



EIGHT DOGS NAMED JACK

... It had stormed for three days straight, and the farming community in Michigan's Thumb was thankful for it. When they got to the farmer's field around 4:00 that afternoon, the sky was ridding itself of the last grey clouds, and a robin's egg blue was all that remained. Pulling into the first field of the rural acreage, they startled a trio of does

that were drinking from the meandering Pigeon Creek—part of the Pigeon River—a tributary that fed into Lakes Huron and St. Clair. Throughout most of the property the creek was only a trickle, no more than a couple of feet across, although in the neighboring woods Mike heard it spread to widths of ten feet or more. In those wider stretches there were supposedly deep holes, as much as seven feet, and tales of fisherman wrestling huge channel catfish up to five feet in length ran through the county.

Mike had never entered those woods.

Art Chesney, the old farmer whose land he was on, told him the piece was off-limits, owned by a “sum bitch liberal” who hated hunters and all they stood for. *Fuck him*, Mike had thought when the farmer first told him of the landowner. But truly appreciating Mr. Chesney’s generosity, and wanting to respect the old man’s wishes, Mike kept off the hunter-hating neighbor’s land, never venturing more than a cursory look.

For the two years he’d been running his dogs on the property—1972 through 1974—Mike had obeyed Art’s request. He and his brothers had hunted in the Thumb for years, but he’d found Chesney’s place on his own. He had never even brought his brother Sam there, preferring to hunt and train the Jacks in solitude. There he could lose himself in the beauty of the animals and their singular joy of performing for him the tasks he trained them for. One of his favorite things to do was to light a cigarette while one of the Jacks held point. He’d watch the anticipation of the shorthair grow as he smoked a whole Chesterfield, finally saying, “Hup!” as the heat hit his fingers. He reveled in the fact that his dogs were *that* disciplined. Teaching that kind of discipline was lost on his brothers.

“This place is a score, Mike,” Tom said, surveying the habitat.

“No shit. The cornfield’s loaded with ring-necks, even some partridge. Hell, all of Caseville used to have nice grouse numbers. Partridge are down throughout the county now.”

“What, from foxes?”

“Maybe. Probably more because my nephew, Roman’s Nick cleaned em out last year, goddamn *conservationist* that he is. Why take two when you can take ten?”

Tom scanned the forbidden woods on the right and then turned his attention to the left of the trail. There, through the twigs of aspen growth, he marveled at the sea of dead gold stalks, dappling against the vertical grey aspen trunks like sunlight on water.

“Is that all corn? Look at it all. What do we do first?” Tom asked.

“Could start by letting Duke out of the fucking trunk,” Mike replied.

“Shit, you’re *right!*” Tom ran to the back of the car.

Mike tossed him the keys then lit a cigarette. Duke sprang from the trunk like he was jumping from a burning building, leaping right into Tom’s chest before he could do anything, dog and owner going ass-over-teakettle. He and the barking, tongue-lapping dog rolled around like two Russian acrobats.

“Who’s my big boy? Who’s my *big boy*? Dukey is, that’s who,” Tom egged on Duke with baby talk. Mike took a drag of the smoke and laughed with a disgusted slant. He glowered at his brother-in-law.

“Man, stop that shit before I puke. First things first: It’s an animal. You act like that’s your kid. Don’t baby him. This is about work, not fun. *We* have the fun. *They* do the work. That’s what they’re bred for.” Tom nodded and got up off the ground.

Both men wore orange canvas hunting vests with loose pouches on their backs to hold killed game. Mike took out his Remington semi-auto. He loaded it with five bird loads and chambered the first shell. He made sure the safety was on. Tom got his Winchester pump and loaded it as well.

“Let’s watch him work that bramble there. See how he does with rabbits,” Mike said, pointing to a brush pile that he always worked at least once before getting lost in the gold of the cornfields, where the pheasants hid.

“Give him a command,” Mike said.

Tom readied his gun.

“Go get him Duke—go get that rabbit,” Tom encouraged the animal. Duke just stared at him, his head tilted impishly to the side.

Tom looked at Mike.

“Again,” Mike nodded, smoke swirling above his head.

“Get that rabbit, Duke—go on now! Duke. *Duke*,” Tom prodded with a forceful bite in his voice. Nothing. He slumped his shoulders toward Mike.

“Watch, and learn.” Mike took one last drag and stamped out his smoke. He walked over to the animal. Leaning close, he put his hand on Duke’s shoulder and pointed toward the bramble.

“Duke! *Rabbit!*” But when Mike said it, there was nothing approaching warmth in his command, only the cold tone of a drill sergeant. And sure as shit, the dog bolted for the brush. It took off in loping strides, and Mike and Tom had to hurry to keep close behind. Mike felt his knee give a little, the lingering effects of a ball bat to the kneecap taken during a brawl he and his brothers had gotten into. He was nineteen then, the

altercation precipitated by a rival group trying to move in on their thing. The knee had never been looked at until two years ago, and his doctor recommended having it replaced. It was pretty much bone on bone. He ignored the pain and pushed forward after Duke.

“Look at em. That’s great, Mike.” Tom was absolutely jubilant.

Duke got into the brush pile and nosed around. Tom got on one side of the thicket, Mike on the other. Duke stopped on point and Mike shouldered his gun. “So far, not bad,” he whispered. He clicked off the safety, and as he did a big cottontail shot out to his left. Mike let it get about fifteen yards away, leading it a few feet before plugging it in the nose. The shot nearly decapitated the rabbit, sending it tumbling to the grass like a flat tire, kicking once before coming to rest.

“*Minchia—*” Mike yelled, seeing Duke’s huge frame pass through the end of his smoking barrel. “*Lucky dog, Tom! Lucky ass dog ...*” He lowered the shotgun and exhaled in relief.

“Dammit to hell, Duke!” Tom snapped, running toward his dog.

Duke sniffed the dead rabbit and circled it. Then he sprinted toward the car in a zigzag, big paws pumping like pistons.

“See what I mean? No interest, and too much damn energy. He’s worse with birds. God, I thought he was a goner there,” Tom said.

Mike lifted the rabbit by its rear legs and stuck it in the pouch of his game vest.

“Me, too. Let’s take him out there, past that small stand of popples,” Mike pointed to the entryway that opened up to acres of corn and the early growth aspen, prime bird cover. As the aspen thinned out, the corn became more visible. It broke off left from

there, into a clearing that buffered the field from the off-limit woods on the right. The cornfield glowed yellow with papery stalks long since harvested, but still standing six-feet high.

To the right of the trail, the woods quickly thickened up with tall pine and oaks, and the property was far more rolling. The creek wandered through the valleys there. Knowing it had to be loaded with game took every ounce of restraint Mike possessed to honor the farmer's request to keep out. The birds spent most of the time deep in the aspen and corn anyway, eating the nutrient-rich buds of the saplings and cobs of corn that Art Chesney's machines and the feeding whitetails left behind. But Mike had seen so many startled and pursued birds and rabbits seek respite in the sanctuary of those woods, that he was well aware how prime the acreage was. It beckoned him, but he'd resisted.

"Duke!" Tom yelled.

The dog ran up to him at breakneck speed, all legs and paws. He stopped five feet short of Tom, lowered his big head, and then took off again just as fast.

Mike raised his gun and fired over Duke's head. The dog stopped in his tracks.

"*Duke!*" Mike commanded. He walked toward the jumpy animal.

"Jeezus, Mike," Tom said quietly, padding after him.

They got to the dog and walked him to Mike's Continental. Mike opened the trunk and moved a bunch of crap around, searching for something. Tom watched as Mike shuffled through debris: a tire iron, three wooden clubs, a pouch of screwdrivers and, most notably, a metal "Slim Jim" blade. Tom arched an eyebrow at the Slim Jim.

"Every contractor carries one. Sometimes a window sticks. Mind your business," Mike said, shoving all of it to the side. "Ah ... there you are." He uncovered a huge,

seven-foot, rusty steel chain made of thick links. There was a snap hook at one end. “Duke—c’mere boy,” Mike barked. The dog bounded over to him, bobbing his head.

“What are you gonna do with that?” Tom said, his voice steeped in concern at the sight of the heavy chain. Mike took one end of it and draped the chain around Duke’s neck and looped it once, then fastened it on itself with the snap hook. Duke kept panting away. Mike got up and grabbed his gun, pointing it past the aspen toward the cornfield.

“Let’s see him run *now*. We’ll take him out there and if he starts to run, the chain will slow his ass down. It’s about twenty pounds. He’ll get the idea quick, but we’ll reinforce it with verbal commands,” Mike said.

Tom looked warily at the length of oxidized chain around Duke’s neck, not unlike a hangman’s noose.

“I don’t know, Mike ... seems like too much of a strain for him.”

Mike picked up the chain’s slack, almost using it like a leash.

“Trust me. You hunt first. We’ll switch off. When he starts to run, I’ll drop the chain. Every time he wants to run ahead, we drop it. It works. Let’s go.” ...

*Excerpted from **Eight Dogs Named Jack**© by Joe Borri*



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