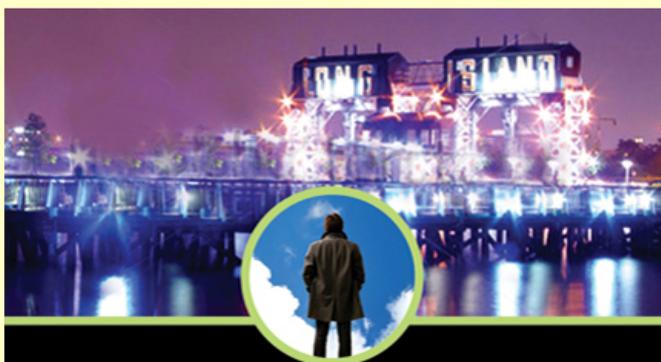


READ IT FIRST



THE DARK AT THE END

A REPAIRMAN JACK NOVEL

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

F. PAUL WILSON



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE DARK AT THE END: A REPAIRMAN JACK NOVEL

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“Sir!” the cabbie said in heavily accented English as Jack slammed the taxi door shut behind him. “Those people were—”

“Drive!”

“They were there first and—”

Jack slammed the plastic partition between them and shot him his best glare. “Drive, goddammit!”

The guy hesitated, then his dark features registered the truth that he wasn’t going to win this one.

“Where?”

“There!” Jack pointed uptown, where the cab was facing. “Anywhere, just move!”

As the cab pulled into the bustling morning traffic on Central Park West, Jack twisted to peer through the rear window. The couple he’d shoved out of the way to commandeer the taxi stood at the curb, huddling against the March wind as they stared after him in openmouthed shock, but they seemed to be the only ones.

Good . . . as if anything about this could be called good.

He faced front again and checked his arm. His left deltoid hurt like hell. He noticed a bullet hole in the sleeve of his beloved beat-up bomber jacket. He reached inside, touched a *reeeally* tender spot. His fingers came out bloody.

Swell. Just swell. This was *not* how the day was supposed to go.

It had begun serenely enough: shower, coffee and kaisers with Gia, then a trip to Central Park West to drop in on the Lady. He knew certain forces

wanted to rid the world of her, and had almost succeeded a couple of weeks ago. But he'd never expected an armed ambush.

After finding the Lady's apartment empty, he'd taken the stairs one floor up to Veilleur's floor.

Even though he could call him Glaeken now, he'd trained himself to think of him as Veilleur and Veilleur only for over a year, so shifting to his real name was going to take a little time.

He knocked on the steel door at the top step. "Hello?"

"Come in, Jack," said a voice from somewhere on the other side. "It's open."

Inside he found Glaeken slumped in an easy chair in the apartment's great room, sipping coffee as he stared out at the morning sky through the panoramic windows.

Jack slowed as he approached, struck by his appearance. He was as big as ever; his shoulders just as broad, his hair as gray, his eyes as blue. But he looked older today. Okay, the guy *was* old—he measured his age in millennia—but this morning, in this unguarded moment, he looked it. Jack hadn't been by since the Internet mess. Could Glaeken have aged so much since then?

"You okay?"

He straightened and smiled, and some—but not all—of the extra years dropped away. "Fine, fine. Just tired. Magda had a bad night."

His aged wife's memory had been slipping away for years and was little more than vapor now. Glaeken radiated devotion to her, and Jack knew he'd hoped they'd grow old together. The *old* part had worked out, but not the *together*. Glaeken was alone. Someone named Magda might be in a bedroom down the hall, but the mind of the woman he'd fallen in love with had left the building.

"Didn't the nurse—?"

"Yes, she did what she could, but sometimes I'm the only one who can calm her."

Jack shook his head. Like the old guy needed more stress in his life.

"Have you seen the Lady? I stopped in to check on how she's doing but her place is empty."

She occupied the apartment just below. Couldn't say she *lived* here, because the Lady wasn't alive in the conventional sense.

"You just missed her." Glaeken gestured to the window. "She went for her morning walk in the park."

“Really? When did she start that?”

“Almost a week now.”

Jack stepped to the glass and stared down at Central Park, far below. A little to the left, ringed by winter-bare trees, the grass of the Sheep Meadow showed brown through patches of leftover snow.

“I take it she’s recovering then?”

“Still weak but feeling a little stronger every day.”

“Well, I guess after being wheelchair-bound and damn near dead a couple of weeks ago, that’s not bad.”

“Would that I had a fraction of her resilience.”

Jack scanned the park but couldn’t pick her out. Even though the park was relatively empty due to the cold, the strollers looked too small from up here. All his uncles looked like ants, as the joke went.

“Can you spot her?”

Glaeken rose and stood beside him, leaning into the sunlight as he squinted below. “My eyes aren’t what they used to be.”

“What’s she wearing?”

“One of those house dresses she favors lately. It’s yellow today.”

“That’s all? It’s freezing—” He caught himself. “Never mind.”

Glaeken shot him a quick glance but said nothing.

Right. He knew. The Lady didn’t feel cold. Or heat. Or pain. And her clothes weren’t really clothes, simply part of whatever look she was presenting to the world. She’d worn the form of Mrs. Clevenger before her near-death experience and seemed to be stuck in that form ever since.

Glaeken said, “You know how she likes to be out among her ‘children.’”

Jack spotted a bright yellow someone strolling in the near half of the meadow.

“Got her.” He turned away from the window. “I’ll catch up to her.”

“She’ll be back soon.”

Jack shook his head. “Got things to do. Today’s the day I start looking for the R-Man.”

“You can say his name now.”

“I know. But it’s geekier to have code names for him.”

Glaeken looked at him. “Geekier?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just me running at the mouth.”

“I hope it doesn’t indicate that you are in any way taking him lightly.”

“Believe me, I’m not. I’ve seen what he can do.”

Just my way of coping, he thought as he headed for the elevator.

Glaeken's elevator had two buttons—one for the top floor and one for the lobby. One of the perks of owning the building.

At street level, Jack waved to the doorman and stepped out onto the sidewalk. Central Park loomed just across the street. He strode to the corner of Sixty-fourth and waited for the light.

He'd developed enormous respect, maybe even a sort of love for the city's traffic signals after they'd gone down during the Internet crash. Days of pure hell followed. They were back in working order now, though not all in sync yet. The Internet, however, still had a ways to go before it could call itself cured. The virus that had brought it down—and the city's traffic and transit systems along with it—was still replicating itself in unvaccinated regions of the Web. Cell phones were back up and running, much to everyone's relief, though local outages were still a problem.

He adjusted the curved bill of his Mets cap lower over his face. Working lights meant working traffic cams. Designed to catch red-light runners, they recorded tons of pedestrians every minute. Couldn't go anywhere these days without some goddamn camera sucking off a bit of your soul.

He crossed with the green and trotted a block uptown to one of the park entrances. He stopped at the edge of the fifteen-acre field known as the Sheep Meadow. In the old days it had lived up to its name, with a real shepherd and his flock housed in what was now Tavern on the Green. Nowadays, in warmer weather, hordes of sun worshippers littered the grass. None of those on this blustery March day, making the Lady's yellow dress easy to pick out.

He spotted her ambling along the tree line at the northern end. Gray-haired Mrs. Clevenger had been a fixture in his hometown when he was a kid, but she'd always worn black. To see her in any other color, especially yellow, was jarring.

As he started toward her, he noticed the stares she was attracting. People had to think she was a little off in the head, strolling around in this temperature wearing only a thin, sleeveless housedress.

He was about fifty yards away, and readying to call out, when four men stepped out of the trees, raised semiautomatic pistols, and began firing at her.

Jack froze for a shocked instant, thinking he had to be hallucinating, but no mistaking the loud cracks and muzzle flashes. He yanked the Glock 19 from the holster at the small of his back and broke into a run.

The Lady had stopped and was staring at the men firing nearly point-blank at her head and torso as they moved in on her. She didn't stagger, didn't even flinch. They couldn't be missing.

As he neared and got a better look, she seemed to be unharmed. No

surprise. Her dress was undamaged as well. The bullets seemed to disappear before they reached her.

One of her assailants looked Jack's way. As their eyes locked the man shouted something in a foreign language and angled his pistol toward him. Jack swiveled his torso to reduce his exposure and veered left, popping three quick rounds at the gunman's center of mass. Two hit, staggering him, felling him. He landed on his back in a patch of old snow. The third bullet missed but winged his buddy behind him. Another of the attackers shouted something and fired just as Jack changed direction. He felt an impact and a stinging pain in his left upper arm. He dropped to a knee and began pulling the trigger, firing two-to-three rounds per second in a one-handed grip. This was going to run his mag in no time, but he had only one man down and couldn't allow any of the three still standing to get a bead on him.

Relief flooded him as they grabbed their wounded pal and ran back into the trees. He stopped firing and didn't follow. He'd counted thirteen rounds fired. That left two in his magazine and he wasn't carrying a spare—a fire-fight had not been on the morning's agenda. He did have his Kel-Tec backup in an ankle holster, but that was useful only at close range.

The Lady was staring at him. "They tried to kill me."

"Ya think?"

Jack looked at the downed attacker. His face matched the shade of the dirty snow cushioning his head. Ragged breaths bubbled the blood in his mouth. His pistol lay by his side. A Tokarev. Jack had seen a lot of Tokarevs lately—too many—and its presence pretty much nailed who'd sent him and his buddies.

The Order.

Drexler had sent out a hit team on the Lady. What was he thinking? Nothing of this Earth could harm her, and lead slugs were of this Earth. Drexler knew that. So why would he try? Unless he thought he'd come into some special super bullets.

As Jack holstered his Glock, he grabbed the Tokarev and felt a jab of pain in his left upper arm. Yeah, he'd been hit. Worry about that later. People were pointing their way, some already on cell phones. Too much to hope for one of the random phone outages here and now, he supposed. And even if they couldn't get their calls through, they could use the phones as cameras. None of the callers was too close but that could change. Cops would be here soon.

He shoved the Tokarev into his jacket and grabbed the Lady's arm.

"We've got to get you out of here."

In the good old days—as in, before last summer—she could simply

change into someone else or disappear and reappear somewhere else. But nowadays she was stuck in old-woman mode and had to travel like a human.

She wasn't very spry but Jack moved her along as fast as she could go. He pulled his cap even lower and kept his head down, not exactly sure of where he was taking her—out of the park, definitely, but after that? Couldn't take her straight back to her apartment. Her damn yellow dress made her stick out like a canary at a crow convention. Needed to get her off the street, then figure out what to do.

As they reached the sidewalk he saw a taxi pull to a stop before a late-middle-aged couple—he wore an *Intrepid* cap and she carried a Hard Rock shopping bag. Tourists. They stood a few feet ahead. He knew his next step . . .

The Lady sat beside him in the rear of the cab and stared at the blood on his hand.

“You're hurt.”

“Yeah. Looks that way.”

Jack wiped his fingers on his jeans and moved his left arm. Pain shot up and down when he flexed the elbow. He checked the sleeve and found the exit hole in the leather. He wondered how bad it was but wasn't about to remove the jacket here in the cab to find out.

The Lady gently touched his sleeve over the wound, her expression sad.

“Not so long ago I could have healed you.”

“I know.” What he hadn't known was that she no longer could. “You've lost that too?”

She nodded. “I have lost so much. But at least I am still here.”

“Yeah, that's the important part. But there *is* something you could do that would help things.”

“Tell me.”

“Can you change into someone else?”

She shook her head. “I am not able. I am still fixed as Mrs. Clevenger.”

“Well, how about switching that dress to something less noticeable?”

“That I can do.” Suddenly she was wearing a drab cloth coat. “Better?”

“Much.”

He marveled at how he'd come to take these things as a matter of course. The workaday world remained blissfully unaware of the secret lives and secret histories playing out around them. As he once had been. As no doubt their cabbie was.

He checked their driver. The Lady was seated directly behind him and

he gave no sign that he'd witnessed the transformation. If and when he did notice the coat, he'd assume she'd carried it in with her.

Jack spotted Seventy-second Street approaching. The light was green. He rapped on the plastic partition.

"Take a right up here—into the park."

The cab turned into the traverse and headed across Central Park. Where to now? Couldn't head straight back to Glaeken's. He'd left a dead guy behind in the park. NYPD would be all over the area, collecting witness accounts, checking the traffic cams. They might end up talking to . . . he checked the operator license taped on the other side of the partition: *Abhra Rahman* . . . they might track down Abhra and want to know where he'd dropped them. Jack needed a diversionary stop.

He pictured the city. They were heading east. What was landmarky in this area of the East Side? Of course—Bloomie's down on Fifty-ninth and Lexington. Get out there, then downstairs to the subway station, hop a downtown N, R, or Q two stops to West Fifty-seventh, then cab back to Glaeken's.

Yeah. That would work.

He rapped gently on the partition. "Drop us at Bloomingdale's, please."
He'd make sure to give Mr. Rahman a good tip.

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