



The Weekly Man

Episode 29: Back to the Present: Monday - Jack

Jack peered through the curtains at the ambulance in the street downstairs. Its flashing lights transformed the still dark morning street into a kaleidoscope of color. He watched—careful to hide his face behind the curtain folds—as the medics rushed to the back of the vehicle, threw open the doors and pulled out a stretcher. They rushed up the concrete stairs to the main door and disappeared from Jack’s view. He figured that Mrs. Gilbert had opened the door for them. It was probably one of the tenants—heart attack or something.

Or is this a ruse?

Would they be coming through Jack’s door any second, injecting him with something and then loading him into the ambulance, and he would be driven off to...where? He rushed to the door and put his ear against it, listening for activity on his floor but he heard nothing. There seemed to be activity on the first floor. He could make out Mr. Joyce’s voice calling to the medics, “Here, over here!”

Minutes later he heard the medics rolling the stretcher over the floor and towards the door. Jack rushed to the window and looked out, not worrying about hiding behind the curtains any more. He looked down at the face protruding from the stretcher covers, like a head emerging from a cocoon. It was Mrs. Gilbert.

Probably a heart attack. This early in the morning? How long has she been down there?

He wondered if she’d just had it and been able to call 911 in time or if she’d been found in her apartment by Mr. Joyce.

He wondered if there was a way he could incorporate this into his comic strip. He’d already smelled and studied and felt his way into his clothing and was just about to start into work when the commotion had started, so now he went back to his drafting desk and immersed himself in the next episode of *The Unseen*. Today, they would be forced to resort to the Fourth Prerogative. Jack still had no idea what that was but he knew it would come to him. It always did.

Bobcat’s eyes were wide and fearful as she said, “The Fourth Prerogative!” The lettering spilled into the next panel where she thrust the hand clenching her cell phone in front of her.

Text appeared showing the rest of the group repeating her words and thrusting their cell phones so that they all touched in a circle as they repeated, "THE FOURTH PREROGATIVE!" In the next panel, a dazzling light emerged from the connected cell phones. Cougar and Bobcat's faces appeared almost maniacal as they stared at the light. The next panel showed the outside of the tree house with light spilling through the windows and through cracks in the wood slats of the walls and roof. And then a beam of light broke through the roof of the tree house, shattering bits of wood and metal, and the beam streaked into the night sky in a panel showing the massive tree and the house and, miles to the right of the tree, the Tyranny motorcade, its lights shining ominously over the road.

And that was as far as he got. He still didn't know exactly what the Fourth Prerogative was, except that it looked pretty cool soaring into the sky.

But what is it?

It was time to check his email. If he could only muster Panther's courage when it came to Vine. He wondered if she would except another of his lame excuses. Surely she must realize by now that they were just that, excuses. So why did she keep giving him chance after chance? He decided not to think about that question.

And there it was, an email from her. There was the slightest tremor in his hand as he opened it.

Jack...I'm so sorry to hear about the death in your family. You must be devastated, with so many deaths in your family. That's 6 since we've been in touch. I'm surprised that you have any family left, you poor thing. But I suppose these things happen and all we can do at times like this is be strong and go on living and doing the things we do and be thankful for our own lives.

I remember when my Uncle Sonny died. He was my favorite uncle and...

He read for another ten minutes, re-reading some of the lines, reading slowly and reveling on every word. She was giving him another chance. All was forgiven. He wondered if she were being a little sarcastic with the "I'm surprised you have any family left..." but she wasn't accusatory and she didn't seem angry or even put out. And...

So, Jack, can we meet tonight?

Yes. Yes, we can meet tonight. And I really mean it. We can meet tonight. I'll be there. I won't chicken out. I'll be Panther. Yes, I'll be Panther.

I know this sinfully romantic spot on Rosemount. It's a quiet upscale place called Tammy's Dream. I think you'll like it. It's quiet but colorful. How about it?

Vine

Tammy's Dream? What kind of place is called Tammy's Dream? She wants to meet at Tammy's Dream? That sounds so sunny and happy. Why would she want to meet in a sunny, happy place? What's wrong with dark and moody, like in The Unseen?

He shook his head, re-read the invitation and thought for a moment.

So, Jack, what's wrong with sunny and happy? Maybe she's tired of being stood up in seedy places by a chicken-shit comic strip artist.

He put his fingers on the keyboard. *So, sunny and happy it is.* And wrote.

I'll tell you about the family sometime. Maybe tonight. No, not tonight. Maybe another time. And yes, of course we can meet tonight. And I promise I'll be there. It truly is time that we met. I'll see you at nine, of course.

Looking very much forward to finally meeting you.

Jack

PS, Did I mention that I'm looking forward to finally meeting you?

It wasn't until he sent it that he realized that he'd completely forgotten the few pages of personal talk. His hands flew back to the computer to start another message but he thought for a moment and then changed his mind.

No. Leave it at that. Anything more that you have to say to her, say it tonight. To her face. Tonight's the night that you're finally going to meet her. Tonight, you're going to be Panther. You're going to be the panther, the fearless jungle cat, and you're going to walk up to her table and say something romantic, something that will sweep her off her feet. But no, you don't have to do that. She's already in love with you and you're in love with her. Just go to Tammy's Dream and sit with her. Just be yourself. No, be Panther.

His eyes darted from side to side, sweeping the whole of Tammy's Dream with a suspicious gaze. He ignored the **Wait To Be Seated** sign and walked slowly into the array of candlelit tables and their subdued conversations. Valerie held the menu high to give the impression that she wasn't watching him through the floor to ceiling mirrors between mahogany slats facing her. She wondered if he would actually make it tonight. He'd seemed determined in his email. In fact, he'd seemed almost excited, so much so that he hadn't even carried on with his usual conversation about everything under the sun. She had a feeling that maybe he'd reached a point where he would finally overcome his paranoia and meet her face-to-face.

She watched as he finally saw her and stopped in his tracks. She watched his chest and shoulders rise as he took a few deep breaths, shrugged his shoulders and began walking toward her. He had a determined look in his eyes and began to walk faster, more forcefully. He was a about ten feet away from her when her boss, Barry Hutchens, who epitomized what a field agent would look like suddenly appeared about ten feet to her right side and called out, "Valerie! How good to see you here."

She looked into the mirrors. Jack was gone.

Jack was certain he'd seen the man who had called to her at the restaurant. And he'd called her Valerie. Not Vine. Valerie. That face. He knew it.

He had his laptop on his lap, searching sites and forums where he might have seen the face but nothing came up. He paused in his search and thought about the name he'd called her. Valerie. He thought: Valerie. Valerie Vine, he did a search on her name. It cropped up on some obscure PDF file from a conference on tactical surveillance techniques. The color drained out of his face when he saw her contact information and saw who she worked for.

She's one of them.

He didn't send her an email with an excuse that night. He didn't send her an email at all.