

## Chapter One

Staring into Rosie's watery brown eyes, Jude didn't know how to explain to the old dog—for the umpteenth time—that her previous owner was dead. And that it was all Jude's fault.

“He's not coming back. I'm sorry, girl,” he said, scratching her behind the ears, which sent a flutter of dandruff to the kitchen tile. Rosie wagged her tail with every ounce of enthusiasm her body could muster, jerking her head between him and the closed bedroom door with a whine, as if waiting for Jude's dad to come out any minute. That had been one of his dad's morning routines: greet Rosie with a shirtless hug and slobbery kisses before letting her out into the back garden to harass the squirrels.

“See, you're a natural pet parent,” Beckett said from his spot leaning against the fridge. He didn't even look up from his phone.

“I can't take the dog.” Jude grunted as he continued shoving more jars of expired spices into a trash bag. He had said those exact words to his brother even more times than he'd told Rosie there would be no more shirtless hugs. “I don't plan on staying in Knoxville much longer, and I doubt she'd appreciate whatever studio apartment I end up in.”

“Rosie can barely walk,” Beckett whined. “You think she's gonna make it up three flights of stairs in LA? And Miguel's allergic.”

Rosie ambled over to the tiny spot of sun coming through the glass backdoor and laid down, scratching her ear with her hind leg. Jude could see her ribs beneath her wrinkled brown skin. The dog couldn't have more than a couple good years left, given

how she'd been limping in the past two weeks they'd spent clearing out the house. Or rather, that *Jude* had spent clearing out the house.

Soon enough, their childhood home would be sold. The profits would cover the medical debt and maxed-out credit cards. But that still left Rosie, who was looking up at him again with the world's saddest eyes, like she was auditioning for an animal shelter commercial.

Jude tried to drown out Beckett's voice with the clatter of glass bottles hitting the trash, but his brother just spoke louder. "She wouldn't survive a flight to California. Just keep her here. Why sell the house when you could just move in?"

"Take a wild guess," Jude said.

Beckett's expression softened in a way Jude hated, and he braced himself for the pity masquerading as helpfulness. "C'mon, some company would do you good," Beckett said. "Dogs are supposed to be good for your mental health."

"My mental health."

Beckett swatted a mosquito off his bare shoulder, his tank top exposing the tattoo of a shining cross on his arm. "You don't exactly have sunshine coming out your ass, J. Can't be healthy to work remotely all the time and never talk to anybody."

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

Rosie gave a half-yawn squeak and trotted up to Jude. He put down the trash bag and let her rest her chin in his palm.

"You know that's not what I mean." Beckett sighed. "Can't you just stay here until she's...?" He glanced at the dog and lowered his voice. "Or put her in a shelter or something."

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“She pisses on everything. Nobody’s going to adopt a dog this old,” Jude said, scratching behind Rosie’s ears as she stared at him with oblivious, big-eyed happiness. “The shelter would probably just put her down anyway.”

“Maybe that’d be for the best...” Beckett said.

Jude’s head snapped up. “No. We’re not doing the usual Beckett playbook of abandoning things when they’re inconvenient.”

He knew it was harsh, but goddamn did it feel good to say. Beckett had saddled him with the lawyers and cleaning the house and paying the bills. All because Beckett had some bad blood with Dad, and Jude had no idea why that was because neither of them would talk about it, and now they never would.

Jude did everything because that was what had to be done. Always a good ol’ boy. His ex said he suffered from “oldest child syndrome.” She’d probably been right.

Beckett’s face flushed. “I’m just talking about the reality here. I don’t wanna shoot the damn dog. I haven’t abandoned anything.”

“Right.”

They both fell silent. Jude stared up at the popcorn ceiling of their father’s kitchen. The place looked the same as it always had: chipped butcher-block counters, window curtains stitched with marigolds, aluminum coffee percolator in the corner. Yet everything in it felt wrong, emptied of purpose.

“I didn’t abandon him,” Beckett said quietly.

“Didn’t say you did.”

“But you implied it.” Beckett crossed his arms, shrinking back against the counter. “Just because you think you’re Nostradamus or some shit doesn’t mean there was anything we could’ve done—”

Jude’s jaw ached from clenching his teeth. “I know *I* could’ve done more.”

“You don’t need to be a martyr,” Beckett said. “You can’t keep blaming yourself. No matter what the voices tell you—”

“I don’t hear voices.”

“But no matter what the voices say, it’s not your fault. I know it’s just the PTSD talking.”

“It’s not PTSD. And I *saw* how it would happen, and it didn’t—” Jude shut his mouth, not sure why he was bothering to explain when Beckett hadn’t believed him the first hundred times.

“I know they feel real to you, the...visions or whatever. But it doesn’t take a friggin’ clairvoyant to guess that he’d—” Beckett shook his head. “The point is, it’s not your fault.”

He reached for Jude’s shoulder. Jude flinched, and Beckett pulled back.

“I’m worried about you. Miguel’s worried, too,” Beckett said. “The past year has been *rough*, man. Every time we talk, you’d just tell me the same things: ‘Work’s fine. Been reading. Haven’t gone out in a while. And hey, did you know Dad’s gonna die?’”

“Fine, I’ll keep the dog.” Jude pinched the bridge of his nose. He frowned as he felt a sticky substance on his nose; he glanced down at his fingers. “Ah, *fuck*.”

Rosie was in her sunlit spot again, itching her ear furiously.

“She’s got mites,” Jude said.

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“Mites?!” Beckett recoiled from the counter, frantically brushing off his shirt.

Jude sighed and washed his hands in the kitchen sink. “I’ll walk over to the store and get some mite spray.”

“Grab me a Mountain Dew, will ya?” Beckett said, his phone already in his hand again.

Jude snorted and patted his pockets, checking for his wallet, keys, and notebook. “I’ll be back in thirty. Don’t work too hard.”

Jude was more annoyed at himself than Beckett. Someone could order him to shoot himself in the foot, and he would do it, if they said it was for the best. He couldn’t resist the pull of doing the right thing, even when it left him with a dog that pissed on the carpet.

Jude did not have PTSD, although he had been diagnosed with it, along with a traumatic brain injury, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, generalized anxiety, depression, and, rather generously by one turtleneck-wearing Freud wannabe, a messiah complex. In the seven years since his symptoms had begun, he’d tried every type of psychotherapy—along with antipsychotics, antidepressants, benzodiazepines, psychedelics, and cannabis. He’d suffered through six marathons, endured meditation retreats where no one spoke a word for three days, and silently screamed as an acupuncturist slid a dozen needles into his scalp.

He’d shelled out entire paychecks for psychics, exorcists, hypnotists, energy healers, nutritionists, and, yes, astrologists, including one who giddily declared that only a Gemini would have this problem. He’d volunteered with a community garden, cut dairy

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from his diet, and switched to a remote job in finance instead of going back into the Army. He'd gone to church, for God's sake, like his dad had been hounding him to do for years.

The only thing he hadn't tried, since a person could only try it once, was putting a bullet in his brain and calling it a day. He knew—with the same certainty he knew he didn't have PTSD—that wasn't how it would end. Jude didn't really want to kill himself, anyway. Wishing for the end of suffering and wishing for the end of life were two entirely different things.

But the cause of the Sight mattered little. He had known how his father would die before it happened, and now that future had already come to pass. He had failed.

As he walked back from the store, with the bag of mite spray and Mountain Dew in hand, his stride slowed with the weight of returning to that house. He had spent the last three months there, before the inevitable, under the guise of needing somewhere to stay between moves. It hadn't been enough time.

For a spring day, the air was surprisingly dry, the sun headed toward early evening. The neighborhood flaunted a particular shade of suburbia, where all the houses were two-story brick McMansions with too much square footage for the inadequate amount of furniture the white-picket-fence families could afford. A person could choke on the aroma of fresh asphalt and hyacinths.

He passed the house with the obnoxiously blue shutters and the even more obnoxious family inside. Case in point: Billy stepped out in front of him on the sidewalk.

"Hey, Juuuuude," Billy sang off-key. That joke stopped being funny around the second time someone said it, but for Billy, twelve-year-old that he was, it was the

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pinnacle of comedy. Another kid stood in front of the open garage, a friend of Billy's whose name Jude mercifully didn't know.

Billy was as scrawny and gap-toothed as Jude had been at his age, complete with a Guns N' Roses shirt that reeked of secondhand nostalgia, courtesy of his dad. The other kid wore a Memphis Grizzlies cap over a web of dark curls, one hand clutching the side of his opposite arm as if trying to stop it from touching any of the pricey motorcycles lining the garage.

"You dropped something." Billy held his hands behind his back.

"Did I?" Jude asked flatly, expecting a raised middle finger. Instead, Billy waved a small brown notebook above his head. Jude's heart skidded to a stop.

For seven years, he had carried that notebook everywhere—one of those smooth pocket-sized hardbacks the color of a dead sycamore leaf, with an elastic strap and a hundred lined pages.

Jude stepped toward the two boys. "Ah, thanks—"

"What is it anyway? Your diary?" To Jude's horror, Billy slipped off the elastic and bent the spine. "*April: Leon. Library volunteer. House fire. Threat level: Significant.*" He looked up at Jude with an expression of mock shock. "This is your hit list! I knew it!"

"It's not a—just give it back."

"You're an assassin!"

"No, I'm not an assassin. They're my meeting notes." It wasn't entirely untrue.

Billy turned to his friend, brandishing the notebook. "But look at all this weird stuff. Ski accident. Baseball bat. *Peanut allergy?* How do you explain *that?*"

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“Fine, you got me. I’m an assassin who carries around a nicely organized list of all his targets in his pocket. Better hand it over before someone thinks it’s *your* list.”

Jude held out an expectant hand.

Billy considered Jude for a moment, then his face lit up in a grin that didn’t signal good news. “I’ll give it back if you help us.”

Jude wanted to say, *Kid, I’ve saved your ungrateful ass twice already, and now I’m thinking I should’ve let nature take its course.* But no matter how much Billy spiked his blood pressure, Jude still would’ve pulled him out of the road before that semi roared past. Jude still would’ve learned the Heimlich from videos online and arranged a “serendipitous” encounter last month at the local artery-clogging buffet before Billy choked on some chicken tenders.

In any case, Jude had to get the notebook back before the kid saw his own name and his parents’ names. Jude suppressed another sigh. “Help with what?”

“Getting that out of the garage.” Billy pointed toward the sleek black Harley-Davidson closest to his friend.

“And what are you going to do with it?” Jude felt he had an obligation, as the nearest adult, to see how much property damage and broken bones he’d be preventing.

“You just need to unlock it and roll it onto the driveway. We only want to go around the block. He’s never even seen a motorcycle in his whole life.” Billy gestured wildly toward his friend, whose face reddened.

Jude wondered how so many accident-prone kids survived to adulthood, especially when some of them actively threw themselves under death’s tires like they were *trying* to off themselves in the worst way possible. If he ever became a dad—

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although it was late in the game for that, with how he was pushing past forty—he'd probably be a helicopter parent who locked away the silverware and hid the scissors until his child turned eighteen.

Billy's date with death would come not in a fiery motorcycle accident but courtesy of adult-onset diabetes long after Jude was in the ground. So, there wasn't deadly harm in letting him play with his dad's twenty-thousand-dollar toys—aside from the obvious. But the same couldn't be said for his friend or for Jude's face if Billy's dad found out Jude had enabled his dumbshit son in any shape or form.

"Gonna pass on that," Jude said. "Why don't you go inside and play a game or something? You'll give your dad a heart attack if you scratch up his bikes." Billy's dad Rick would, in fact, die of a heart attack, although he had a good thirty years to go. It was an actual miracle he wouldn't end up choking on his own cologne instead. Rick was the type of guy who liked to overpower a room with his smell as well as his ego, and little Billy was on track to follow in his father's stench.

Billy's eyes narrowed. "I don't have to listen to you."

"Let's just go inside," the shy kid said, his voice shrinking at the end of the sentence.

Billy crossed his arms. "I want to do something cool for once. Not sit in a dirty basement watching stupid cartoons like we do at your house."

"They're not cartoons," the friend mumbled. "We can do whatever. I don't care."

"Fine." Billy threw the notebook onto the concrete. "Here's your stupid hitlist, killer."

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He headed up the garage steps and into the house without a glance backward, leaving his friend to stare longingly at the Harley-Davidson. Jude picked up the notebook and tucked it safely into his back pocket. Feeling that his responsibility for someone else's kid ended there, he started to walk away—but then Billy shouted, “You coming, Grayson?”

Jude's footsteps slowed halfway down the driveway. Maybe he hadn't heard any name at all, and he'd only imagined it. He took a deep breath, tried to mentally travel through his dad's garden to push out any intrusive thoughts: *Red bell peppers next to marigolds, basil, chamomile*. But with a name given to his face, a vision surfaced like bile rising in the throat.

An invisible hand reached into his brain, nails sinking between the gyri and sulci, carving new pathways with the gentle precision of a feather tip. The vision flashed before Jude with the intensity of a lived experience. Through the eyes of Grayson's twelve-year-old body, he witnessed his death.

Billy in a closet of clothes pulling away from a safe. A gun safe.

He gives you a handgun. It's heavier than the movies make it look.

You turn the weapon over in your hands, reverent.

Billy tells you confidently that his dad's guns are never loaded.

Go ahead, pull the trigger. Try it out.

The safety is off.

Impulsively, you obey. The barrel is pointed upward.

There's power in its weight. Like you're a man now. Grown up.

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With a snap, the bullet rips through your forehead.

It is not an instant death. Your heart pounds and pounds—until it doesn't.

There is no real last thought, only a litany of surprise: *why, why, why.*

Jude staggered over the threshold between the driveway and the garage of the house where a boy would soon die. The more faded the vision, the longer the person had left on this earth. Most deaths gleaned faint visions of hospital beds or nursing homes. Yet this vision was so sharp Jude could feel the cold metal against his palms, smell the wood of the cedar chest that had stood beside the gun safe.

This wasn't some distant end. Death had already opened its maw and invited Grayson inside.

He had seen wounded kids. He'd put them into Blackhawks, crying, bleeding, or so stunned they were mute. He'd seen dead kids, too, pulled them out of vans and cars, their bodies light and lifeless. And then, after he'd return home, the Sight had come for him, and he only had to think of the boy in the yellow-tiled bathroom to feel bile rise like an unanswered prayer. He would rather die than let another child suffer like that.

It might've been a bad idea to walk into a neighbor's house uninvited, but there was no time for hesitation. The absence of cars in the driveway told Jude that both of Billy's parents were at work, not that he begrudged them that. He and Beckett had been left home alone once they learned to talk, and they'd somehow survived to adulthood. But you could take every precaution in the world as a parent and still miss one threat or another because *living* was dangerous.

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The image of that small finger squeezing the trigger assaulted Jude's brain in staccato bursts as he dropped the grocery bag, ran up the neighbor's garage steps, and threw open the door. It led into an empty kitchen with wooden floors, dishes piled around the sink. The stairs stood down an adjoining hallway, where voices filtered from the bedroom above.

He gripped the banister and tried to focus on the here and now, willing the dark images to still. How many seconds did Grayson have left? What if he'd already said the last words he'd ever say? Some hidden alarm blared inside Jude, telling him it *would* happen today, that he was moments away from that future.

Fear propelled him to the top of the steps. He rushed through the open bedroom door. The closet light glowed on the left, the only detail his mind registered beyond his own ragged breathing.

"Stop!" Jude shouted.

Both boys jumped, their eyes wide. Jude could've kicked himself. He was lucky he hadn't shocked them into making any sudden moves with the weapons in their hands.

Billy glared at Jude, his arm still inside the safe. "What do *you* want?"

Grayson cradled an M9 like a baby bird, his index finger resting too close to the trigger.

"Put the guns down," Jude commanded. Grayson began to bend toward the ground, but Billy placed a hand on his arm.

“You don’t have to listen to him,” Billy said to Grayson, then looked back at Jude. “I didn’t really think you were cool enough to be an assassin. You probably don’t know shit about guns anyway. My dad says you’re a liberal cuck.”

Jude spoke with calm authority. “Actually, I do know something about guns. I did a few tours in the Army and—”

“My dad was in the Navy, and he taught me how to use them for real.”

Jude chewed on a jibe about how his daddy spent more time bragging to anyone who would listen about his one-year stint in the Navy than he did making sure his kid didn’t do stupid shit—but as a general rule, Jude didn’t get into pissing matches with children.

Instead, he kept his tone even. “Cool. And I say put it down so you don’t shoot yourself or anybody else. Now, get it back in the safe and lock it up. Then I’ll leave.” *Once your dad gets home*, he didn’t add.

“They aren’t loaded, and it’s none of your business what I do,” Billy whined.

Jude didn’t get the chance to answer. The suffocating musk of cologne silenced his windpipes.

“What the hell are you doing in my house, Myers?” a gruff voice rumbled. Rick stood in the door behind Jude, his arms crossed over his EMT uniform. Jude had been so focused on the life-or-death panic that he hadn’t heard his car pull into the driveway or even him stomping up the stairs.

“I’m just a concerned neighbor,” Jude said and immediately regretted it as a scowl crossed Rick’s bearded face.

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“There’s nothing to be concerned about, buck. It’s not loaded. I remember. I never leave ’em loaded.”

The death vision hovered in his mind’s eye, the snap of the bullet through the boy’s brain still lingering on the edge of certainty.

“The safety is off, and he didn’t clear it. I’m not willing to bet my life—or anybody else’s—on your memory.” Jude pointed toward Grayson. “It’s dangerous. Guns aren’t toys.”

Rick puffed out his chest. “My son knows what he’s doing. I raised him right. And it ain’t loaded. You best get out of my house before I call the police.”

The two kids watched their standoff, Grayson with open-mouthed horror and Billy with barely contained awe.

Jude glanced at Grayson again, at the self-destruction he held in his hands. “When he puts that gun down, I’ll go. Not until then.”

Rick took a step toward him, close enough for Jude to see the red veins of sleep deprivation threading through the whites of his eyes. Jude met his stare with a straight face. Without looking away from Jude, Rick held his palm out to Grayson.

“Give me the gun, boy.”

Grayson handed it over with trembling fingers, and Jude’s whole body unclenched—that is, until Rick lifted the barrel and pointed it at Jude’s chest. Jude put both of his hands up slowly.

“I don’t need to clear it. Wanna know why?” Rick’s cold blue eyes shone with cruel amusement. Jude had seen that look a couple times before in fellow soldiers who liked to throw feral cats by their tails and make prisoners cry out for their mothers.

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He turned the gun away from Jude's chest and pointed it at the far bedroom wall.

"Because I'd bet *my* life that there's nothin' in there." Grinning, he squeezed the trigger.

Most gun owners familiar with their weapons could tell if it was loaded by the weight. But Jude knew from experience that a semiautomatic pistol could hold one round in the chamber, even when the magazine was empty, making it harder to feel that small but significant difference in heft.

With an ear-numbing *pop*, the bullet ripped through the drywall, disappearing into the next room of the house. Grayson crouched against the cedar chest, screaming. Billy froze in place. Rick's face drained of all color and then filled to the brim with livid red as he stared blankly at the hole in the wall like he didn't understand how it had gotten there.

On instinct, Jude had covered his ears the split second before. A sharpness coursed through his blood. He waited for Rick to admit he'd been wrong and apologize. Instead, Rick turned to Billy with bulging, wild eyes.

"This is all your fucking fault." Rick jabbed a finger at his son's chest. "Why did you put a bullet in there?"

"I-I didn't—I'm sorry," Billy said, his usual confident veneer falling away as tears gushed down his cheeks.

"You're gonna be sorry." Rick moved to grab him.

Anger ate away all common sense, and Jude stepped between them, the fury only death could bring boiling inside him. He doubted Rick had ever felt any real guilt or remorse in his life, too much of a coward to face himself.

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“You don’t need to say another word, Rick. You want to know why?” Jude said, his voice low. “Because you’re a piss-poor parent. You almost killed somebody’s kid, and you could’ve hurt your own. Don’t blame this shit on him.”

“I wanna go home,” Grayson mumbled.

Jude could almost hear the crunch of Rick’s teeth as he clenched his jaw. “You stay the hell away from my house and my son.”

“Glad to do it, as long as you put some time toward parental supervision.”

Rick shook his head with a disbelieving look and licked his lips. “There’s something wrong with you, Myers. I should’ve put a restraining order on you at the restaurant after you had your hands all over my son, like some pervert! Carol talked me out of it. Why are you showing such an ‘interest’ in Billy, huh?”

Jude met the challenge in his gaze. “Someone’s got to look after him.”

He gave a guttural roar as he slammed a meaty fist into Jude’s gut. Jude doubled over, only dimly aware another one was coming before the next punch landed. What followed was a blur of pain and movement.

Jude shoved Rick away from him and punched until his knuckles burned. Rick’s elbow cracked against his skull. A woman’s screams ripped through the white noise. Jude didn’t even think of the boys, of what they might be witnessing. They had already witnessed one act of violence, and he had given them another.

Finally, Rick pulled away and slumped against the wall, holding his nose. As Jude clutched his head on the floor and grasped that Carol was speaking to the police—*Yes, he’s still here, he broke into our house, he attacked my husband*—he reassured himself that no matter what happened, he’d done the right thing. The boy was safe now.

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His parents wouldn't be left crying over a closed casket. Grayson could live the invincible childhood that all children deserved, and maybe his brush with death would even make him dream bigger, and he'd become a heart surgeon or travel to every continent or play for the Memphis Grizzlies like his heroes. But then a new vision of Grayson blurred into focus.

A motorcycle speedometer revs up past one hundred.

You lean against the windshield, your girl's arms wrapped around your waist.

Over your shoulder, you shout above the night wind, telling her to relax.

She's so fine in her blue skirt. The second finest girl at school, but she's got these brown eyes that make you swoon.

A dark road unfurls ahead, shrouded in mist.

Then a pickup truck with dim headlights materializes from the shadows.

An old man is driving that pickup truck, a man with dark circles under eyes that are too wide, a man who looks like what you might look like in fifty years, and that thought is enough to make you swerve, hard.

Your girl cries out, but it blurs into your own screams.

The truck swerves, too—into a ditch—but it creates a wall of metal across the road.

You refuse believe this is how his life ends, because then what was the point?

The impact is inevitable, too fast, too much, years crushed in seconds.

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Blood dripped from Jude's nose and into his mouth, a bitter taste on his tongue. When he looked up, there was Grayson leaning against the wall and hyperventilating, his young face so relieved it broke Jude's heart. By saving Grayson, he had likely accelerated the death of two others. The cruel irony of it all stung harder than Rick's punches ever would.

He couldn't fully articulate the thoughts swirling in his throbbing skull. All he could think was that sometimes you were the traveler who booked the last seat on the plane before someone else did, unknowingly saving them from the crash. And sometimes you were the swimmer who packed up your picnic along the riverbank right before a stranger slipped and drowned. There was no blame, only luck and circumstance. Everyone was steering in the dark, night after night after night.

Outside, a procession of sirens lamented with him. Jude stood and awaited his fate, keenly aware he would always stand alone.