

Chapter 1: Call to Work

Jake's Work: A Novel by Larry A. Mitchell

Deep in the snow country of the Cascades Range, within sight of Mount Baker, a small town arose beside a waterfall.

If Prospect Falls inflicted occasional minor damage and muddy debris upon the residents, they thought this to be light and passing pain, compared to the delight of clean, clear water flowing sweetly through the heart of town, water that was sinus-achingly cold, pure and nourishing to the heart.

As the balmy rains of April brought spring to the high country, an increasing torrent of snowmelt came flooding down the falls. By Mother's Day, sheets of water sheared across the granite ledges with a continuous thunder, astonishing to hear from anywhere in town. These were evenings when families lounged on lush lawns, serenaded by the unceasing boom of freefalling icy white torrents, and watched the last rays of the setting sun turn the ancient seabed shards of the Cascades Range to a dozen shades of orange and red. Generation after generation cherished sitting in the balmy twilight of ten o'clock, feasting on fresh Rainier cherries chased with the world's best drinking water --all to the wondrous concussion of just-melted snow plunging, then plunging again, bound for the sea.

Just above the waterfalls stood the Mountain County Courthouse, a towering Victorian fortress built of brick the color of undercooked salmon.

The gold-baron county councilmen of the mining era, given to style and vigor, had envisioned three objectives for their civic jewel. The courthouse must upstage the one in Bellingham, must stand for centuries and must resuscitate the failing brickyard of a reformed local madam. They hired an esteemed builder of mineshafts and bade him to extravagance. This former constructor of tunnels and sluices brought forth the municipal palace for which they had longed.

The four floors of the courthouse each rested on beams of oak. (One of these chest-high timbers was displayed at the groundbreaking, circus bears dancing on it.) Finely-wrought staircases spiraled around pillars carved from single Douglas fir trunks. Pairs of gilded birdcage elevators rose and fell from each end of the marbled lobby. Stuffed grizzlies glared from the corners. Mounted eagles were poised for flight from icon niches. Even offices designed for snowplow drivers and privy inspectors had ballroom floors, Tiffany lamps and twenty-foot high, mullioned double windows. Whole groves of cedar had been cut down, then planed and trimmed to make closets big enough to live in.

If the courthouse exterior was merely massive and without exquisite detail, the building's interior more than compensated, with its polished woods and beveled glass, with its wondrous silvered dome high above the lobby and with the windswept vistas of its public rooms. The public rooms and chambers all faced toward the waterfalls. County functionaries were given the slightly quieter, if less scenic side, with the top floor housing the Sheriff's Department. On this particular sunsplashed May morning, Sheriff Locke Lloyd decided to wait to close the blinds on the several sets of windows around his corner office. Right now, with noon two long hours away, he played bureaucratic solitaire with the stacks of paperwork on his desk, carefully examining each document then placing it in a more suitable stack.

Next to Locke's office, in the staff bathroom, Deputy Wallace was putting in his 'thinking time', groaning with the effort. The closed outside window was paned in frosted glass, shielding passing birds from the spectacle.

Outside and above the next set of windows down, in the twig-cobbled nest under the courthouse eaves, baby swallows were hatching out. Their mother was frantically ferrying worms and grubs to her plaintive brood.

Her mate was nowhere around. Perhaps harm had befallen him, leaving no more than a fading red stain on distant snow.

If so, it would be an apt tragedy. This office, its window open to the beseeching cries of baby birds, housed Investigations of Violent Crimes.

Not long ago, the office space needed for Investigation of Violent Crimes was created by renovating the walk-in closet in the deputies' squadroom. It would take Lieutenant Norman Macon eight paces to stride the length of his domain, four paces to cross it.

His nearly century-old desk was wider than he could span – and Norman Macon was a big man. (The desk was hewn from a single block of oak by the sole survivor of the Henry Street Flood. The desk and its multitude of drawers took the sad-eyed mute eight months to make.) Norman spent his life undoing what violence had done. If he had come to believe in evil, he had also come to accept the presence of wonder and deliverance.

Because he knew victims, as few of us know each other, he wanted more for them than simply justice done or a mystery solved. He understood how they longed for an end to what had happened to them. He understood this as well as anyone could --anyone but Jake. The Sheriff worked patiently, this morning, his movements almost prim, as he perused code violation summaries, vendor invoices, protocol memoranda, booking forms, leave requests, allowance and expenditure variances, field interview reports, interagency alerts, warnings, cautionary notifications and apprehension advisories, all grist for the mills of justice. Sheriff Lloyd was a man built to the scale of his office, tall and imposing, with a weathered face and gunslinger-blue eyes.

He turned those eyes on Deputy Matt Dudley, who was tapping at the open door. Matt flashed a toothy grin. "Sir, I think Lieutenant Macon's got something big going. He's on the phone now."

The sheriff gave a quick nod, put down the invoice in his hand and picked up his Stetson. Matt assured him, "It's big. You can see it in Macon's face."

They went down the hall, the sheriff leading, as he always did, as though he was striding to a showdown on a dusty street. As they passed, he tapped on the closed restroom door, two brisk raps without breaking stride, "Wallace, present yourself."

By the time Locke and Matt reached the Violent Crimes office, Deputy Wallace was out of the bathroom, buckling up his utility belt, a satisfied smirk spreading across his toad-like face. They found Lieutenant Macon at his desk, cradling the phone against his shoulder, his face tensed and alert, listening intently like a cat watching a hole. Without looking up, he jotted a note and handed it to the sheriff.

Prison warden back East. May have something for us.

Locke Lloyd picked up an extension. He put a fingertip in his free ear to mute the sound of the falls and heard the warden's voice. "I strapped Butcher Reilly into the electric chair myself. I was glad to do it and proud to help rid the world of him. He sat there in the hot seat, sneering at me, as if he was putting something over on us by being executed."

"As soon as he was secured, I backed away from him. 'Well, Reilly, anything to say before we ship you out?'"

"It made my skin crawl to hear the man giggle when he said, 'I once killed an old lady, up in Sweetwater Canyon, Washington State. Nobody ever caught me for her. I outsmarted all of you.' Butcher stuck out his tongue at me and laughed out loud. 'Go ahead! Send me to Hell!' "We took him up on that. We fed him enough voltage to make him buck and twist.

"It's only been an hour since Doc pronounced him dead. I went right to my atlas and found a Sweetwater Canyon in your neck of the woods. Just thought I'd let you know."

The warden talked for a while longer, without saying much of anything. The lieutenant finally thanked him for his time and got him off the phone.

Norman and Locke Lloyd looked at each other, listening to the long, rolling boom of tumbling water.

"This might clear your Ryan case," the sheriff said.

Norman nodded. He pulled a red-tabbed folder from a back shelf and joined his superior in front of a wall map of the backcountry. The sheriff spoke, tapping the map; “We’ll meet you here at the trailhead in one hour. Go get your special deputy.”

Norman sighed softly and said, “Poor Jake. But it’s the only way to bring Maisie home.” The sheriff shrugged and straightened the brim of his Stetson.

Ten minutes later, Lieutenant Macon was driving his department-issue Jeep Cherokee down Dark Hollow Road. Poorly kept farmland alongside the road was shedding topsoil, layering the pavement with a light powdery yellow dust. Norman remembered the Western axiom that ‘Water makes the land’ and marveled at its truth.

He could then appreciate the Jepson place, as he turned into their gravel driveway. The green of their willow trees, the silver surface of their clear, clean pond and the rich dark earth of their truck garden stood out against a landscape of sallow weeds and star thistle. The Jepsons might live in a trashed and worn-out trailer, but they took care of their land.

His arrival, as always, took Libby and Jake by surprise.

The hounds began to bark, and Jake began to cry. He was a pudgy boy in his forties, standing stock-still, wailing at his obese mother and pointing at the Cherokee. “No, no, no! Oh, no! It’s Mister Norman! I don’t want to go wandering! Don’t make me go wandering no more!” Norman stepped out of his vehicle.

The Jepsons’ half-dozen scruffy hounds knew him. They stopped barking and bounded along beside him, as he approached Jake and Libby.

Jake, still sobbing, hid behind his mother, tugging at her flowered muumuu. She wouldn’t stand for that and grabbed him by the wrists.

Jake broke free and waddled frantically behind the shabby Airstream trailer. Chickens scattered and squawked. The hounds romped and barked with delight.

Norman and Libby Jepson both knew that Jake’s work was too important to be rushed. They waited.

Libby wouldn’t talk much, except to her son. Just to be saying something, Norman offered, “I don’t see any blackberry thickets on your land. How do you manage that?”

Libby didn’t change expression. She just continued gazing around the hillside, her huge arms folded across the purple and gold pattern of her muumuu. But she flushed with pleasure at his praise.

Norman was always startled by the soft, melodious sound of Libby's voice. "Blackberry brambles won't abide sweet water. I found us the best well in the county before we set up the trailer. My dowsing power was lifted from me in birthing Jake. Maybe because I came to fear wells."

"How's that, ma'am?"

"Many is the time that I've visioned that someone was trapped down a well, fixing to die, somehow because of my boy."

The lieutenant smiled, "Libby, I don't think that we allow open wells in this county anymore." Libby turned and looked at him. She and Jake both had slightly bulging eyes with white edges showing under oversized brown pupils. Jake's eyes tilted and hers did not, yet son and mother had the same unveiled stare. "You don't have the sight," she said, her voice chill. She studied the toe of her gray, torn tennis shoe while chewing on her lip, banishing Norm from her awareness.

Norman shrugged and studied the landscape. He wondered why Libby always had to be so touchy.

After a few minutes, Jake emerged from the shadows, the sunlight falling fully on his tear-stained moon face. He hugged his mother and held her by the shoulders, "Mama, I got to go with Mister Norman. It's man's work."

Libby smiled at her boy. "Don't cry no more, my son. I'll help you get ready for your man's work. I'll put your work things together and run your special bath. Go ahead and show that man what you need for your wanding." She ponderously, painfully climbed the rickety three wooden steps into the silver trailer, gave Jake another smile and went inside.

Jake led Norman by the hand to an ancient incense cedar tree, at the edge of the garden. Norman watched Jake become absorbed in its scented shadows for several moments, squinting and frowning, rubbing his nose on the sleeve of his dingy sweatshirt. He abruptly straightened up and pointed two high boughs; "I need that one and that one."

The lieutenant looked to make sure he knew which two wanding branches were destined to help bring Maisie home.

Jake went inside the trailer and Norman spent fifteen minutes in climbing up, sawing the boughs loose then climbing back down.

He felt sad and faintly nauseous. Fresh incense cedar boughs smelled to him of death, because of the work that he had seen them do.

He had to get away from the tree. He walked alongside the garden, straightening the deer netting.

After twenty more minutes, Jake carefully sidled down the ruined front steps of the trailer. He was dressed for his work, in denim overalls, black gumboots and his favorite baseball cap with a yellow cartoon canary on the front.

Jake inspected the lieutenant's work with the branches. "This one's too long," he complained about one. "Cut it here, kind of slanty."

"At an angle? Like this?"

Jake nodded. After the cutting, Jake held the limbs while Norman carefully twined the two fragrant boughs at right angles to each other. Jake held up his wand, waving it back and forth. Satisfied, he touched the bill of his cap. "Jake's ready for work. Mister Norman ready?"