THE APPRENTICESHIP OF LUCAS POLK

by
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"To every man is given the key to the gates of heaven;

the same key opens the gates of hell."

Buddhist proverb

"I haven't got time for this Mickey Mouse bullshit!"

Stansfield

PROLOGUE

Every night my dreams bring me back to those two copper pennies, rattling on the rails.

I used to see them in crisp, shining detail until the day I bought a better birthdate from a guy downtown. Once I got my new ID to a liquor store, the pennies began to blur. Two mushy-faced-Lincolns. I don't think they were ever truly bright and polished and new to begin with, but if you spin your life on a single moment for ten years straight, you're bound to put a little distance on the truth.

The dirt was wet; I remember it raining so much that it flooded my school that week. That's why we were out there, on a school night. Running wild along the tracks. Brian let me lay a couple of pennies on the rail and I ducked down in the dirt as close as he would let me. Ten little fingers, mushed inside the mud. When the cargo train finally came by and rolled my pennies flat, I could feel the whole weight of that lumbering locomotive, all its power, shaking right through my fingertips-

It was the last time I smiled and meant it.

Brian yelled something to me as the train passed, but I couldn't hear my brother over the roar. Not then, and not any of the dreams that have troubled me since. Eventually the last car disappeared around the back of the old bread factory-

Ten thousand windowpanes and every one of them cracked or empty-

And then I crawled up to the rails to check the remains of my pennies.

Spaz.

That's what Brian said when I stood up with my penny pancakes. I turned them over in my hands and didn't see anything I recognized. Copper ovals, made wild with magic. The fake kind, anyway. The fun kind, anyway.

My brother went farther down the tracks to the point of no return-

To the point where it all went down.

He waved for me to hurry up. To catch up and go.

It's the spot in my dream where I always try to scream and wake.

Brian just looks at me with that smile of his. That broken canine tooth. He fell off a scooter at my grandparents' house. Or maybe it was my dad. I don't remember much on either side of the moment. Probably on purpose. I remember his sweatshirts, though. He had one that night and he had one for every day of the week. Like a living cartoon. Hood, two pockets, silver zipper, no graphics or nothing. *What, and distract from this handsome face?!*

That night he wore a red one. The one with the bleach stain near his ass. He told me it was from toxic farts. Told me he'd fire one at my face point-blank if I didn't listen to him. He didn't mean it though, didn't ever so much as lift a finger to me.

Hell, the guy kept a Ken doll hid under his bed to pair with my Barbies when I needed someone to play with. Well, not the capital "B" ones, but something similar. Brenda, maybe. A Dollar Store diva with crooked eyes and hollow legs. Still-

Let's go, Spaz!

He teetered down the length of a rail and slipped into a crunch of wet gravel.

"Brian, please," I said.

Now. He said it like my mother did. End of her rope, bags beneath her eyes.

And I cried, because that's what I did. In the dream and real life, too. Back then and later. In sticky subway stalls and humid dumpsters and empty park benches. I've cried in every crusty corner of this island that ever offered me a nap or meal.

When my brother saw me crying he sighed and pulled his hood over his head. It was always shaved- *tight like my game!* He pinched my Velcro wallet out of his back pocket and skipped it down the tracks like an ocean stone. *One more time, Spaz- that's it.* The wallet stopped down around my feet, rattling with coins.

"You asshole..." The bad words limped out no matter how hard I tried.

My wallet was dirty, Elvira's face smudged with war paint.

Elvira, Mistress of the Night. Hostess of Halloween. My living comfort blanket.

I had five pennies left. Or four. Maybe three. The dream always deals my wallet whatever amount it feels like and I take them. I line them along the rail and the last one to lay flat always vibrates.

Here it comes, Spaz.

I knew that already. There was a sound first-

A faint bark, heavy like a seal-

And then the yellow headlamp. Blinking through the broken windowpanes.

"It's going to be awesome." It was supposed to be. "Right, Brian?"

Uh-huh.

"Right?"

I said, 'yes!'

I spin around, thinking I might try to tell him to shut the hell up or that I might start crying but everything I mean to do is lost underfoot. When my shoe gets wedged underneath the rail. When, on the nights when I really dive inside a bottle, the rail turns into a tentacle or an icy-steel python that won't ever let me go.

And then I did cry because my brother was watching-

He jogged to help me-

And he said it again-

Don't be such a baby, Spaz!

I cried harder because I couldn't move and I'd ruined the night.

Stop crying and help, Lucas!

The train whistled. Twice. Both of them long and loud. And close.

Lucas! He used my name because it wasn't fun anymore. My foot stuck in the tracks was a serious thing and he wanted me to seriously stop.

"I can't!"

It felt like my ankle would snap before my foot came loose.

He reached underneath the rail and dug his hand in the gravel in search of my shoe. His hand was shaking, just like the rail. In my dreams I can hear his bone rattling, the sound of fear and fate colliding. I'm not sure if that really happened, but I've heard it enough times to commit it to truth. I'd double knotted my shoe that night, a big gumball of a knot because my shoes were his and I'd made a habit of running right out of them.

You stupid fucking idiot. His words were rough, but there wasn't enough air behind them to fill a balloon. He was scared too, and that was the scariest part yet.

My brother was never scared and my shoe was never going to come loose. My foot neither. The shoe was too tight, locked around a deathtrap-of-a-knot.

"Please, Brian!"

Fuck!

The sound of the train's brakes squealing– screaming– was a lie like no other.

My brother dug as fast as he could, through the gravel and down to the crags of broken cement beneath it. He dug so hard the tips of his fingers bled. It didn't matter if he split his skin to the soul- the train was coming and our ending, too.

I screamed for my brother when he stepped back from the tracks-

I screamed for him to come back and save me, but I should have asked him to run farther away instead. I've wished it on a thousand stars since.

Leave me be, let me go-

He was the bigger brother, the better brother, the brighter brother.

He made everyone laugh, quieted a dozen fights with his wit.

He gave me Aquaman.

He taught me how to hate Marvel and listen to Missy Elliot and Metallica.

He shot my sleep straight to shit when he showed me the original Robocop.

I was his lesser by half, a watered-down weirdo and-

When the train closed in-

My big brother fell away from the tracks. Staggering and crying. He opened his mouth to say something to me. *Lucas...* If there was more, it was lost in the squeal of sparks that ripped off the rails when the massive train wheels locked and skidded.

Twenty-five feet away, then fifteen. Ten. Five.

I threw my hands over my face and emptied my bladder- BOOM!

No pain, no nothing. I opened my eyes and it was if the train had hit an invisible wall. The cars at the rear of the train buckled - folding, flying and rising into the air like a giant, metal cobra.

It was seconds– an absolute sliver of time– but I will never ever forget the look in Brian's eyes. His met mine and a shadow crept over him and every single one of those massive train cars piled up onto his hood, his head, and his whole damn body.

Real magic kills.

CHAPTER ONE

"Clay, man – wake your ass up!"

I catch myself on the edge of the toolbox, waiting for my dream to pull its hook out. It's day, I'm in the back of a nondescript van and my mouth tastes like ass. Proof positive I'm in the here and now. I rub at the laughable dust of scruff on my face and wonder if a good vomit might set my system back in order. I remember the voice, a call to the waking world. "…What?"

Zero idea where it came from. Aside from my toolbox and a twisted wool blanket, the back of this van is empty. Front, too. *My toolbox*. I'm on a job.

A walkie-talkie cracks and I hear it again, this time from my pocket. *"Clay!"*

I cough and push the button on the side of it. "Hey- yeah, what's up?"

It pops. "*What's up?'* Get in here!"

The men inside won't be paid if I don't *get in there*. They might end up doing time; they'll probably wind up dead. The talkie rolls out of my hands and crashes against the floor of the van. Rattle and hum. Echoes of the dream train. This is what life balanced on a throttle feels like. I slink inside my hoodie, pick up my toolbox and kick the rear doors open, screeching and retching-

More train, more pain. Awake is only slightly better than the alternative.

The slap of sunlight that split between the buildings in the alley winces my eyes to slits. When your weight locks in around a buck-fifty, even the sun has a way of kicking your insignificant ass.

I pull my ski mask over my face as I come around the corner. Itchy-prickly wool and hot as hell. Because "that's how we do it." I don't care about being made, only the screaming lecture that would come with it.

I like conversation like I like black licorice.

I stumble up the steps of First National Bank feeling like I'm wearing cement shoes. They get a bit heavier when I slide inside and an assault rifle catches me in the gut.

"What are you doing?!" I ball up in case another one comes poking around.

“What am *I* doing?" My boss likes quoting me. "I called for an entire minute!”

I like making his face red. “A whole minute?”

My boss- Dutch- he tenses up. He's all-muscle in the same way I'm all-bone.

I try to move past but he holds me. Hands like wrenches. "Where's your gun?”

I shrug inside my sweatshirt. “I think probably in the van, I guess?”

The black fabric circles on his mask frame hard, blue eyes. I-want-to-kick-your-ass blue. “*Just get in there and get it done*. “ He yells out to one of his men, some one-time guy who makes a living holding the living contents of a bank at gunpoint. “TIME?”

The man turns his wrist up. He can read a watch, too. “Three-nineteen!”

Dutch verifies that I can hear. “You got that?”

I roll my eyes and walk through the tangle of people lying on the floor. There's blood on the tile, someone crying around a fat mouth. The unifying line on the resume of every single one of these one-time guys is that they're all short-tempered assholes.

Inside the vault, Dutch's asshole bagmen load up the last few bags of cash.

I set my toolbox down. Hard. *The master is here.*

They look up, but they don't move-

The second unifying line on the resume of every single one of these one-time guys is that they feel the need to measure their dicks across every tick of the clock. God set the standard for disappointing when he sat down and made himself men.

I crouch and open my toolbox, careful to pick out the tiniest pick I own. A steel one-incher, electric tape rolled around one end to form a tiny grip, the other end pocked and chiseled around the tip like the teeth of a key. "Out."

Dutch hovers behind me, body heat cranked all the way up to eleven. He's waiting for me to turn around so he can remind me who runs things. The seconds tick, value multiplying as they drop. I don't move in any way he can detect. Because I don't give a shit.

Dutch grunts with defeat and claps his hands. "Close it up!"

Score one for the little guy.

I roll my mask up around my mouth as the men clear out and close the door, parting my lips for a bent cigarette from my pocket. There's a lighter there, too. I marry flame and tip together, coughing immediately. I hate it, ever aware of the consequences and the elderly flavor, but at least it spares me all the 'kid' jokes in the company I keep.

I choke through a third of my smoke before I hear a knock.

"Not yet!"

Dutch barks through the door. "*Now or never!*"

I flick the butt off the tip of my finger and pinch it under my shoe. A practiced move, but cool enough to pass for natural, I guess. I've seen it in reflection and bought what it sold. Less so for what I see in all the sliver, safety deposit boxes stacked and gridded around me. A long and lanky loser, twisted and broken straight up the metal. *Whatever*. I crack my knuckles, sigh and get right to it-

Lord knows my tools aren't good for shit, their various uses a total mystery to me. I'm happy that the line on my resume where it says *yegg* has never required me to explain exactly how I do it.

I put my hands out and close my eyes. Fingers out. I grunt, a strain that is not without its gassy side effects, and I imagine the boxes swinging open. I imagine it *hard,* hard enough to put sweat on my brow and a gurgle in my stomach and I pull my hands apart like I'm opening a cabinet and-

Click!

They're open. All of them.

I shake it off of me, the wretched tingle. My wonky witchcraft.

Ugh.

It always feels like someone lit my hair on fire. My insides, too.

"Hey!" I pick up my toolbox and bang it on the vault door. “Let's go!"

Dutch's masked eyeballs creep around the door. “You’re *done*?”

"You're surprised?"

Dutch moves inside the vault and picks the butt up. "Are you insane?"

"TIME?" I yell.

A voice barks from outside the vault. "Fifty-seven seconds!"

"Hey!" Dutch jerks me by the arm again. Harder. "You trying to be funny?"

I laugh. "You tell *me."*

He pulls me in close, sniffs. "You drank again."

So what. The world is tolerable with my brain halfway drowned. "So fire me."

Dutch pulls away and I slip out of his grip and the vault. "I'll be in the van."

I take my ski mask off halfway down the steps and snap my hood over my head, yanking it as low as it will go before the seems pop loose. I'm not afraid of someone who buries a rifle barrel in my gut, all I need is a cowboy brave enough to pull the damn trigger already.

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Dutch drives the van across the city while the rest of his one-time crew wobbles in the back, silently wasting through their shares inside stone-faced daydreams. Dutch doesn't pay them any attention, such is his focus on the sideview mirrors and a few blatant stares at me.

I roll my head on the window. "Need something?"

"You want to shave next time? Get some sleep? Act like you give a damn?"

"I don't know," I say. "I can't really promise you anything."

He leans across the armrests to keep the sound private. "I didn't set you up with my *mica* man so you could drink all day." I don't answer, so he continues. "You hear me?"

"You didn't really set me up. The guy was like forty."

"You're a prick," he says.

"He was too ugly, too."

"You're going to get us all killed," he says.

"It's all good." I pop my head off the window. “You can drop me here."

Dutch pulls over and the guys in the back perk up, worried we've been made. He waves and they disappear inside their thoughts again. "I'm serious," he says to me. "Take it easy."

I climb out and the window rolls down behind me.

"Clay." He's got a hand up. Maybe to hold me, maybe to swat away the ever-present stench of wet garbage. He always eyeballs my neighborhood like it's made out of rats. In his defense, the guys in suits aren't that far off. "What do you do with your cut? For real."

“I stay alive."

"You're lying."

The average rent on this side is absurd. I could if I wanted to but he knows I don't. I've never let him drop me within a mile of my place. The Turd of Taj Mahal. Still. Shit. I pinch my hood and pull it down until it hides my eyes completely. I don't want to do this anymore.

Dutch sighs and checks his mirrors again. "Look, I'm going to be stripping this thing all day tomorrow. I'll settle with the guys early- can you do noon?"

A little early, but I'll manage. I nod and turn to leave.

“Hey..!"

My God. He's still over the armrests and halfway out the window. "*What?"*

"How do you do it, anyway?"

I twiddle my fingers. *“Magic…”*

“You're a prick, Clay." He honks twice before he speeds away. "Clean it up!"

I smile as I walk down the street, lies on lies on lies.