

**PART I**  
**Jesse**



**Chapter one**  
**Santa Man**

Boone County, West Virginia  
Christmas morning , 2 a.m.

Jesse Burwell Walker prayed that his goddamn truck would make it through at least one more winter before rusting completely in two. The truck, a '78 primer gray Ford F150, had been left to him by his father after the old man lost his long battle with the black lung. A guitar now hung in the gun rack and the new bumper sticker pasted across the rear window of the camper shell read WHAT WOULD HANK DO.

Snow-covered gravel crunched beneath Jesse's tires as he pulled off Route 3 into the King's Kastle mobile-home court. Jesse had turned twenty-six about a month ago, a little tall and a little lean, with dark hair and sideburns badly in need of a trim. He drummed his long fingers—good guitar-picking fingers—on the bottle of Wild Turkey cinched between his legs as he rolled by the mobile homes. He drove past a few faded blow-mold Santas and snowmen, then past Ned Burnett's Styrofoam deer, the one Ned used for target practice. It hung upside down from his kid's swing set, as though about to be gutted and dressed. Ned had attached a glowing red bulb to its nose. Jesse found that funny the first few times he'd seen it, but since Rudolf had been hanging there since Thanksgiving, the joke was wearing a mite thin. Jesse caught sight of a few sad tinsel trees illuminating a few sad living rooms, but mostly the trailers around King's Kastle were dark—folks either off to cheerier locations, or simply not bothering. Jesse knew as well as anyone that times were tough all around Boone County, that not everyone had something to celebrate.

Old Millie Boggs's double-wide, with its white picket fence and plastic potted plants, came into view as he crested the hill. Millie owned the King's Kastle and once again she'd set up her plastic nativity scene between her drive and the garbage bin. Joseph had fallen over and Mary's bulb was out, but the little baby Jesus glowed from within with what Jesse guessed to be a two-hundred-watt bulb, making the infant seem radioactive. Jesse drove by the little manger, down the hill, and pulled up next to a small trailer situated within a clump of pines.

Upon leasing the trailer to Jesse, Millie had described it as "the temporary rental," because, she'd stressed, no one should be living in a cramped-up thing like that for too long. He'd assured her it would only be for a couple of weeks while he sorted things out with his wife, Linda.

That was nearly two years ago.

He switched off the engine and stared at the trailer. "Merry Christmas." He unscrewed the whiskey's cap and took a long swig. He wiped his mouth on the back of his jacket sleeve and raised the bottle toward the trailer. "On my way to not giving a shit."

A single strand of Christmas lights ran along the roof line. Since he'd never bothered to take them down from the previous year, he'd only had to plug them in to join the season's festivities. Only all the bulbs were burned out, with the exception of a lone red one just above the door. It blinked on, then off, on, and then off—beckoning him in. Jesse didn't want to go in. Didn't want to sit on his lumpy, blue-tick mattress and stare at the cheap wood paneling. He had a way of finding faces in the knots and grain of the veneer—sad faces, tortured ones. Inside, he couldn't pretend, couldn't hide from the fact that he was spending another Christmas by himself, and a man who spends Christmas by himself was indeed a man alone in the world.

*Your wife sure as shit ain't alone though. Is she?*

"Stop it."

*Where's she at, Jess? Where's Linda?*

“Stop it.”

*She's at his house. A nice house. With a nice tall Christmas tree. Bet there's plenty of gifts under that tree with her name on them. Gifts with little Abigail's name on them, too.*

“Stop it,” he whispered. “Please, just leave it be.”

The light kept right on blinking, mocking him along with his thoughts.

*I don't have to go in there, he thought. Can just sleep in the truck bed. Wouldn't be the first time. He kept a bedroll in the camper for just that purpose, mostly for his out-of-town gigs, because honky-tonks didn't pay a two-bit picker enough to cover both a motel and the gas home. He looked at the snow on the ground. “Too damn cold.” He glanced at his watch; it was early, at least for him. When he played the Rooster, he usually didn't get home till after four in the morning. He just wasn't tired or stoned enough to fall asleep yet and knew if he went in now he'd stare and stare at all those faces in the wood.*

Sid had closed the Rooster early—not because it was Christmas; Christmas Eve was usually a decent money-maker for Sid. Plenty of lost souls out there who, just like Jesse, didn't want to face empty living rooms or empty bedrooms—not on Christmas.

*Like to shoot the son of a whore that came up with this goddamn holiday, Jesse thought. Might be a joyous occasion for folks fortunate enough to have kin to share it with, but for the rest of us sorry souls it's just one more reminder of how much shit life can make you eat.*

Only five or six sad sacks had found their way into the Rooster this night, and most of them only for the free Christmas round that Sid always doled out. Jesse set aside his amp and went acoustic, playing all the usual Christmas classics, but no one cared, or even seemed to be listening, not tonight. Seemed the Ghost of Christmas Past was in the room and they were all staring at their drinks with faraway looks on their faces, like they were wishing they were somewhere and sometime else. And since no one was buying, Sid had called it quits a bit after one in the morning.

Sid told Jesse he'd taken a hit tonight, asked if Jesse would take an open bottle of sour mash instead of his usual twenty-spot. Jesse had been counting on the cash to buy his five-year-old daughter, Abigail, a present. But he took the booze. Jesse told himself he did it for Sid, but knew darn well that wasn't the case.

Jesse gave the bottle a baleful look. “She asked you for one thing. A doll. One of them new Teen Tiger dolls. Wasn't a real complicated request. No, sir . . . it wasn't.” He heard his wife's voice in his head. “Why do you always got to be such a screw-up?” He had no answer. *Why do I have to be such a screw-up?*

*It ain't too late. I can go by the Dicker and Pawn on Monday. Only he knew he didn't have a damn thing left to pawn. He'd already sold his TV and stereo, his good set of tires, and even the ring his father had left him. He rubbed his hand across the stubble on his face. What'd he have left? He plucked his guitar off the gun rack, sat it in his lap. No, I just can't. He strummed it once. Why not? Damn thing brought him nothing but grief anyhow. Besides, it was all he had left of any value. He glanced at the wedding band on his finger. Well, almost. He sat the guitar down on the floorboard and held his ring finger up so the gold band caught the streetlight. Why was he keeping it? Lord knew Linda wasn't wearing hers anymore. Yet he couldn't bring himself to sell it. As though holding on to that ring might somehow get them back together. His brow furrowed. “I'll think of*

something. Something.” Only he knew he wouldn’t. “Abigail, baby doll,” he said. “I’m sorry.” The words sounded hollow in the truck’s cab. Was he really going to say that again? How many times can you say that to a little girl before it doesn’t count anymore?

He took another swig, but the alcohol suddenly tasted bitter. He screwed the cap back on and dropped it onto the floorboard. He watched the bulb flick on and off, on and off. *Can’t go in there. Can’t spend another night in that hole thinking about Linda with him. Thinking about Abigail, my own daughter, living in another man’s house. Thinking about the present I didn’t get her. . . that I can’t get her.*

“I’m done with feeling bad all the time.” The words came out flat, dead, final.

Jesse hit open the glove compartment, dug down beneath the cassette tapes, pizza coupons, vehicle registration, and an old bag of beef jerky until his hand found the cold, hard steel of a snub-nosed .38. He held the gun in his hand and watched the red light flash off the dark metal. He found the weight of the piece to be comforting, solid—one thing he could count on. He checked the cylinder, making sure there was a bullet seated in the chamber, then slowly set the barrel between his teeth, careful to point it upward, into the roof of his mouth. His aunt Patsy had tried to shoot her brains out back in ’92, only she’d stuck the barrel straight in, and when she pulled the trigger, she just blew out the back of her neck. She severed her spine at the base of her brain and spent the last three months of her life as a drooling idiot. Jesse had no intention of giving his wife one more thing to accuse him of screwing up.

He thumbed back the hammer. The damn bulb blinked on, off, on, off, as though blaming him for something, for everything. He laid his finger on the trigger. On, off, on, off, on, off, pushing him, egging him on. Jesse’s hand began to shake.

“Do it,” he snarled around the barrel. “Do it!”

He clenched his eyes shut; tears began to roll down his cheeks. His daughter’s face came to him and he heard her voice so clear he thought Abigail was really there in the cab with him. “Daddy? When you coming home, Daddy?”

An ugly sound escaped his throat, not quite a cry, something guttural and full of pain. He slid the pistol from his mouth, carefully setting the hammer, and dropped it on the seat next to him. He caught sight of the bottle, glared at it for a long minute, then cranked down the window and chucked it at the nearest pine tree. He missed, and the bottle tumbled across the shallow snow. He left the window down, the cold air feeling good on his face. He leaned his forehead against the steering wheel, closed his eyes, and began to weep.

“Can’t keep doing this.”

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Jesse heard a jingle, then a snort. He blinked, sat up. Had he fallen asleep? He rubbed his forehead and glanced around. There, at the end of the cul-de-sac, stood eight reindeer, right in front of the Tuckers’ driveway. They were harnessed to a sleigh and even in the weak glow of the glittering holiday lights Jesse could see it was a real sleigh, not some Christmas prop. It stood nearly as tall as a man, the wood planks lacquered a deep crimson and trimmed in delicate, swirling gold. The whole rig sat upon a pair of stout runners that spun into elegant loops.

Jesse blinked repeatedly. *I'm not seeing things and I'm not drunk. Shit, don't even have a buzz.* One of the deer pawed the snow and snorted, blasting a cloud of condensation into the chilly air.

He looked back up the road. The only tracks he saw in the fresh snow were those of his truck. *Where the hell had they come from?*

The reindeer all lifted their heads and looked up the hill. Jesse followed their eyes but saw nothing. Then he heard tromping—someone in heavy boots coming fast.

*What now?*

A man with a white beard, wearing knee-high boots, a crimson Santa suit trimmed in fur, and clutching a large red sack, sprinted down the gravel lane, running full-out—the way you'd run if something was chasing you.

Something *was* chasing him.

Four men burst out upon the road at the hilltop right next to Millie's glowing manger. Black men, cloaked in dark, ragged hoodies, carrying sticks and clubs. Their heads bobbed about, looking every which way until one of them spotted the man in the Santa suit. He let out a howl, jabbed his club in the direction of the fleeing white-bearded man, and the whole pack gave chase.

“What the hell!”

The Santa man raced past Jesse, dashing toward the sleigh, huffing and puffing, his eyes wild, his jolly cheeks flush, and a fierce grimace taut across his face. He was stout, not the traditional fat Santa Jesse was used to seeing, but solid through the chest and arms.

The pack rushed down the lane in pursuit, brandishing their weapons. Jesse realized their hoodies were actually cloaks of fur, hide, and feathers, billowing and flapping out behind them as their long, loping gait quickly narrowed the gap. Jesse caught the glint of steel, noted nails protruding from the clubs and deadly blades atop the sticks. He felt his flesh prickle—their orange eyes glowed, their skin shone a blotchy, bluish black, and *horns* sprouted out from the sides of their heads, like devils. “What the f—”

Two more appeared, darting out from behind the Tuckers' trailer, intent on intercepting the Santa. These two wore jeans, boots, and black jackets with hoods. Santa didn't even slow; he put his head down and rammed his shoulder into the first man, slamming him into the second assailant, knocking both attackers off their feet.

A gunshot thundered. One of the pack had pulled a pistol, was trying to shoot the Santa man. He—it—fired again. A chunk of wood splintered off the sleigh.

“*Away!*” the Santa screamed. “*Away!*”

A head popped up in the front seat of the sleigh—looked like a boy, a boy with large, pointy ears. The boy looked past the Santa man and his eyes grew wide. He snatched up the reins and gave them a snap. The deer pranced forward and the sleigh—the sleigh actually rose off the ground.

“What . . . in . . . the . . . hell?”

The Santa man slung the red sack into the back of the sleigh and sprung aboard. Jesse was struck by just how nimble and spry the stout old guy was. The sleigh continued to rise—a good fifteen feet off

the ground now. Jesse figured they just might escape when the foremost devil man leapt—launching himself a distance Jesse would've thought impossible—and caught hold of one of the runners. His weight pulled the sleigh down sharply, almost toppling it.

The remaining five devil men leapt after the first, four of them clambering into the back of the sleigh while the last one landed upon the back of the lead deer. The reindeer—rolling their eyes and snorting fretfully—pawed at the air and the whole circus began to spin upward.

The pistol went off three more times. Jesse was sure the Santa man was hit, but if he was, he didn't seem to know it. He let loose a tremendous kick, catching one of the men square in the chest, knocking him into another and nearly sending both of them off the back of the sleigh. The pistol flew from the creature's hand and landed in the snow. Another devil man grabbed the sack and tried to leap away. The white-bearded man let out a crazed howl and lunged for him, grabbed him, swinging and clawing. He landed a mighty fist into the devil man's face; Jesse heard the bone-smiting blow all the way from his truck. The man crumpled and the Santa yanked back the sack just as the remaining creatures fell upon him.

The sleigh shot upward, spinning even faster, and Jesse could no longer see what was happening, could only hear screams and yowls as the sleigh spun up, and up, and up. He stepped out from the truck, craning his neck, tracking the diminishing silhouette. The clouds had moved in and it was snowing again. The sleigh quickly disappeared into the night sky.

Silence.

Jesse let out a long exhale. "Fuck." He clawed out a pack of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his jean jacket. About the time he located his lighter, he caught a sound and glanced back up—someone was screaming. The screaming grew in volume and he caught sight of a black speck tumbling earthward.

The devil man landed on the front windshield of the Tucker boy's Camaro, smashing into the hood and setting off the horn. The horn blared up and down the snowy lane.

Jesse took a step toward the car when something crashed down through the trees and slammed through the roof of his mobile home. He turned in time to see the back window shatter and his Christmas lights fall off—that one damnable red bulb finally going dark. Jesse looked back and forth, unsure which way to go, then continued toward the man on the car hood.

Lights came on and a few heads poked out from windows and doors.

As Jesse approached, the horn made a final sputtering bleat like a dying goat and cut off. He stared at the black devil man, only the man wasn't really black or really a devil. He wore a crude hand-stitched cloak made from what must be bear hide, and his hair and ragged clothing were smeared in what appeared to be soot and tar. His skin reminded Jesse of the miners heading home at the end of their shifts, their faces and hands streaked and crusted in layers of coal dust. The horns were just cow horns stitched into the sides of the hood, but his eyes, his eyes flared, glowing a deep, burning orange with tiny, pulsing black pupils. They followed Jesse as he walked around the vehicle. Jesse hesitated, unsure if he should come any closer. The strange man raised a hand, reached for Jesse with long, jagged fingernails. He opened his mouth, tried to speak, and a mouthful of blood bubbled from his lips. The man's hand fell and his eyes froze, staring, unblinking, at Jesse.

Slowly, those vexing eyes lost their glow, changed from orange to brown, into normal, unremarkable brown eyes.

“Now that was weird,” a woman said.

Jesse started, realizing that Phyllis Tucker stood right next to him in her nightgown, house slippers, and husband’s hunting jacket. Phyllis was in her seventies, a small lady, and the hunting jacket all but swallowed her up.

“Huh?”

“I said, that was really weird.”

He nodded absently.

“See the way his eyes changed?”

“Uh-huh.”

“That was really weird.”

“Yes, ma’am, it sure was.”

Several other people were venturing out, coming over to see what was going on.

“Think he’s dead?” she asked.

“I believe he might be.” “He looks dead.”

“Does look that way.”

“Hey, Wade,” Phyllis cried. “Call an ambulance! Wade, you hear me?”

“I hear you,” Wade called back. “Be hard not to. They’re already on their way. Fiddle-fuck, it’s cold out here. You seen my jacket?”

From three trailers over, the Powells’ two teenage daughters, Tina and Tracy, came walking up, followed by Tom and his wife, Pam. Pam was trying to light a cigarette and hold on to a beer, all while talking on her cell phone.

“Why’s he all black like that?” Tina asked, and without giving anyone a chance to answer she added, “Where’d he come from?”

“He ain’t from around here,” Phyllis said. “I can sure tell you that.”

“Looks to me like he must’ve fell off something,” Tom said. “Something really high up.”

Everyone looked up except Jesse.

“Like maybe out of a plane?” Tina asked.

“Or Santa’s sleigh,” Jesse put in.

Phyllis gave him a sour look. “Don’t believe the Good Lord approves of folks disrespecting the dead.”

Jesse pulled the unlit cigarette from his mouth and gave Phyllis a grin. “The Good Lord don’t seem to approve of most things I do, Mrs. Tucker. Or hadn’t you noticed?”

Billy Tucker arrived, hitching up his jeans. “Shit! My car! Would you just look at what he done to my car!”

Jesse heard a distant siren. *Too soon for an EMT. Must be a patrol car.* His jaw tightened. He sure didn’t need any more trouble, not tonight. And if Chief Dillard was on duty, that could be a bad scene indeed. Jesse ducked away and headed back toward his trailer.

About halfway back he remembered that something else had fallen from the sky, had crashed through his roof, as a matter of fact, and the odds were pretty good that that something might well still be in there— waiting. *Another one of them?* He couldn’t stop thinking about the thing’s eyes, those creepy orange eyes. He knew one thing for certain: he didn’t want to be in a room with one of those whatever-the-fucks if it was still kicking around. He reached through his truck window and plucked the revolver up off the seat. It didn’t feel so solid or dependable all of a sudden, it felt small. He let out a mean laugh. *Scared? Really? Afraid something’s gonna kill you? Weren’t you the one that was about to blow your own damn head off?* Yes, he was, but somehow that was different. He knew what that bullet would do to him, but this thing in his trailer? There was just no telling.

He gently inserted and twisted the key, trying to throw the deadbolt as quietly as possible. The deadbolt flipped with a loud clack. *Might as well have rung the goddamn doorbell.* Holding the gun out before him, he tugged the door open; the hinges protested loudly. Darkness greeted him. He started to reach in and turn on the lights—stopped. Fuck, don’t really want to do that. He bit his lip and stepped up onto the cinder-block step, then, holding the gun in his right hand, he reached across into the darkness with his left. He ran his hand up and down the wall, pawing for the switch, sure at any moment something would bite off his fingers. He hit the switch and the overhead fluorescent flickered on.

His trailer was basically three small rooms: a kitchen-dinette, a bathroom, and a bedroom. He peered in from the step. There was nothing in the kitchen other than a week’s worth of dirty utensils, soiled paper plates, and a couple of Styrofoam cups. The bathroom was open and unoccupied, but his bedroom door was shut and he couldn’t remember if he had left it that way or not. *You’re gonna have to go take a look.* But his feet decided they were just fine where they were, so he continued standing there staring stupidly at that shut door.

Red and blue flashing lights caught his eye; a patrol car was coming down the hill. He thought what a pretty picture he painted, standing there pointing a gun into a trailer. *Okay,* Jesse told himself, *this is the part where you don’t be a screw-up.* He stepped up into the trailer, pulling the door to but not shutting it.

It took another full minute of staring at his bedroom door before he said, “Fuck it,” and walked over and turned the knob. The door opened halfway in and stopped. Something blocked it. Jesse realized he’d bitten his cigarette in two and spat it out. *Don’t like this . . . not one bit.* Holding the gun at eye level, he nudged the door inward with the toe of his boot. He could just make out a hunched dark shape on the far side of his bed. “Don’t you fucking move,” he said, trying to sound stern, but he couldn’t hide the shake in his voice. Keeping the gun trained on the shape, he batted at the wall switch. The lamp lay on the floor, the shade smashed, but the bulb still lit, casting eerie shadows up the wall.

Jesse let out a long breath. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

There was no orange-eyed demon waiting to devour him, only a sack—a large red sack, tied shut with a gold cord. It had smashed through the roof and ended up on his bed.

Jesse held the sack at gunpoint as he plucked out a fresh cigarette, lighting it with his free hand. He inhaled deeply and watched the snow accumulate in his bedroom. A few deep drags, and his nerves began to settle. He set a foot on his bed, leaned forward, and poked the sack with the gun barrel as though it might be full of snakes.

Nothing happened.

Jesse jiggled the gold cord loose, pulled the sack open, and took a peek.

“I’ll be damned.”