

## THE MAN WHO WINDS THE WATCH

Tyler Hawth

**CHAPTER ONE: JIM**

Jim heard the watch tick even in his dreams. The gears turned, and to another man they might have sounded like the second hand of a timepiece moving in intervals to mark the time, but to Jim they *were* time. *Tick, tick, tick*. The watch was a live thing that had a heart that pulsed and thrummed with blood; drops of blood in the morning dew. A wash of blood, like a river. A spurt of gore from pale flesh, a gush, a torrent, a geyser that shoots like a hose. *Tick, tick, tick*.

When the noise woke him, he already had a headache. The mere thought that he had a headache was enough to make him wince. The realization that thinking hurt was another thought, and that made him wince, too. He'd known this would happen. This was the price—the *Proof Price*, he called it, more expensive the more honest you got. The stuff he'd drank last night had been exact enough to convince a jury of twelve. Not that he had to convince anyone of anything.

He swung his feet out of bed, grimacing, and reached toward the nightstand. *This is the price*, he reminded himself, chanting in tune with his pounding skull. He pawed for the corner, past the bottle of bourbon, and his fingers landed on the chain. He pulled the watch into his palm, felt that comfortable weight there, and turned the little gold gear. Three times the charm. Turn it thrice, not twice; three cheers for Jim. *Tick*, he breathed. *Tick. Tick*. That's the golden ticket.

Jess stirred, rolling into the cool spot that always sat between them, reaching sleepily. If she'd made that motion just half a minute earlier, she would have found him there. She would have touched his skin and jerked her hand back. There was no love lost between the two of them in the past weeks. Who was he kidding? Two years ago they'd tolerated each other. In the last year, it was a struggle just to be cordial. Something had grown between them, something bigger than the love they used to share. A constant thing, like a mountain, with roots that went deep into

the earth, roots that might be older than anything that breathed or ever had breathed. Whatever it was, it had no name, and was to Jim more like a faint memory of something unusual, the kind of thing one works to not think about (and therefore rarely *does* think about).

Nonetheless, Jim considered climbing back in, going to her, possibly having a romp. *No*. He wouldn't be able to get it up. Even if he did, he'd pass out from the pain. Besides, he knew she didn't want anything to do with him. His head was really humming now. He gritted his teeth, grabbed for the bottle, finally, and took a long draught. Anything to deaden the hurt. There was no cheating the Proof Price, only prolonging judgement. Fight fire with fire. That was Jim's motto. Of course, if you fight a fire with alcohol, you're only apt to fan the flame. The thought brought a sour smile onto his unkempt face.

He donned a robe that reeked of cigarette smoke and stumbled toward the kitchen. Jess murmured something sleepily—he didn't hear, and didn't want to hear. Too early for an argument. Too late for an argument. The Proof Price would exact its toll, it always did, and he'd pay. She'd pay if she wasn't careful. Jess had grown increasingly belligerent as of late, and Jim suspected it was on account of his drinking. She'd always thought she knew what was best. That was the root of most of their problems. Jessica Harp knows best, just like *Mother* used to know best. But his mother had been a whore, hadn't she? She'd ended up poorly off.

All that blood—

No. He ought not to think about that. He took another swig, just a sip, really, to help fight off that damned hammer, *tick, tick, tick* against his skull.

## **CHAPTER TWO: CHARLIE**

Charlie had been up for an hour by the time his dad came out of his room. He'd heard him get up and skipped into the kitchen, smiling as big as any six-year-old boy who gets a hard

beating a few times a month would smile. Daddy came around the corner, dragging his feet, drinking his Grownup Drink, and Charlie let him have it. He dove into him, nearly making an impact, and buried his face in the fluffy robe. He hugged him *big big big*.

“Charlie... how long you been up?”

“I dunno,” he said, disentangling himself from the stinky mass that was his father. “The suns up, and that means I can get up. Right Dad? That’s what you said, right?”

Charlie watched as his Dad considered. He did this by measures. First, he took another drink. Then he made his way to the medicine cabinet. Charlie knew all about this routine. He needed his medicine so he could keep drinking. He needed to drink to help his headaches. The medicine gave him the headaches, or maybe it was the drinking. It was hard to keep straight. At the bottom of it, Charlie knew, was a simple fact. His dad was sick a lot in the mornings, and this made him feel better. Anything that made his dad happy was A-Okay with Charlie.

“I guess that’s right,” he finally said.

Charlie managed to keep quiet for a full minute before his patience broke. “Dad? You hungry?”

Daddy considered the question with a grimace. Charlie was used to watching him think. Sometimes he scrunched up his face and put a hand on the side of his head, like what was going on in there hurt. Sometimes he thought real hard, sometimes real long, before he answered. It was when he spoke fast that you had to worry—not that *he* had to worry. Daddy didn’t get mad on purpose. So long as Charlie was careful they got along great.

“I could have an egg,” he eventually relented. “You know how to make eggs yet?”

“*Dad*,” Charlie chortled. “I’m not allowed to use the stove.”

Jim peered at him suspiciously. “Not allowed?”

“Not until I’m older,” he said wisely. “Mommy said so.”

He frowned hugely. “Did she now?”

Charlie stared cautiously. *Careful now*, a little voice whispered. *Careful*. “Want me to get Mommy? She won’t mind.”

Daddy rooted around in his pocket, pulled out his watch, and blinked at it for all of a second. Charlie fancied he could see the reflection of its gold face blink in his dark, brooding eyes. “I believe that’d be all right. You tell her the men are hungry and they want eggs. Will you do that for me, champ?”

He let out a breath he hadn’t even been aware he was holding, smiling in relief. “Want to help me *get her*?” Charlie was fully capable of launching a tickle-monster-assault, but nobody was better than Jim Harp.

Daddy tapped his head, frowning. “I’ll leave that one to the better man.” He took another swig, sloshing it around in his mouth, *just* missing the fall of Charlie’s grin. By the time he looked back, Charlie had fixed his face back into a slight smile. “How’s that sound?”

Charlie snapped to, like G.I. JOE, offered his best salute, and did an about-face. “Yes, sir!”

### **CHAPTER THREE: JESS**

Jess wiped the sleep from her eyes, already smiling. “Eggs?”

Charlie pealed with laughter. “The men are hungry,” he said. “Starving!”

She heard her husband in her son’s voice and didn’t like it. But it was still Charlie’s face, beaming, innocent, a touch shy. She pushed the covers away, feeling that rush of cold morning air hit her skin, shivering because of it, and walked to get her robe. A Christmas present from Jim, what must have been four years ago—back when they still exchanged gifts.

She controlled her voice perfectly, feigning innocent curiosity, hiding that worried note which a predator can always detect in his prey. “Where’s your father?”

Charlie rolled off the bed like a circus clown, narrowly missing the corner of the nightstand, and leapt to his feet. He’d perfected this move a year earlier after Jess had taken him to the county fair. “Garage,” he said. “We’re hungry, Mom. Can we get some eggs, please?” As an afterthought, he added, “I’ll help.”

Jess knew what *garage* meant. He was out there smoking half a pack of cigarettes, drinking hard liquor, and probably thinking about his father. He would be thinking about his father because today was his father’s birthday, although unless she brought it up, Jim would never speak a word about it. She brought her hand up to her face and felt the bruise. It’d be a shiner by noon. He’d nearly knocked her unconscious last night when she told him he stunk as he came to bed. That had been stupid on her part, admittedly, but sometimes these things just slip out.

After, he’d collapsed onto the bed, trembling, and clenched his watch in his fist. Jess had watched from the floor, curled defensively, wondering what she was going to do if he came back for more. Then she’d heard him muttering. At first it was so quiet she couldn’t make out the words... but then she heard: *‘You’re supposed to be dead. You’re supposed to be dead.’* He chanted methodically, in a rhythm, *‘been here before. Done this before. Been here before. Done this before. Heard this before. Seen this before.’* His eyes were blank when she caught them with her own. His chest was heaving, as if from exertion, although she knew he hardly had to break a sweat to smack her around.

She’d lain asleep for hours, listening to him breathe, deep and heavy. He’d mumble occasionally, something angry about his father. Her face ached, throbbed, and she hated herself

for *caring*. For feeling for him. For loving him. She hated herself for not being strong enough to leave. Hated herself for being so damn scared of what he might do one day when he got a little too drunk. A little too mad. But she loved him, and she went to sleep with the faintest touch of a smile playing at her split lip, remembering a better time, back when they exchanged gifts and said *I love you*.

#### **JIM: CHAPTER FOUR**

The Frenchmen called it *déjà vu*. Familiarity. But this was something more. Something worse. *Déjà vécu*; not just familiarity, but a certainty. He'd been here before. Done this before. Lived through all this before. The goddamn watch. The rage. The frustration. The tick in his skull, pounding, drilling, deadening until he was numb and tears streamed down his eyes and all he could do was lash out and attack.

It was louder than it used to be. At night, when the world was still, he could hear it on his bedside table, clear as day. Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. Like time, the watch would never end. The hand would go around forever if it was allowed. It would stop, maybe, if he didn't wind it; but he had to wind it. He lay in bed and he dreaded the noise of its little gears turning the second hand, popping it ever so slightly forward, fifty-nine times and then sixty. One minute. One hour. Twelve hours. Twenty-four. A day into a week into a month. The year goes by and before he knows it, he's missed a birthday party at the fair that Jess swears she told him about, but that he knows she didn't. No, she wanted the day with Charlie all to herself. She'd paid for that one.

He heard movement in the kitchen. Low, playful voices and the clap of a pan on the stove. He took a long drag off his cigarette, the fourth of the morning, and flicked it into an empty can. His bourbon was gone, and maybe that was just as well. His head was pounding worse now. It'd probably be smart to get some water.

He reached for the door, raised his leg to go inside, and nearly fell from the shooting pain in his neck. The jolt of physical pain was secondary to the mental strain that hit him like a dart right behind his eyes. It was a javelin of shock; a memory that hit like a heavyweight. A red recollection that stunk of blood and...

But he'd never do that. Never. He never had done that. Of course he hadn't. Jess and Charlie were right on the other side of that door. They were fine. Sometimes he got mad, sure, but he'd never really hurt them. He'd never do something he couldn't take back.

He gritted his teeth and groaned out a plea to whoever the hell might be listening. Or maybe it was a plea to whoever this memory belonged to. "Get out of my head."

A bead of sweat rolled down his temple and got lost in his beard. He squeezed his eyes tight, trying to hold back the tears, involuntary tears, the only kind he allowed. All that blood. All that fucking blood. The watch hung in his pocket, growing heavier, louder, ticking, sure, but maybe doing more than that. Sometimes he suspected it could do a lot more than tick. Sometimes he felt it stir in there. Sometimes he felt it nudge at him, when he was feeling down. Sometimes...

A thought occurred to him, suddenly, for no particular reason at all, flaring where that ember of rage sat in the back of his mind, waiting to flash up and set fire to the neighborhood when given the fuel of irritation or slight. That thought, which used the coal of rage as its conduit, occurred with all the power of a hurricane, and he was caught in the eye. To resist such a power was absolute folly. A man doesn't resist a storm of such torrential authority. He hunkers down and survives. Maybe he tries to run. But Jim knew there was no running from this storm.

When did he take possession of that watch, exactly?

It was his fathers once, and now it was his. But when did his father pass it down? Why couldn't he remember? It should have been a simple question. It wasn't a graduation present, no, Jim had owned the watch for as long as he can remember. Even when he was a boy.

He backed up from the door, taking his hand off the knob as if from the pin of a live grenade that he had, only a second before, been prepared to pull. He walked to his workbench (last used for work nearly three years ago) and reached behind the toolbox, where he kept a bottle for emergencies. He broke the seal, took a small sip, and then another, longer, and finally one to wash it all down. He looked at himself in the dark reflection of the big bottle's glass.

He was surprised to see he hardly recognized the crazed expression of the man who looked back.

#### **JESS: CHAPTER FIVE.**

The plate of eggs sat untouched for the better part of an hour. By the time Jim finally came in (Jess learned long ago to never disturb him while he was in the garage) the sunny-side-up breakfast looked like a sad motel buffet—the kind people only eat at because they feel it would be wasteful to not utilize the complimentary meal. Indeed, when Jim sat down to eat, the yolk of his egg was colder than his glare and a sheen of oil clung to the bottom of the white plate.

Jess bit her lip. “Do you want me to warm it up?”

Jim grabbed his fork, holding the side of his head with his other hand, and took a labored breath. As if the mere thought of speaking to her was too much for his troubled mind to handle. Finally, in a voice quieter than Jess had expected, he said, “That's all right.”

She breathed. The pressure blew out in a tiny, quick shot of steam. Jim cut into the egg, speared it, and swallowed without chewing. Jess saw him wince and felt guilty for feeling worried. She should take gratitude in seeing him in pain. But she felt concerned instead.

“Do you want something for your head?”

He took another bite, slower this time, actually chewing. “Where’s Charlie?”

She looked over her shoulder, into the living room. Charlie was there, in clear view of them both, playing on the floor. When she looked back at Jim, she saw his gaze had found their son and answered his own question.

She said, “He’s bored.”

Jim engulfed half a piece of toast and washed it down with a big gulp of orange juice—perhaps the first non-alcoholic beverage he’d had since last weekend. “I’m sick,” he said, climbing to his feet, only a little unsteadily. “I’m going to cut wood. Helps the pain.”

She found the courage to speak as he turned his back and put his hand on the backdoor. “Jim?”

His shoulders tensed and he turned. He didn’t say anything, he just grunted. Sometimes that was more than she could hope for.

“Is everything all right?”

He blinked at her like she was an alien. Jess felt like a child under that angry gaze, and she almost quailed beneath it. She would have, if she wasn’t so damn worried.

“Have I done something wrong?”

“Probably,” he said. “But not that I can think of off the top of my head. Give me a while to think and I’ll come up with something.”

She scowled at him, but there wasn’t any heat behind the expression. This was as close to joking as Jim got these days. “I know it’s your father’s birthday today.”

The look of surprise on his face was so genuine that Jess knew he actually hadn’t remembered.

“I’m sorry,” she rushed as his expression curled into disgust. “I’m s—”

His right hand shot into his pocket and gripped something there like a priest might grab at a crucifix when confronted by a demon. Jess knew he was holding the watch, and not for the first time, she marveled at the power that little gold trinket had over her husband. She could almost hear it ticking in his palm.

Her mind was locked up; she knew there was nothing safe to say. Sometimes, in situations like this, the best thing she could do was simply wait for him to do or say something himself.

He broke the tension by spinning about, wrenching the door nearly off the frame, and then slamming it behind him as he rushed into the yard.

In the beginning, when they were still learning about one another (when they still cared enough to learn) she’d asked him about it. Where did it come from? He’d looked at her with those wide, peculiar eyes—an expression not dissimilar to the one Charlie wears when she catches him in the kitchen after bedtime. He’d been quiet for a frightfully long time. And then he’d cracked a smile, as if it was a joke. Well I guess I can’t remember. That’s funny, isn’t it?

Jess had agreed.

But looking back, she didn’t think it was funny at all.

## **CHARLIE: CHAPTER SIX**

Joe was under attack. The red commies were coming in hot from above, unleashing a radical socialist reign of hellfire on the allied troops at the base of the coffee table. Charlie called in support to Joe over the radio, offering intel that allowed him to avoid the brunt of the attack, but at least half his men weren’t so lucky. The screams of the dying carried all the way into the bathroom and brought his mother’s anxious face around the corner.

“What’s going on in here?”

“Can’t talk,” Charlie huffed. “Joe’s in trouble.”

And he was. The collectivist force in Russia had intercepted a secret message from Joe’s men and laid an ambush. Now, Joe and the remainder of his forces were wounded, cut off from reinforcements and surrounded. Enemy soldiers parachuted into the adjacent fields. They took cover behind the television stand, grouping up, and Joe turned to his men. Over the sound of scattered bombings, he spoke the truth, as Charlie’s father liked to put it. Speaking the truth was important in tense situations like this. There wasn’t any time for anything else.

“Listen up,” he said. “We’ve got two options. Die, or die fighting!”

The men talked it over and decided they’d die fighting.

## **JIM: CHAPTER SEVEN**

Jim made it to the wood stack in spite of himself. The watch was heavy as an anvil in his pocket. He felt it weighing him down as he walked to the back of the yard and was alarmed to realize he was favoring his opposite leg. The trouble of it was something he wanted to push away, just as he pushed away the trouble of his smoking and drinking and of the horrible memories.

He grabbed the familiar axe off the top of the wood pile and brought it down on the end of an old log. The watch stirred angrily in his pocket and he heard it tick; a heartbeat passed and he heard it again, louder than the trumpet of an angry elephant. The gears were oiled and smooth but they clanged like a cymbal as they turned. It grew heavier, somehow, and Jim realized it was demanding to be heard and seen and understood. Today he couldn’t drink the memories away or work them away.

He couldn't get it out of his head. The storm had come, and he was stranded, without power, without a car, without a life raft. His head pounded, wailing like a newborn, and his eyes watered as he took a swig from his flask. But that only seemed to make it worse. His vision swirled and the memories came washing in like cold water. If he hadn't given up gambling, he would have bet all the money in their bank account (not exactly high stakes poker, truth be told) that it had happened before. But then how would he know about it?

He worked jerkily, moving now like a clock himself. Tick, he raised his arm. Tick, he swung, just a second hand now, moving fast to the 5, 10, 15, and 20. Tick, he hit 30 and the log came in two. A splinter of wood broke from the deadfall. It flew out of the time piece, into the nether. Jim watched it go, acutely aware of that fine detail, and laughed in spite of the pain. The watch snickered with him, tick, tick, tick.

The curious spin of that splinter brought on a startling wave of understanding, more powerful than earlier in the garage. Suddenly, in one great punch of recollection so potent it nearly knocked him off his feet, Jim understood the true horror of that watch; the true horror of his fate. He remembered for the first time since he'd been six years old and trembled madly at the terror.

He saw the face of his father and realized with a jolt that he used to wind the watch. He'd always known it was his fathers, of course, but he'd never quite realized he was still the one winding it. He heard the whispers that came late at night; he saw the old, fumbling fingers working at the gears. The dead, rotting face of his father loomed in the shadows and Jim watched him come out of the dark and walk to his bedside table as he slept. He saw the long dead man reach for the golden watch that used to be his own and turn the dial.

He'd always kept the spring tight.

Suddenly, he remembered, maybe for the first time... why.

He let the insanity wash over him in a cold sheet of dread. His eyes grew wide and his lips peeled back from his teeth and he began to laugh, a choking, ripping laugh that came from somewhere deep inside, a place he'd kept away from the world (and even himself), until now. He opened the gate, which had closed the same day he'd taken that watch off the ground. He saw that scene of horror, heard the howl of the watch, and knew it was too late.

He never heard the door open. Never heard her steps come closer. He never heard her calls, quiet at first, and then louder.

"Jim," she said. Then louder: "Jim! Jim Harp!"

He felt a hand close round his shoulder and he turned, swinging with all the strength of a madman, and took his wife at the neck with the rusted head of the old axe which he'd got, so many years ago, from his father's toolshed where it had hung, unused, for who knows how many winters before he thought to take it down.

It sunk deep, unhindered by the skin and muscle, emboldened by the spine, which split like dry kindling, thrilled by the sinew and exhilarated by the tendon. It cut straight through Jessica Harp's neck, taking her head clean off and slinging a single bright wash of blood as it went. He followed through with his swing, like the good baseball player his father raised him to be.

Jim watched, more than halfway blind between the deafening screech of his pocket watch and the pounding of his skull as Jess's body fell, dancing, headless, to the ground. A shot of blood erupted from her ruined neck like water from a busted hydrant. Her arms and legs twitched as if full of an electricity which had been waiting, all these years, until now to make itself

known. Her fingers curled, her ankles twisted back and forth. Her legs kicked, as if to run—but with no head and no brain they couldn't make up their mind.

Jim stood over her for a full minute, and then he set to work. He looped an old frayed rope from a strong branch and made a noose just the way he'd been shown in boy scouts. A hangman's noose, the instructor had said, pleased with himself. It gets tighter the more you pull. He put the rope round his neck and scaled half the ladder. Then he kicked it out from under his feet, pleased to find that even after all these years, he'd remembered how to tie the knots.

### **CHARLIE: CHAPTER EIGHT**

A streak of blood marred the watch face. It seemed crueler to Charlie than a deep scratch. He picked it up, wiping the stain away on the leg of his jeans, feeling troubled but not really able to make sense of it all quite yet. He gripped the gold weight tight, pleased by the feeling, and took a deep breath.

The watch thrummed in his hand like a live thing. It had a heartbeat! He felt it pulse with a rhythm not unlike that of a kitten. It breathed.

It occurred to him for no real reason at all that he'd better wind the watch, because if he didn't, then who would? *Turn it thrice*, a voice seemed to say. *Not twice, thrice; three cheers for Charlie. Three times the charm.*