

The Death of Jennie Stark

“Does she have to die?” Stan Baker asked his agent. For years Stan’s Jennie Stark mysteries topped all bestseller lists. A television show based on Jennie finished its tenth season syndicated in three markets. Copies of Jennie Stark mysteries sold in twenty-seven languages. Jennie made Stan millions. Now his agent’s advice was to kill her off.

“Move on. The plots are stale, formulaic and predictable. Yes, your heroine is everyman’s dream of a woman, but after sixty books, my god, every man’s had her.” The agent shook her head, “Sorry, Stan, the sales figures from the last three books are dismal. Your TV show is cancelled. Jennie is old news, kill her off.”

“Never,” Stan rose. “I’ll find a new agent. I’ll find a new publisher. Jennie isn’t going to die.” He stormed from the agent’s office. After a drink at 12:31 his favorite bar, he calmed down. The agent hadn’t lied to him; his books had lost their edge. *The fault isn’t Jennie’s*, Stan admitted to himself. *My plots are stale.*

I could change her name. I could change the genre. Jennie could become Queen Mallory of the Planet Flagon. I’ll write under a different name. Jennie Stark is old news; Queen Mallory is new and hot, and she is going to be a huge success. I’ll try anime.

He took the short cab ride to his Greenwich Village apartment. The apartment Jennie paid for. Pumped and ready to start on the first book of a new series, he rushed to his office. He picked up a remote and started a fire in the gas fireplace. The flick of another button moved his horizontal blinds to the setting he liked to let in the morning sun without shining on to his computer. He opened a mahogany cabinet and retrieved a whiteboard, multi-colored sticky notes, and several fat pens with the special grip he loved. He closed his eyes to visualize the setting, style, and character of Queen Mallory’s world.

He saw Jennie Stark: a tall, slender, auburn-haired beauty with blazing green eyes, dressed in a tailored suit featuring a tight short skirt that framed those shapely legs. A silk drape neckline in the shape of a deep V displayed just a hint of the firm orbs of her breasts. She sat on the edge of his desk, dangling a red Prada sling off one dainty foot, dressed for the prestigious law firm in Manhattan, ready and willing to tackle her next murder case. *I'm going to miss those red Prada's and that enticing white V, it can't be helped.*

Stan hesitated, not wanting to tell Jennie. He looked her over. How many men had traced their fingers down the V of that silk, as Jennie sighed in electric anticipation? How many times had men caressed those long slender legs from the firm thighs, past the calves, to those dainty feet and slipped off the red Prada's?

He tried again to visualize Queen Mallory. She wears a royal purple velvet cape over a very short metallic skirt. Her top is a metallic bustier; her legs are covered in tight, thigh-high leather. She holds a staff, and an ornate golden dagger is discreetly tucked into her belt. *I'll go retro, back to the metal bra genre . . . the Buck Rodgers era. It might just work, offering nostalgia for the old folks and a surprising twist for the young geeks who thrive on sci-fi.* He pictured posters of his heroine hanging in a million dorm rooms. He thought of Jennie's eyes. The flashing green eyes still mesmerized him. Perhaps Queen Mallory possessed the same power to enslave men. He would think about that.

Then Jennie appeared before him, hands on hips glaring. "No, I'm not some hussy, sci-fi queen. I'm Jennie Stark, defense attorney. You'll degrade my reputation in some third rate sci-fi rag." Jennie stormed around the room. Stan feared her now, wouldn't tell her what his agent suggested. He'd give up writing.

For three sleepless nights Jennie screamed at him, *Start the book. You have to start the next book.*

Sleep deprivation drove him to resignation. Stan started writing. The story line was stale, the plot old, yet Jennie remained tantalizing. The plot didn't matter; the book would inspire men to dream of his green-eyed beauty one more time. Stan wrote his master piece, a love letter to his inspiration. He didn't think about the ending. He hoped the book would never end.

And yet he approached the final chapter, Jenny won another case. Once again she proved her client's innocence. A shot shattered the celebration in the court room . . .

Stan stopped typing. He couldn't finish. He walked back to his bedroom and lay down thinking back to the first Jennie Stark novel.

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The skinny red-headed kid, dressed in the tacky orange nylon shirt of Bimbo's Pizzeria with a name tag declaring "Stan Baker, happy to serve the best pizza in town", knocked on the door of apartment 6A, even though the door stood ajar. Stan expected this. The man in 6A, a recluse writer, made it clear he didn't want to be interrupted. The expected envelope sat on a side table in the entry. *Bimbo's* written in an illegible scrawl. *He may be a writer but he sure can't write.* Stan smiled at his little joke, and counted the cash, which included a generous tip. About to leave he heard something crash in the back of the apartment.

"Hey, mister, are you ok?" Stan called, expecting to hear a rich variety of expletives from the recluse... no response. Stan froze conflicted. He had been warned in no uncertain terms to not interrupt. He felt it, he sensed it. *Something's wrong.* He couldn't quite identify ... *the typing, the familiar clicking of the keys, was absent. The writer isn't writing.* In fact that single crash and the hum of the fridge were the only sounds in the apartment: no key clicking, no grumping, and no mutterings disturbed the quiet.

Stan ventured further into the apartment, and called again. At the door to the writer's office and listened to the silence. Then he jumped two feet into the air as another crash reverberated through

the hall, followed by the screech of the huge orange Tom that lived with the recluse. The sound had come from the kitchen. Stan rushed in that direction to find the cat pawing through the remains of a ceramic bowl that had once held chicken salad no longer safe for consumption. No sound from the writer.

Embolden by the solution to the mysterious crashes, Stan proceeded back to the writer's den. Pushing the door open, Stan saw the man slumped at his desk. His head was down, pressing into the keyboard of his laptop, and the screen showed a page of uninterrupted "Isdaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa." The computer continued to pump out page after page of the nonsense, no longer directed by the hand of the departed writer. Trembling, Stan dialed 911 on his cell. "The man is dead." He managed to tell the operator before he crumpled onto the floor, his tall skinny body folding like an accordion.

Stan awoke to stare into the eyes of a cute thirty-something medic who told him he would be fine. Not the manliest way to meet a woman.

Later that evening, as Stan changed out of the grease-splattered, tacky orange uniform, he noticed a lump in the side pocket. He found a key etched with 6A. He didn't remember picking that up. He couldn't sleep, wondering what the police would think if they found him with a key to the writer's apartment. They might think him a thief or worse, a murderer. Stan began to tremble and sweat. He could throw it away. He jumped up and started for the trash. No, police always find things in the trash, and his finger prints would be all over it. Stan wiped the key clean and wrapped it in a tissue. What to do. Stan paced. I'll return it, now in the middle of the night, no one will be around.

The writer lived in an old building with no doorman. Stan snuck in and took the elevator to the sixth floor. He expected to see a yellow crime scene tape barring the door. Nothing there...The writer wasn't murdered. Stan remembered the cute medic mumbling something about a heart attack, *such a common death for a writer. If I were a writer, my death would be exotic, maybe mob-related due to my penetrating insights.* Stan hesitated before the old door. His hands were shaking as he tried the key. The

door creaked, and Stan found himself in the apartment. He crept down the hallway to the writer's office. On the desk Stan spotted a yellow pad with *Book One, Jennie Stark Mysteries* scribbled at the top.

Half way down the page, printed in big letters. *NO, THIS IS TRASH, I WON'T DO IT.*

Jennie Stark, Stan thought. I like the name. He sat down at the laptop. In a dream, he saw Jennie Stark. He saw the white silk V that led his eyes to the faint blush of firm, round mounds and a promise of paradise. Stan saw that short skirt and those long sculptured legs. Then he looked into emerald green eyes and lost his soul.

The next day, Stan quit his job at the pizzeria, and six months later he finished the first Jennie Stark mystery. Men all over the world were captivated. Women dreamed of being Jennie Stark. Now twenty years later, Stan had to kill Jennie.

"No, he heard a scream from his office." Stan rushed to his laptop. He had been so careful not to think of the ending, now it had to be done. Stan hesitated for a second then began typing; his arm hurt. He struggled to move his fingers across the key board, his chest heaved. He fought the sensation of a ton of bricks crushing him; he blocked out the screams of Jennie, "stop this, stop right now!"

Fighting through the pain, he typed, *Jennie Stark died*. He collapsed to the floor. *A heart attack—they'll rule my death a heart attack.*