

Stories Untold

A Novel

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***** Excerpt *****

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THE CHOSEN DAY

He was ready to die.

Not fighting the thought anymore, not even feeling sorry for forfeiting his tomorrows.

All feeling had abandoned his weary heart, leaving nothing but hollow space behind.

Nothing more than emptiness, the vacant shell of what he once was, back in the day when life was wondrous and joyful and fun, centuries ago, when he was still alive.

He leaned back farther in his seat and enjoyed the silence that engulfed the warehouse. The last of the employees had clocked out and gone home. Even Terrell, who took the most convincing to leave while he was still there looking busy in his small office, had left almost an hour ago. Most of the warehouse was shrouding itself in darkness, while one fluorescent light after another reached their automatic delays and went off, precisely sixty minutes after the last human being had tripped the respective motion sensor. It was almost like nightfall in a way; it had to do with life, but wasn't natural. There, in the realm of the immense office supplies warehouse, it was life that generated light, not the other way around.

Soon darkness would come, and bring relief with it.

His desk lamp was the only light still on, and he stared at its pale, yellowish glow for the longest time. Absentminded, he pulled two small, white pebbles out of his pocket and let his fingers play with them, rubbing and knocking them against each other, making soothing, muted sounds that filled the hollow silence. No thoughts crossed his mind; he could have stayed like that for ages, lost in the transcendence between life and death, caught between his past and his nonexistent future.

But no, he had a job to do. He forced himself to come back to reality and shrugged off the emptiness that had swallowed him whole. He let the two pebbles drop into his pocket, then tapped on the fabric to make sure they were tucked safely in there. His eyes struggled to focus on

the paperwork lying in front of him on the desk's melamine surface, guaranteed to be scratch and stain resistant.

He shook his head angrily, inviting the unwanted tidbit of office product description to get out of his head, and then reviewed the list of dates printed on the sheet of paper he held with firm, cold fingers.

Only one policy left, that was all. The rest of them had passed the two-year mark that was the typical suicide exclusion waiting period. Most life insurance policies would pay the benefit even in the case of suicide, if more than two years had passed since the policy had been underwritten. His had passed that mark, except for one. He looked at the date and counted in his mind. Five more months, and that last one would reach the threshold, putting the suicide clause into effect.

Huh... From a risk analysis perspective, the insurance companies believed no one could hold on to the will to die for as long as he had, and that's why they were willing to pay. He reflected on that thought for a while, while his eyes wandered absently to the letters that formed his name, printed in all caps at the top of the form. The insurance companies knew how to quantify and manage risk, but they had never met nor quantified Dylan James Ballard. By the time the dust would settle on his grave, numerous actuarial busybodies would adjust that risk factor based on his precedent, and soon that clause would probably run three years instead of two. No insurance company could stand to make less than billions in profits each year.

Not his problem anymore; none of it.

All he still cared about was his wife, and he'd made sure she'd be well taken care of. The rest had stopped mattering a long time ago.

He stood with a groan and pulled the calendar off the wall, then sat back in his chair, flipping through the pages. Six months from today was November. The last of the policies would mature in five months, but he didn't want to cut it that close, so they wouldn't be suspicious.

He picked up a red pen and read through the dates, looking for one that would be worthy to become the day he stopped breathing. A Monday... what could be worse than a Monday in November, right? It would probably be a gloomy, never-see-the-sun kind of day, cold and humid and foggy and nasty, like November Mondays can be in San Francisco.

He chose the second Monday, the twelfth, and circled it firmly with the red pen. Then he squinted a little in the dim light, and read what was written right underneath the bold digits that

formed the number twelve. *Veterans Day (Observed)*, it said there, in font so small and discreet, it was almost like the calendar makers had been ashamed to print those words. How appropriate a day for him to choose; how fitting. Decidedly, he revisited the date with the red pen and circled it a couple of times more.

Satisfied, he flipped the calendar pages back to May, and hung it on the wall in its rightful place. Then he turned toward his computer and opened a browser window. It was time for the next phase of the plan.

He scrolled through countless search results and spent his time reading reviews and looking at people's faces before he finally chose her. Dr. Angela Blackwell, forty-four years old, highly credentialed, favorable reviews, published works. Not cheap at all, but he didn't care to save money this time. He needed the perfect witness, someone whose testimony would carry weight in court, someone who could swear his wife had nothing to do with his death, so the cops wouldn't suspect her of any involvement in his sudden demise. Then the insurance bastards would leave Taylor alone and have no alternative but to pay the death benefits.

He checked the time on his phone and almost smiled, noting it was probably late enough to not risk catching the good doctor still in her office. He dialed the number, and after four rings and the customary beep, he cleared his voice and spoke plainly.

"Yeah, Dr. Blackwell, hello. I need your help. I need a few sessions during the next six months or so. I will pay in cash; I believe that won't be a problem. I can't have anything like that show up on my record; I hope you'll understand. Please call me back."

He ended the call and leaned back in his seat, then allowed the silence to settle over the vast space of the warehouse, after the last echo of his voice had vanished. He closed his eyes, feeling nothing but emptiness, the familiar absence of feeling that shrouded him wherever he went.

He was ready to die, and now he knew just when that was going to happen. November twelfth.