

KILLING TIME

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Time is a commodity we cannot afford to waste.
You only get one chance at life.

A daunting stranger visits six individuals from diverse backgrounds who seem to have no obvious connection to each other, to offer a second chance at life – a proposal they are all highly motivated to accept due to their tragic circumstances of living in obscurity and failure. He offers each a chance to remember everything of their existing life so they can avoid the mistakes of the past. Not all want the weight of the dark memories portraying their failure, and those who accept without pause cannot realise the lasting implications of this seemingly benign gift...

Prologue: Diablo

A dark and lonely highway in the middle of nowhere seems a little cliché. However, when the truth of the matter is just that, there is no point in denying the detail. This was one of those abysmally dark nights. You know, the kind of night that offered no redemption, when not even the faintest glimmer of light touched the unforgiving blanket of pitch, absolute in its dominance as to make hope seem like something mythical. A night like this made everything surreal, and every surreal and twisted landscape had a point, even if that point was lost on the observer. Every melancholy moment was a look into the divine if only to reaffirm that God was whacked out on go-go juice when he created the Earth, more so when he set man upon his divine conception. A night like this also meant only one thing out here in this nowhere, nothing corner of the world – trouble was coming!

This trouble became obvious the moment the door to the bar swung open, and Jake swallowed hard at the sight of the man standing there, rain-soaked, indignant, and emanating cold, when he was certain that no rain had fallen all day, and none had been obvious two minutes earlier when he had come in from the back after stacking the empty barrels for pickup in the morning. The air had been hot as hell out there and the breeze hardly had the inclination to blow the dust with anything more than the occasional yawn. Rain was something of an anomaly. Even when it was inclined to make an appearance, they would have been lucky to see a spitting haze that lasted less time than it took to draw breath. Jake, being somewhat over-sized, who was inclined to sweat at even the mere mention of the word *'hot'*, felt every aching degree of this arid rock on which he lived. He had given up trying to stay cool about the same time that he had given up being clean. The grime that inhabited the folds of his skin oozed stains into his shirt, once an unfortunate choice of white that had long since turned to varying shades of grey, brown, and other less recognisable hues that were best left undiscovered. The stains resisted all attempts to remove them long before Jake had resigned himself to his fate and his depreciating condition. He had lived with this *status quo* long enough to have all but dismissed the perception of a time when he cared. The odours in the bar served to mask most of the unsavoury nuances of a clientele who were similarly not known for their hygiene. The thick smoke constantly filled the air with ever increasing resilience as the day wore on into the night, counteracting the myriad of olfactory digressions from the decrepit dispossessed souls who found their way here solely because they had no place better to go. In the absence of anything akin to air-conditioning, the frequent click and snap of lighters and matches did far more to contain the odours than the alcohol being consumed. The air was simultaneously overpowered and subdued by the influences of those who would have been oblivious to the taint they encouraged by their presence. The aftermath of the night before always left a lingering and stale aroma that took newcomers about two to three hours to normalise. The stranger betrayed a grimace as he could do nothing to resist the sniff that involuntarily widened his nose to this questionable olfactory mix. He brought something of his own to the blend. The taint was subtle but it reached Jake who refrained from taking too much notice. He did, however, cast a glance to the floor looking for any sign that the stranger had stepped in something unsavoury and brought this into his bar. In any case, he had already decided that he was not going to invite trouble even if this man had made the mistake of stepping in something that the barman would inevitably be forced to clean up. The circumstances of this stranger's arrival did not lend itself to any inclination of *bravado*.

Jake Hully was a man who had known ambition before the stark realities of the world broke his spirit and eroded his bank account faster than his sense. The day when he could have simply walked away had long since passed, along with the remnants of his hair. All that he had left were beleaguered strands, little more than lines of regret traced over a bowling ball of discontent. He showered every other week. This wasn't one of them. And he was a coward. He liked to believe that he was sensible, cautious, a survivor, and a whole lot of other things, but the only one he fooled was himself. There is no delusion like self-delusion and Jake was an expert at deluding himself. Being a coward had kept him alive. It had also kept him here in the back end of *Satan's* hospitality, the garden spot of what passed for hell's highway to inopportunity. Whatever mistakes he had made, he was paying for his sins in spades. He had resigned himself to his fate a long time ago though the discontent showed in his less than gracious humour. Still, this stranger gave him cause to pause. Jake reached for the old sawn-off twelve gauge he kept behind the bar, knowing he would never have the nerve to bring old Betsy out – and knowing if he did, this stranger would make him eat it and then get the endangered barkeep to thank him for going to the trouble of educating him as to the error of his ways. The stranger was a curiosity with

an old brim hat that looked like something out of the 1920s or 30s. He was nothing like Jake's typical customers. With the dark suit cut in an outdated style, the wide tie, and dull trenchcoat, he completed the impression of being a relic of some past that did not quite fit in the here and now, as well as being someone who did not fit into the jaded '*ambience*' of Jake's bar. The shadow of the hat covered the stranger's eyes but the jaw-line was as straight as a brick, the features chiselled in granite. The wry smile was a little disconcerting. The lines carved into the high cheekbones of the man looked to have been cut with opposing blades that marked a precision and depth defying the skill of the most daring surgeon. They were almost too precise and uniform to have been marked by the attrition of time on a face that looked like it seldom changed expression long enough to allow for such deep lines of menacing contrition. Jake immediately had no desire to see the stranger's eyes, though an impression of '*cold and unforgiving*' entered his thoughts unbidden.

For a long time, the stranger just stood there – tall, dark, looming, and dripping all over the floor, until the water started to wash away some of the grime in circles of hopelessness – small puddles that had no chance of changing the ingrained despair and depression that had been soaked into the decaying wood.

There were only four regulars in the bar at this time. Business had been seriously down of late but this night was quieter than most and seemed to attest to Jake's continued decline. Two were shooting pool, and the other two stayed to shooting their mouths off, but everyone stopped as the stranger came in. He stood there for a moment that seemed far too long to be comfortable and absorbed his surroundings. The stranger crossed to the bar and climbed up on the edge of one of the stools as Jake followed his every move, certain that he was not alone in watching this man. He just had to ask the one question that everyone in the bar wanted to know the answer to, without needing to think about it.

The question needed to be asked and outweighed Jake's inclination towards a typically stoic sense of self-preservation.

'How come you're all wet?' he asked with a quiver in his voice as he threw caution to the wind and dismissed his rule of practising a good survival sense by not being nosy.

'Raining,' remarked the stranger. One word drawled with an air of callous disinterest.

'No, it's not,' replied Jake as if the man before him had told a joke. 'I was just out there a few moments ago and it was drier than hell,' he declared casting a glance towards the pool players and his eyes to heaven as if this stranger was *loco*. Jake took his hand off of old Betsy and moved deeper into the recess of the bar closer to the door, bold enough to prove the stranger wrong in another uncharacteristic act of courage.

'It's not...' he began as he pushed open the door. '...raining,' he finished in astonishment as he looked out into a torrential downpour the likes of which he had not seen in more years than he cared to remember. His mouth gaped wide in surprise.

'How is it raining?' he asked to no one in particular.

'I didn't have the time to get to you,' drawled the stranger. 'So I brought you to me,' he said with a knowing grin as he tapped his nose with his index finger.

The words sent a chill down Jake's spine as he returned to the bar and set a nervous sweaty hand back on old Betsy. The touch of the smooth wood did not instil any degree of courage.

'Broug... brought me to...' stuttered Jake as he wiped his free hand on his shirt. He tried to smile but the expression was lost in his fear. He looked to the others but no one else had moved in the bar. They still stood there looking at the stranger but did not seem otherwise inclined towards anything more than listening to the exchange.

'Yes, indeed. Think of it as Mohammed and the mountain,' said the stranger.

'Mohammed?' questioned Jake uneasily.

'Couldn't go to the mountain so the mountain came to him, or vice versa. Probably not an accurate reflection but apt enough for this occasion,' added the stranger.

Jake looked confused, and then angry. He was a coward but there were a few things in his life that motivated him to push the envelope of his fear. Usually something that got his ire up.

'Are you saying I'm the mountain? Are you saying that I'm fat?'

Jake's voice was increasing in pitch as he gathered some modicum of audacity to suppress his usual inadequacies. Jake did not like to be called '*fat*', even if he was rather large. He was big-boned, but he didn't like that either. His hand tightened on the grip of old Betsy. The last time that he had fired the *old gal* was when Weedy Pete had called him *fat*. Pete was deaf in one ear for months and damned near lost that ear, but he had

deflected the shot enough to still be here to whine about the time that Jake nearly took his head off. At least it gave him something legitimate to whine about.

The stranger sighed. 'It is an analogy, Jake. I am not calling you fat. I am merely explaining what was necessary.'

Jake's eyes narrowed. 'How do you know my name?'

The stranger sighed again.

'You mean besides the obvious fact that your name is plastered on the front of this establishment in big letters – *JAKES*? You are the reason I am here, or to be more accurate, I have come here for you.'

Jake was a little taken aback. Again, the occupants of the bar barely moved and showed no inclination of returning to their previous activities and tedious unchanging banter while this was going on. The stranger was... compelling. His presence demanded attention both because of his peculiar arrival and his outdated attire.

'Why... why have you come for me?' enquired Jake, the erratic words driven out by fear alone.

'I have come to make you an offer,' announced the stranger. 'I have come to change your life!'

Jake almost laughed. If this was some crazy, off-the-wall, sales pitch, he would not be pleased. Still, the rain outside did not seem to support that conclusion.

'Change my life?' questioned Jake with a hint of sarcasm.

'Yes. I am going to let you go back to do it all again, knowing now how you went wrong. You have a choice,' stated the stranger, his gravelly voice rising to focus the attention of the barkeep.

'You are going to let me go back where?' quizzed Jake, replacing some of his fear with suspicion, though in truth a fair measure of fear remained. After all he had enough of that emotional weakness to fill the whole bar, even with less obvious intimidation than that provoked by this stranger.

'To a time where you know it will make a difference. To a moment when your choices made your life what it is now. You have only to accept my offer.'

Jake laughed again, as did the others in the bar. They were not likely to return to what they had been doing while faced with such an entertaining and engaging diversion.

'You hear this, guys? This magical man is going to give me my life back. And just what's in it for you, Mr *Fucking* Magical man?'

The barman had become almost too daring. The profanity did not seem to inspire the desired *bravado*. The stranger stood up and leaned closer to Jake. The other occupants of the bar strained to hear what was being said.

'Let's just say that you'll owe me one,' he whispered, and the hairs rose on the back of Jake's neck.

The whisper carried weight. It was not lost in spite of the exchange being directed only to Jake. The silence had become absolute in that one awkward moment as a shudder traced Jake's spine. The chill was downright disconcerting. It did not diminish even when the stranger eased himself back into the stool and increase the distance between them. The fear returned with venom. Jake could barely keep his hands from shaking and had to relax his grip on Old Betsy in case he accidentally set the gun off. However, the stranger held his attention.

'What... what do I have to do?' stammered Jake. He could not hope to control the tremor in his voice and had to remove his free hand from the bar to hide his obvious dread. He didn't know what to believe but he had seen far too many strange things in his life to just dismiss the words of this most unusual man.

'You only have to say yes, Jake,' replied the stranger casually.

Jake looked to each of his clientele. They offered nothing to aid the hapless barman, and he could not be sure they would do anything to come to his assistance if this went wrong. Jake forced a false laugh but it died almost instantly. His heart was racing far too much to maintain the charade of *boldness*. Jake drew in a sharp breath and let it out in a long sigh. *What had he got to lose?*

'Okay then... yes,' he said as beads of sweat formed on his forehead and further betrayed the depths of his terror.

When the stranger levelled Old Betsy at Jake's head, the barman barely had time to wonder just how the gun came to be in this man's hand when it clearly still rested in his own sweaty palm. The thought helped to distract him from the sound of the gun discharging.

The others in the bar had already dived for cover – cowards one and all when it came to a choice between them and Jake. The stranger was already walking towards the doors before anyone felt inclined to look. He pulled his overcoat tight about him and left the bar without further incident. The doors swung open to reveal a torrential downpour. As they swung closed and opened again for a brief instant, the sky burned in a furious red

as the day refused to submit to the encroaching night. Time held this moment for far too long and just as quickly let the moment die when fate surrendered. Jake was gone and the present unravelled like a thread pulled from an already compromised tapestry. No one mourned his passing. Time moved on oblivious to the change.

The rain hadn't stopped for nine days. Not so bad in recent months unless you considered the fact that this was supposed to be summer, and that the season was usually naturally hot. Outside of the rain, the strange numbing cold at night was unbearable and offered no relief from a depressive overture hanging over the city – more so because Matthew Harding's apartment did not have adequate heating at the best of times and this freakish little weather pattern had not been anticipated. His apartment also had the rather unfortunate position of being nearer the roof. Great when the sun offered even a trace of heat but not when icy rain pounded on the high glass atrium-like windows with a perceived brutality. There was nothing delicate or majestic about the rain, and little that inspired hope. The precipitation didn't even provide anything akin to a cleaning aspect as some taint defied the ability of the wash to remove its grime from a place that clung to an impression of despair. He had a hell of a view of the city. Hell being as apt a word as any given the undeniable fact that this was not a neighbourhood of particular exclusivity unless you coveted the ambience of local muggers and pickpockets along with people who just wanted to eke out a living without all of the usual crap – *violence, rape, robbery and murder*. Not the finest corner of New York, or any other city for that matter. Contamination was as fitting a word as any, but this rain made it seem dismally worse than normal. Humanity had made the weather unpredictable but it had also left the grime of the city thrive in the shadows of deniability. The world had been tainted to the core. It was a sad reflection of a place in time no one living remembered.

Matthew was an artist – or at least he had been when he could afford to pay for all those things that made one an artist. He was as short on paint as he was on money and with the recent passing of his uncle Gerald; he no longer had anyone left from which to borrow who would not close the door on him the moment he showed his face. Correction, he had plenty of people who would close the door on him without so much as a backward glance. In truth, even when Matthew had the money he hadn't painted much in recent years. He spent most of his time in one bar or another under the pretext of learning about life and real people and getting in touch with the *visceral* side of living. Uncle Gerald must have had enough by the time of his demise. He didn't leave Matthew a dime. With little or no income left, the ailing artist had been resigned to staying in to watch and listen to the rain, to huddle in a blanket in the corner of a virtually empty apartment shivering from the cold, and to the hunger which gnawed away at his stomach. He never had much flesh on his bones. Lately, he appeared more and more emaciated. His height, at a little over six feet didn't help. The unkempt hair and beard along with a generally dishevelled approach to his care gave him all the attributes of a vagrant – a bum – a dispossessed soul. All Matthew had left to do was sit there in the cold, listening to the frantic melody of the rain and wait for the inevitable. Alternatively, he could take the razor from his pocket to usher along the forgone conclusion of his demise. At least after the initial cuts it would prove less painful than the slow degradation that had already taken the last sliver of hope and dignity. If the dead had any cause for regret, Uncle Gerald might just feel the weight of leaving him here in destitution. Similarly, the few living patrons he had indulged with his artistic charm by playing to their vulnerabilities might be given cause to pause if he died in such a manner. He had never been one to let his arrogance open his eyes to the harm he in turn caused those who tried to befriend him. He had used as much as let himself be used. Accepting the consequences of moral impropriety was for those who believed in a *soul*. Matthew did not have enough within him to believe in anything, let alone something divine. He had hurt for no other reason than because he did not care and did not believe.

When the door to his apartment opened rather suddenly, Matthew Harding barely had the inclination to raise his head, though his hand dropped instinctively to the pocket containing the razor. He managed a faint smile. He was hardly in any condition to mount a defence even against the most feeble of foes. If they had come to rob him, they were already too late. He had nothing left except a few old brushes and a piece of canvas barely worth keeping – the last half finished painting of an indulgence he had scorned. He had used her because he could and discarded her because he had already cost her more than she deserved. He was a moral paradox, callous, cruel and self-serving, but he recognised what too far meant. He let her go because it was wrong. If these intruders wanted to reset the balance and use him for any perverse fun, he was already too far gone – too fragile to provide much entertainment and beyond redemption. Only the faintest flicker of life remained as he stubbornly clung to this existence without knowing why he was so inclined. He certainly didn't feel like he had anything

left to live for in a world that ignored his being with the same contempt he had shown in equal measure for the rest of humanity.

The outside was a vague reflection of life as the day moved towards an end with casual and deliberate sluggishness, the light too lazy to go down and the night equally obstinate against taking over. The room was dominated by heavy shadow. Matthew coughed. He had no need to draw attention to his presence. There was nowhere to hide. The cough was involuntary, not reactionary. At least it was not in reaction to this intrusion. Matthew had to look up to see what he could not discern from the solitary footfall. The steps were sure – an approach with intent. The stranger who had entered his apartment unbidden was tall and dressed in a curious fashion that could only be described as antiquated but functional. He wore a dark suit, tie, and a trenchcoat along with an old style hat. Still, he was a little too well dressed for a thief, or the conventional scumbag that infested the streets of this degenerate part of the city. The stranger's cold eyes fixed on Matthew and a chill traced the beleaguered artist's spine as he shuddered in an unexpected response to this scrutiny. Matthew had cause to wish he had never been disposed to look. In spite of the discomfort he experienced from the eyes, the stranger's face was a curiosity to this ailing artist, from the high cheek bones etched with the lines of a life of some hardship to the wry smile that seemed so out of place with the misfortune that clung to this man. Otherwise, he had the features of a statue, where any movement seemed so out of place as to be absurd. Matthew saw more than he wanted to in this stranger. The adversity that adhered to him was something else – not within him, but like a vague impression that permeated the air around him. It was difficult to define, more so because Matthew was beyond the ability to reason out anything more complicated than a visual impression that touched senses decayed by decadence and despair. *Trouble and misfortune*. The stranger was the central focal point for strife and chaos. Again, the impression was fleeting. Matthew Harding's own misfortunes and continued inability to concentrate made the thought dissipate as assuredly as any modicum of warmth retreated from his apartment.

'Hello, Mr Harding, please forgive this intrusion and the lateness of the hour. I was unavoidably delayed. I have come to make you an offer, which I can see from your circumstances, it would be unwise to refuse.'

Matthew felt the fear rise from the pit of his stomach and he gripped the razor in his pocket all the more tightly. For a moment he thought he saw a slight disturbance in the darker shadows about this stranger, almost as if the air wavered but when he closed and opened his eyes, it was gone. A trick of the failing light no doubt.

'What... offer?' asked Matthew sheepishly.

'A chance to do it all over again knowing where you went wrong.'

Great. This stranger wasn't a thief or a mugger – he was just some crazy *son-of-a-bitch* who had wandered in off the streets to share his *dementia*.

'Do it over?' questioned Matthew.

'Yes,' replied the stranger. 'You have a choice to make, but you must make it now. I am already later than I expected. You do not have much time left.'

A *choice*? From where Matthew was sitting, he had been out of choices a long time ago. All he had now was his inevitable demise.

'Why me? Why have you come to give me this choice?' he asked when he realised that he had been staring at the stranger for far too long without saying anything.

'Suffice to say, you have been chosen. I do not have time to explain, or to be more accurate, you do not have the time for me to offer a reasonable elucidation. You need only say yes and I will do what is necessary.'

Matthew hesitated. *Fear*. An understandable reaction. *Suspicion*. An equally logical feeling. It wasn't every day that some stranger, who looked like a relic from the past, gave him an opportunity to get his life back. He looked around the room at the utter despair of an empty shell with little or nothing to show for the efforts he had long left behind, caused mostly by his ineptitude, frivolity and selfishness. He climbed to his feet with some difficulty and had to use both hands to steady himself. He immediately put his hand back in his pocket to take hold of the razor lest this man prove to be... just some *psycho* out to do him harm. On reflection, there wasn't a great deal he would have been able to do about it if the stranger was crazy and had a propensity towards violence.

'What do... what do I have to do?' whispered Matthew.

'Just say yes,' replied the stranger.

The weight of Matthew's doubt surrendered to his desperation. Any choice was moot.

‘Yes,’ answered the ailing artist.

The stranger cut Matthew Harding across the throat with a razor that looked remarkably like the one he had in his pocket, like the one he was certain that he clutched in his right hand. Matthew had no time to ponder further on this dilemma. The moment seemed to linger about him for far longer as the reality, such as it was, unravelled. The stranger crossed the room to the door of the apartment as the icy rain continued to fall, equally oblivious to what had occurred here. He closed the door and his footfall faded as the sound of the precipitation rose to a deafening crescendo that drowned out everything else. No one would ever realise what had transpired within the here and now.

Time moved on without as much as a flicker of discontent.

The fall of leaves had become unbearable. No matter how many times Caroline Richards cleaned them out of the porch, she only had to turn her back and they returned worse than the time before. Surely there were too few left on the trees to be still causing this much trouble. Fall seemed to last way too long after a summer that had been somewhat remiss in what had promised to be a return to the days when the seasons behaved in a manner that one expected. The world like the weather had become jaded, a parody of the past that played out to the whims of every wrong that had been perpetrated on nature.

Caroline hated the onset of winter. The cold promised her more misery than she could afford. She despised it more after a summer that could barely be acknowledged as such. Caroline was only forty-four and already she felt so old and worn down that she barely had the inclination to get out of bed in the morning, let alone to do anything to get herself out of this situation where her whole life had stood for nothing. Like the world, the years had taken their toll, manifesting in ways that were no longer subtle in their outrage. She had been attractive once and still retained enough of her looks to invite attention when she had been disposed to making an effort or had the wherewithal to change. However, Caroline had been stepped on so many times; she no longer had the will. She aspired to nothing, inspired less and practised the mundane with all the aplomb of someone who had already accepted that fate had left her behind and no longer cared. She was tall, slim, and better than average build, though it was hard to tell the latter at present as she wore the most unflattering and concealing of clothes. Any trace of her femininity was lost. *Homely*. An apt term, but in truth she was more like a tarnished jewel. Her dull blond hair showed through the worn navy scarf. Her eyes had lost something of the vibrancy and enthusiasm that had once defined her youth. She had no companionship, male or otherwise, and had not had any for some time that now measured in years in her mind, or decades if she was inclined towards truth.

Caroline had become one of those lost and hopeless souls that no one ever noticed – or who were rarely noticed by anything or anyone other than someone intent on mischief or real harm. As she fought against a brisk breeze and the swirl of leaves, it was the latter miscreant that deemed fit to notice. Caroline became aware of the man watching her from across the street. She had seen him before. He had worked in the gardens around here during better times. Caroline didn’t know his name but she knew he was trouble. His skin had been darkened from labouring outdoors in the gardens, but he was white, thirty-something, with hair cut so tight it made him look more intimidating. He was the kind of man who looked like he would murder an old woman and feel nothing in the aftermath of the crime. He certainly would have little or no regard for Caroline. She had never been in a position to be able to afford his services and he had never asked, as if he knew her circumstances better than she did. He seldom seemed to lose that dark shadow of a beard that did not quite come to fullness, but then again, never really went away. His eyes were empty, devoid of any redeeming quality that might otherwise soften his appearance. They followed her no matter where she turned. The way he watched her did not leave any ambiguity in her mind about his intent, or at least Caroline’s imagination made her believe that he had the basest desires. Perhaps this was just a consequence of her own lack of intimacy, provoking thoughts that were not wholly unwelcome. When she became aware of his scrutiny, her fear quickly manifested and any latent desire waned. He would do her harm. Her heart beat so fast in her chest as she went about the pretence of continuing her awful battle with the leaves, edging slowly and deliberately closer to the house, hoping beyond hope that she was wrong. Her heart was hammering and from the stabbing pain that followed she knew it could not be good. When she finally passed inside the door and looked out into the street, he was gone. She lingered and watched, unable to quell the tide of discontent brought on by all that she imagined and could envision as her fate. She breathed a sigh of relief that died on her lips as she turned to find a stranger

standing in her hallway, dripping what could only be rain all over the rug. Her mouth opened and closed involuntarily.

Caroline was terrified beyond reason. The fleeting ease of pressure on her heart had been too short to offer any relief. Besides the obvious disassociation with the weather, she had already been on edge. It did not take much to push her nearer to the brink. The pain that burned in her chest sent an alarming tremor down her left arm. The stranger was definitely rain-soaked but he was also misplaced because of the clothes he wore, precise but antiquated in style. Not that Caroline could talk. She was hardly a picture of fashion. Again a stabbing pain cut across her chest and reverberated down her left arm, but just as quickly subsided.

The stranger wore a hat, like those Caroline had often seen depicted in movies from the 1920s or 30s. His face was mostly in shadow but the jaw-line looked like it had been carved from granite. Still, somehow his eyes pushed through any hope of concealment to form an impression. *Penetrating*. They stripped away her resolve. When the stranger spoke, the gravel in his voice almost overshadowed the framed and polite tone.

‘Please forgive the intrusion and for startling you by my rather sudden appearance in your home. I seldom arrive out of place. Must be the weather,’ he drawled while shaking the rain from his overcoat. His remark caused Caroline to look towards the door and she was taken aback by the torrential downpour that pounded on the glass of the porch. Her mouth opened in disbelief as she returned her furtive gaze towards the stranger.

‘Infernal weather,’ he remarked.

Caroline did not respond. She remained transfixed, caught between the ferocity of the rain and the imposing threat this stranger presented.

‘There is no need to be alarmed,’ offered the stranger. ‘I have only come here to make you an offer.’

Caroline responded with suspicion and fear. A greater deal more of fear than misgiving.

‘Come now, there is no need to be impolite. I must have a response, even if you say no, but I cannot leave with only silence between us.’

Caroline let out a sigh, the release finally expelled as an outlet for the mounting tension. Whatever this stranger was, it became apparent that he did not intend to harm her. At least not in the way that she had imagined the other man would have, had he been given the opportunity.

‘What... what do you want?’ she asked sheepishly. ‘Why have you come here?’

The stranger smiled. At least she believed that he was smiling. It was hard to tell by the way the shadows played with his face.

‘Two questions, but at least you have found your tongue. Very well. What I want is for you to accept my offer. Why I have come is far too involved for me to go into now. Suffice to say, you have a choice to make. I have come here to let you go back, to unravel the tapestry of your life and begin anew in the full knowledge of where you went wrong.’

Caroline shuffled away half a step. Her fear was evident but whether or not she understood what this stranger was saying was uncertain. Caroline’s expression was both apprehensive and confused, though it favoured the former to leave the latter far less prevalent.

‘Who... who are you?’ she cried.

‘Another question. Perhaps my timing was more off than I realised. Tell me, have you been *raped* by the gardener yet?’

Caroline was horrified. She backed away until her retreat was barred by the door and the fury of the rain outside. Any sliver of curiosity evaporated.

‘I can see from your reaction that you have not. I will leave you and return when you have been... more suitably prepared. If at any time you desire to conclude our business, just call out that you accept my offer and I will return. If it is any consolation, he will pay for his sin in full, in this time and the next.’

Caroline turned towards the door and tried to retreat. The rain pounded against the glass of the porch. The door did not move. She had opened it countless times before, but now it remained resolute. She turned in terror to face the stranger. *He was gone*. Nothing remained to mark that he had ever been there. There should have been a wet patch in the hallway but everything was as it had been when she went outside to sweep the leaves away. Caroline was shaken to the core when she turned to look outside again. The rain had not just stopped. All signs that it had been raining had disappeared. Just like the stranger, there was nothing to show that the weather had taken a turn for the worst just moments before. The beat of her heart quickened. She pushed the door open

and looked out into the garden to see the leaves continue their swirling and maddening dance of relentless discord.

Caroline retreated inside. As she stepped back into the hallway and let the door close, a single leaf rushed toward her in solemn greeting. She knew only that it could not have come with her. She stooped to pick the leaf up, offering a puzzled look that soon turned to terror as she raised her eyes to see the gardener standing in the hallway, so close she could almost feel his intent. The words of the stranger came back to her with all of the dread of a nightmare that she prayed was not happening. ‘...*have you been raped by the gardener yet?*’

Caroline barely had time to scream before he struck her. The beat of her heart quickened as the awful stabbing pain cut through her chest and reverberated down her left arm. As he tore the clothing from her ailing body, oblivious to the agony that had already been motivated to claim her life, a last whispering sigh escaped her lips.

‘I accept...’

The darkness closed with a measured resolve about Caroline and time unravelled.

The rain was an unfortunate consequence that followed the stranger. For those who practiced observance, the inclement weather served only to herald his arrival. The stranger was not oblivious to the cause and causation of his effect on the atmospheric conditions of a region he visited, but he was not inclined to dwell on something that was merely a consequence of the disturbance he created in time. It was something he had very little control over and did not need to understand. This was perhaps a concern, but not one he could rectify in the interim.

Time. There never seemed to be enough to go around. He had completed three assignments. He still had three to go – and that was only the beginning of this horrid affair. He had nearly made a mistake with Caroline Richards, and unlike his question of the rain, it was a matter that had now been rectified in the aftermath of his departure. Her acceptance was late but sufficed.

Unfortunately, the next subject was somewhat difficult. Primarily due to the fact that he had already been declared criminally insane and was incarcerated in an institution with questionable patient care practices. What they lacked in the care they provided, they made up for in a fair measure of paranoia. The security was... bothersome. Particularly because the stranger had not arrived inside the institution, but several feet outside a rather formidable looking security wall. Traversing this obstacle would require either finesse or fatality. One would take more time, while the other had deeper consequences to time. *Unknown variables were a nuisance.* Finesse was necessary until the alternative became the only recourse. Still, the stranger could not stifle an inflection of irritation. He preferred precise resolutions to his tasks, and disliked the quirks that affected time, or to be specific, his time. He did not like the consequences that could arise from any necessary collateral damage.

Since his arrival here in this parody of a rehabilitation facility, James Murdock had spent far too much time wrapped securely in a strait-jacket than he had free. Of course this was due in no small part to his violent outbursts and the *criminally insane* tag on his file. His intimidating size did nothing to diminish his status or the precautions taken with who they perceived to be a *lunatic*. Murdock was in his mid-thirties when he was incarcerated. He was tall, muscular, with a clean-shaven head, the latter that had been instigated against his will. He would never have voluntarily let someone cut his hair off. His nose had been broken too many times to ever be set right again and his eyes reflected the morose darkness behind the demeanour of a furious miscreant. The stubble was heavy and dark on his jaw line. He pitied the orderly they sent to deprive him of this growth but it would not sway him towards a calmer demeanour. He was unhappy with his incarceration. His discontent culminated in violence. He was indiscriminate in choosing those on which he vented his considerable frustrations.

Murdock had one quality that kept him from making progress in any proposed treatment. He was angry all of the time. He could not control the rage and no matter what they pumped into him, the feeling never abated. He had been angry for a very long time. He was here because somewhere along the way he had snapped. Maybe it was because his wife was *fucking* his best friend, or anyone else who would show her an interest for that matter, or maybe it was because he really did love her and the hurt took away the last of his self-respect. She was dead now. So too was his friend, along with four other *assholes* who had thought to jibe him about how much of a *whore* Lauralye was, or how often they had *fucked* her when he had been away on the road. Murdock had been incarcerated and the anger started to burn hotter than anything else he had felt in his life. He showed no remorse for those he had killed, except for Lauralye. No matter what she had done, she had not deserved to die the way

he had killed her. If she had lived, there wasn't a man alive who would look at her in that way again. The wrong of it all consumed Murdock until his teeth ground alongside the bile rising in his throat and he launched himself against the walls of the padded cell, knowing in the end that any attempt at hurting himself would be futile, but unable to stop as his self-control became non-existent and fuelled the madness of his frustration. In the end he would succumb to exhaustion. Yet, even his sleep gave him no respite. The same endless nightmare played out over and over again. Lauralye with Bill. Bill *fucking* Lauralye. Breaking every bone in his friend's body with a four pound hickory lump hammer, before going to work on his unfaithful wife. *Whore* . He broke her jaw and kept her tied to the bed post, *naked, ashamed and terrified* . The things he did to her, and had done to Bill repeated in his mind, until he could find no reprieve from his rage. *Over and over* . The madness of it all was not lost on him but he could not find it in his heart to forgive his errant wife any more than he could forgive himself. Bill, he could care less about. *Bastard* got what he deserved. His betrayal was not a matter for recrimination in Murdock's mind. Lauralye was something else. He could not find it within himself to forgive her but he had made her suffer in a way where he could not deny some modicum of regret. The smell of her perfume lingered even now, as if the olfactory infusion had melded to his brain in reprisal for his crime. Bonded essence of penance.

When the orderlies came to try to calm Murdock down, it had the opposite effect. They gave him something to focus on – something that could be hurt – something in which to vent all the fury that had been denied him in the intervening time.

As soon as Murdock heard the key in the lock, he immediately redirected his attention. You think they would have learned by now. He had been here for weeks and this always ended the same. He would attack them – repeatedly and relentlessly, screaming at them until his lungs were almost fit to explode. They in turn bludgeoned and tazered him into submission, offering retaliation for any hurt he had inflicted long after he had been subdued. The effort was a parody of pointlessness. However, this time the door did not open right away. There was no panicked rush to take him down before he got the chance to gain the initiative. When he heard the screams from outside of his cell, he was more than taken aback. He had heard the caterwauling of the other inmates before. This was different – anguish and agony on a whole new level. A strong odour reached him. *Burning* . Flesh, hair and other things he did not want to even think about. When the door finally opened, he was surprised to see a man dressed in a rain-soaked overcoat with a hat that looked so out of place and concealed his face in a most bewildering fashion. The shadows were disjointed, too elongated to be defined by the brim of the hat. The stranger was momentarily compelling and Murdock forgot his customary greeting for all of a second.

'Who the *fuck* are you supposed to be?' he snarled as his volatile personality took hold.

'Charming as ever,' drawled the stranger as he shook his head in disapproval.

Murdock didn't have the presence of mind to offer hesitation in the face of an adversary he had no hope of gauging. He charged the stranger with a bellowing roar of raw rage.

A futile effort . Murdock was on his knees. He had not seen the older man move but the precise impact of the blow was hard to deny nonetheless. In spite of his apparent age, he was fast. Murdock would have put him at late fifties or early sixties. The force of the blow hit him square in the abdomen – solar plexus to be precise. It knocked the wind out of him. For the moment, he could not stand upright, coughing hard as he sucked in air in an effort to soothe the pain. He brought his head to the floor and rolled on his side. His anger did not diminish.

'Now that I have your attention, such as it is, let me explain why I am here. I have come to make you an offer – to give you the chance to go back and do it all over again knowing where you went wrong.'

Murdock coughed again and forced himself to his knees and then to his feet, using the wall of the padded cell to push against.

'Go... go back where?' he gasped angrily.

'In time, Mr Murdock. To a place where you can make a choice.'

This guy was yanking his chain. He was as crazy as everyone else locked up in this place.

'I assure you that I am quite sane. A perception of madness is relative, but I am rational and certainly sane in the way you are thinking.'

Great . He could read minds as well as tell ridiculous stories.

'I do not have much time, Mr Murdock, and neither do you. Do you accept my offer? If yes, our bargain is concluded. If not, I wish you no ill.'

How magnanimous of the old guy. Somehow Murdock doubted this stranger was that noble.

‘A chance to go back?’ questioned Murdock without the customary snarl. ‘Knowing what I did. Knowing what I have become... what I could become again?’

The stranger nodded and offered a smile, or at least Murdock believed he was smiling. It was hard to tell.

‘No,’ said Murdock.

There was a long sigh of disappointment.

‘A pity,’ stated the stranger. ‘You would have made a great addition. I will leave you to your... life, such as it is. No doubt they will blame you for any indiscretion I was forced to commit in gaining access to this facility.’

Murdock shook his head.

‘You misunderstand me. I’ll take your offer. I have nothing else. I just don’t want to remember what I did.’

The stranger definitely offered a pleased smile.

‘Well, it doesn’t quite work like that, but I suppose I can make an exception. I will send you back without the memory of killing your wife and best friend, and even those who transgressed against you, but you must remember everything else.’

There was a moment, as if Murdock was mulling the offer over, and then he nodded his consent.

‘I need to hear the words, Mr Murdock,’ interjected the stranger.

‘Agreed,’ snarled Murdock, losing his hitherto brief and remarkable self-control.

The stranger turned to walk away. Murdock looked after him in some confusion.

‘I said yes,’ he shouted after the stranger.

‘I know,’ came the gravelly reply.

‘So what do I do now?’ he bellowed, the anger rising from the pit of his stomach.

The stranger locked the door.

‘Die, Mr Murdock. You die.’

It was only then that Murdock noticed the heat and the first lick of flames that touched the small toughened pane of glass on the door, blistering the exposed paint and blackening the padding on the inside. The odour was dreadfully unpleasant. The fire spread with alarming ferocity, as if it was motivated by something wholly unnatural. James Murdock’s lungs burned as the heat scorched his innards. His screams filled the hallway as the stranger stepped outside into a torrential downpour. The fire stifled the cries of the damned and the dying. Time moved on. The rain was gone as the fire rose to an inferno, consuming all traces of the stranger ever having been there.

Tragedy and hopelessness often went hand in hand. One cut deep into the heart and the other had the propensity to erode the soul. Alice woke to the slow drumming beat that played across the base of her skull amidst stabs of pain that increased in severity the longer she tried to stave off the drunken, drug-induced drowsiness that made her whole body feel like she had crawled through a sewer. Something that she did not have the wherewithal to realise was perhaps closer to the truth than anything she might be inclined to imagine had occurred while she remained oblivious to the fate of her body. When she became aware that she was not alone, the memory of the night before started to press on her reality with all of the bitterness and shame of an accusation. She had no need to speculate even if her mind had the capacity left to engage anything akin to rationale.

Who had she given herself to this time for drugs and booze? Anything to block out how absolutely *fucked* up her life had become. This dark reflection on a fate that was as real and stained as the bed on which she lay did nothing but offer her pain. A tear fell involuntarily from her eye and traced her lips in lament. She wiped it away and ground her teeth to hold back the contempt that unwittingly made the bile rise in her throat. She coughed as the anger burned her mouth in bitter reprisal, the coarse croak only adding to the depression. Her stomach ached. Other parts of her body groaned in equal lament, a testament to how poorly used she had been. The consequences of her degradation remained, but it was probably best not to dwell on remembering too much of a night that played into so many others to evoke nothing but bitterness and anguished regret. She could barely find it within her to open her eyes to the truth of her shame. She could not stay here, lost in a hopeless denial.

Alice forced herself into a sitting position. Her mouth tasted like ash laced with something far more unsavoury. *Naked*. When she looked to her arms and legs, the bruising offered nothing to restore even the tiniest shred of self-esteem. The recrimination could be covered up but it could never be denied, not without a reliance on the very things that drove her further into the gutter with each passing night. Wanting to escape only trapped

her in the here and now as each acceptance of what she had become eroded the soul. She was worse than a *whore*. She did anything to make the pain go away and sold her body for less than nothing. Every humiliation only made it worse and she was stuck in a cycle that could not be broken –needing drugs and alcohol to escape her reality or giving herself to get the things that drove her further into this despair. The only way out was death and she lacked the courage to finally give in.

An after image of the night before played across her mind – face down in the covers of the bed as... Rick, and then... Bernardo, took her from behind. They were not gentle and her body groaned again at the travesty of enduring such repeated abuse. However, when she looked to the lump of flesh in bed next to her, it was not Rick or Bernardo. She recognised the man. *Smiff or Smiffy*. Another of Rick's questionable associates. She did not want to remember what they had done to her. The only solace of a drug and drink-induced disassociation was that she did not have to forget. Her memory was the first thing to go. She had been too far out of it to know what they had done to her.

Alice Lake was only twenty-two but she looked older. Worse, she felt so old, her bones ached in a way that made a geriatric appear supple. She was alone in life, if you discounted a mother who had walked out the door shortly before Alice's fourteenth birthday and never came back. Her father had died after a long fight with cancer that had taken every last cent they had. They still lost him in the end to an undiagnosed congenital heart condition. Her mother had broken. The strain had all been too much. Alice had run away from the poor excuse for a foster home they had put her in. *Discarded and forgotten*. She sold the only thing she had to survive, and now to feed an alcohol and drug dependency that pushed her closer to oblivion.

Alice retreated from the awful excuse for a bedroom to what passed for a shower in this place – cold and unsatisfying – just like her life. She locked the door with the feeble latch and prayed that the guy would be gone when she was forced to go out and do it all over again. She found her clothes strewn on the bathroom floor, as stained and worn as her body. They were all she had if you discounted the three dollars, twelve cents she found in the pocket of her jeans along with the half-smoked, partially crushed pack of cigarettes and two *marijuana joints* tucked in another pocket of her jacket.

When Alice caught her reflection in the mirror, she wanted to turn away. She was pale to the point of *anaemia*. The skin around her eyes was reddened, her face gaunt, cheekbones evident and traced with the lines of an age that should not have been apparent. Her hair, which should have been full and blond, was matted to her skull and dulled to the colour of diluted rust. Tears formed in Alice's eyes. She was a mess. However, she could not bring herself to turn away. Almost as if she needed to look at this pale reflection of someone that held the faint facsimile of a person she barely recognised, one who was too far gone to deny the obvious. She was nothing. No one cared. No one would care if she took the blade from the medicine cabinet, cut her wrists and let the whole world just bleed away.

Alice withdrew into the shower and let the cold water run over her body to wash away some of the taint of the three guys who had used her. She had only vague disjointed images of what had happened and could not be sure that what she remembered was last night or another one of so many. She could not resolve the faces or the indignity. She couldn't be sure if everything in those fractured glimpses had not just been woven into the long nightmare that had driven her to such a reckless submission and to the depraved nature of those she had let use her so completely in recent years. The tears did not stop when she turned off the water. The cold made her teeth chatter and her extremities ache all the more. The fear more than the cold made her shiver without relief. She could not stay here like this – lost in hopelessness.

Alice dried her hands on a towel that was about as clean as her clothes, and reached for the cigarette packet, her attention fixed on the two *joints*. At the last moment her fingers diverted and she pulled out a cigarette instead, moving the little white stick to her lips with a trembling hand. She reached out with her other hand and fumbled within her jacket pocket. Her fingertips were almost blue from the severity of the cold. It was only then that she became aware of the torrential downpour outside, the heavy rain hitting the glass with all the ferocity of an unchecked emotion. Alice brought the lighter to the cigarette, lit up, pulled in a long draught and continued to dry off with the questionable towel. She did so quickly, as the cold finally worked to numb the pain and discomfort of her body. Three dollars, change and a few joints. Not much to show for what they had taken from her. Not much to show for the years of abuse her body had endured. The tug in her heart would have been almost heartrending had there been anyone here to care. Alice choked it down. Her self-pity was an indulgence

she could not afford for long. It wouldn't take much to make it fade when she found someone willing to give her what she needed – to make it all go away.

Alice extinguished the end of the cigarette in the sink, unlatched the door and peered out into the room. At least Smiffy was gone. *Asshole*. He had left her nothing but his greasy imprint on a bed that had hardly been clean in the first place. At least her sense of smell had left her a long time ago. She could only imagine what the room smelt like in the aftermath of her corruption.

Alice sniffed away more tears and searched for her boots. They were at the other side of the bed but instead of going around she struggled under and reached out until she snagged the laces and drew them to her. When she came back out she immediately became aware that she was not alone. The shininess of the black shoes defying the wash of having been out in the rain was the first thing she saw. Her heart skipped a beat as the fear shook her body. She followed the line of an imposing figure upward until she looked into the face of a man whose piercing eyes gave her more cause to know terror than at almost any other time in her life. His presence was overwhelming, his eyes wavering beneath the shadow of a hat that looked so out of place. The rain dripped from his overcoat, forming pools of disdain in the worn carpet. As his eyes disappeared beneath the cowl of shadow formed by his hat, the effect diminished but did not dissipate.

Alice pushed herself into a sitting position on the floor and was unable to take her eyes off the stranger. If he had come to harm her, she was hardly in a position to resist. She could scream her lungs out but she knew that no one would come to her aid. She was just some *crazy druggie bitch* who lived on the top floor of a run down, all but derelict apartment block; one who had questionable associations. This man could do what he wanted to her and no one would lift a finger to stop him. Resignation to her fate was all she had left to offer.

The stranger scowled at Alice and reached out with his hand. *Frowning disapproval or masking contempt?* It took Alice more than a moment to realise that he was offering to assist her in regaining her feet. She was more than a little taken aback.

'Please forgive my intrusion,' he drawled with all the air of a genuine apology.

Alice took his hand. It was warm and hard. His polite courtesy was just as unsettling as his sudden presence in her... apartment.

'I have not come to harm you,' he continued. In spite of his congeniality, Alice did not look convinced.

'Then you would be the first,' she countered with a mixture of fear and bitterness.

'Indeed. Be that as it may, I have come to make you an offer.'

Oh here it comes. He wanted her for some *kinky* old man game. Sadly, it would probably be a better offer than her pathetically *fucked* up life. Maybe he would buy her some new clothes and give her the opportunity to have a decent shower, or even score some better quality booze and drugs. Maybe he was just crazy.

'I have not come here for that,' he scolded, his annoyance clearly directed at the tone of her thoughts.

Alice did not want to believe that this old guy could actually hear her thoughts. She wasn't sure if she was disappointed or relieved. It did ease some of her tension. She was still afraid but her fear was... manageable. When you had essentially spent the majority of your life scared of living each and every day, the sting of any sudden shock or prolonged unknown, engaged a lasting proclivity to react. She would not lie down and curl into a ball. If he had been inclined to take advantage of her in any way, all she could do to defend herself was to offer acceptance and hope that he let her be when he was done with her – as she had with so many who had come here before. As she would again in an endless cycle of degradation until her life was forfeit – drowned in drugs, booze and ruin.

Alice reached into her jacket, nervously drew out a cigarette and patted her jeans looking for the lighter.

'I have come to give you a chance to go back – to change your life, knowing how it all went wrong.'

Well she was right about one thing. This old guy had a few loose wires. *Wacko* would have been an apt term. Still, he was no crazier than other guys she let use her and he was a hell of a lot cleaner.

'I assure you that I am quite serious. I can let you go back to a time before what passes for your life all went wrong, knowing what you know now.'

The stranger stepped closer and his presence almost overwhelmed Alice. She was no longer cold. In fact, if she didn't know better, she would believe that this old man had gotten a hell of a lot drier – as had she – mostly because her hair no longer dripped.

'Alright then,' said Alice. 'Why not? It has got to be better than this place. What do I do?'

The stranger reached out and a flame appeared around about where his thumb should have been. She could not see the lighter. As neat as this trick appeared, it was also creepily disconcerting. Alice brought the cigarette up to her lips. Her hand shook so badly that the stranger had to reach out to steady it so she could draw in to light the cigarette. The warmth of his hand was almost too much to bear. The heat spread into her body. Every wrong she had done exploded in her mind with vivid clarity, every misdeed heaped upon sin. Her perception of shame was as damning as the truth. *Rape*, compliance and forfeiture of any divine grace that would have left her soul untarnished. Her mind began to reel. Her stomach churned. Alice closed her eyes and fell towards the bed, the whole sickening revelation too much to contain – too much to deny. The cigarette slipped from her mouth on to the severely tarnished covers as the foam formed on her lips and her eyes turned awkwardly in their sockets, twisting inside out until the bland blue colour dissipated into milky white. She drooled on the fire hazard label exposed through a hole in the frail covers of the dreadfully stained mattress.

The stranger left the room as the cigarette continued to burn and the first flicker of flame jumped up to herald the inevitable. *Only one to go*. Time lingered long enough to permit Alice's screams to fill the void of a long regret before they were finally extinguished as the heat burned away the lament of her voice.

Snow. Somewhat difficult to mask one's comings and goings when there was snow involved. Especially when you had the predilection of bringing a torrential downpour of rain with you to herald the arrival of a disturbance that was bound to be noticed by someone in a city like New York, even if it was in the dead of night. *The city that never sleeps*. Rain and snow, though both precipitation, did not mix well. The stranger could not avoid the consequences of his arrival and he could not contain the situation by removing certain obstacles of curiosity. This would only undo some of what was necessary in dulling the desired effect. Termination without cause on such a grand scale would not be permitted. The rain would wash the snow away but when he passed out of this time, the effect would be rendered null and void. No one would remember. No one of any significance. His passing would return time to a *status quo* for the infinitesimal moment before the ripple of change corrected all.

The stranger appeared in an alley and the proceeding deluge caused an added dilemma. He had forgotten that the rain was not cold. In fact, with the frequency of his transitions, in places the precipitation was almost hot enough to make the snow dissipate faster or turn it into a haze – a steamy mist. The stranger frowned and moved on quickly before he became the focus of attention – a force that was not natural meeting a force of nature that did not have the sense of presence to withstand his arrival. He passed into the underground car park in an effort to alleviate his effect on the area around him knowing the rain would continue unabated without him. His final acquisition should be in the vicinity. There were no guarantees but this was essentially the time. While Caroline Richards had caused a hiccup, he had recovered some of his momentum during the last two assignments, which could have been infinitely more bothersome, and for which he had planned for when this whole venture had been conceived.

The stranger reached into his pocket and drew out an antiquated time piece. He flipped the watch open and glanced at the time. *10:50 p.m.* He was early. Morris Quibley had not arrived as yet. The stranger retreated to the darker shadows of the underground car park and waited.

A hangover was never the best way to start a shift. Morris was oblivious to the irony that his hangover occurred at night whereas most of the clientele he serviced had the decency to have theirs in the morning. He had to get off of these night gigs. They had his whole internal clock *fucked* up. Being off in the day might have had advantages and working the nights definitely kept him in the loop, but he was starting to wear a little thin and couldn't get into a regular sleep pattern to allow his mind to rest. Parking cars for a living was hardly the most glamorous job but it allowed him to engage in a few extracurricular activities with a number of regular clients, many of which would have raised the disapproval of his employers. Strictly low key drugs, a few illegal contraband items, like Cuban cigars, and when required, the occasional firearm. He had managed to stay below the radar and liked it that way. He normally didn't drink knowing that he had a shift the following night but he scored some premium booze as an added bonus from another satisfied customer. Cindy had come over to help him enjoy the moment. In spite of his enthusiasm to see the amply proportioned dance girl, escort and sometimes call girl, he couldn't remember if they had actually done it, or if he had imagined doing it, because they had both passed out. He woke up alone and late for a shift that was supposed to be Lenny's before he had promised to swap nights in what seemed like a lifetime ago. It was Lenny's anniversary. Morris had forgotten

until it was too late. When Lenny rang to remind him, he had already gone too far to pull back on the booze and a little recreational weed. This was going to be a long night.

Morris pulled into the car park about 23:00. No time for a cup of java loaded with sugar. No time for a smoke. No time for anything but to get his *ass* in gear and hope he had done enough to mask the booze or the hole in his head where the bongo drums were playing. Flashes of Cindy pushing him on the bed and mounting him crossed his mind in disjointed images of provocative pleasure. *Guess he did have a good time.* Unfortunately these thoughts only served to give him a *hard-on* that wouldn't quit until sated. Another distraction he didn't need.

Morris was struggling with his tie and smoothing his hair with his hands as he made his way to the elevator that would take him up to the hotel. He nearly jumped out of his skin when the stranger appeared from behind one of the wide support columns.

'Geez, *fuck*... you nearly scared me to death, man,' he screeched out in a voice that had far too much nasal quality. Something that Morris disliked in others and even less in himself.

'Forgive my intrusion,' offered the stranger.

'Yeah, man... no problem, gotta go. I'm in a bit of a hurry.'

The stranger still barred his way. Morris was not a formidable presence. He was average in every way – build, height, *et al.* His strawberry blond hair, which he was inclined to keep long, was about his only distinguishing feature if you didn't count the noticeable cleft on his chin. His eyes were a dull blue, now dilated by the day's excesses. He was sweating from the effort of getting here, irritable from having to rush across this city, and frustrated because he couldn't really remember screwing Cindy to the point of any great relief. The stranger did have the effect of ending any prolonged discomfort in that regard as his passion waned when his heart jolted at the appearance of the old man.

'I have come to make you an offer,' interrupted the stranger as if he noted Morris Quibley's distraction.

The stranger might have been frowning or smiling. Morris couldn't really tell. The shadow about this old guy's face was... perplexing.

Morris did not have the time. Even if he did, he doubted that this old geezer had anything he wanted. His dress might have been considered refined, or even the peak of fashion around the 1920s or 30s but what was the deal with the hat. He was a mean looking *fucker* though, so Morris decided to err on the side of caution lest he invite the kind of trouble that had a lasting effect on his physical wellbeing. Confrontation at the very least would only make him later than he already was, and any upset to his dress would only add to the scrutiny by the concierge. Miguel was a stickler for dress and cleanliness. *He was a prick.* Morris was hardly the picture of fashion, even when he wasn't in his required valet uniform – black pants and deeply embroidered red jacket with the yellow brocade that was supposed to pass for gold. His clothes could use a press – maybe even a wash. At least the old dude seemed to cut a better line. Miguel would have approved of the cut of the stranger's clothes more than those Morris wore.

'Alright then, well make it quick. I am already late,' said Quibley with some irritation.

The stranger let out a sigh. He understood. *Late.* Even when time was something fluid, the perception was always linear. People had a fixation on time, or lack thereof. He too had to impose a sense of urgency. Time was running out to complete this task.

'I am going to give you an opportunity to go back and do it all over again knowing what you now know – knowing where you went wrong.'

Morris could not take this *shit*. He had no idea what *loony* bin this guy had escaped from, but his patience evaporated. He drew out the flick knife from his pocket, tapped the button on the side and brandished the rather pathetic blade at the stranger, hoping that the old guy wouldn't notice that the thing hadn't been sharpened in years, or the few specks of rust.

'Get – the – *fuck* – out – of – my – way!' screamed Quibley. Again, the high pitched nasal quality of the retort caused him more distress than anyone forced to listen to the shrieking outburst. He really had to work on that.

'As you wish, Mr Quibley, but you should be aware that once the authorities find the body of the girl you spent your morning with, I believe that my offer will have more appeal.'

Morris was taken aback. *Body? Cindy? What had happened to Cindy?*

'Allow me to offer you some clarity,' said the stranger.

With that, he reached out and enveloped Quibley's hand holding the blade, within his own. The blade melted away. The handle became searing hot, forcing Morris to let go. However, where the stranger's hand touched that of his quarry, the effect was nothing more than a warming sensation. Morris Quibley's mind erupted with images of Cindy... of him... strangling... Cindy. He had forced her body into the boot of his car – the same car in this car park.

This was all wrong. Morris had screwed Cindy. He had not... killed her. Morris had forgotten about how late he was – and the job – and the hard-on that had died long before the revelation imparted by this old man. He ran to the car, fumbled with his keys at the trunk, dropped them, fumbled again and kept one eye on the stranger who had not moved.

When Morris opened the trunk, he dropped to his knees. Cindy was crumpled inside – naked, with eyes staring up at him in a mixture of pleasure, surprise and terror. *An accusation.* The images burned away the haze to offer brutal clarity. There had been... others! The clarity of the images offered a rebuke that was all at once undeniable.

The stranger approached, but Morris had not necessarily noticed his advance, except perhaps in an abstract way of disassociation.

'You are most unfortunate, Mr Quibley. A fractured fiend of true potential. One last chance. Do you accept my offer?' drawled the stranger.

'What... what are you?' pleaded Quibley.

'What I need to be, Morris. I can already hear the sirens. You have very little of the commodity that you have been so concerned with of late... time.'

The stranger turned to walk away. Morris Quibley looked at the dead form of Cindy. The sirens seemed to have gotten louder. *The knife had just melted away in the old guy's hand.* He had killed all of those women and as much as this stranger offered clarity, Morris still wanted to scream out that he didn't do it – knowing that he did. His heart sobbed as his mind laughed at the absurdity of it all. He reached into the trunk, between Cindy's legs, and drew out a gun from underneath the spare tyre. A Glock-17. The best of the batch he had acquired during his last consignment. Morris levelled the gun at the stranger's head. He was only a few yards away. Even as *fucked* up as Quibley was, surely even he couldn't miss at this range.

The stranger stopped and turned towards Morris.

'Really, Mr Quibley, do we have to do this?'

The gun lowered from the stranger's head – still pointed in his direction – but Morris' nerve had wavered. The sirens grew louder still – harder to be denied. The screech of rubber filled the car park along with flashing lights almost close enough to burn. Morris heard voices calling out to him but he couldn't hear the words. They were just noise.

'I... I accept,' he whispered.

When Morris Quibley looked up, the stranger was gone. Suddenly the voices screaming at him forced him to turn. As he did, the noise dulled to offer clarity to one sentence.

'He's got a gun!'

Morris barely had time to look at the gun in his hand before he felt the hail of bullets hitting his body. As he fell, he could see Cindy's arm hanging out of the trunk like a final accusation. As Morris died choking on his own blood, time wavered and washed away.

The stranger stood beyond the periphery of this place – a smile widening his lips to a grin – a definitive display that penetrated the shadows of his invoked obscurity. *Success.* Six souls. Six changes. Six disturbances. A cube of chance invoking the desired ripple in time.

Now, all he had to do was wait for the consequences to be felt. In the end it had all been too easy. Human nature as just too... predictable.