

It had been almost a week since that terrible night at Jack's house. For Jack, the nightmares were finally over. He was at peace with himself once again. He'd faced the devil and been able come back – if not completely unscathed – at least completely intact. He was whole again and he felt exonerated.

And Todd was alright. He was recovering nicely from a concussion and the seventeen stitches he'd gotten in the top of his head. Todd had been found wandering aimlessly behind the house, groggy and dripping with blood, but alive. He made all the typical Todd remarks like "if he'd had the guts to come straight at me" and "I've had worse". In the end, Todd remained unshakably – Todd.

Duke had been thrown into a tree and had suffered a couple of cracked ribs and had a few stitches of his own. The vet said that he would be fine, but Jack would have to restrict his activity for a few weeks. The doctor's orders seemed to be fine with Duke. He had yet to get too far from either the fireplace or the food bowl.

Betsy hadn't been harmed by Leonard. She'd faced him. Stared straight into the darkness of his soul and somehow cheated him out of his prize. She felt incredibly lucky and hopelessly unlucky. She knew that her healing process would take time. Knew that Leonard would continue to invade her dreams until she could learn to let go. Letting go of this nightmare was going to be hard for Betsy.

She had made the decision to move in with Jack at the cabin – just for a while. They needed each other more than ever right now and the healing would be easier this way. Jack told them at work not to look for him for at least a month. He spent his days, with

Betsy, walking in the woods and fishing out on the lake. Enjoying the crisp piney air and the sun and the water.

Today, they had walked down to the water's edge and along the rocky shore. Jack skipped a couple of flat rocks across the silky smooth surface of the dark blue-green water. They talked about politics and the weather and what they were going to have for supper. They enjoyed each other's company and soaked up the sun's rays like it was an invigorating tonic.

As Jack continued to follow the shore line, Betsy started up the hill, back toward the cabin.

"Jack," Betsy called, only half turning around, "are you coming?"

"You go on, Bets . . . I'll be up in just a minute." Jack flung a stick into the water and watched it sink slowly.

Betsy knew that Jack's 'just a minute' could mean an hour. He was like a damn little kid when it came to that lake.

"Well, I'm cold and I'm going in." Betsy looked over her shoulder as she started up the winding trail through the woods.

Jack stood solemnly down by the lake, staring at a neighbor's dog in the distance. Studying the big black mutt as he gingerly sniffed the rocks along the waterline. It seemed like he'd seen that dog around a lot lately. Jack stood there, motionless as the dog waddled up to him, wagging his tail wildly and then it looked up at him.

"Are you the little fucker that's been shitting in my yard?"

The dog seemed to smile. Jack knelt down in front of the scraggly looking mutt. He remembered stepping in a big old pile of shit this morning. Right on his sidewalk. He also remembered how long it had taken him to train Duke not to shit in the yard. It was only common sense. You've got a hundred other acres out there for shitting.

The dog continued wagging its tale and then he put his head down and sniffed at Jack's jeans. Jack had no patience for people that couldn't control their own animals. Call it a pet peeve or whatever. He just couldn't stand the thought of this little bastard running around undisciplined. It really pissed him off. After all, it didn't take that much effort to train an animal properly. Just a little patience and a lot of follow through. And you didn't have to train them to catch Frisbees or jump through hula-hoops – just the important things. Like not shitting on somebody else's property.

Jack pulled the .357 from his shoulder holster. He always carried it when he was out in the woods. There was no telling what you might run across out there - snakes, bobcats, even the occasional grizzly. Besides, he had a little range set up down by the water where he'd pop off at beer cans and whatever else he could scrounge up.

Jack stood and emptied all the shells into the palm of his hand. The dog looked back up and sniffed at him. Looking down at the dog, he loaded one round into the pistol and shoved the rest into his coat pocket. Jack spun the chamber and then snapped it shut.

Jack held the gun up to the trusting animal's head. The dog stopped sniffing and stared at him with those droopy, black eyes.

“You filthy shitter.”

Jack squeezed the trigger.

“Click,” went the firing pin as it hit nothing but dead air.

Jack opened the pistol, gave it another spin and again, snapped it shut.

Up the hill, Betsy had stopped to catch her breath. She turned to look down the trail and could just barely see Jack through the trees. It almost looked like he was on his knees but she couldn’t make it out any clearer than that. Just a colored blob through the trees. And for some reason that Betsy couldn’t explain, it just creeped her out. Jack wasn’t moving. Just kneeling there by the water like a statue.

She wished she could see him better, so she moved forward a couple of steps and leaned around a tulip poplar to try and get a clearer view through the trees.

It wasn’t a new feeling, but since the Leonard incident, she’d been filled with a strange sense of dread. Kind of apprehensive about everything. And now, it was growing into something stronger – like impending doom. An awful cloudy feeling that engulfed her to the point of suffocation.

“Jack?” She said quietly at first then repeated it loud enough to project down the hill. “Jack, are you coming?”

BANG!

The gunshot had come from the spot where Jack had been kneeling and a swirl of smoke was now circling over his head. Betsy jumped out of her skin and began running frantically down the hill. Gun shots down at the lake weren’t anything new. Jack target shot down there a lot. But this one scared Betsy and she didn’t know why.

She jumped and ran and almost lost her balance as she jetted down the trail and into the clearing at the bottom. There, she stopped, leaned forward and put her hands on her knees to stabilize herself and catch her breath. She could see Jack several yards in front of her, facing the water.

“Jack,” she tried to speak between gasps, “JACK ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”

Jack seemed peaceful as he looked out at the lake. In front of him the water swelled in large circular patterns of concentric rings out from the shore. Betsy stood motionless behind him, panting.

Jack turned to face Betsy with a smile.

“Snake,” was all he said.

THE END