

Terminal Beginning Book Excerpt
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It was five-twelve AM.

The desert on the other side of the picture window of the dilapidated truck stop remained lifeless, save for the low howl of the wind and the occasional, obligatory tumbleweed. The oversized window was gritty with the dirt and dust resultant from years of obvious neglect. The inside of the diner was not much cleaner.

The brutalized Wurlitzer near the bathrooms had been cycling through Hank Williams, Sr. tunes for about an hour now, after some freak-ass trucker had plopped in something like twelve dollars in quarters before departing the dining room.

He hated those friggin' truckers, but not as much as he hated Old Hank; preachy bastard.

He had been sitting there, in that corner booth, for nearly three hours. After serving him only coffee, and pestering him to order something every twenty minutes or so, the waitress had finally gone home when her shift had ended. But not before warning her replacement about the tightwad son of a bitch in the corner booth. He had heard her, although she had assumed that he could not. He had particularly keen hearing.

Eventually, he might order something, if it meant that he could hang out here a bit longer. But coffee was what he needed right now. Coffee kept him going; kept him focused. They did not have coffee where he had come from. And if he ever got the opportunity, he was going to see to it that that changed - if he ever made it back.

He had been away from home for quite awhile now. Eight-hundred and thirty-two years, to be exact.

His name was Wayne Chapel. Or, at least, that was what he was calling himself these days. Chapel to his friends, of which there were none to speak of.

Chapel was not necessarily pleased about the name. But, 'When in Rome', as the saying goes. The 1600's - now *there* had been a time for names! Then, he was known as Lord Balthazar the Elder. He had thrown the 'The Elder' part on himself. It had such a nice ring to it. No messy last names; no trite first names; nomenclatural bliss.

Names had real power then; could captivate an audience. Then, perhaps: But not now. Now, names had degenerated into a free-for-all with people mixing consonants and vowels wherever they liked into powerless names. People named their kids after *things* now; they were not names - they were flagrant nouns.

"Here's little Flowerpot. Isn't she a delight?" and so forth. Chapel tried not to think about it. It just depressed him.

The new waitress approached him yet again, eyeing him with measured caution. She had been bothering him with more frequency in the last hour, and Chapel knew that she wanted him to order something or just get the hell out. He watched the goose bumps on her arms form as she approached; the blond hairs on them erecting themselves to perpendicularity. Chapel had that effect on people.

"More coffee, sugar?" she said, grinning; halfhearted.

Ha - friggin' - ha. The 'sugar' part was notably forced - a habit on her part, more than a

compliment. She incessantly smacked her gum, even when speaking.

"No, thank you. I'll take a... what's the special?" Chapel inquired.

At this, the waitress brightened. This response had not been expected from him. She envisioned the solid promise of a tip on her otherwise desultory horizon. A broad smile split her waxy face.

Too broad, Chapel thought.

"Two eggs, two pancakes, and two sausages with hash browns for nine ninety-nine." Her reply was absolutely dry; soulless; perfect.

"I'll have that. And make it extra sausage - four of 'em." Chapel had a penchant for sausage as well. They did not have that at home either. One of the perks of having to be here, he figured.

"You betcha, sweet-pea. My name's Ethel. You need anything else, you just lemme know. It'll be up in about five." She clicked her tongue, winking at him, as she loped back across the dining room; hips wagging like a trotting rhino.

Two more habits that Chapel knew she would never break. He watched her with malevolence as she sauntered away. As soon as she was engulfed by the swinging kitchen doors, Chapel got up. With unpretentious nonchalance, he stole out of the truck stop.

Ethel was a good name, though; solid. You could sink your teeth into a name like Ethel.

Outside, Chapel straddled his motorcycle. Within moments, the truck stop was a forsaken spot in his rear-view mirror.

Chapel loved the feel of the open road. It gave him clarity. Motorcycles and highways were two inventions that he often wondered how he had ever done without. Gone were the days of the ox cart; the dromedary, the horse. That was all well and good with him. He usually ended up shooting his horses, and that tended to get expensive pretty fast. Annoying animal, the horse. Plus, they gave him raging hemorrhoids.

Hemorrhoid medication had been another welcome advance in his existence here, though he wished that it had come a bit sooner. Such was life, he guessed.

Chapel was clad from head to toe in green leather riding gear, so much so that he literally creaked when he moved. Wraparound sunglasses covered the steel grey of his cold eyes.

He had been on the trail of his prey for a good while. Yet without explanation, time and time again, the trail had gone cold. It was enough to piss him off. To be fair, though, everything tended to piss him off.

Chapel was born pissed off.

Hunting this one had consumed two years thus far. And yet, this mark always seemed to elude him; better than most. It was almost as if he knew that he was being followed.

Chapel had never taken this long with a hit. And he had his reputation to think of, after all. His employer had told him - expressly - not to complete the hit until he gave the go-ahead, though; even if the opportunity presented itself.

Accustomed to knowing most everything, Chapel abhorred not being privy to knowledge.

His employer obviously knew something that he did not, and that perturbed him to no end. Why not just whack the little wanker, and be done with it? It was almost as if his employer was playing with him. Chapel would not put it past him.

In many ways, Chapel vacillated on his desire to return home. He knew for certain that if - when - he did go, he did not wish it to be as the result of a botched job. That would not do. What would his contemporaries think, after all?

So, Chapel followed the orders he was given; grudgingly, of course. If he had his way, there would have been a blast radius of entrails and hell to pay several times over.

But he did not have his way. Three times he had had the opportunity to take his prey out; three times he had laid low, per his employer's orders, and done zero; nothing. The adrenaline rushes - and subsequent crashes - were starting to get on his last nerve. He did not know how much longer he could take it. He needed a fix - soon - employer's wishes or no.

Chapel was practically a legend back home, in more ways than one. When the assassin job had been offered, he knew that it was the part he was born to play, to use a cliché. Since their falling out, Chapel had been itching to settle the score with his previous employer. And, since some of the hits were on *his* men, it was a natural fit.

His quitting had been a good decision, in hindsight. Chapel's previous employer did not have the foresight that his new one did. No drive; no ambition.

Chapel was the best hitter his new employer had ever had. He had even said so. And Chapel had a passion for his work. It was his outlet; his art form.

Assassination proved to be much more rewarding than his old job. It had been so passé - boring - just hanging around and doing nothing of consequence; waiting. And waiting and waiting and waiting.

Chapel was not about to blow this sweet job for this prick of a mark that he could not find. Not now. Where in the hell was the son of a bitch?

As the trail had become fresh, Chapel had been riding for thirteen days on this stint. He had chased his mark down a half-dozen dead ends, and had killed two bystanders in the process.

To be fair, he hated when people told him no, or got in the way. It was so messy, really. And blood was a real bitch to get off the leather once it set. A *real* bitch. And out and out killing people was not really the same as performing a hit. It was not without a certain inexplicable charm, sure. But it was not the same surge of power; the high you got when you had finished a first-class hit. Hits provided an orgasmic level of release, and, addict that he was, Chapel craved it; lived for it, so to speak.

At the moment, he was experiencing serious withdrawal, which made him exponentially more irritable. Irritable did not wear well on him. Oh no, not at all.

Chapel rode for another three hours, and stopped at a mom and pop gas station in the middle of nowhere. Pop was minding the store today, and Mom was nowhere to be found. He five-fingered some random snack cakes and iced tea while the old man conversed with him. He could not believe how simple it had proven to be.

Pop had been *looking right at him* while he had taken these things, yammering on about some damnable local baseball tournament the whole time. Chapel figured - née, hoped - that it would end in a confrontation. Any sort of confrontation would be fine with him: A shotgun from under the counter; threats of the cops; baseball bat; that sort of thing; anything.

On the contrary though, Pop must have been blind as a bat. In the end, Chapel made one last ditch effort to antagonize Pop by short-changing him for the gas. Pop had, defying the odds, missed that too.

Pop was no fun at all.

Chapel almost felt sorry for the pathetic old geezer - almost, but not quite.

As evening morphed into dusk, Chapel rode on, stopping only on occasion for fuel wherever he could get it - purchased or siphoned.

By morning, he had come upon a ramshackle motel in the northern part of the state, and had decided to lay low for a few hours; get his bearings. Mentally, he was fatigued. And he needed to get the bugs and dirt off of his apparel before they hardened like droplets of glue.

After checking in with the teen strumpet working the counter, who sported makeup like a nineteenth century whore, Chapel retired to his room. He had specifically asked for a room at the far end of the motel, nearest the highway. Not like it mattered, though. No one could ever remember his face anyway.

If he was feeling particularly devious, he would sometimes appear to the people he interacted with as someone whom he had met recently. This led to no end of fun when later watching the local news. Those folks always looked so surprised as the police placed them in the back of the car, hands cuffed behind them.

Loki had nothing on him. But even that had lost its appeal in recent years. Lately, it was all about the hit.

Chapel stayed in the motel for six days. His senses were not functioning for some inexplicable reason, and it was, per usual, pissing him off. He knew that he had to be close, speaking in relative terms. Yet, he could not put a finger on the mark; could not pinpoint his location or direction. This concerned him greatly.

People had managed to elude him before - for a while, anyway. The end was a foregone conclusion, once his services were retained. So it was not as if it had never happened before - but not like this. This felt different. Something was off.

The strumpet, whose name, it turned out, was Darien (not a bad name, but no power in it either) had been by his room early this morning inquiring as to when he: A.) was going to be leaving, or B.) intended to pay her the day's fees. Chapel had not been out of his room all day, and had not informed her whether he was staying or going either. He was not entirely sure what he was doing at the moment, except waiting and floundering - and being interrupted by an annoying, dolled up, pre-pubescent, trollop.

This was bordering on agony. Chapel could do agony.

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