

THE
LIMINAL
PEOPLE
AYIZE JAMA-EVERETT

A NOVEL



"A voodoo cauldron of Sci-Fi, Romance, Crime, and Superhero Comic."
—Andrew Vachss (author of *That's How I Roll*)

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Small Beer Press
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Chapter One

Nordeen was right to send me. I feel three heartbeats at the ridges of the ancient crater we're resting in. Snipers. I don't know for sure, but their hearts are tense and their trigger fingers twitchy. As soon as I got out of the car their right eyes all zoomed in on something. If they're not snipers then they're one-eyed caffeine freaks with muscular dystrophy in their fingers. At least they're smart enough to know not to shoot me right away. Their boy, my date, Omar, wants what we have. If it's not in the car and they shoot us, they're shit out of luck.

“Stay in the car, no matter what,” I say, leaning into the passenger side of the twelve-year-old Mercedes-Benz that has dragged me to this ancient and massive hole in the ground. The meteor that crashed here centuries ago is as cold as Fou-Fou's response to my command. His steady sub-Saharan heartbeat is the only answer I get from the 240-pound menace. He'll play it smart. Always does. The kid in the back is who I'm really speaking to. Nineteen, can't pee straight, and ready to scrap, the native Moroccan looks more spooked than ready. “Understand?” I bark at him in his native Berber instead of the usual French patois we play with.

“I got your back.” He says. His blood pressure is pumping a steady drum and bass beat. His rank breath is stinking up the car. I guess his family had the Third World dental plan: eat for a month or

get one of your children's teeth fixed. I know which one his parents chose. Maybe when we're done with all of this, I'll help him.

"Get my back by staying in the fucking car, man. Keep with the package until I call for you. Yes?"

"Yes. Yes. But if that fucker Omar starts anything . . ."

"I'll finish it." I barely get the words out before two heartbeats enter the gully from the opposite side. Before I get up I close my eyes. I envision the three ridge heartbeats. They've been waiting for this a long time. Too long. They're tired. It doesn't take much to nudge them into sleep. It takes a little more effort to put them into the REM state needed so that they'll stay down, so I release the brain's native marijuana, anandamide, into their minds in P-Funk-size quantities. With one person it would have been easy. Three folks, far away, hurt a little. Knew it would. That's why I didn't bother to use my abilities to warm myself up. I've got limits just like everyone else.

I read bodies the way pretentious, East Coast Americans read the *New Yorker*. With a little focus, I can manipulate my body and others' on a molecular level. With a lot of focus, I can push organs and whole biological systems around. But if I do it too much, I get tired and hungry. I've got skills. What I don't have is patience.

"Taggart." Hate the way Omar says my name. Hate the way he slams his fucking door all the time. Hate the way his heart is always skipping like it's lying. Hate the way he smells. Hate his Third World breath as I give him the mandatory three kisses business partners expect in this part of the world. Hate this fucking man.

"You're late."

"Don't be mad, Taggart. These things take time."

"What things?" His heartbeat is as erratic as I expected. He thinks he's got us in a trap. It's not the first time someone has thought that.

"Finances, my friend. We have many investors. Some are not so much forthcoming with the funds as you asked. . . ." His bad English irks me almost as much as this crap-ass play.

THE LIMINAL PEOPLE

“I didn’t ask for anything. You know who I represent, and he doesn’t ask for anything. You don’t got the funds, we don’t have any drama. We’ll take our product back to Maximus and—”

“You are so harsh, Taggert. This is not Marseilles, this is Morocco. You must . . .” I open my jacket quickly and brace myself against the cold mountain air. Omar’s new trigger boy is as twitched as my foul-mouth nineteen-year-old. Either that or he really has no idea who I represent; he actually palms his .45. Omar—who has sense enough to know what a bad play that would be—tells him to calm down with a wave of his hand. For my part I just hold up the razor-blade necklace my boss gave me.

“Razor-neck crew,” I say in the hill language of the Berbers. “That’s who you’re dealing with. This ain’t the medina. This should be a simple exchange. It’s not. I’m not in a position to negotiate and neither are you. So we back out of this. Let our betters talk to each other and make another meet time. That’s the smartest play for you.”

“Hey, French boy! How about you don’t tell me what the smart play is?” Omar shouts like he owns something. I don’t know who told him I was from Marseilles, but I’ve never tried to change his mind. I do know why he’s so mad. At five-three he’s got the Napoleon complex bad. Anytime anyone tells him what he can’t do, it’s like setting off a firecracker. I didn’t do it on purpose, but I’ll be damned if I let some midget with an attitude and nothing but new booty for backup bark at me.

“How about you fuck the dumb shit, you son of a maggot-ridden whore, and make your move. Come on, you want to pull something. Want to try and jack the shipment? Make your play!” I open my arms wide and make a grand circle, inviting the unconscious snipers to take their shots. Halfway through it occurs to me that there might be more than three snipers, or that the new booty might be dumb enough to shoot one of the razor-neck crew in the back even with God knows who still hiding in the car. Luckily, I make my round with no shots fired. Omar’s face finally reflects what his pulse has been

telling me all along. He's scared shitless. I march up close, a nose hair away, before I start speaking again. At the same time I've increased the pressure on the new booty's bladder three times over. He's afraid to move for peeing himself.

"This is your play, ain't it, Omar? Your bosses don't know anything about this, do they?"

"Can you forgive your brother for—" I crack him on the jaw hard with my fist. Before he reaches the ground my elbow gets a piece in, too. Now that he's peed himself, the new booty feels totally ineffective, even with the .45 in his hand. Who am I to tell him he's wrong?

"You are not my brother." It's a chore to keep it French. That's how I know I'm mad. I only want to speak English when I'm pissed off. "Don't ever let those words pass your lips again." I look up quickly at the new booty. He almost jumps. "Go get what cash you brought. Now." Less than a minute later, a briefcase with six hundred thousand euros is at my feet and the smell of piss has invaded my nostrils. This guy needs to drink more water.

"So we can do the deal?" Omar asks, still trying to salvage something.

"You're short. For every day we have to wait for full payment, it's ten percent marked on. We hold on to the product until then. If it's over a week, we start selling it off, ten percent at a time, to your competitors, and you still owe for the full amount."

"Taggart." He tries to think of some way to convince me to do something else but then realizes I'm holding all the cards. To reward the comprehension I throw him a handkerchief.

"Your betters won't be mad at you for trying to trick us. That's the name of the game. But it was that you didn't have a Plan B. You might lose a finger or thumb or something because you didn't have a way to cut your losses and just do the damn thing the way it's supposed to be done. Don't take it personal. Just the cost of doing business."

THE LIMINAL PEOPLE

My back's to them and I'm heading to the car. Neither one of them will move on me. Omar is dialing right now, trying to ring in on his snipers. I can "feel" a phone vibrating in one of their pockets now. Doesn't matter. We got the money and held the hashish. Plus we didn't leave any bodies behind. Nordeen will be as happy as he gets.

Chapter Two

*I wake to the smell of fish, and I know I'm home. Biya, or Al Hoceima, isn't too far from us, but the underground regiment I live with likes to stay away from there. Most of our business goes through that port, which makes it better to not be seen anywhere near by. I leave Fou-Fou in charge of the money and the kid in charge of the hash. Kif, or hash, in the Rif mountains is like water in the ocean. There's no value in it. Six hundred thousand euros, however, is something most people in Morocco can't even imagine. I don't know if Fou-Fou has ever imagined it, but his heartbeat doesn't change. I trust him to get it to the boss. For the past six years I've been living here. My passport works for Nordeen. In exchange I get a nice, three-bedroom, sky-blue house with a rooftop that overlooks the ocean, and peace. By peace I mean I get enough cash to buy anything I want, a beautiful young girl to clean my apartment twice a week, cooked meals, good friends, and even vacation when I want it. As I ascend my ocean-colored stone steps into my spot I can't help but smile a little bit. This home has been a long time coming. I'm glad that it feels like a place to come home to. I don't have a door. Everyone here knows who I work for. They know who I am. At least they think they do—and even *that* reputation is enough to keep people out. Still, it's a comfort to come home and find a box filled with "supplies" from Spain. It's mostly American comics, chocolate, and books*

THE LIMINAL PEOPLE

I'd ordered online. I'm already on the roof reading and drinking some tea when I see something that doesn't belong. A voice recorder. The type that records onto chips, with no tape. It's Suleiman's. He's recorded something for me, despite the fact that he lives a two-minute walk away. Suddenly my chocolate doesn't taste so sweet. There's an ugly pit in my stomach. It hurts as it expands. There's only one way to get it to shrink. I have to listen. I don't want to. I can tell already. Fuck.

"I'm calling." I'm gasping for air as I hear the voice. "You said to call if I ever needed you. You said you'd come. You said if I used this number then to not use my name and that you'd find me. Find me. I need you. I need you now."

Yasmine. Damn.

The second person like me I ever met was in college. Her name was Yasmine Petalas. A year older than me, and she was gorgeous. If she ever weighed more than 110 pounds I never saw it or felt it. She stood a good four inches shorter than me but could bring down the house with her lungs. Her British-born, Ugandan mother gave her excellent bronzed skin while some recessive gene from her Greek father gave her deep, red, long, straight hair. I knew her for a year before she even knew my name. When I say I fell in love with her, don't understand it as some fantasy made flesh, or some adolescent reciprocal fascination. I would have died for her. She says she needs help, and if I'm the man I want to be then I'm dropping everything and getting on the first thing steaming out of Biya. But I am not that man. Before I leave, think of leaving, I have to get Nordeen's permission.

Suleiman is Nordeen's right-hand man. He knows Nordeen and I have a special relationship but doesn't know what it's based on. Nordeen likes it that way. Still, I show the man respect by never meeting

with the big boss until I clear with Sully first. Otherwise he may think I'm making a play for his spot, which I am most definitely not.

Nordeen is like me. I read bodies but I'm not exactly sure what he can do. I know for sure that he can always tell when someone is lying to him. It's a great talent for an international drug dealer, and a fucking annoying trait in a boss. But even that's not Mr. Maximus's real power.

In comics there's this bit character called the Question. He's got no face, and no powers. He's kind of like a brokeass Batman without the Robin. I like him because of the concept of a man with no face being called the Question. It's good in comics. It's bad in your boss. No one knows where he's from. Not me, not Suleiman or any of the other fifteen people he's got working for him. Maybe Fou-Fou knows, but he's not talking. One night we all got drunk in Segovia and tried to piece together the bits of our mystery leader. All we got was a colossal-sized riddle. He won't leave Morocco anymore, but has bank accounts, which have to be set up in person, in his name in the U.A.E, the Cayman Islands, Scotland, and South Africa. All the royalty of Malaysia sends him birthday cards, all at different times of the year. At least five women claim to be his first daughter, he has no sons, and his grandchildren range in age from six months to thirty-five years old. We've never seen any of his wives. His English, French, and Berber tongues are incredible, but he massacres Arabic as though it were a heathen in the noose of the Lord. Yet he's a devout Muslim. By the end of the night of speculation, I was more fearful of the man than I had ever been before.

"Suleiman." I find him with his family, his wife, and his two children ages three and seven. His tastes lean toward the moderate: not a lot of foreign products in the house aside from the expansive television. Minus the drug running, and Suleiman would be the perfect model for the modern Morocco. I take my shoes off before entering his house and wave my hand at his wife, letting her know it's OK to keep the veil down.

THE LIMINAL PEOPLE

“Taggert, say hello to my children,” Suleiman commands. He thinks I’m from London so he speaks with a fake Cockney accent. He wants his children to speak English, so I’m put through this cross-generational farce every time I come by. I hate children. Luckily, I don’t have to tolerate them for much longer than it takes Suleiman’s wife to make the customary tea. We are left in the kitchen alone.

“Was Omar so bad?” he says, examining the scowl on my face.

“He tried to swindle. The boss will have to talk to his people; don’t be surprised if the guy comes up missing,” I say in rapid-fire Arabic only to be interrupted by Suleiman’s brief but fervent prayer for the idiot’s soul. The rumor goes that Suleiman used to be in training a mullah before the boss got a hold of him. “This isn’t about that.”

I pull out the recorder and slide it back to him. Already erased. Sully looks at it suspiciously, then brings his long-scanning, desert eyes up to meet mine. “You asked me to check it once a month when you first came to us. But we haven’t used that safe house for a few months now.”

“I’m not mad,” I lie. “I just want to know if you played it for anyone else.” Has he told Nordeen?

“I’ve only been home twenty minutes. I haven’t even had time to see the Old Man yet,” he says slowly.

“If it’s OK with you, I’d like to tell him about it myself.”

“Can I help?” I forgot that Suleiman likes me. His wife has a hard time bringing babies to term. She’s lost more than she has. I lied and told her of a tea that would help. In truth I just worked with her body. That’s the only reason they have the three-year-old. Suleiman thinks he owes me for the tea. But I don’t delude myself about his loyalties. He *will* check to see if I’ve told Nordeen.

“If it comes to it, yes. But for now let me see what the boss says.”

Chapter Three

Nordeen Maximus lives in the biggest house in the city, the closest to the beach. We can almost see Italy from his roof. Everyone here hangs out on their rooftops looking someplace else: Europe, a ship leaving for the States, or places they can't see. Everyone wants to get away from here. Everyone but Nordeen. He hates the cold air on his naked skin with the vitriol of a mongoose in a cobra's nest. Most people think he's frail because on those rare occasions he leaves the house he's always bundled up in layers of Berber sweaters and jackets. That's the way he likes it, people underestimating him.

I never announce myself in his presence. He hates it. I just walk in to his huge living room and sit in a corner. If he's not talking to someone else he's either watching TV or reading. Interruptions cause this blind irritation to rise in him; even to me they come out of the blue. His heart rate doesn't increase, his breathing remains steady, his eyes don't even twitch. He just yells with a fury my brother could only muster when he was truly afraid. Sometimes I love Nordeen and sometimes I wish he'd just die. I've yet to find a subject that he doesn't know nearly everything about, including myself. But he takes the whole "knowledge is power" thing to phenomenal heights. It doesn't make sense to ask the man for anything without giving something in return. Not if you've grown accustomed to a fully

THE LIMINAL PEOPLE

functioning reproductive system, that is. He is brilliant and deadly, a combination often hard to like. But I always respect him.

An Al Hoceima whose wife plays housewife and offers me tea before scampering into the back room. He's always got a parade of them. As he reclines on his floor pillows with shirt proudly open I can almost see why. I don't know how old he is, but he looks to be able to give the nineteen-year-old a challenge. The tea I use like a prop, downing it quickly and healing my scalded throat before the shock has time to set in. It's the type of subtle move only he'll notice.

"You almost broke Omar's jaw for mentioning your brother," he says in the Rif tongue, and I'm mad. Of course he wants to talk business first. I'm gonna sidestep it, then remember he knows when I'm lying.

"He had three men on a ridge for an ambush." True. I've never told him about my brother.

"You handled them?" A question. Luckily I can answer without lying.

"Put them to sleep right before he came. I needed to give him something to know me by. If I used my . . . thing, in that scenario I'd have to . . ."

"The youngster." He smiles, finally putting down the French fashion magazine he was reading. "How'd he fare?"

"Stupid and young. But followed directions well enough. We'd both appreciate any dental care he could get. Pretty sure the Geneva Conventions outlawed that breath." My boss laughs, and I know I'm not in the doghouse for the arrangement I'd reached with Omar.

"I doubt we'll see Omar again. The deal's gone sour with his people. But the parting gift of the cash was appreciated. Now, what's this recording all about?"

"I'm asking for permission to take the razor off temporarily." I don't dare meet his eyes when I ask. Membership in the razor-neck crew is for life. We all have small nicks and scratches on our

breastbones from where the razor scrapes our chest. They're never to be taken off. Even when we're having sex. I'm scared shitless that somehow he knows whenever we even think about trying to take them off.

"Ya'llah." If that's all the mangled Arabic I get in this consultation I might make it out of Morocco. But I know enough of my boss to know that if he ever decides I need to go, it won't be him that'll do it. He owes me too much.

"Tell me about it." He says. Good. Not a question.

"I don't know what it is. Maybe something minor, but I doubt it. In any case, it predates my association with you and the crew. I don't want to track mud through your house." I use French because it sounds prettier. He knows I'm not French and appreciates the sentiment.

"What will you do?"

"Find the sender. Do what I can. Get back to my life here as soon as possible." All truth. I'm not gone yet and already I'm missing my house—my fried-fish dinners every night, tea on Suleiman's porch, fantasies about Fou-Fou's past. All of it. I don't want my world to change. I'm hating Yasmine right now. But she dialed a number I swore she'd never use.

"The one who called. She is like us?" The question I was hoping he wouldn't ask. There's no way out of it.

"Yes." This time I'm looking him in his eyes. Any more questions about Yasmine and I'm out the door and dodging bullets. Nordeen has an unusual obsession with people like us. I've never met anyone else who knows more about people with our type of abilities. I don't want to know how he came to his knowledge. But he's not getting any more from me about Yasmine than the sound of her voice and that she's got power.

"Keep the razor on," he says with no change in his face. "Fou-Fou will give you sixty thousand euros from the take. Call back if you need more." He beckons me close, and I'm scared. I've healed him

THE LIMINAL PEOPLE

three times from lethal gunshot wounds. Those were the only times I was allowed to touch him. I keep low, making sure my head is never higher than his. I'm expecting a hand to kiss; his deceptively powerful arms embrace my body. Even so, I still can't see him or feel him like I do everyone else. It's like hugging a ghost.

"Remember, what we have is rare." I realize he's speaking English in that no-accent way he does when he's trying to show me compassion. "People like us tend to stay away from each other." I nod. I'm like a cat being held by a kid known to abuse animals. I can't give him any reason to be pissed at me or he'll kill me. I don't know how he'll do it, but it'll be bloody and sadistic. I know because I've been his instrument for such tortures in the past, waiting in shadows and silence for him to finish an embrace just like this before I struck.

"But before you go"—Nordeen breaks his lips apart in an attempt to smile and reclines back to his pillows—"tell me about your brother."

Fifteen muscles in my back spasm, arguing the pros and cons of flight and fight until I consciously remind my body that neither is truly an option. This is Nordeen at his worst, picking at my scabs. And I've just asked for a favor and been given finance and permission for it. All he requires is a story. By the ancient rules of friendship and service, Nordeen is in his rights to hear the whole story. I'm too tired, physically and emotionally, to think of any way out of this. So I speak the truth.

"My brother was like us," I say and wait for a response. Nordeen takes a drag from a nearby hookah. "Only, he could push things with his mind. Make things move. He was strong with his power but weak in morality. I . . . he was four years older than me. I idolized him. Despite what he did to my family. . . ."

"What did he do?" Nordeen asks with the voice of a sadistic psychotherapist.

"He was a bully. My father couldn't stand against him and wouldn't report to anyone what my brother could do. My mother