so focused on Jack; he did not notice Jill rising behind him.

Jill is no Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan but when it comes to martial arts her strategy is simple—aim low. With enough anger to snuff out a fire, Jill kicked the towering thug between the legs and connected with his Achilles tendon. With bulging eyes the giant fell to the ground groping like a beggar toward Jack. Jack cautiously ran past thug number seven, took Jill's hand and ran into the darkness for the last time.

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Jack jammed his key into the ignition when they reached his car, and accelerated as fast as the car could manage, which was not very impressive. To reach the highway they drove past the warehouse and right before the building was out of sight, Jack saw several men burst through the front warehouse entrance, stumbling toward their cars—cars that would go nowhere without first receiving a new set of wheels.

After entering the highway, they drove for thirty minutes. Neither said very much, it was not because they did not have much to say, but because they were tired and their reserves of adrenaline were finally depleted. Also, Jill did not know what to say. What do you tell someone who has saved your life twice in the last twenty-four hours? "Thanks," seems too shallow and, "You're crazy for coming after me," seems too rude.

When they felt they were far enough from the warehouse they found a motel to crash at for the night. It was unanimously decided Jill would talk to the motel clerk to check out a room. Jack looked like a chimney sweeper with his black clothes and skin.

By the time they entered a room it was 3:11 a.m. in the morning. Jill sat on the bed farthest from the entrance and Jack sat on the bed closest to the door. It was Jill who started the first real conversation since the evening before.

"Why did you do it?" she said looking toward Jack.

Jack thought for a few moments and then replied, "This might sound strange, but then again compared to tonight it might not." He paused and met Jill's stare, "During my entire life I have dreamed of things I have never done, of adventures I have never had, and of goals I have never reached. Most of my dreams have been about silly things, like saving a damsel in distress."

Jill laughed, and Jack continued, "But when I was faced with walking away or living one of my dreams, I knew that if I had fled from what I have always wanted to do, a part of me would have died."

Jokingly, Jill said, "So you saved me just to satisfy your adventurous ego!" and sarcastically added, "How noble."

Jack smiled, "It's the only reason anyone would save such a silly looking women like yourself." She grabbed the nearest pillow and threw it at Jack's head. He laughed, "Just joking." Jill got up from her bed and sat by Jack.

Smiling and with a lady's voice that would make a queen jealous, she said, "Well, Sir Jack, I must congratulate you for saving your first damsel in distress and I must say you do a wonderful job considering your lack of shining armor. I would recommend you to any damsel who is in danger." The next part she spoke in all seriousness and gazing into his soul, "Thank you, Jack." Before Jack could respond she kissed him on his cheek.

He shot off the bed like a rocket and if it were not for the black paint, Jack's face would have been glowing brighter than the sun. He stumbled for words, "Um...yeah...no problem...any time...I uh, I better try to get some of this paint off." Jack walking to one side then the other, finally reached the bathroom; Jill was laughing.

After using all the toilet paper to try to scrub off the paint, he finally exited the bathroom defeated, with most of the paint still existing on his skin. Jack went out to the car and fetched the knife and the hammer he had used at the warehouse. They were crude weapons, but they had done their job. It was decided Jack would stay awake and Jill would sleep, then they would switch. The plan was to receive some shut-eye then they would discuss what to do next. That never happened.

Instead of going straight to bed, Jack and Jill talked for hours about anything and everything, about their dreams and their fears, about their past and their future, about their likes and their dislikes. They laughed and they cried. They would have continued to talk into the sunrise except Jill could not resist the sweet peace of sleep. After sitting in the silence of the night Jack, like Jill, could no longer hold back the curtains of his eyes.

His sleep was deep, his dreams were good, but his awakening was rude. When his conscience finally remembered he had fallen asleep, he was dragged into the present. Jack burst from the bed with hammer and knife in hand. He looked to see where Jill was. She was missing! He looked for signs of forced entry. There were none! He ran to the bathroom. She wasn't there! Panic was clawing at his brain. He was about to explode through the motel room door but a piece of paper on the television caught his eye. It was from Jill.

Hey Jack!

My dad found me! Apparently, when you checked my Presidential Seal of Protection card it sent out a homing beacon from your computer. After that he couldn't tell me how he found us, something about a confidential surveillance system.

Anyway, when I awoke this morning I went out to get some fresh air and there he was, standing right by our door! I knew he was good but I never imagined he was that good. He said he found us last night and ended whoever was after him. Actually to tell the truth, he said you did most of the work for him at the warehouse. When I told him how you took out seven killers single-handedly; he was more than impressed. I would have awakened you to say goodbye, but my dad thought it would be better if I just left a note. Sorry, I really wanted to thank you again.

My dad said once he checks your background he might let me write to you; I hope he does. Oh, by the way, he allowed me to tell you my real first name. My first name is Jill,

no joke. I guess Jack and Jill is a good set of names. Lol. Thanks again Jack. Hope to write to you soon.

Your damsel,

Jill

P.S. I forgot to tell you. My dad said that you have been compensated for your help, whatever that means.

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The weeks that followed that evening were snail slow for Jack. When he had returned to his apartment he found his place completely clean of any sign of the shootout that had happened the previous night. A few days later he checked his banking account and found a large sum of money that would pay for his college and room-and-board for the next three years. Jack told himself he should be happier about the money, but the reality was he just wanted to see Jill.

Jack tried telling his friend Sam, and his parents about what happened that night, but they just thought he had dreamt up the story. The only reasons Jack didn't think the same thing were Jill's note which hung on his living room wall and the large sum of money in his bank account. Three years passed before Jack convinced himself he would never hear from Jill again. Even though she never wrote him, he dreamed of her constantly.

Little does he know their paths will cross again, but that of course is an entirely different adventure. An adventure that will take place seven years from the night they met.

Until then Jack, dream big and walk tall.