

MY LOADED GUN, MY LONELY HEART

(sequel to *Bring Me Flesh, I'll Bring Hell*)

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This manuscript is not yet final.

[Talos Press]

Talos Press

To pub, October 2015

PROLOGUE – HAPPILY EVER AFTER

I want to give you a happy ending.

I want to tell you that Niko and I piled into the Ford Thunderbird and drove off into the sunset. That we bought a house with a thirty-year mortgage on a sensible budget. Every year was a photo album of barbecue cookouts on the holidays. I'd squint into the sun with a spatula in my hand and Niko would stand in a square of green lawn in a yellow dress with her belly swelling. We'd be surrounded by friends that reflected our good social standing, with diverse stock portfolios that never crash. We'd be so charmed, even the fierce coastal mosquitoes wouldn't sample us. Laughing and drinking beer. Life by glossy catalog, paint by numbers.

I'd flip steaks cooking on the grill and laugh at politically correct jokes. I would never, ever let anyone know that in another life, I'd been a zombie. An honest-to-god, eat-your-brains zombie, with a wicked prescription drug habit that kept my brain agile enough to master sarcasm and a bad attitude with psychopathic tendencies.

Blood would dribble out of the meat and sizzle on the red hot coals and conjure a smell from the grave. I'd fall quiet while I contemplate the past. The sun would dim with a passing cloud. Niko would explain my quiet as unease from the time I spent in Bosnia, or that ill-fated trip to Sarajevo when I was sixteen. Any of these would be enough to forgive my stoned gaze as I remembered what it was like to be as bloody as that steak, as I remembered Jamie. The brother who authored my demise and made me a monster. Bending people to his will as one folds paper into origami.

I spent a decade as a rotting, decomposing corpse that aped and mimed at real life until a twist of events gave me a second chance—and that second chance came with the sacrifice of

Jamie's son. He traded his life and gave me his body. Instead of sustaining my final years as a restive corpse, I fret and strut in my nephew's skin.

I want to tell you my days and nights were filled with suburban idyll. I want to tell you that Niko and I got married and built a family from scratch, a family that didn't include my brother or my father, the wily gray fox. I said goodbye to the military life and all its subterranean machinations. I said goodbye to godforsaken New Jersey and the junkies and the thieves and casinos and the mob bosses and every crooked resident.

I want to tell you I kissed my brother on the cheek and I forgave him.

I want to tell you I honored my nephew's sacrifice.

I want to tell you things were good.

You and I, we both know better, don't we?

#

They asked me what happened later. I told them I didn't remember. There's a darkness in my memory like a rotten tooth in a shark's grin.

Witnesses said they saw a young man tear out of my driveway in a Ford Thunderbird. On surveillance, I'm pushing the car through intersection after intersection with my fingers tapping the wheel and a gun in my other hand.

They sat me in a chair in the interrogation room. I watched myself, this new version of me in my nephew's skin but wearing my fury in his eyes, grinding through red lights and lurching down side streets. The full-time guard at Ruby's Retreat gated community reported a young man he recognized as Amos Adamson blow past his window and ram through the gate, breaking the

automated arm into bits across the concrete.

Footage from Jamie Adamson's house shows a Thunderbird skidding to a stop in front of the castle-sized McMansion on the waterfront. I watched myself exit the vehicle and leave the door swinging open. The resolution high-definition crisp. Dash light blinking. In my head, I imagined the automated *ping ping ping* accompanying the seat belt, clattered limp as a snake over the fabric. Keys dangling in the ignition. Fumes coiling from the exhaust pipe. Sand like lumpy cookie dough batter in the street gutter.

They told me the man in the footage is me. I looked angry enough to shake the ground through my walk, to crack pavement with my heels. The gun at my side pointed down. My old zombie corpse refunded and exchanged for this new one, but I could not reconcile my identity with the image on the screen. Me, Vitus Adamson. How like Amos he looked—but every twitch and idiosyncrasy is me down to my bone marrow. The way I held myself with my head down in the hot and unforgiving coastal sun. The evil northeast ocean wind punching ragged claws through my hair. A cigarette clamped in my teeth. I've got new skin and I'm already making a down payment on a set of smoker's wrinkles.

Exterior video showcased my brother's lawn, mowed in neat diagonal patterns. His mailbox in the shape of a lighthouse. A silhouette of a woman stood at the window through a frilly white curtain. Megan, my brother's wife. I watched myself increase speed and make my body a battering ram, pushing my shoulder into the door with the cigarette still throwing smoke up into my face. The lock broke and fell to the ground. The door opened. I disappeared inside.

Screams followed. Witnesses report several shots fired. An officer recovered spent shells and dug two bullets out of the studs later. They'll dig the other out of Jamie's dead heart. Minutes passed. In my head, I pictured the light on the car's dash blinking frenetically, on and on,

calculating minutes into infinity.

While the surveillance footage reeled on, they let me stew in the chair. But I don't need footage. My memories filled in what the surveillance missed, expanding into Panovision Technicolor.

On-screen, police cars arrived and screeched onto the roadway, one by one. They stacked themselves into every corner of the property and came with their weapons drawn. A man with a bullhorn. Neighbors peeking through their windows and standing in their door frames while officers waved at them to stay back and to get inside. They didn't listen.

Screaming and commands. Red-faced men in uniform and then, a figure appeared in the doorway. A bystander would report that he heard his long-time neighbor Jamie Adamson screaming one thing, over and over again before the gun shots silenced him: *Beware the echoes and specters! The echoes and specters! The echoes and specters!*

I watched myself drop the gun into the manicured lawn. My hands crimson to the wrists. Blood splattered all over my shirt. Blood on my mouth, forming a clown smile. Blood tracked through the entry way. I expected a river of it to spill out behind me.

Two steps forward and I fell to my knees. Cops rushed me. I leaned forward and vomited into my brother's green lawn. They repelled in disgust, and the last chunk not even out of my mouth before they're cuffing me with my face down in my own sick, and dragging me into the back of a police van.

After that, the screen faded to black.

If you don't know by now, we don't deal in happy endings here.

PART 1

I spat out blood onto the prison floor and caught the ox's fist on the second throw.

On the third, he flattened my lungs and settled in to tenderize me. Prisoners howled in a ring, hissed and clapped. Money and discreet packets of drugs changed hands. Like my old suburban neighborhood, but the scenery changed, this HOA run by tattooed men with daddy issues. I wheezed and french kissed concrete walls. The world deconstructed and put back together at random while I took punch after punch after punch.

You spend enough time dead, even the pain becomes something you miss; and you watch it from outside of yourself, like surgery on television. Turn the volume down. Rewind. Freeze the frame. Play it back, make it last longer.

After ten years as a corpse, pain plays a confidence game with pleasure. Every sensation overwhelming and intense. Starved for it, until I grinned with each throw, moaned when he hit pay dirt and knocked my bones loose. The ox stared in horrified confusion long enough for me to rear back and spit blood into his face. Every cut sustained became a blissed-out high. "Fuckin' mook gets off on it!" I couldn't breathe, but who cares. I spent ten years not breathing. Why pick up new habits now?

I slumped down the wall, trailing a long bloody line until my ass hit the floor, and guards arrived to beat back the congregation. The crowd dispersed. Unruly prisoners pulled away. Someone complaining about the money he lost betting on me. Prison guard, McSneer, snapped: *This ain't no fuckin' casino.*

A blurry silhouette blotted out the cool florescent light while I spiraled into memories of Niko's mortuary. Keys rattled on the chain as the screw held out a hand to help me up. I grinned

through a film of blood and gave him a gentle suggestion for how to put his recreational time to good use and keep his hands occupied. Hint: It's not knitting.

He didn't like my suggestion and picked up where the ox left off. They sent me to my cell with a fractured rib and bruises pulping down the middle of me.

Ah, the joys of living.

#

Going from death to life is like walking backward into puberty. Just when you thought you were done with getting random boners or growing pains, here you are, a thirty-something bastard in twenty-something skin, waking up in the middle of the night slick with sweat and trying not to think too hard about the past.

So I don't think about it. I sleep at night, or pretend to sleep. Navigating a brand new body on fire with sensation and acclimating to the sound of my beating heart keeping me up all night with the racket. Between bad meals and worse memories, I find a few minutes to myself between lights out and on. Jolted from my zombie consciousness and into this young flesh is like being drunk every hour of the day. In the hours and the days and the months since they threw me in the county slammer while they build my case and gather evidence, and most of all, wait for my turn in the clogged judiciary system, I spent the time parsing through an avalanche of emotions and a junk heap of mood swings and memories.

They buried Jamie in the rain while I languished in a cold prison cell. I wondered if the old gray fox would come to his funeral with his retinue of black suited men in tow, wondered if they would bury my brother with a flag and a medal, wondered if they would leave Megan to

weep by herself, wondered if Niko was the one who prepared the body for burial, and if she was, did she think of me and remember those halcyon days when I had been dead?

Did she see what I had done to my brother?

A boot scraped the floor. The clank of the cell door. Then, a guard jerked me up off the rigid cot, up from the dank concrete flooring where the blood of convicts past lingered.

A pair of handcuffs and ankle chains dangled from in his hands.

“I’ll take five more just like it,” I croaked as they threw them on and yanked my arms over one another and locked me together. The hood came down over my eyes.

I’m in deep shit.

These guys aren’t the regular guards. They’re too 1950s buzz cut for prison fare. Military spooks.

I’m dragged stumbling over concrete floor. They threw me into a room. Wind rushed in behind me and with it the footfalls, labored breathing, the creak and groan of an iron door. A smell coiled tight around me. A deluge of childhood memories rode in on its tail winds: The old gray fox by the hearth with the roaring fire. My mother in her pearls and her Coco Chanel black dress handing my father a whiskey while he paged through Julius Caesar’s *Gallic Conquest* and yes, *that smell*. His aftershave above the woodsmoke. Pinaud-Clubman. The smell formed an insidious meat hook into the room and pulled me up to my tip toes until my lips peeled back from my teeth so I could taste it.

Had he come at last to see what became of his prodigal son?

Someone yanked the hood off. Silhouettes before me resolved out of the shadows into bleached light.

Not my father.

An older gentleman. His spine hooked a question. As a young man, he might have once been tall but infirmity shrank and diminished him. His eyes, yellowing around the edges. Trembling hands. White hair tonsured as a monk's.

Close your eyes and imagine the grandfather you wished you'd had instead of the angry drunk who used to beat your father. This is the guy you would picture. The guy who takes you fishing and puts together model ships.

"Astonishing," the older man whispered as he studied my face in the bald light. His eyes jittered and jumped as he committed to memory my every feature. His brown suit looked like it'd been exhumed from the 1970s. "I take it you are, indeed, Vitus himself. It took the good folks in the Pentagon a tick to figure it out, but we've straightened out the paperwork. We know who you are now."

"And who am I, exactly?"

"You? Shall I elucidate your résumé? You were born as Vitus Adamson, the youngest child of a May-December marriage, and by all rights with a silver spoon seated firmly in your sulking mouth. Reports tell me you were a fractious one. You shed blood on the school ground, and most of it was yours. Violent, irascible. Your father offered you a political position in the hopes of calming your wrathful nature by a season spent learning the intricacies of diplomacy, but you enlisted for infantry instead. Your father's report surmises you did so hoping to die in service, a kind of vengeance motivated death-wish. Instead, you did well, suffered no major conflicts, and then, troubles began in the Balkans. You and your brother were sent; and this is where the worm turns. Need I tell you the rest?"

"Don't stop now. Why not give me the online dating profile version?"

"And then there's the posturing sarcasm you perhaps picked up from bad eighties action

movies. You're known for deflecting. That's hardly unique. Rather tiresome, to be honest. What is unique is when your brother, Jamie, ran a test virus on you and a subset of soldiers."

The man clucked his tongue.

"That did not work to your benefit, I am led to understand. The side effects were what they now call a 'pre-deceased,' a condition during which you killed your wife and child in a fugue. Afterward, you made a kind of deal with the devil, eh?"

"Well, you hardly need me to fill in the blanks."

"Hmm. Jamie's son, Amos, was the lamb. The sacrifice. And now you occupy his body, no longer a 'pre-deceased' sufferer. I believe that brings us up to speed. Of course, your murder of Jamie has left us to the trouble of legal wrangling, for what kind of civilization are we if we do not abide by the rule of law?"

A blade of shadow cracked the concrete floor into halves and pointed the way to a woman beyond him. Dark clothing. Dirty sweater and black jeans sideswiped with rust stains—or dried blood? She looked like she gutted sharks for a living. An unsmiling face. Beneath her attire, the form and fit of discreet body armor. If this were the movie version of my life, this would be the plucky, tough-as-nails heroine with perfect rock star eye shadow and head to toe in leather. But this is reality and this bitch looks like she sets fire to rock stars. With an acetylene torch.

"I don't know who you are," I said.

"Once upon a time, you could call me Agent, but those days have long been over for me. I was recently retired. Recalled for this special purpose. It would seem you are something special indeed, Vitus. Call me Lionel, Lionel Valens. The young lady over my shoulder, you may call her Elvedina Susic. Now I would say we've been properly introduced."

Lionel watched me, severe.

“Do I have to tell you that you are in quite a lot of trouble, Vitus?”

“You’re not my dad. I know when I’m in trouble.”

“I knew your father.”

I forced my face into a stone, into a moonscape where all signs of life have dried up and left hard-packed desolation behind.

“Couldn’t be bothered to come down himself, could he?”

“We served together, after the war,” Lionel said.

“He talk about me?”

“No, actually. He spoke of Jamie. Which is what unites us all here, at the moment.”

Water sang through pipes buried in the walls. When he turned his head or scratched his neck with his rough and dry fingers, his mothball suit creased and rasped.

Elvedina did her best impersonation of a grave marker.

“We have greater jurisdiction than the local police department, in your case.”

“Who is we?”

“Come, Vitus. You know our policies.”

“There’s been so many of you from the alphabet soup agencies lately, it’s getting hard to keep track.”

Lionel sighed. A gust of breath. “Your unfortunate decision to kill your brother has resulted in a change of priorities. Your father has taken interest.”

I leaned against the concrete wall. Lionel’s voice lulled and sounded like it was tailor-made for Shakespearean theater. He orated as in a grand speech before a vast and unseen audience. I smelled his aftershave, particles of stink settling in my mucous membrane. Like swallowing pieces of my father. What a shame I’d never had the chance to do so when I’d been

pre-deceased. Perhaps that's why my father had never visited.

"What happens now is both above and outside of the auspices of any agency. There is no 'alphabet soup' when it comes to you, Vitus."

"What's it like, knowing my father sent you on a mission to babysit his brat son?"

Lionel ignored this. "I have the greatest authority in the nation when it comes to making decisions in your case. The local police department are in the dark. They believe you are Amos Adamson, and you have just killed your own father. Your future, should you remain here, is one of endless incarceration. Your sanity is in question, but your judgment is not. You will die within these cell walls without our help, Vitus Adamson."

"I've been dead before—"

He cut me off with a hand. "Save your bravado for later. Surely you are wise enough to know that in your father's court, your swaggering sarcasm has no currency."

I waited in sullen silence. He was right. I could throw out every cheesy two-bit line designed to bite, but the invocation of my father was enough to cut out the spine of my devil-may-care banter. He and I both knew I was no more than the smallest cog in the most ruthless machine. The only reason I was being given a second chance was the high standing of my family.

"You can choose to wait out the rest of your life in this cell. I don't need to describe to you the interminable years ahead, do I, Vitus? You may be crude and vulgar, but if you think you will fool me, rest assured now, at eighty years old, it takes no great genius to see through you. Do you want to spend the rest of your life in an institution?"

"No."

He inclined his head. "That's good, for a change. Now we're getting somewhere. I'm a civilized man, Vitus, and not unreasonable or unsympathetic to your plight. Your decision to kill

Jamie came at an inopportune time. Your brother had a number of ongoing projects. Those, we've been scrambling to reconfigure and replan as needed. That is not so much a catastrophe as it is an inconvenience."

"So what's the catastrophe?"

"Quick. Good. You'll need to be. The catastrophe is that Jamie was running projects he could not commit to paper."

"Black projects."

"So dark they could not be written. There is no record of them. We depended entirely on Jamie's resilient memory to keep them in line."

"And now Jamie's gone. What a shame."

"You are the author of that shame, Vitus. More than a shame, very wealthy investors expected results from those projects and experiments. How do you think you were funded all these years? You don't think New Jersey property taxes pay themselves, do you? Or your prescriptions?"

"You got an offer for me? What do you want from me, old man?"

Lionel smiled to reveal a line of teeth behind expanding wrinkles. His mouth looked like mine when I had been dead. But without the mold.

"You were a private investigator before this, yes?"

I nodded.

"We will give you freedom and a clean slate. In return, we need you to sniff out your late brother's hidden secrets. We will, in essence, hire you."

"Oh?"

The old man came forward from Elvedina's monolithic shadow to stand before me. His

aftershave an invisible python constricting the air. He reached up with one shaking hand to take my cheek in his cool palm. The gesture unnerved me and forced me to lean forward so he could whisper into my ear.

“Your father wanted me to give you a message. He regrets he could not deliver it in person.”

He withdrew a paper from his breast pocket with one tottering talon. Lionel held it out before me and I snatched it, rattling both chains and paper as my eyes adjusted. I ripped open the envelope and unfolded the single paper.

White House stationary. The sort they kept in the guest rooms on Pennsylvania Avenue. The eagle against the blue shield.

Beneath it, my father’s scrawl, like squirming night crawlers burrowing into the paper:

I’m proud of you, my son.

And to my everlasting shame, I burst into tears.

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