

An excerpt from the novel LIMINAL STATES by Zack Parsons.

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Chapter Three

Dr. Rutledge was a specialist of the lung with a reputation in pediatrics. He was recommended by my regular man, Doc Brightbow, a whisper of an old coot with palsied hands and a tendency to medicate everything with bicarbonate and aspirin. The Brightbow special wasn't taking care of my cough, so he sent me to Dr. Rutledge with the promise that he had an X-ray machine and could sort this out.

It was a little radiographic instrument intended for children. I was a big lunk. Taking pictures of my chest meant lots of repositioning the equipment. The result was a bunch of overlapping X-rays arranged on a light box in a puzzle of shadow bones and faint tissues. Reminded me of collaged reconnaissance photography. P Boats over the Pacific, hunting Tojo's fleets in my lungs.

I only like incurious doctors. I'm paranoid the good ones will be wise to me. Take a measure and examine a chart and say, "This isn't right at all" and know what I am. How long I've been kicking around. I didn't like Rutledge especially. Too many certificates and big words. It was dangerous. He spoke with a cigarette hanging from his lips, ashes gathering in the folds of his white coat.

"You have some severe scarring of the osseous tissue from your previous injuries." He pointed to my mended ribs with the cap of a pen. "It complicated this, but we have an accurate picture now. These dark spots here are what we're after. Malignancies here and here. I would say two growths in your lung that have metastasized to your surrounding tissue. Two more on your lymph node here. Those account for the swelling in your throat. There's also an odd lesion that appears to be on your pineal gland, but we weren't photographing your head, so I'd like to schedule you for head X-rays and—"

"Cancer?"

"Yes, we knew this was a possibility," Dr. Rutledge said. "You were on the Home Islands."

"I'm only thirty-five," I lied.

Rutledge took off his glasses and hung them from the front pocket of his white coat. He leaned across his desk toward me, and his smile made me want to clobber him.

"Cancer doesn't know age. Every day I see children with cancer. Some of them I can save, and some of them I can only treat. Mr. Cord, there are tablets and new therapies that could extend your life, but we did not catch this early. I am afraid this instance is probably terminal."

I'm sorry, fella, but your belts are all worn out. Your radiator is cracked. Transmission is shit. Fuel lines split and leaking. You're broken down and no good to anybody. Better to junk the whole damn thing and start over from scratch.

"How long?"

"I don't like to set a timeline for this. With the right medication, aggressive surgery, it could be measured in years."

"I ain't asking you to swear on a Bible. What's your best guess?"

"Three months," said Rutledge.

That will take the vinegar out of you. My clothes became all tight around me, and yet my senses expanded like a trick camera shot. I was aware of individual details in the room. There was the brick wall with the schoolhouse-awning windows, the wood paneling behind Rutledge festooned with a dozen certificates and important photographs, the wooly texture of the orange chairs, the way the trees outside turned the sunlight cold.

And there was Rutledge, fucking Rutledge, with his slicked-back hair and his cigarette resting in the ashtray, coiling purple smoke above his desk. He was writing on his pad.

I wasn't afraid to die. There have been times in my long, long life that I've been trying to die. I can get killed, but I can't stay killed. Been through it all. But there was the Covenant, rules that meant that when I died, I couldn't pick up where I'd left off. Breaking those rules would have severe consequences.

I didn't want to start over.

"What do I do?"

Rutledge passed me the papers he'd scribbled on.

"Tablets for the swelling in your neck. X-rays in one week for that lesion in your head." Rutledge scribbled again and passed me another sheet. "This is for a drug to treat the tumors in your chest. If it works, we'll continue with it; if it doesn't, we'll take a look at surgery and radiation. The one benefit of the post-war increase in cancer rates is that treatments are getting better and better. This last one is just for the pain. It will help stop the coughing, but you need to lie down if you take it.

"Two of these are expensive, so if you can, I would go through the Veteran's Administration. You'll have to see a VA specialist to get them approved."

"I'm on the waiting list to see the VA cancer docs," I said. "They're busy."

The government tried to hide it, but the VA cancer docs were a hundred-thousand-men-worth of busy, according to Murrow. And those were just the ones who bothered with the doctors. God only

knew how many poor SOB's camped under bridges or moved around the country in those hobo caravans that followed the trains.

"If you can afford it out of pocket, then pay for it. Don't do anything stupid. You're still alive. I want to see you in a week, and we can reassess the situation then." He laid a hand flat on his desk. "You can also talk to your clergy. Miracles aren't my line of work."

What an asshole. I walked out in a daze, past the crying kids and the tangle-roots of matronly ankles. The lady at the window treated me like I'd just gotten a checkup. I paid cash and staggered out. My hat was crumpled in one hand and the prescriptions in the other.

The old Ford Tudor was baking under the California sun. I pushed my hat down on my head and sat in the excruciating heat, sat and drank warm whiskey out of a flask I kept in the smuggler's hold in the dash. I looked at the silver of the revolver next to the flask. Stillman .38 loaded with dum-dums. A bullet through the brain is close to painless.

Nah. Not ready yet. I closed the smuggler's hold on the gun. I didn't have time for more of Rutledge's X-rays and exams. I didn't have time for waiting at the VA office and begging for Uncle Sam's help. Out on the highway I rolled the window down and tossed Rutledge's yellow bouquet of prescriptions into the rushing air.

I had time to kill.

I was out of place under the golden lights of *Ciro's* on a Friday night. I was more of an afternoon-lunch-crowd-er. Sit me in the back where I won't scare away the pretty girls. My hat was dented, my overcoat hung ruffled and smudged around my legs, and I was wearing a cheap loaner tie from the *maitre de*. Golden-threaded ducks on blue houndstooth.

The crowd at *Ciro's* was a luminous bunch of Hollywood aristocracy—*raconteurs*, stars, and the fragile ships of beautiful dreamers soon to be wreckage on the jagged coast of a seedy hotel. This was the stuff gossip pages were made for. The Will Mastin Trio was up on stage, the girls were dancing, but I was making my way through the crowd for a good angle on a particular man in a ruffled tuxedo.

"Beau Reynolds?" Someone tapped me on the shoulder. It wasn't the man who'd spoken; it was his muscle, a thick-necked Italian. The speaker was a smiling sprig of glitz beside the gorilla. He was a slicked-back type with dark eyes and a knockout blonde on his arm.

"Not me," I said, and I made sure he could see the scars. That usually scared them off, but if I was getting picked out of the crowd already, it might mean trouble.

“Oh, my apologies,” he said. “I mistook you for the pilot. Have you seen him?”

“No,” I said, and I shot a look of annoyance at the muscle. The gorilla hustled his man away to the private dining area.

Before I could resume my search for the real Beau Reynolds, I got waylaid by a twist with too much paint on and too much skin showing for the film code. Cigarette girl by the look of her wares, but something more by the look on her face and the way she was tugging at my elbow. Good-looking girl if you like them small and dangerous.

“You know who that was?” She had to lean in to ask me over the music. I could smell her sweat beneath her perfume. “Howard Hughes.”

“He looked familiar,” I said.

“So do you,” she said. “You in the pictures?”

“Sell it somewhere else.” I dragged my arm away from her. She told me what I could do with myself and circulated into the crowd near the edge of the dance floor.

Beau Reynolds was where I wanted him. Once I macheted my way through the jungle of people, I parted the fronds and found him entertaining a boisterous table of celebrities and those aspiring to join their ranks. One of the cigarette girls was in his lap, half girl and half legs, and he had one of the waitresses sitting on the table next to several emptied magnums of Champagne. I moved myself to a table with a free chair and ordered a drink and something to shut up my growling stomach.

The night was early for a man like Reynolds, the party only beginning. I recognized some of the faces that came and went, some of the old jokes being told. Sinatra and Ava Gardner stopped by. Reynolds convinced Sinatra to sing. He belted out “One for My Baby,” and Beau took visible liberties dancing with Ava Gardner. Sinatra didn’t say anything when he jumped down off the stage. I wasn’t sure if it was Hedda Hopper taking notes from Beau’s table or Beau’s notorious right hook that kept Sinatra in line.

It was past midnight. More and more stars drifted out. Beau kept on dancing, his bowtie hanging from his collar, his cheek covered in lipstick kisses from a dozen different girls. At the table he bragged about escaping the Japs, about his turn as a movie star, but mostly he told lewd stories that made everyone roar with laughter.

When Reynolds was shooting *Aces Over Tokyo*, the director used to threaten him and William Bendix with a golf club for being out late drinking. That ended one day when Bendix showed up with a bat signed by Babe Ruth. He told about the time he drove over Darryl F. Zanuck’s foot with a motorcycle, the time he skipped out on a beach picture to spend a week in Malta with Betty Grable, even though she was married, and the time he got three sheets and punched out Dwight Eisenhower’s driver at a White House dinner.

Even some of the actors were jealous of a man who could be war hero and star. He was an Audie Murphy of the skies. I wasn't so envious. He was burning too bright. Late in the evening he was still going when all of the real stars were gone, still drinking and dancing to the house band, ragged at the edges, holding girls like a man holds the edge of a cliff. I was the only one in the place who knew why.

"Another soda water?" asked the waitress, scooping up my ashtray from the table.

Beau Reynolds was finally lurching off the dance floor, staggering toward the door and relying on a pair of laughing girls to steady him.

"No," I said, and I followed him out.

One of the girls was the cigarette girl with all those legs; the other one was a blonde from some science fiction picture. I couldn't remember the name of it, just that she filled out a sequined bathing suit and was eaten by a brain.

The three of them climbed into a taxi, and I followed in my car. It wasn't hard. I knew where he was headed. Reynolds had been camped out at the St. Francis for the past week. His minor scandals were making all the papers. The girls were chewing on him like red meat in the back of the cab. I kept my distance in the thinning traffic.

The cab pulled up outside the hotel, and the doorman hurried over to hold open the taxi while Reynolds settled with the hacker. I waited for the cab to pull away and then wheeled around to the alley beneath the fire escape of the St. Francis.

Reynolds had a suite near the top with a view overlooking Sunset Boulevard, but the bathroom window faced the fire escape. I put on my leather gloves and got onto the hood of my Tudor to pull down the fire escape's ladder. I climbed up to the shaky iron staircase. My heart sank as I looked up at the framework extending toward the sky. I remembered climbing the ten floors the day before when I scouted the place out. It wasn't going to be pleasant.

I was still wearing the duck tie from Ciro's, and the wind was blowing it into my face. After about three floors I was having trouble. Five and I was ready to go down, wheezing and gasping for air, all sweaty, heart pounding in my chest. I hacked up something black and spit it over the side. I had to sit for a minute and smoke a Bravo before finishing the climb.

The light was on in the suite's bathroom. The dark shape of someone was moving inside, but I could not see clearly through the frosted glass. The shim I'd put under the double-hung window the day before was still there. I slid my fingers under the frame and lifted the window very slowly. I could hear water running. A shower too, but Reynolds was dressed and on his feet, hands on the sink and staring down into the water. I knew that feeling. Trying to will yourself not to be sick. Too much booze will do that to a man.

My shoes squeaked on the tile. I moved swiftly behind Reynolds and shut and locked the bathroom door. Reynolds turned to me, to the Stillman in my hand. His eyes were in shadow. His face—my face, but younger—registered no surprise.

"I saw you at Ciro's," he said. "I wanted it to last all night."

"Why did you bring the girls?"

"You won't hurt them, will you?"

I didn't need to answer; he knew I wouldn't. I lowered the gun.

"You knew this day would come," I said to him, and I advanced, grabbing him by his jacket. "You've been very bad. You made our face famous."

"What about Bishop? He's in the newspaper every day."

Harlan Bishop, still hanging on to life after all these years. But Harlan Bishop never broke the Covenant. Not technically. Not that I would admit that to a troublemaker like Reynolds.

"You were supposed to stay dead after I threw you over the side of that boat."

"I can't help it if sharks destroyed the evidence."

I shoved him toward the shower.

"Evidence or not, you know the rules. When your number comes up, you get your ticket punched. Start the ride over with a new name. A new identity. This is twice now you've come back as Beau Reynolds."

"Nobody is the wiser."

"Sure. They only made a movie about the first time you pulled it off. What did the Japs call you?"

Shot down over the Sea of Japan in '45, back in '46 to give 'em hell again. Funny thing was, the Japs remembered it. The pilot who shot him in his parachute was still alive to tell the story after the war, and yet Beau Reynolds came back to haunt the skies over Japan.

"They called me 'Ghost Dragon.'" Beau sat down on the rim of the bathtub. "What did the Japs call you?"

There was a name for the Marines who came ashore on the Home Islands. What they called out when they saw us coming to their villages, into their homes, but Beau Reynolds probably knew that. I wasn't about to get sucked into his fast talk.

"Doesn't matter," I said, and I snapped my mind back out of that particular deep hole. "I've got to do this, bud. Now strip and get into the shower. I'll make it look like an accident."

"Why?"

"That's the way things are."

"Whose way? The Gideons'? Bishop's?"

My grip tightened on my Stillman, and I thought about putting one into his chest right then and there.

"None of the rest of us work for the Gideons," he whined. "How do you stomach looking at him? How do you sleep at night?"

I struck him across the brow with the grip of the gun. Not too hard, a little argument-stopper, but it opened a cut in his eyebrow, and blood gushed down the side of his face. Before he could protest, I pointed the gun at him.

"We all do what we have to do," I said. "Now get into the shower before you make me murder you."

"All right." Beau held up his hands in defeat. "I don't mind going out as a drunk who slipped in the shower. Just don't shoot me."

He undressed and got into the shower. I took off my hat and overcoat and set them over the sink. The water in the shower was turned pink by the blood flowing from Beau's lacerated brow.

"You need to hit the temple." I reached in and tapped the back of the faucet. The plunger for the stopper was square. "That'll pop right through the bone and open you up like a can of beer."

"Delightful," said Beau.

"It'll only hurt for a second. You'll black out right away, and if the fall doesn't kill you, the blood loss will. You don't want to end up paralyzed from a neck injury."

"It's not fair. I liked this one."

"Ain't nothing fair about this world, bud."

Beau swallowed some of the water. The chrome shower pipe distorted his reflection into a nose described by an oval. His muscles tensed. He threw himself forward, stopped. Did it again. I was wearing my hat and overcoat again and looking on from a safe distance. Starting to get annoyed. Beau cast a sidelong gaze at me, at the silenced Stillman I had once again leveled at him in case he lacked the courage to finish the job.

"I remember your name now," said Beau. "Casper. Those scars on the side of your face. It's still you, isn't it? What's your last name?"

"Doesn't matter."

"I'm just curious," said Beau. "My dying wish."

"Cord."

"Casper Cord?" Beau blinked away the water running into his eyes. "That's a good one. Lucky draw."

"I hate alliteration," I said, and I reached up and grabbed Beau by the throat and yanked hard. Beau's feet slid out from under him, and his temple fell straight down onto the faucet.

I heard the bone crunch. Beau made a sound that was all consonants. He kicked his legs and flexed his arms, but it was a dying thing. He lay at the bottom of the tub, his dark blood swirling into the shower drain. He tried to say something and couldn't. His eyes were already faraway.

I dried off the sleeve of my overcoat with a towel. I took out the black book and pen from the breast pocket of my jacket and stood beneath the light to see the names written within. The book contained many names of many men, soldiers and criminals, whom I did not know and could only describe. I found where Beau Reynolds was written, and I added a small notation.

Beau Reynolds. Whom I killed twice.

There was a churchman by the name of Reverend Marquis whom Henry Ford hired to put Jesus into his factories. I guess Ford thought that instilling a Christian ethic would create more efficient workers. I met this Marquis fellow once, back when I was newly named Max Holden, and it was 1915 or 1916, on a ship crossing the Atlantic. Marquis had a pudgy face and an intellectual look. He was a bit quiet but always polite, and I learned once I got him going that he talked with enthusiasm and charisma.

I was on a personal mission to figure out what I was going to do with myself. That mission never really ends, but it was my main purpose at the time, as that person. I was listening very carefully to everyone around me, and I'll never forget what Marquis told me. The guy hated being aboard a ship and could barely sleep. One night I found him walking the halls, restless, and I took him to the ship's kitchen and cobbled together a proper American coffee.

After some polite conversation and answering his questions about the ship and about traveling the North Atlantic, I asked him what automobile Henry Ford was going to make next.

"You misunderstand," Marquis said. "Henry Ford is not concerned with automobiles. He rolls cars out of his factory just to be rid of them. They are the byproducts of his real business, which is the making of men."

Time proved Reverend Marquis at least partly wrong. He left the company because Henry Ford placed more value on productivity than spiritual enlightenment. His comment nevertheless informed my own life.

The Gideons would make Henry Ford proud. They issue from the Pool at irregular intervals, in resurrection or in the unpredictable act of duplication, and each man who comes out accepts his fate and seems friendly with the others of his kind. They are a production series. The Model G, of unified purpose and design.

Not so with us. With the Warrens.

In the beginning, all the evil that had wound its brambles around us formed a new man. The act of division created two men different from the original, one good and one evil, and they became the diverging fathers of us all. Death provides a clear line, but duplication muddies our memories. It is an instantaneous process.

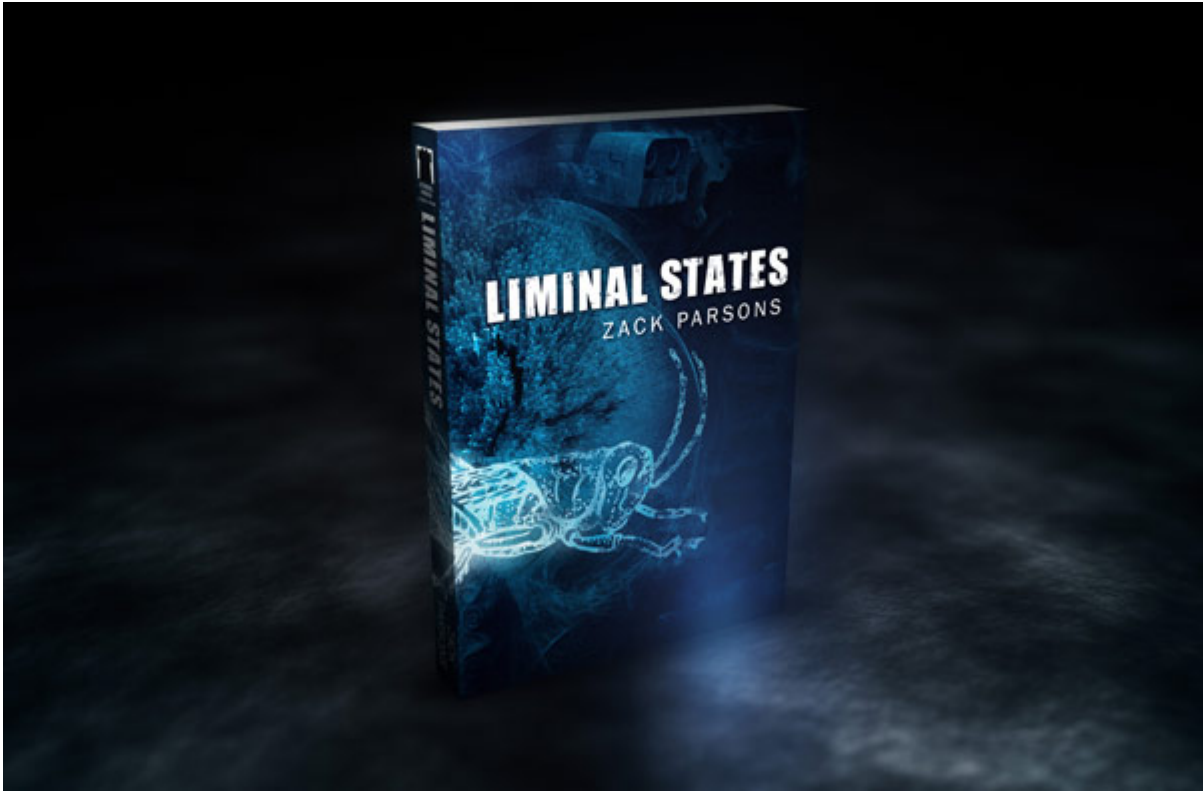
If you're a duplicate, the last thing you remember could be your originator eating a sandwich, making love, fighting in a war, or reading a newspaper on the can. A third of us awake from a dream by emerging from the Pool. You come roaring to life and have about ten seconds in that goddamn cave to smack sense into your face and decide to be a whole new person. You have to turn all those memories into a new branch of the tree.

The Gideons seem to accept this arrangement. They're constructing their own narrative out of all those lives. For the Warrens the interwoven past grows more clouded with each generation, more jumbled as we multiply, but I remain certain of two things: that half the Warrens are pure evil and that I'm not.

Probably.

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