

Chapter 1

It should be illegal to tell a man when he will die.

“Caldwell kills you himself,” Gloria Jackson says.

In her dank basement, she drops this on me. She’s pivoted her body away from the long metal table used as her work bench, her sketch papers and pencils spread across its cold, metallic surface. She looks up at me from her chair, shows me the picture she’s sketched.

Like any AMP, an analyst of necromagnetic phenomenon, she is only supposed to know the day of my death, not particulars. But this is a detailed fucking sketch if I’ve ever seen one. In the picture, my Python revolver is pressed to the side of Caldwell’s head. In the background, a 1940s farm house is on fire. Other mysterious shapes pool around us like ghostly spectators. People? Animals? Whatever the hell they are, they send a chill up my spine.

My eyes fixate on the gun. This .357 magnum tells me everything. It’s my lucky gun. If I were to take that revolver out of the steel box I keep it in, and press it to the side of a man’s head, I would do it believing I was as good as dead.

When I lower the drawing, I see Jackson’s face. The single yellow bulb swinging overhead makes her cheekbones shine. She waits for me to say something.

“Jim—” She uses the old familiar nickname. I haven’t heard it in a while. God, if that doesn’t add a sense of severity to the conversation.

“Gloria,” I reply. In the ten years I’ve known her, I’ve called her by her first name only a few times. The furnace kicks on behind me, rattling awake. The house creaks above us, groaning under the weight of the evening hours.

She looks away first and lets the yellow pencil fall from her fingers and roll across the table top.

“I made a green bean casserole,” she says and the metal chair screeches across the concrete as she stands up. “I’ve also got a six pack of Rogue.”

“Thank God for small mercies,” I say. I’m relieved she’s going to let this lie for now.

Upstairs, I put a turkey leg on top of a heap of casserole and as promised, Jackson hands me a cold beer. Across from her at the squat card table, I turn the slick amber glass in my hand to read the label. A skeleton perches on a barrel, taking a shit for all I know, wearing what could only be described as a party hat made of someone’s bones.

I rip at the hot turkey flesh with my teeth and the grease melts on my lips. “Dead Guy Ale,” I read aloud and turn the label face out so Jackson can read it. “How fitting.”

I burst into a loud laugh and she follows, unable to help herself.

“Death,” I say, pointing at the little skeleton man. “Shitting on my beer. How fucking true is that right now?”

We laugh so hard tears rise in our eyes and they blur out Jackson’s squash-colored kitchen. Her little table wobbles between us as we roll in our seats until the laughter dies away.

I lift the bottle again and Jackson clinks hers against mine. “To the second loneliest holiday,” I say. It is the best toast we have. We are soldiers and have been for a long time. There is no room for a family in this kind of life.

“It’s been a wild ride,” I say between gulps. Then I set the empty bottle on the table.

“It sure has been that,” she agrees, inspecting the bones of her devoured bird with dark fingers.

“I thought I would see it to the end. Sorry I won’t.” It surprises me that I really am sorry about it. I didn’t realize how sorry until I apologized to the one person who’s been in this with me since the beginning and is probably just as exhausted as I am.

Jackson shakes her head. “Don’t say that.”

“All right.” I shrug. “I won’t say it, but I’m really sorry to leave you with this shit. The good guys were already in short supply.”

She looks up then. I think, *no need to be a dick to her now*. Giving me the news couldn’t be any easier than receiving it. I sigh. “I won’t say it for a third time then.”

I don’t. In fact, neither of us manage another word for the rest of the night.

Chapter 2

I stand in the dark outside Jackson's house and scheme. On one hand, I am surprised I've lasted this long. I've been stabbed, shot, tortured. Just about anything that can happen to a man in war, it's happened to this body. It is a miracle I even open my eyes in the morning. On the other hand, I can't believe it. Murdered? *Really?*

October 3.

Forty-five weeks from now, I'll be dead. The old survivor in me searches for the loophole, the clause, and the fine print. He is a weathered bastard and has been damn good at dragging me out of the trenches for the last 56 years. Old habits die hard I guess—just like old dogs.

Get the kid to replace you, the survivor says as callous as anyone willing to step on the head of a drowning man, if it means getting to the surface faster himself.

I sink onto the sagging stoop. My worn out boots—a great pair of Bates 922s—crunch dried leaves into powder, while Jackson's words play on a loop in my head.

"Caldwell kills you himself."

I fish pieces of fat out from between my teeth with a toothpick and consider this while Jackson sleeps in an old, stained armchair in the living room, the blue TV light and game show voices as good as any lullaby. I'm not such a bastard that I'll wake her to talk about this. The tryptophan is the only reason she'll get a few decent hours of sleep tonight. Her relationship with the Sandman is about as shaky as my own, so my questions will have to wait.

What could I ask anyway? I saw it for myself, my gun pressed to Caldwell's head.

That is the clincher really.

If I can get that close, actually put the old Python to Caldwell's temple at long last, it would be the closest I'd managed in the ten years I've hunted him.

Ten years. Ten years since Memphis walked into my office and started all this.

I tilt my head back and look up at the sky. It is clear and I see a few of the brightest stars. My breath comes out hot, rising in white puffs.

Hell of a night, Thanksgiving, the day to be grateful. *And what are you grateful for, you old bastard?*

This beer. I pick up the beer and take another swig.

That the kid is still alive.

That I've still got 45 weeks, which is better than 45 days.

And I've a chance to finish what I started.

I pull my leather jacket tighter around me but I am unable to shake the cold. I lean my head way back and finish the beer. Then I go inside and put the empty bottle on the kitchen table beside the three I've already drained. I try not to make much noise as I do up the dishes with the pink sponge left by the sink, warming my icy hands in the hot tap.

When I decide that it is time to hit the road for the night, I peek into the living room one last time.

Jackson is still asleep in the chair. Her dark face calmer than I've ever seen it awake. I pulled the rainbow afghan off the back of the couch and drape it over her. Then, just before the television show fades to credits, I slip out the front door.

Sitting at the Harding Place and Danby red light, I send a text to Sullivan.

Happy Thanksgiving, kid.

Back at ya, boss. Nearby? Ally made ALL THE FOOD.

Maybe next time kid, already knowing this Thanksgiving will be my last.

Even dead guys need to eat, she quips. The little shit. But what she means as a joke rings heavy.

I am dead, by most accounts. It's been nearly two months since I faked my death. I needed the freedom to go deeper into my hunt and end Caldwell. I just didn't realize I had a deadline.

I park the Impala on the topmost hill at Mt. Olivet's cemetery. It is hidden enough by the large weeping willow above it to protect me from view. No cops checking the grounds with search beams, looking for punk kids, will see me standing over my own grave.

James T. Brinkley. Veteran and friend.

I stand there until I can't feel my face anymore, the icy wind pulling tears from my eyes, my hands cold and stiff again, even in my pockets.

Where would they bury me the second time, I wonder.

After all, this grave is full.