

**BLOOD  
& INK**

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‘The purpose of literature is to turn blood into ink.’

—T.S. Eliot

## PROLOGUE

Any fool can hold a gun.

For proof, I offer myself. Crouching in the shadowed stoop opposite the café, I held the Glock raised before me, gripped double-hand. Easy.

Fully loaded, a Glock 17's steel, brass, plastic and propellant totals nine hundred grams. Weighs less than a can of beans. And any fool can hold a can of beans.

What's more, if the Glock is typical—built, as it was, by a man with no firearms experience to win a contest by the Austrian Ministry of Defence—any fool can design one too.

But to fire one at a human being?

That, it turns out, takes a devil.

It's like they say: pressure can make a diamond, or a stain. It all depends on what's being squashed.

Squatting there in the shadow, one shoulder braced against a dirt-encrusted brick wall, trying to keep the Glock's sight trained on the kid's chest as he sauntered to the café entrance, I was beginning to fear I was from Stainsville.

The problem wasn't the occasional yellow flash of a taxicab, or the stink of rotting trash wafting out of the gutter. I had clear sight across the street. There was no wind to speak of. I knew the chambered hollow point round would expand when it punctured his flesh with a good chance of smearing an artery or organ.

Everything was ready.

Except me.

My hands were jittering like a junkie in withdrawal.

Maybe it was nerves? I know it wasn't guilt.

No, I wanted a tight bead on his chest. I wanted my bullet to tear him a

new hole. Was *giddy* to see him ragdoll to the ground, and watch his blood sluice onto the street.

Those are the perks of an Angel of Death on an avenging mission.

My real fear was that my body was falling apart. That the stresses of the past weeks had caught up with me, and the flesh-machine named Jack Griffen had finally thrown a cog. That deep down, part of my constitution had ruptured. Now, when I needed it one last time.

Maybe murder took more than a professor of literature had—particularly a forty-five-year-old professor of literature with a diabolical heart condition and a fear of needles.

Why not? Everything else had broken.

I strained again to still the tremble in my arms. Just one more shot.

Because—*oh, boy*—I meant to murder. Just once. First and last on my scorecard.

My one hope was that before he died, he had the presence of mind to look for me. I wanted him to know I made it. Me, Jack Griffen. I played his game. And he lost.

## Fifty-six days earlier

The knife was six inches long.

Its handle was hardwood wrapped in brass wire, its blade acid-etched with a Native American icon of a snake. A scalping knife.

Hiero laid the blade across the palm of my hand just above the first knuckle, on the fleshy part of the fingers.

In hindsight, it probably should have concerned me more when he burst into my office brandishing the knife, quoting Homer, ‘The gods are hard to handle—when they come blazing forth in their true power!’

But to be honest, in the months I’d known Hiero, I had come to expect anything.

‘Describe it for me, Professor,’ he said.

‘*Professor?*’ I said. ‘You haven’t called me that since the first day you walked in here.’

‘Maybe I’m feeling nostalgic.’ He leaned toward me across my desk. ‘Come on. How’s it feel, the blade’s touch? Like a line of fire?’

This close, I noticed the livid skin of a graze on Hiero’s normally immaculate forehead. But the feel of razor-keen steel on my skin left no room to consider its significance.

Fighting the urge to flinch, I shut my eyes. In the darkness I tried to shrink my world to the feel of that line of pressure on my skin. The smell of his aftershave was overpowering.

From somewhere outside a shriek of laughter echoed through the grey buildings of the English Faculty. The campus was slowly draining of students on a post-exam high.

‘It feels ...’ I said, groping for the right word. ‘Wet.’

My eyes snapped open, fearing for a moment that the blade had drawn blood.

‘Wet?’ he said, voice flat. ‘That’s the limit of your imaginative reach: *wet*?’

I nodded, a trifle guilty, and the scratch of his pen on a notebook was the only sound for a moment.

He put the pen down, and with the ghost of a smile, shifted the knife blade. He lifted it and rested the last two inches of steel across the base of my index and middle fingers.

‘Now you have a choice: two fingers, or—’ He angled the blade, moved it down. ‘One thumb.’

Not exactly Sophie’s Choice, but my mind refused to work with the blade touching me, so I stalled.

‘Last time you made us drink that bottle of five-dollar wine.’ (A shattering hangover eclipsed the fun of trying to write how *that* felt.) ‘The time before you punched me in the neck. When are you going to threaten me with donuts?’

He withdrew the knife and sat back. From a box on my desk, he took a chocolate, popped it into his mouth, and chewed. The aroma of chocolate wafted past me. They were a gift from a failing student, but I never ate them. Hate chocolate.

I snatched my hand back, and noticed the glimmer in his eye dim a little.

But only a little—it never quite died with Hiero. He lived high octane, as crazy as that sounds for a kid meeting in the cool evening hours with a crusty professor of literature.

I watched him scratching in his notepad, and wondered if I’d miss our talks when he returned home. He was on exchange, and semester had almost finished. The next day he was flying back to the US.

‘You told me to research, Jack.’ His hand rested on a leather folder he’d laid on the desk, his touch almost a caress. The folder had been with him for weeks now. Its cover was brown and worn like a sailor’s skin.

Research? I had. Three weeks ago. Straight after he’d told me his secret: he was writing a novel.

‘Not just any novel,’ he’d said. Hieronymus Beck only had one novel in him, but it would be a cracker. A *Catcher in the Rye*. An immortal novel.

When I pressed him about it, he said he didn't want to spoil it, but confessed it was a murder mystery. And since then, he'd remained uncharacteristically coy.

Tonight was my last chance to grill him, face to face. The teacher in me wanted to convince him that it was the details—the *verisimilitude*—that made a novel ring with truth. Made it endure.

More than that, I'm ashamed to admit. There was a rare spark in Hiero. If this novel did, against all odds, turn out to be a bestseller—or, God forbid, a classic—this was my last chance to be the guy who coached him to greatness.

Selfish, I know.

I took a breath and dove in. 'Who's the victim?'

His gaze settled on me again. Behind those eyes I fancied I could see his mind calculating whether or not to entrust me with his baby.

Then—

'This guy,' he said.

Progress, at last.

'How does he die?'

'Death.'

'Hilarious. Knife wound?' I said, glancing at the knife, which he had thankfully set down.

He shrugged.

I pressed. 'Bullet, strangulation, poison? You must know.'

'All of the above,' he replied, deadpan.

Gen Y—always want all the options.

He took a sheet of paper from his folder and wrote again.

'What about forensics?' I said. 'Murder always leaves a mark on the world.'

I hunched forward onto my desk, tried to coax a tell from his poker face.

'What trace evidence will your medical examiner find? Is it poison? It's poison, isn't it?'

He didn't deny it, so I latched hold.

'Poison offers plenty of ways to fork the reader's attention, but you need to be precise. Hemlock isn't arsenic.'

'Hemlock,' said Hiero, 'causes dilation of the pupils, dizziness, trembling,

paralysis, whereas arsenic causes headache, drowsiness, diarrhoea, white patches in the fingernails.’

‘Wonderful!’ I said. ‘But cold. Here’s the twist: hemlock grows by the side of the road in Washington; arsenic looks like cholera in Haiti. See the potential?’

‘My novel isn’t set in Washington or Haiti.’

‘Don’t be obtuse. Just nail the detail. That’s where the devil lies.’

From where I sat, I read upside down as he wrote ‘detail’ and ‘devil’.

He lifted his gaze, and his deep grey eyes smiled from behind a curtain of chestnut fringe: ‘I’ll research.’

I couldn’t tell if he was humouring me, so I made one last pitch for attention to detail.

‘Agatha Christie—queen of murder mystery—knew her poisons so well that a real murder was solved using her novel, *The Pale Horse*. It practically introduced the world to the lethal efficacy of thallium, and described the symptoms of thallium poisoning better than the medical journals. The very year the novel was published, 1961, the British serial killer known as the Teacup Poisoner began experimenting with it. Heck, just ten years ago a girl in Japan, an admirer of Teacup, killed her mother with thallium and blogged about it. You know you’ve hit the detail when your novel informs *real life*.’

Hiero snapped his folder shut. ‘Life and art.’

‘Art and life,’ I replied, in what had become an in-joke.

Through my office window I saw evening had thickened to night. A hint of damp drifted through the old wrought-iron air vents, and with it the tick and croak of frogs.

I leaned back in my chair and let my eyes roam through my office. My gaze inevitably fell on the bookcase taking pride of place on the long wall. Its shelves bowed under the weight of classics.

*Art*. Art was going to kill me. They could write that on my headstone.

Hiero caught my glance. In a moment he was out of his seat, and at the shelves. As he scanned the spines, he murmured, ‘Chandler, Lewis, Nabokov, Salinger, Tolstoy, Vonnegut ...’

This was no book-of-the-month portfolio club set. These books were marked by life, picked from charity shops, garage sales, laundromats, each stained by the grit of life, creased by fingers uncaring or eager.

How I loved those books. How I hated those books.

'These guys are gods,' breathed Hiero.

*Gods?*

'Come on, Hiero. They're writers. Leave divinity to the surgeons.'

A curious smile lit his face when he turned toward me.

'No, I'm serious, Jack. *Gods*. Know why?'

I spread my arms, 'Explain the theology to me.'

'Who alone knows a man's thoughts in the last moment of his life, as a bullet tears his brain apart?'

*Jesus*. A sudden thought disturbed me. Hiero could be manic; was he suicidal? 'You're going to say "God"?' I said.

'And writers, Jack. Authors.' He sat again, hunched toward me, his shoulders trembling with contained energy. 'Only God and Hemingway could know that, at the very end, the Old Man dreamed of lions.'

'So you're a god?'

He smiled, spread his arms wide. 'Well, I'm writing a novel.'

Who was I kidding; I would put a thousand bucks on Hiero never finishing his novel. He had that mania that might never settle on anything in life.

'There's just one thing that destroys your theory,' I said. 'These authors, these gods of yours, Hiero: their creatures are fiction. Make-believe. They live in worlds built from dreams or nightmares. If anything, *false* gods.'

Night had taken the corridors when we said our goodbyes. I locked up my office in the pale green light of an emergency exit sign.

And slipped on the tiles. I crashed onto my hip and sent my briefcase careening into the darkness.

When I'd collected myself, I discovered what had caused my fall. I'd slipped on a leather folder. Loose paper had slewed from it across the tiles. I gathered them up, then held the folder up to the poor light.

Printed on one side of the folder in permanent marker was *Hieronymus E. Beck*. And below that, *Blood and Ink*

I'd slipped on the notes for Hiero's novel.

And my life would never be the same.