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NOVEL

ALSO BY JOHN CLARKSON

THE JAMES BECK NOVELS

Among Thieves

Bronx Requiem

Death Comes Due

THE ONE SERIES

And Justice for One

One Way Out

One Man's Law

New Lots

Reed's Promise

TRIBES

JOHN CLARKSON

Tribes

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For the divided

1

Somewhere in the back of his mind James Beck knew that drinking alone outside at night in December wasn't the best thing he could be doing. Particularly at an isolated hangout in upstate New York patronized by blue collar working types, half of them members of a rural gang referred to as the Kin. Beck was familiar with the type – lots of beards, tattoos, and threatening glares. They reminded him of white Aryan gang members he'd run across during his eight years in New York State prisons. The Kin boys annoyed Beck, but they didn't intimidate him. He either ignored them or stared back, daring them to say something.

Beck's size and demeanor, salt-and-pepper Covid beard, and dark hair grown past his collar made him look like someone best left alone. Particularly hunkered down in an Adirondack chair with his black knit cap pulled low and his dark Burberry quilted coat zipped up. And perhaps some of the Kin boys knew an ex-con when they saw one. Even in the half-light of the firepits scattered around the Field.

The locals called it the Field because that's what it was. An empty field in the Catskills bushwhacked out of overgrown farmland, surrounded on three sides by a scrub forest and on the fourth by a rundown red barn set back about twenty yards from a dirt road. Behind the barn, steel rings contained fires that didn't provide much warmth against the wintry night air but did have an evolutionary power to be comforting.

The Field had its advantages. It stayed open as long as people wanted to drink. It was only two miles from Beck's house via

back roads, so there was little chance of getting nailed for a DUI before he arrived home to a spacious house on twenty-seven acres. Also, the Field didn't have much competition. After years of Covid, legit bars opened only three or four days a week; none of them stayed open late.

The two brothers who ran the Field, George and Vic Myer, didn't bother with closing hours, a liquor license, permits, health codes, or filing tax returns. They did make sure to keep the peace so the state police and county sheriffs could continue acting as if the Field didn't exist. If a disturbance broke out, George and Vic would emerge from their dilapidated red barn carrying baseball bats, intent on turning unruly patrons into piñatas. It put a quick end to trouble. Beck figured that if George and Vic relied on baseball bats, it meant the locals knew enough to leave their guns at home or at least in their pickup trucks.

On balance, the Field worked for Beck the few times a month he was in the mood for it. Sitting outside by a fire sipping Irish whiskey helped Beck ignore the toll that living alone in a rural area had taken on him. Leaving Brooklyn had seemed logical. Covid, the gentrification of the fringe Red Hook neighborhood, and the desecration of his home by a maniac who had set fire to it as part of a gruesome war waged against Beck and his tight-knit crew of ex-cons were all good reasons to move upstate. But the months and years of isolation had diminished Beck's already small tolerance for anyone trying to impose their will on him.

There were times when sitting back in a weather-beaten Adirondack chair, sipping good Irish whiskey, followed by a swallow of Guinness, and glancing up at a black winter sky bristling with billions of gleaming stars, made James Beck feel as if all was right with the world. Even though it wasn't.

2

Andy Miller stood in the shadows watching Beck. Andy didn't know Beck's name. He knew him by his drink order – a double Redbreast Irish whiskey in a four-ounce tumbler when they had it, Jameson when they didn't. Guinness chaser in a 14.2-ounce can. Miller carried drinks from the barn to customers scattered around the Field, along with enough free chicken wings and chili to keep the drinkers drinking.

Andy had been waiting to see if the bearded guy wanted another round. He usually nursed one round but sometimes ordered a second. Miller kept track because Mr. Redbreast was a good tipper. Then Andy saw Irene Allen step into the firelight surround Mr. Redbreast. The odds on a second round went up.

Irene approached Beck with her usual conspiratorial smile. She was one person at the Field Beck enjoyed seeing. He liked Irene's looks and manner. Country cute, good humored, and a trim body, all of which went well with her who-gives-a-shit personality. And Irene never stayed long enough to wear out her welcome. She liked to move around, hit and run, visit with anybody and everybody, flirt, crack wise, and find out the latest scuttlebutt.

Beck pegged Irene as mid-thirties. Around five-four. Maybe a hundred-ten pounds. She dressed like a tomboy and seemed impervious to the cold. This night she wore a snug fitting thermal top under a brown plaid flannel shirt and a half-open canvas Carhartt barn jacket. Tight jeans showed off her legs and ass. No hat covered her tousled, short, dark hair.

Beck knew that Irene worked in construction. He was sure that underneath the layers of clothing, there wasn't enough body fat on Irene Allen to hide her lean muscles. Beck didn't dwell on what Irene would look like without clothes. She deserved her privacy, particularly around the Field. Few women patronized the Field, and none of them came alone. Irene Allen always came to the Field by herself; another reason Beck liked her.

She stomped toward Beck in her Red Wing work boots, holding a bottle of Lagunitas IPA in her right hand. She straddled Beck's left leg and sat down on his thigh. Beck didn't react. Even though Irene presented as lesbian, she always flirted with Beck, although not quite this blatantly. He could feel her pubic bone pressing into his leg. It distracted him so much that before he knew it, Irene leaned over and snatched his small tumbler of Redbreast with her free hand. She took a generous sip, chasing it with her ale, and put his glass back on the arm of the Adirondack chair.

Beck grabbed the remains of his whiskey. Irene smiled and said, "Jeezus, I'm horny tonight."

"And thirsty."

In response Irene tipped her bottle of ale at Beck and took another swig.

"Don't you have a girlfriend waiting somewhere for you?"

"Friendzzzz. I can't find any of 'em." She bounced a little on Beck and said, "I can make do with a man if I have to. How are you in bed, Irish? Any good?"

"Absolutely life-changing. Now get off me and pull up a chair. You're too heavy."

"Bullshit." Irene gave it one more bounce and pushed off Beck, swinging her leg over like she was dismounting a horse. Irene stepped into the shadows and reappeared dragging a yellow Crosely lawn chair mottled with rust. She set the flower-shaped metal chair on Beck's left next to his glass of Redbreast which was now empty. She stared at the empty glass.

Beck said, "You want one?"

"Thought you'd never ask."

As if on cue, Andy Miller came out of the shadows, smiling.

Beck held up his empty glass and said, "I'll take another."

Andy bobbed his head as he listened to Beck's drink order. He never looked directly at whoever was speaking. Beck wondered if that was because Miller couldn't see very well. He wore glasses with lenses so thick they made the frames slide down his nose.

"And a Guinness?"

"No. Just the whiskey."

Irene leaned over and gave Beck a look. "Aaand?"

"And a Redbreast for Irene."

"A double," said Irene.

Andy nodded and gave them a thumbs-up.

As Miller disappeared into the shadows, Irene said, "I have a theory why he always wears them shitbag, worn-out Dickie coveralls."

"To hide his bowlegs?"

"You got it, man. That and how skinny he is. Like bag of bones skinny."

Beck nodded.

"I like that fucker," said Irene. "The help at this shithole comes and goes, but Andy hangs in. The assholes around here rag him about being an inbred retard, but he works hard and never complains."

Beck said, "Inbred?"

Irene waved a hand dismissively. "He comes from people been here a long time. Generations. Hill people. You know, kissin' cousins and all that bullshit."

Beck nodded, thinking about Andy's bowlegs, bad eyesight, and apparent mental deficits.

Miller emerged out of the shadows with the drinks on a small tray. He handed Irene her drink.

She smiled. "Thanks, sweetie."

Miller placed Beck's whiskey on the arm of his chair and scooped up the empty glass. Beck handed him a folded fifty-dollar bill and thanked Andy.

Irene caught the bill's denomination in the firelight but didn't say anything. She liked this guy she called Irish. She didn't know his name, what he did for work, or where he lived. Clearly, he had money. He tipped well, dressed well, and drove an expensive two-year-old black GMC Denali Sierra. But he wasn't interested in people knowing he had money. Or knowing anything about him, for that matter. Unlike the assholes who wanted everyone to know they had enough money to buy the expensive trucks and SUVs they drove to the Field because they were part of the Kin.

Irene had slept with a few women, but more out of curiosity than sexual preference. She wasn't gay. She projected that image mostly so that the men at the Field wouldn't hit on her. That didn't include the bearded stranger who drank expensive Irish whiskey, had a sense of humor, and knew how to tip hard-working people.

Irene took another sip of her whiskey and said to Beck, "Hey, Irish, anybody ever tell you that you don't talk much?"

"Not really. What have you got to say for yourself tonight?"

"Not much. Although I saw something interesting a few minutes ago."

"What?"

Irene dropped her voice. "Before I came looking for you, I went to see if your truck was in the parking area. I saw three guys having an argument. One of them is mid-level Kin leader named Lund. Oscar Lund. Longish gray hair. Gut hanging over his damn pants. He doesn't come here often. One of the other two was a meatball asshole named Hamm Elrod. The third guy was Joey Collins. It was mostly Hamm Elrod doing all the bitching. Lund was trying to squash it."

"What's so interesting about that?"

"Nothing much. The interesting part is that Hamm Elrod and Joey Collins shouldn't be anywhere near each other. Hamm Elrod

is Kin muscle. A knuckle-dragger whose go-to move is a fist in your face. Joey Collins is like Kin aristocracy. A lot of high-up leaders came out of his family.”

“You seem to know a lot about the Kin.”

“I grew up around here. People are always talking about the Kin.”

Irene jumped up and finished her whiskey.

“I want to mingle. You gonna be here for a while?”

Beck looked at his drink and lifted his can of Guinness to gauge how much was left.

“A bit.”

Beck watched Irene disappear into the shadows. He took a sip of his Redbreast. Suddenly, he didn't feel like finishing the booze. A sense of unease came over him. He'd been telling himself there were plenty of locals at the Field who weren't part of the Kin. The guy who'd told him about the Field worked on his property and had nothing to do with the Kin. But there were enough Kin assholes around the Field to cause trouble he didn't need to be around. He checked his watch. Nearly midnight. The fire near him had burned down to embers. Time to go home.

Just as Beck leaned forward to push himself out of his Adirondack chair, voices approaching from the shadows stopped him. Three men emerged into the firelight off to his left. The three Irene had talked about. It wasn't hard to figure out who was who. Oscar Lund looked like a hundred other guys he'd seen in the area. Maybe bigger than most, but typical. Beefy, wearing a camouflage vest, sweat-stained Carhartt ball cap, jeans, and boots. He was talking to a fireplug of a man walking next to him who had to be Hamm Elrod. His hair was cropped so short he looked bald. Elrod moved and sounded like a disgruntled dive bar bouncer who'd been in too many fights. He wore baggy jeans that hadn't seen the inside of a washing machine in a long time, a fake sheepskin jacket patched with a piece of duct tape on the right shoulder seam over a dirty t-shirt, and Walmart boots. That

left Joey Collins. Younger. Saying nothing. His corduroy pants and down coat looked clean and relatively new. He walked behind the other two like he didn't want to be with them.

Lund tried to keep his voice down, but he had a smoker's rasp that made it easy to hear him as they came parallel to Beck.

"Goddammit, Hamm, I'm done talkin' about it. You knocked that fucking geezer down so hard I heard his skull hit the asphalt from fifty feet away."

"What was I supposed to do? Pretty boy Joey was nowhere to be seen."

Lund started to say something, stopped himself, and said, "Quit arguing with me. I'm done talking about it."

Beck sat back waiting for them to pass by. As they walked past him, he spotted the gun holstered at Oscar's hip. Oscar Lund's down vest didn't quite cover it.

Apparently, the brothers' ban on guns at the Field didn't apply to Kin leaders.

As they walked past the firepit, the bald bruiser picked up a piece of firewood from a pile nearby and tossed it onto the fire, sending smoke and sparks in the air that wafted in Beck's direction. Beck waved away the smoke catching Hamm Elrod's attention. Elrod turned and sneered at Beck. "What's the matter princess? Smoke get in your eyes?"

Beck's eyes narrowed. He kept his mouth shut and tamped down the anger that flared in his gut, but there was no way he could leave now and let some fat asshole think he'd driven him off.

Beck checked his watch. 12:13 a.m. Suddenly, the cold seemed to penetrate into him. He finished his whiskey and chased it with the remains of his Guinness, keeping an eye on Elrod to see if he was going to become the focus for Fatboy's bad mood. The three of them stood on the other side of the fire. Elrod kept glancing back at Beck with hostile glares. Beck knew nothing good would come from letting this guy get away with that shit, but he decided walking over and breaking his nose wasn't worth the trouble.

Beck watched the three of them. Lund was doing the talking. He pictured what would happen if he told Elrod to go fuck himself. Beck figured he would bull rush him and try for a roundhouse right aimed at his head. The bruiser was shorter and heavier. Ducking under the punch would be difficult. The move would be to step right and lean away from the punch. When the punch missed, pivot left and deliver a short, hard right hook as the bull staggered past him. Aim for the jaw, just under the ear. The pivot would have to be fast. The counterpunch faster. Beck knew he'd be lucky to take him out with one shot, but if he connected, he'd break the fucker's jaw and knock him out. And probably break a couple of his knuckles. Then there were the other two, one with a gun. He'd have to take down all three before they could react. Very difficult. Nearly impossible with a broken hand. The hell with it.

Hamm Elrod stopped glaring at Beck when Lund reached out and backhanded Elrod's shoulder to get his attention. Lund spoke slowly. Beck could hear most of what he said.

"All right, you two, you got it done, but not how you should have. There could be blowback but screw it. Won't be nuthin' we haven't dealt with before." The bruiser started to say something, but Lund raised a hand and said, "No. Zip it, Hamm. We sent a message. It's done. We'll talk in a day or two when things settle down. For now, I want you both to hang out until the place thins out so people will remember seeing you. First round is on me. But don't overdo it. Just goddamn relax. We're done."

Joey Collins said, "Yes, sir."

Elrod nodded and kept his mouth shut.

Oscar said, "Okay." He turned and walked in the direction of the barn to pay for the first round of drinks. Elrod and Collins grabbed two chairs and sat down opposite Beck on the other side of the fire.

Interesting, thought Beck. They'd hurt an old man and now they're here to establish an alibi.

Andy Miller had been waiting for Oscar Lund to leave. Now he stepped into the firelight, a scarecrow in his stained Dickie coveralls, nodding. Andy bounced up and down on the balls of his feet, ready to take their drink order.

The bruiser ignored Andy. He turned to Collins, still pissed off about what happened.

“Fuckwit. Would’ve been no problem if you’d been where you were supposed to be.”

Joey Collins snapped back, “When are you going to get it? He was already out of the van helping those guys load up. It was so damn simple. All you had to do was wait for him to...”

“Shut it. Like Oscar said, we’ll go into it later. I know you think you got status, pal, but you had a chance to prove you’ve got some balls and you blew it. Trust me, I ain’t takin’ all the blame. Right now I need a fucking drink.” He looked up at Andy, still waiting. “Gimme a Scotch. Double. No ice.”

Collins said, “Beer.”

As Andy Miller turned to fetch the drinks, the bald asshole lifted his foot and booted Andy in the ass.

“And make it quick, retard.”

Beck saw Andy wince. He was too thin to take the blow. He moved away from the pair awkwardly, trying not to show how much the kick hurt.

Beck’s anger and disgust ignited breathtakingly fast. Fucking lowlifes. He had no business being here. Whatever fondness he had for drinking under the stars at the Field evaporated. As he was about to leave, Irene dropped down onto the chair next to Beck.

She said to Beck, “Did you see that?”

“Yeah, I saw it.”

“Goddamn Elrod is such an asshole. The word is they were on some kind of holdup or something and went wrong. My money says the fuckup was Hamm Elrod.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I got my sources around this dump.”

Beck shrugged, put his empty glass on the chair arm next to the Guinness can, and was about to stand up when he saw the bald bruiser storming in their direction heading for Irene.

He pointed a finger at Irene and yelled, "You got a big fucking mouth, you little dyke bitch!"

Elrod was surprisingly fast for a short-legged thug. Before Beck rose fully out of his chair, Elrod made it past him, reaching for Irene who jumped off her chair, but not before Elrod grabbed the front of her barn jacket intending to slam her onto the ground. Irene pulled a three-and-a-half-inch stainless steel push dagger from her belt buckle and punched the tip of the blade into Elrod's forearm. Elrod howled and let go of her. Irene backpedaled and fell. Infuriated, embarrassed, Elrod lost whatever control he had. He moved toward Irene intent on stomping her. He didn't care about her knife or anything else, including Beck. Big mistake.

Beck took one long step and slammed his right forearm into Elrod's chest with all his two-hundred-fifteen pounds behind the blow, the impact made more powerful by the momentum Beck had generated with his lunge forward. The blow knocked Elrod away from Irene, turned him toward Beck, and made him raise his arms. That opened him to Beck's left hook, delivered from a crouch, with all the power of Beck's hips, legs, and shoulder, aimed just below Elrod's bottom right rib. A body killer. A perfect liver shot.

The blow made a popping thud followed by Elrod's painful grunt. Elrod dropped to his knees, then down onto his forearms, paralyzed by excruciating pain. Beck didn't waste another second on Elrod. He turned to check on Irene. She was still on the ground, still holding the knife, motionless, stunned by what Beck had done.

Beck looked back at the young guy to make sure he wasn't going to draw a weapon or get into the fight. Joey Collins stood by his chair, hands down, confused at how quickly Hamm Elrod had been rendered helpless.

Beck helped Irene to her feet. Hamm Elrod tried to stand up. Beck ignored him and put his arm around Irene's shoulders, gently but firmly steering her away from the scene.

"Time to go. Put the knife away." Irene turned to look at Hamm Elrod, who'd dropped back onto his hands. Beck said to her, "C'mon. It's over."

Irene slipped the knife back into her belt buckle.

From behind them Hamm yelled, "Keep walking, faggot. Next time ain't going to be no bitch to get in the way so you could sucker punch me!"

Beck was one second away from turning around and pounding Hamm Elrod's face into pulp when he saw the Myer brothers emerging from the back of the barn carrying their baseball bats. He realized he'd never seen them. Both were big. One of them was huge.

Irene saw George and Vic, too.

She said, "Shit. Hurry up. They'll come after you when they see what you did to Hamm."

Beck let go of Irene and walked next to her, heading quickly toward the parking area on the left side of the barn. He kept an eye on the brothers. He figured it would take them a few moments to find out what had happened. He wanted to be gone by then. He and Irene made it into the shadows and increased their pace.

"Where's your car?"

"We just passed it. That beat-to-shit Ford Focus." Beck stopped, not anxious to turn back. Irene decided for him. "Forget it. I'll come back and get it later. I'd rather stick with you if you don't mind. I don't want to get caught on the road if they come after me. I'm about a half-hour from home. How far is your place?"

"Five minutes. Let's go."

3

They were silent until Beck said, “Here we are.”

He turned onto a gravel driveway that ran about fifty yards before it angled left, revealing a two-story, 2,500-square-foot white colonial with a red front door. A covered walkway on the right side of the main house led to a guest house which at one time had been a stable.

Beck parked his GMC in a space cleared of snow on the left side of the house. A curving waist-high wall of split firewood set the parking area off from the surrounding grounds. Discreet lights flanking the front door and mounted above a side entrance illuminated the area.

As Irene jumped down out of the truck she said, “Nice house. How much land you got here?”

“Twenty-seven acres. About five of it cleared.”

Irene asked, “When did you get it?”

“Couple of years ago.”

They entered the house through a side door that opened onto a mudroom. A green bench ran along one wall facing a rack of brass hooks. Irene sat down on the bench, pulled off her Red Wing boots, and hung her barn jacket on a hook. Beck did the same with his ankle-high black Timberlands and Burberry down jacket. He wore a black cashmere sweater that kept him warm at the Field. Irene walked into the kitchen ahead of him.

With her Carhartt jacket off, Irene looked even more diminutive in her oversized plaid shirt.

“How old is this place?”

Beck said, "I think they built the original part of the house around 1860. There's been sections added on and renovations done over the years."

Irene pointed to the overhead beams that ran along the kitchen ceiling.

"Those beams are original. Chopped out with an ax."

"Yes."

"The kitchen is new."

"Everything you see was done before I bought the place."

Irene asked, "Is there a bathroom on this floor?"

Beck pointed the way, and Irene walked out of the kitchen. He grabbed a bottle of seltzer from his refrigerator and two water glasses from his dishwasher. He took down two rocks glasses from a cabinet above the counter and a bottle of Midleton Irish whiskey. He placed everything on a large, free-standing, rectangular worktable that had been custom-built for the kitchen. There were two matching stools on one side of the table.

He heard a toilet flush as Irene emerged from the downstairs bathroom. She entered the kitchen with a smile.

"Your house is about a hundred times nicer than my hovel."

Beck said, "A hundred times?"

"At least." Irene sat down on one of the stools opposite where Beck was standing and said, "Are you pouring?"

"Yes." Beck poured two fingers of the whiskey in each glass and asked, "What do you want to chase it with?"

Irene slugged down half the whiskey. "I'm fine. This is great." She held up the rocks glass. "What is this?"

"About three hundred dollars a bottle."

"Show off."

"I've got to live up to my image."

"Don't worry, your image is just fine."

Beck sipped his Midleton then asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah. Sort of. Stuff like that doesn't usually happen to me."

"But you carry that knife just in case."