

Chapter One: Y'all's Daddies Are Looking for Y'all.

Chapter Two: Always tip the waitress more.

Chapter Three: Breathing Dirt.

Chapter Four: Go Ahead, Give me a reason not to

Wayward came to as someone had just kicked the bottom of his boot. The sun must be setting

based on the light coming in through the edge of the tree line, so it had to be time to get moving.

Blinking his eyes clear he managed to croak out, "Uh, yeah, I'm up, I'll be ready in five."

"Still a little early for that. I'll give you thirty." The voice of the young officer came back to

him through the dim light. "Just wanted to wish you a happy birthday, shithead."

"Uh, Sir?" Came a puzzled response from Wayward.

"Today's your 21st birthday, right?" The LT managed to make it sound more like a statement

than a question.

"Is it?" Was the best Wayward's sleep addled mind could come up with. Man, he really needed

more than three hours of sleep, but there was always so much to do for a team leader while in

country.

"Yeah, it is, so you'll finally be legal to do half of the stupid shit you have been written up for

over the last few years." Came the reply from the young officer with as much sarcasm as he

could put into it.

"Damn, I guess it is, if you say so sir." Wayward acquiesced to the LT's word as law.

"Just bring you team back tonight and I will buy the first round for everyone when we get home." With that the second lieutenant turned and walked away. He didn't notice how every enlisted man around him shivered with how bad he had just jinxed the entire night.

The buzz Wayward felt was starting to wear off and he looked around the kitchen wondering what in the actual fuck was going on. He didn't even know half of the people here, in his kitchen, at his birthday party. He had invited maybe two or three people over, because that was all he felt comfortable being around. He really didn't even want that many because he no longer felt like his birthdays were worth celebrating. His acquaintances had gotten it into their heads that they wanted to help him celebrate with an "EPIC PARTY." Granted the female to male ratio was about 3 to 1, but it just didn't feel right.

Most of the males roaming around had criminal convictions, tattoos on their faces and hands, and lacked the confidence to leave their little peepees alone when trying to talk to anyone.

Wayward wasn't going to talk smack about tattoos, he understood that each had a meaning, hell he had three tattoos himself. His left shoulder had a gunslinger standing in front of the full moon with a sword stuck in the ground beside him, his right had the first unit he had ever served in, and his left armpit had a tattooed version of his dog tags. After following that train of thought, he figured out what it was that was bothering him. He wasn't with family; he would be ashamed to have any of his brothers to see who he was celebrating with these days.

With that he stood up and walked out the sliding glass doors to the backyard. After breathing in deep and exhaling slowly, he started staring off towards the tree line behind the house. He turned as someone hollered out the name his parents had given him. The guy everyone called Buck waved at him and said "It's too important of a day to be so glum. Come on back over here and I

will buy ya a beer and a girl." The small gold bar that dangled around Buck's neck glimmered in the last rays of the sun and caught Wayward's attention.

He came to a decision in that instant and tossed out a half-hearted reply, "Sure, just going to water the bushes and I'll be right back."

Cookie had marked this day on her calendar weeks ago and checked it every day counting down until she could call her best friend and wish him a "Happy Birthday." Today had been an epically bad day, it was one thing after another, and all she wanted to do was relax and watch some tv.

"Call him."

Cookie sat up quickly and looked around, it sounded like someone was whispering to her, only she was the only one in the apartment, and the couch sat against the wall. After listening for a few seconds, she thought she was imagining it. As she was easing herself backdown onto the couch she heard it again, "Call him."

"Is someone there?" OK, so that time she thought she had heard it a little clearer. She had been home for about an hour, taken a shower, grabbed some snacks and just wanted to relax on her first day off in weeks. Surely, she wasn't going insane, she couldn't afford it, damn waitressing job didn't pay enough for good healthcare. After a tense few seconds she jumped when the scream queen on the tv demonstrated her talents that won her that title.

Cookie quickly grabbed the remote and muted it. After a few more seconds of listening to the empty apartment, she shook her head and changed the channel as she slowly leaned back. "Stupid movie must have gotten into my head."

As soon as her shoulder blades touched the back of the couch, she heard it as clearly as someone was standing right in front of her carrying on a normal conversation. "Call him."

When Wayward got just ten-feet into the edge of the woods his knees went weak and dropped to his knees and almost fell over because the stupid brace got hung up on a small sprout of a pine tree. True to the form that he was in, he cussed and swore like a drunken Marine as he pulled the damn bush out of the brace so he could try and force his right leg into the kneeling position. It hurt like hell, but it wouldn't matter at all in about 30 seconds based on the way his life had gone so far. When he finally settled in, he tried to remember what he had been taught by his grandparents; all he could remember was he had to place his hands palms together, close his eyes, bow his head and say what was truly in his heart. "I'm done. I'm tired of hurting all the time, and I can no longer think of a reason you chose to save me. There's no reason for me to be here. So, just give me one good reason not to do it."

Cookie shot off the couch and sprinted for the kitchen. She just knew she was acting out a scene from one of those cheesy slasher movies, but she would grab a butcher knife from the kitchen and then use the phone to call for help. As she sprinted into the kitchen, she glanced towards the wall mounted phone and saw all the bright red Xs over the little squares representing the days on the top page. She slowed down as she noticed the red sharpie dangling from the string in front of the calendar, it was swinging slowly side to side. The red Xs stopped next to a big red cluster of circles around the day she had marked for her best friend's birthday, and there were two words written, in her own handwriting, inside the center circle. "Call him."

There was an old paper napkin pinned next to the phone on the wall where he had written his number on it almost six years ago. She had been flooded with a feeling of joy for no reason the day she had found it a few weeks ago. It was tucked into that old middle school yearbook next to his picture where he had written a cryptic message. "Seven days before your birthday we will celebrate our anniversary, and seven days before that we will celebrate mine. As it is written, so shall it be done." But this phone number was supposed to be to a pager and surely, he had already changed it by now. No one even carried those stupid things anymore, but she had to try, she was not about to ignore that voice a fourth time.

Wayward pulled the pistol from the small of his back and racked a round into the chamber. "You never listened to any of their prayers. I don't know why I should expect any different." As he looked down at the pistol and thumbed the safety off, one of his nervous habits saved his life. He had gotten so used to carrying a pager all the time that he just kept doing it out of habit. It was nice not having to be tied down to one spot all the time, but having people be able to reach you if they needed to had always been the whole purpose of his life, until now. He couldn't tell you the number assigned to the landline in the house, but he still carried his pager everywhere he went no matter how much the "young adults" laughed at him for being an old fogey.

He set the pistol on the ground, pulled the pager out, and frowned at it.

"SHIT!!! What was those damn instructions again?" Cookie slammed her finger down on the button in the base station and tried to dial the number again. She hoped she had entered it right, but something told her she had messed up when she entered in the call back number. She just had to try it again but didn't know why.

Wayward didn't recognize the number, it looked like a DC number, but at this point he didn't care. "Well, that's just my luck. Can't be anyone important because I don't know the number." He dropped the pager on the ground next to the pistol and reached down to pick up the sleek

black instrument of relief. "Now where were we? Oh yeah, give me just one good reason." The green screen with black writing lit up again, and the casing started to vibrate in circles, as the telltale beep-beep, beep-beep started playing again.

"Damn it I think I hit too many buttons trying to get it to send. Now I got to try it again."

Cookie was frustrated and her heart was pounding. Why was this so important?

"Same fucking number..." Wayward craned his neck back to look up into the sky and stated as calmly as he could, "See I can't even get any peace when I am trying to have a serious conversation with you. Instead, I get bothered by some telemarketer that doesn't know what the hell a pager is? All I asked for is one good reason, and you can't even give me that huh?"

Cookie took a few deep breaths and calmed her heart rate as best she could, she would give it a third try but after that, she would quit. After listening to the entire spiel this time, she pressed one followed by the pound sign and hung up. "God, why do they have to make these things so hard to understand? No wonder everyone is buying one of those flippy things they call a mobile phone. I'm going to take a nice hot bath and then go to bed. He's probably having a blast with his friends anyways."

As Wayward brought his arm back to chuck the pager out through the woods it went off a third time. Out of sickening habit he looked at it again. "Same fucking number. All right fine, I can take a hint. You still need a messenger huh? Fine, I am going to go call them and set up a meeting. If it's another one of these low life's dealing drugs or something, I will end them, and then I will end this miserable curse you have laid upon me."

Five minutes later Wayward sat on the edge of the back porch with the cordless phone in his hand. "You called?"

"Uhm, yeah, I am sorry to bother you, but I am having a *really* crappy day, and I was trying to reach an old friend of mine. He gave me this number like five years ago and I just found it.

Today was supposed to be his birthday so I thought I would give it a try." Cookie just blurted it all out, it was too much to hope that he still had this number, but she had to try.

"I'm sorry you're having a bad day; I'm having one too. Who is this?"

"Oh yeah sorry, I can hear music and laughter in the background. I'm sorry, I don't want to bother you. I'm just trying to reach my best friend." That shy timid voice sounded so familiar that Wayward thought he was imagining it.

"Cookie, is that you?" Wayward felt his eyes water, and he felt the insistent need to swallow. He hadn't felt like this since he was just a kid still in school, surely this wasn't the woman who had been haunting his dreams from before he had even gone to bootcamp.

"Oh my God, YES!!! It's me, and you still have this number. I had written on my calendar to call you today for your birthday because of that weird cryptic note you had left in my yearbook. Is today your birthday?"

Her joy and excitement were contagious as it caught him off guard and started to infect his own mood. "HAHAHA. Yes, yes, it is. But what cryptic message are you talking about?"

"You know. Seven days before your birthday we will celebrate our anniversary, and seven days before that we will celebrate mine. As it is written, so shall it be done. That's some vague stuff right there."

"Oh man I forgot I had written that. Are you sure you didn't miss some of it? I seem to remember there was a few lines before that, but the pen died, and I had to finish it with a magic marker."

"Hang on, I got it right here. I just found it the other day and wanted to keep it out until I called you." She stepped over to the phone table and opened the book to the page she had marked. Sure enough, there was more written in his neat little script in fading blue ball-point pen. "Two weeks before your first heartbeat was mine, like it was meant as a sign from the divine, I guarantee you that no better friend shall you find... Seven days before your birthday we will celebrate our anniversary, and seven days before that we will celebrate mine. As it is written, so shall it be done... Whoa, now that's just creepy, you were truly going for the whole mysterious fortune telling stalker thing, weren't you?"

Wayward was hit with a burst of laughter and had to struggle to get himself under control. "Really, I was the one trying to be a fortune teller? Do you remember your response to my promise?"

"What Promise?" Her curiosity was genuine, and it showed in her voice.

"Fine. I will become one of the best, and then someday I will make you my wife." That ancient promise came out more like a growl, but he was serious as he repeated it and wanted her to know it.

"Oh, is that what you said? All I remember was telling some sawed off little runt, who was too big for his britches, that the only promise he would get from me was 'No other woman will ever make you happier than me." Was that nervousness in her giggle or was it a hopeful chuckle, he couldn't tell with the music playing in the background.

"What can I say, you are definitely an answer to my prayers." With that Wayward laid back

onto the porch and stared up into the stars as they talked until the battery on the cordless phone

started to die. When they finally hung up, he noticed that no one else was around and he took in a

deep inhale before blowing it out. "Welp, let's start cleaning this mess up and see what all got

broken or stolen." It would be a long time before he told her of the importance of the

conversation they had just shared. She would always smile at him when he told her she was his

reason for living or that she was the greatest gift God had ever given to a man, but it took a

nightmare coming to life for her to understand the truth in what he was saying.

Chapter Five: Failure to Pie

Chapter Six: An Angel from Above

Chapter Seven: Sword of Pain

Chapter Eight: An Ancient MVP

Chapter Nine: Till Valhalla Brother

Chapter Ten: I'll Sleep When I Am Dead

Chapter Eleven: Welcome to Valhalla, Asshole

Chapter Twelve: Hey Boss, It's for you

Chapter Thirteen: Low-Down, Double-Dealing...

Chapter Fourteen: Live or Die, It's Your Choice

Chapter Fifteen: Giving the Dog a Bone

Chapter Sixteen: T stands for Terrifyingly Terrific

Chapter Seventeen: Tough votes and even tougher love

Chapter Eighteen: It's all about the Music

Chapter Nineteen: General's Gather in Their Masses

Chapter Twenty: Murphy Proof Planning?

Chapter Twenty-One: Same old song and ... new dance partners?

Chapter Twenty-Two: Shake Down Cruise

Chapter Twenty-Three: Clearing the Skies

Chapter Twenty-Four: Express Ride to Hell

Chapter Twenty-Five: Mobs Rule

Chapter Twenty-Six: Pay Back's a Bitch

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Closing the Show with a Bang