

# A CHRISTMAS



# CONSPIRACY

RYAN GRAY

By Ryan Gray  
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# A CHRISTMAS CONSPIRACY

## THE GRINCH HAD A POINT!

At two hundred feet per second, the wind rips at your face. The exhilaration of the free fall, cutting through puffy white clouds as thick as marshmallows while plummeting towards the ground at 120 miles per hour, bored me to no end.

I'd jumped out of this particular airplane in the same spot, caught the identical wind current in precisely the same weather seven times prior. But, this time, it was different. This time, I wasn't here for fun. I've had all the fun and all the thrills already.

This time, I was here to die.

I'd shown up to the airfield wearing the same slacks and long sleeve dress shirt I wore the night before. I must have looked like hell, I didn't care. I knew what hell was. Hell was today!

Jim was the pilot. He'd left his job as a wall street executive to see the world but only got as far as upstate New York. He fell in love with the freedom of being in the sky. He had two dogs and three cats he spent too much time with. He LOVED white wine but hated red. Jim never drank the night before flying but loved smoking weed. He had been married once for three years, had a ten-year-old daughter whom he saw every other weekend, and begged God that she didn't turn out like him. And with all that said, today was the first time we'd ever seen each other.

Jim didn't like the look of me and probably smelt the booze from the night before (I couldn't help that), but when I stuffed a wad of cash into his hand, he shrugged his shoulders and waved me on.

As we taxied for take-off, I ripped off my tie and shouted at the pilot, "17,000 feet!" He was about to argue when I tossed another roll of bills at the cockpit.

The middle-aged pilot again shrugged his shoulders and readied for take-off.

I walked back to the rear of the Stalwart Cessna 182, and dropped into a jump seat. If I had any hope left, I'd ask a stupid question like, "How did I even get here?" But I was too smart for that now. A series of selfish choices, disguised in indecision, had gotten me here, and I was about to pay for it with my life.

A guy in my predicament thinks about this: first, how much he despises Christmas parties, Christmas cheer, and especially stupid Christmas music. Don't judge me! Let's see you attend more than 650 Christmas parties in a row and not get a little grinchy.

The second thing a guy in my predicament thinks about is death, but not just if or when I might die, but how I can make it happen: painlessly and immediately.

Personally, electrocution is the most exciting way to go. You'd think skydiving without a parachute would be better. The problem with human flight is that the entire way down, you keep thinking about the landing and if you'll feel anything. It's the sound of your bones crunching that's hard to take. By the way, most of the time, you're too numb for pain, then you pass out and

eventually die. It takes about five tries before you'll stop thinking and just enjoy the ride down.

A bullet is way too risky and messy, and don't even mention hanging yourself; ugh, it takes too long, and besides, it's creepy. Jumping in front of traffic only gets you a night in the hospital, and when I tried a swan dive off the Brooklyn bridge, I survived...and broke my back!

Poison? Ha! Dumbest idea I ever had. Drain cleaner hurts way too much, but not quite enough. My theory was that the pain would make me pass out as the poison did its work, eating my organs. Well, it did its job alright, and I felt every inch of it.

Wait! Hold on a second. I don't want to give you the wrong idea. I'm not suicidal. I mean, sure, I've killed myself 36 times, but that's just because I had to! I'm desperate! I'm trying to escape this, this....nightmare.

Maybe I should start from the beginning.

Let's see, first off - I was set up and ruined!

Wait a minute. Is that the beginning? This day has played out so many times I'm having an impossible time remembering when anything begins or ends.

Hold on, let me think, I was drunk, went there, oh, and then Joey....that's right. I always start the day with my boy, Joey!

## **THE FIRST NOEL - TODAY #1**

"YAAAAHHHHHHO0000!" An explosion of pleasure burst from my lips. I screamed over the techno Christmas carols blasting on loudspeakers, "Joey, I must have more Morgan!"

Joey responded with a tip of the rectangular glass bottle into my red Solo cup. "My command is your wish, Captain."

I accepted the refill eagerly, "I think you said that backwards." I slurred.

"You know what?" Joey agreed with childlike wonder, "I think I did." He raised his glass, "To the backwards!"

We toasted and drank again.

Christmas parties could be dry, but since I had just made senior partner at my big firm - the youngest ever, I might add - my personal assistant and I decided that we were partying for two reasons: season greetings and joy to all. Hahahahaha....Nah, I'm just messing: booze and ladies!

As an L.A. kid who made good in the Big Apple, I was very confident. Actually, I was pretty cocky. But I played it off like a chilled surfer, which was easy since that's who I was until law school. Then I had to "grow up" and become serious. Blaa-blaa-blaa. Well, I had to act grown up and serious when practicing law. However, if not on the clock, all bets were off!

Joey elbowed me in the ribs and nodded over my left shoulder. "Mark, there she is!"

"Nice spot, Joey. I'm going in!" I downed the rest of my drink, popped a mint into my mouth, and swaggered through the crowd, across the hotel events hall to my target: Susan. By far she was the hottest woman in the office, and since most would consider me the finest specimen around, I figured we had to be the right match, at least for tonight. Susan saw me coming, squared

her shoulders and hips at me, and took a sip from a champagne flute. After she bit her lower lip, grinning at me, I knew I was in, and I still had ten feet to go.

Oomph! Suddenly my right foot wouldn't move, and my left toe caught the carpet as I tumbled to the floor. It wasn't a bad fall, and I don't embarrass easily; otherwise, I'd never drink in public, but I lost sight of Susan!

"I'm so sorry, Mark."

"Huh?" I brushed myself off as I stood and rolled my eyes to the impending voice. "Amber, what are you doing?" Amber, my paralegal, winced at me with an apologetic look on her face. She was a few years younger than me, a nerd if I ever saw one, and she never EVER stopped working. Currently, she was holding three file folders in her arms, an ink smudge adorned her cheek, and a black pen wrapped her hair into a makeshift bun.

"Sorry, Boss, but I need you to sign these before I can go home!" Amber said with a thick Canadian accent.

"Fine, fine, but laader." I slurred as I brushed her aside and pushed back into the crowd in search of my prey. Alas, Susan was gone!

Then, the she-devil stepped in. I immediately sensed a falling sensation, an engine on fire and metallic crunching under its weight: Penny.

"Mark." She stood full-bodied in front of me, her impossibly thin waist and lean arms, framed from a bright red dress, only covering what it needed to and stilettos most women would never dream of wearing.

I sighed, "Penny?"

"I'm bored. Let's go back to your place and see if we can't spark some excitement."

I sighed, Penny had done this a couple of times, and I had given in once, ok, twice; don't judge me. Like so many super successful career people, men and women, her problem was that she couldn't turn it off. Going back to my place is fine and all, but I did like to have some type of conversation other than the office. Not Penny, she had two speeds: tell you what to do, and tell you what she will do, especially if you defied her. Many associates had been fired, pushed out, and even investigated for fraud. I was not prepared to take any risks.

Penny stepped up closer, into my face, drawing rings around her cocktail glass, and smirked. "Marky, I won't take no for an answer."

I forced a smile, "Lead the way."

## **SLEIGHBELLS RING...MY HEAD'S ACHING**

The following day, I awoke tangled up in my white silk sheet with a well-earned headache in an empty bed, "Thank you." I motioned to the heavens.

"What was that?" Penny called from the other room.

I instinctively searched the room for pants and kept an eye on my en-suite bathroom. I could always lock myself in there and start making puking noises. I thought to myself, "Ah,

nothing. Would you like to stay and make some breakfast together?" I tried to sound sincere, but I only managed to sound terrified.

"Umm, thank you, sweetie, but I really do need to get going. I'll call you later this week. Kisses." Her patronizing tone wouldn't have been too bad, except that she did not even bother to pop her head into the room to say goodbye.

As I heard the door close behind her, I moaned, "Whatever, at least I don't have to live through that nightmare again." I stood and swiped my cell phone off my nightstand out of instinct, more than genuine urgency. The day after the Christmas party, almost everyone at the office kept a low profile unless a client was in trouble. However, to my surprise, I had a voicemail.

"Hi Mark, this is Doreen. Please come up to see Mr. H as soon as humanly possible. We have a fairly urgent situation which must be resolved."

"Ah, come on!" I moaned as I tossed my phone onto my bed and made my way to the shower. Not only did I have to shower and shave, but I also had to put on my good suit as well!

Mr. H (A.K.A. Hoskins), the Senior Partner and Chairman of the Board opened his office door and ushered me in, "Thanks for coming in on short notice, Mark, please take a seat." Hoskins' first name was Bob. No one ever called him Bob. It's like calling a sitting president Presbo as you pointed a weapon at him. Disrespectful and suicidal.

"Ah, it's not a problem..." The word problem swam around my still semi-intoxicated gray matter several times, refusing to flush down through my subconscious. The other three most senior members of the law partnership were scattered around Mr. H's big corner office, some stood, and others sat. They glanced at me in unison, trying to betray nothing, but everything I needed to know was in their eyes. I was in trouble: not good!

But, I played it cool, "Wow, what is all this? A little hazing of the new guy?"

"Not exactly, son, please sit," Hoskins pointed to a chair set up in the middle of the room.

I eased myself into the soft leather chair. I tried to ignore how much lower it made me than everyone else in the room, including one of the other senior partners, Hellen. She was barely five feet. So, as an athletic guy of 6'2," it was unnerving to be loomed over by the little New Yorker.

"I need to know, Mark. Before anything is said, is there anything you would like to inform us about?"

"Excuse me?" I was still dwelling on the awkwardness of the looming hobbit lady when the question jarred me back to Hoskins. "Um, what type of information should I be informing you about?"

"A question, with a question. Good instincts, well, at least we still have an eye for talent, even if that talent turns out to be Benedict Arnold!"

"What?" I was so lost.

"Last chance, tell us something we don't know. Backchannels with another law firm you are making a deal with? Making a deal for information on a case with a competing firm - Anything?"

I grinned and chuckled. I always giggle a bit when I'm super uncomfortable. "Honestly, Sir..." I looked over at Helen and nodded, "Ma'am, I have no idea what you are talking about."

“Yeah, so I’m sure you have no idea what this means?” Hoskins slid a stack of printed emails across his desk. One of the other senior partners, Lane something or other, stepped forward, snatched them from the mahogany desk, and practically shoved them into my nose. They wanted me sitting, on my butt, defensive and weak.

I thumbed through the white sheets. At first, my hung-over brain could not make sense of the emails, but then everything came into focus. They were filled with confidential information from multiple cases, none of them mine, forwarded to one email address. The damning part highlighted in luminous yellow was my security code embedded into the IP address.

Twenty minutes later, I carried two boxes of personal items out of the front door. With me were two security guards and a stack of NDA agreements. Basically, I made promises to stay quiet in exchange for the partner’s word they would not go after my law license at the state level.

Youngest partner ever, and I hadn’t even lasted twenty hours.

I was still dressed in my Italian tailored work suit, heart racing, sporting the hangover from the night before. What just happened? I didn’t know, and I didn’t have the energy to care. I just wanted to go somewhere and hide. So, I did. I took a cab to the nearest liquor store, picked up three bottles of my favorites, and hid in my Manhattan condo.

Two hours later, I was on the phone sipping a bottle of JB, pouring my heart out to my mom. She needed to know who had hurt her baby! Of course, since she was a busy lawyer herself, I could only reach her voicemail. So I told the entire story, a few times, to her voicemail, over and over. I’m not sure if the voicemail cut out before I finished talking or the other way around. Either way, I blacked out, only to reawaken....for the first time.

## **THE SECOND NOEL - TODAY #2**

“YAAAAHHHHHHOOOOO!” An explosion of pleasure burst from my lips. I screamed over the techno Christmas carols blasting over loudspeakers, “Joey, I must have more Morgan!”

Joey responded with a tip of the bottle into my red Solo cup. “My command is your wish, Captain.”

I accepted the refill eagerly, “I think you said that backwards.” I slurred.

“You know what?” Joey agreed with childlike wonder, “I think I did.” He raised his glass, “To the backwards!”

We toasted and drank again; I paused before I sipped my rum. This felt very familiar.

Christmas parties could be dry, but since I had just made senior partner at the firm - the youngest ever, I might add - my personal assistant and I decided that this was a party for two reasons: season greetings and joy to all. Huh? That joke didn’t feel quite as funny as I thought it would.... Anyways, the main point is that I’m here for the booze and ladies!

Joey nudged me and nodded his head towards my quarry. “Mark, there she is.”

“Nice spot, Joey. I’m going in!” I downed the rest of my drink, popped a mint into my mouth, and swaggered through the crowd, across the hotel events hall to my target: Susan.



Susan saw me coming, squared her shoulders and hips at me, and took a sip from a champagne flute. After she bit her lower lip, grinning at me, I knew I was in, but I still had ten feet to go.

Oomph! Suddenly my right foot wouldn't move, and my left toe caught the carpet as I tumbled to the floor. Even though I don't embarrass easily, I was frustrated because I lost sight of Susan!

"I'm so sorry, Boss."

"Huh?" I brushed myself off as I stood and rolled my eyes to the impending voice. "Amber, what are you doing?" Amber, my paralegal, winced. She was a few years younger than me, a nerd if I ever saw one, and she never EVER stopped working. Currently, she was holding three file folders in her arms, an ink smudge adorned her cheek, and a black pen wrapped up her dirty blonde hair into a makeshift bun.

"Sorry, Boss, but I need you to sign these before I can go home!" Amber said with a thick Canadian accent.

"Fine, whatever, laader." I slurred as I brushed her aside and pushed back into the crowd in search of my prey. Alas, Susan was gone!

Then, the she-devil stepped in. I immediately sensed a falling sensation in the pit of my stomach, an engine on fire and metallic crunching under its own weight: Penny.

"Mark." She stood full-bodied in front of me, her impossibly thin waist and lean arms framed from a bright red dress, barely covering what was necessary. She sported stilettos most women would never dare to attempt.

I sighed and forced a reluctant smile, "Penny, how are you?"

"I'm bored. Let's go back to your place and see if we can't spark some excitement."

I sighed, Penny had done this a couple of times, and I had given in once...ok, twice, wait, maybe three times. How can I have memories of Penny in this dress? Don't judge me. I've been with my share of women, but not that many. Wait, have I? I looked at my cup, maybe too much Capt. Morgan too quickly. I dumped the booze out into a pot plant I was standing next to and let the cup fall to the floor.

I refocused my mind on the imposing manikin-turned lawyer in front of me. Besides being a conniving, dishonest, control freak, the problem with Penny was that she was an excellent attorney and gorgeous. Way too skinny for my taste, but no one could deny her natural beauty. Plus, with her supermodel anorexia, most everyone on the street stopped to watch her walk by. That being said, she ruined much of it with her plastic smile and backstabbing way of doing business. The worst part, like so many super successful career people, she couldn't turn it off. Going back to my place is fine and all, but I did like to have some type of normal conversation, other than office talk. But not Penny, she had two speeds: Tell you what to do, and tell you when to do it, especially if you defied her. Many associates had been fired. (Boy, all this feels so familiar!)

Penny stepped up closer into my face. She drew rings around her cocktail glass and smirked, "Marky, I won't take no for an answer."

I forced a smile, "Lead the way."

## ON THE 3RD DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME - PSYCHOSIS!

The next morning, I was confused. I knew Penny was there, yet, I also knew that she was leaving and that I wouldn't have to see her smug, patronizing face. I also had a sinking feeling in my gut that my massive hangover and shame for giving in to Penny's demands were only the beginning of a really, really bad day.

"Do you want to stick around for breakfast?" I asked. Penny was readying herself for the walk of shame back to her apartment. My voice was more confused than sincere.

"Oh, no, sweetie, but thank you. I'll call you later this week. Kisses." I heard the door slam shut behind her, impacting the headache which ran the length of my forehead.

I instinctively reached for my cell phone but stopped short. I knew there was a message on it. "It's from the office; I think it's from Mr. H's assistant?" I muttered under my breath. My hands trembled as I lifted the rectangular shape from my side table and flipped it in my hand.

One voicemail...office.

"Ah!" With a yelp, I threw it across the room.

One hour and six minutes later. I was standing in the front of my law office, two security guards re-entering the building after escorting me out, my arms filled with my personal belongings and a stack of NDA agreements. "What the hell is going on?"

I climbed into a cab and numbly recited my condo's address to the cabby. At this point, I'd like to say that I was suspicious but analytical and trying to think straight. But trust me, if you ever find yourself repeating the events from the day before, your brain will have a tough time reacting to the present. Should your memory store current events as another today, which would have to be thought of as tomorrow even if it's not? Do we record this experience as a dream if that doesn't work? But according to modern sleep psychology, that would create psychosis. If your brain begins storing waking hours as a dream, your body won't sleep, creating a nervous system paradox leading to, well, you get my point. Physically, psychologically, probably at some level metaphysically too, can't be digested, for lack of a better term. So my brain was experiencing its first major indigestion.

"Acid!" I blurted out.

My cabby, a woman with half a shaved head and an eyebrow ring, raised an eyebrow and quipped back, "Hey man, we don't do that crap in my cab!"

"No, lady, not you...someone else must have dropped some acid in my drink last night. Has to be! Only way to explain this insanity."

The lady driver sighed, "Do you have nausea, cramping, diarrhea?"

"No, just a nasty headache, but that's the hangover."

She smirked, "Then, sir, you didn't get slipped a dirty mickey."

"How would you know?" I snapped back.

She pulled a large bronze coin from her front pocket and held it up behind her. Around a

pyramid shape was the inscription, se suis tuo verum est.

“To thine own self be true.” I read aloud.

“What, you a professor?” The cabbie asked.

“Nah,” I sunk back into my seat and glanced down at the box of junk in my hands, “I used to be a lawyer.”

“Well, I’m five years sober.” She pulled the yellow vehicle to the curb in front of my building and turned in her seat, “And two things I can tell you. First, if you did acid, on purpose or not, you’d know it! Secondly, if you thought someone might have dropped something in your cup, but you don’t know, you should join me for a meeting.”

“Pssst.” I rolled my eyes, “Nah, it’s not like that.”

She laughed and turned back around to her meter, “Ok, pretty boy, whatever, just pay me....”

“No, I’m serious. I don’t have a problem. I’m not an addict!” I insisted.

“The man doth protest too much, methinks.”

“Oh wait, now you do Shakespeare?” I rolled my eyes.

She smirked, “I used to. But, unfortunately, I couldn’t admit to needing help until I got myself blackballed from Broadway.”

She turned back and stared me square in the eyes. It took me aback; she was not afraid, and she wasn’t defensive or angry. And as a lawyer for the past five years, I could not remember having a conversation with intense eye contact that was not defensive or angry. This funky little cab driver was confident but even more incredible, she was sincere!

“Everyone is or has been addicted to something. Maybe it’s not weed or alcohol, but it could be cigarettes, new clothes, or the feeling of power and money.” She looked down and sighed. Reminiscing to a sad part of her past life she still felt shame for, but then glanced back and up and stared into my eyes. “Until you figure that out, sir, you’ll be a slave to something you refuse to look for.”

My face went flush. I had just been fired, and this loser hippie chick throwing self-righteous mumbo jumbo at me really pissed me off. I snapped back, “Ok, well, thanks, Dr. Phil, here, keep that change.” I threw forty bucks at her and did my best not to run away from the cab with my tail between my legs.

“I’m addicted, hahaha!” I slipped into my luxury condo and dropped the box of junk onto the floor. “Just got fired, and I have every excuse to drink, but I won’t ‘cause I don’t need to.” Instead, I kicked off my dress shoes, tore away my tie and dress shirt, dropping them onto the Berber carpet on my way to my second bedroom. I flipped a light on and basked in the warmth of my man cave. A three-foot humidor for my favorite cigars, a dry bar with thirty-year-old scotch, soda water, and three clean glasses my cleaning service kept in stock. A dartboard and a foosball table.

But what I wanted right now was my real pride and joy on the far wall. Three PC monitors mounted in a semicircle, surrounding a leather swiveling chair with a headrest, a retractable keyboard, three different joystick options, and an endless list of online first-person player games.

Of course, I've spent many an hour in World of Warcraft, but Final Fantasy was my jam. Some nights I'd be up till 3 or 4 am before bagging a few hours sleep then heading to the office. "If it weren't worth doing, it would be easy!" I grinned and plopped down into my chair, readying myself for an epic battle. As I flipped the on switch and my supercomputer hummed to life, a message popped up almost immediately. Suck it, again, Surfer88! Haha!

"Crap! Son of..." I logged in and went hunting. This punk, WhosLikeG7, had been hounding me for weeks. I searched for my character's items, "NO!" He had looted me! Son of a monkey-faced..." I used to swear all the time, but spending five years in a business environment and the courtroom taught an old skater and surfer from Redondo beach to not drop F-bombs, even in private. Charm goes a long way. So I created my own slang.

I spent the next five hours searching and waiting for this WhoslikeG7 (Whatever that meant). After three hours, my eyes became droopy, but since I wasn't drinking - cause I'm not an addict - I could push through. I brewed a pot of coffee and went for another two hours. Searching, looking, regathering the tools, weapons, and maps that I had lost to the little punk, G7. I kept pounding the digital pavement, looking, searching until....I fell asleep and...

"YAAAAHHHHHHOOOOO!" An explosion of pleasure burst from my lips. I screamed over the techno Christmas carols blasting over loudspeakers, "Joey, I must have more Morgan!"

Joey responded with a tip of a bottle into my red Solo cup. "My command is your wish, Captain."

I accepted the refill eagerly, "I think you said that backwards." I looked at him sideways.

"You know what?" Joey agreed with childlike wonder, "I think I did." He raised his glass, "To the backwards!"

Joey toasted, but I, in turn, tossed my hands up in the air, rum splashing over everything and everyone around me, and ran from the hotel ballroom, hands raised, screaming in panic.

I overheard Joey slurred laughter behind me, "Hilarious boss...so awesome!"

I stopped screaming long enough to disappear into the crowd, "I have to get out of this, this ..." I frantically searched for an exit, but nothing made sense, the air around me was stifling; I pulled at my collar, searching for more oxygen. I made my way around a circled group of drinking colleagues, whizzed past two associates trying to congratulate me on my new, doomed partnership, then straight into the waiting arms of a succubus.

"Hello Mark, I've been waiting for you." Penny purred at me.

I turned, threw my arms up in the air, and screamed, "Holy Crap!" Then ran full tilt in the other direction, straight into a cleverly ordained support beam. As I was blacking out, I remember thinking that this nightmare was finally over. Unfortunately, it had only just begun.

## HARK THE HERALD

Glassy-eyed and expecting very little, I sighed as I leaned away from the coffee shop table. “So, that’s about it. I don’t know how much longer I can do this before I go insane.”

The stranger smiled across the table at me, “Well, first, consider that losing your sanity is mostly due to a fraying of nerves and an overuse or misuse of brain function. Your brain function is all reset and perfectly healthy every day you awaken. Secondly, your loop is operating outside the limitation of time. So, I would estimate that you can continue this endless life loop indefinitely.”

“Come on, man. You are not being very encouraging...wait a second.” I looked up into the stranger’s eyes; his response did not seem to make sense. “You believe me?”

“Of course I do, idiot. I’m the one who put you in this loop.” With that bombshell, the stranger stood, snatched up his venti coffee, and strode out of the green franchise coffee shop.

Roughly twenty minutes earlier, a shadow had loomed over me. The corresponding voice asked if he could sit down; I shrugged my shoulders, so he did. He asked me how today was going; I scoffed at him, “Which today?”

“Is there more than one today?” He grinned.

I turned towards him, “Oh, you’d be surprised.” So I unloaded. Why not? It’s not like I had anything loose...or so I thought.

After finally coming to grips with the unexplained insanity of reliving the same day over and over again, I decided it was time to have fun! First, I had my fill of excursions around the world, like a day trip to Macau or Rome. I surfed in Australia and scuba-dived off the coast of South Africa and Madagascar. I flew into the Everest base camp and tried climbing the world’s tallest mountain and even hired a jet fighter to do his best to make me throw up (he won, by the way; if the day didn’t start over, they’d be picking my partially digested corn flakes out of that cockpit for the next six months.)

Eventually, the charm wore off. I soon became depressed and hopeless. There was no one to share these adventures with me. No one to talk to about feeling the same hangover every time I awoke or the identical aroma of French bread from the bakery down the block wafting through my bedroom window every stupid morning. I used to LOVE waking up to that smell...now, it both depresses me and makes me sick to my stomach. So I had to find a way out of here!

I started with academics, asking Quantum Theorists, Engineers, and eventually a double Ph.D. of Religion. I even spoke to a Hindu priest and a Buddhist monk. The Catholic priest was very polite but gave me my first turn in the nuthouse. My next lock-up was at the local police precinct. But the worst was the time when I was strapped to a hospital bed and pumped full of narcotics to keep me calm! But, in all fairness, when they found me, I was standing on a cab, smashing its windshield in with a crowbar, wearing nothing but my smile.

Yep, I have seen or done it all over the past months or years (who knows how long I’ve been stuck here).

And so, I unloaded on this unsuspecting stranger. And a massive stranger at that. He was

quite possibly the largest man I had ever seen. But unlike most giant men, he wasn't long, nor was he big and fat; he was just solid and muscular— and about 7 foot 2! (Almost 2.2 meters for all my Canadian friends). From a distance, he'd look like an average, fit guy in his early thirties. The other strange thing was his ethnicity. It was impossible to determine. Some kind of Asian-American, maybe Native American? An Inuit from Alaska? Whatever his nationality, he was quite possibly the prettiest dude ever. I mean, a pro-athlete body melded with the face of a model and the charm of a movie star. Let's be straight here, I like women, but it almost felt like talking to a dream when speaking to this guy.

At the time, how could I have known how quickly this dream would turn into a nightmare.

## E.T. OWNS HOME

After my mind caught up to the giant stranger claiming responsibility for this loop of insanity, I chased after him. When I finally caught up to his long strides, I looked him over. Now, remember, I'm about 6'2", so I looked down at the average human. I craned my neck to converse with this guy. "What are you like, 7 foot or 7'2"?"

"Ah, come on, man, I'm not that short."

I shook my head at the strange comment but pressed on, "What do you mean you put me here?"

"Just what I said, I put you here." The stranger replied.

"Impossible! A person can't do that; the technology isn't available." I retorted.

"Not on this earth, it isn't." He snickered back at me.

"So what? Are you an alien? Should I be calling you Kal-el or E.T.?" I asked dryly.

"Personally— I prefer Worf; I'm more of a Star Trek fan." The giant grinned and nodded, "Yeah, I am kinda an alien."

I shook my head, still not believing a word this weirdo was saying, "Let's just assume I believe you. Why? What motivation would you have to torture me like this? What have I done to you?"

"I wouldn't." The giant slowed for a second and turned to look at me as he shrugged massive shoulders. "I would let you stay the course of your pathetic and mediocre life, then watch you die an old and lonely man. You want to live for ambition and pleasure; that's your choice. You can suck on the rewards for all I care."

Pathetic and mediocre? That hurts, I thought, but I shook my head and fought to stay on topic. "So, you didn't do this to me?"

"No." The giant stopped for a moment and used his hands to emphasize a point to me as if I were a toddler, "I did stick you in this time loop, but not 'cause I wanted to, but because I was ordered to do so."

So many questions swam through my head, but I could only get out one at a time, "So, you work with the CIA, DARPA, Area 51, or something like that?"

“Are you kidding, son? First, you call me short, and now you say I’m dumb? You really don’t want help, do you?”

I stepped around a woman coaxing two grade-school children down the sidewalk and stated, “I don’t understand.”

The giant ignored me but mused aloud. “You know, when this planet was an infant, I led the greatest army in the history of the universe, but for the past 18 months, I’ve been stuck babysitting you.”

“Wait, you’ve been here the whole time...” I paused as realization hit me “...and it’s been a year and a half!” I exclaimed.

“Of course I have; I told you I put you here. Time loopers are never allowed to be alone; it’s too dangerous.”

“Wait a minute. You’re saying this is a regular thing?”

“Well, that’s relative. Not exactly regular.”

“If you have regulations regarding ‘time loops,’ that sounds pretty regular to me!”

The giant Asian cocked his handsome head and flashed a cheeky smile, “Lawyers: so good at finding holes in arguments to look smart and get their way, all the while ignoring moral truth. They don’t want to solve an issue but simply win an argument.” He stopped walking and glared down at me and growled, “Impressing me will do nothing but extend our time together and piss me off.”

Most could imagine that being yelled at by a giant would be scary, terrifying even. So when I say this dude scared me, I have to be clear, it wasn’t his size that made me wet myself. It was the fire flashing in his eyes. No, I’m being literal! His eyes had flames that ran through the iris of his eyeballs. Also, he glowed. Like Ryu from the old street fighter game readying to blast you with a fireball. I am not exaggerating when I say the guy went slightly nuclear!

After composing myself, I asked a stupid question, “Are we in the matrix?” I was only half-joking.

“You just figured that out now?” He was only half-serious.

“So, I’m in a simulator.” I mused, digesting this new information while walking next to the big man.

He laughed and shook his head, “No, you were born in a matrix, boy. Trust me; you aren’t figuring this one out; all you can do is figure a way out.”

I rolled my eyes, “Ugh...I hate philosophy so much. You have no idea.”

“So do I. I only speak 100% truth. It’s your materialistic nature which obscures your mental vision.”

“Oh, so my lack of metaphysical understanding is because I like nice things?” I scoffed.

“No, your lack of understanding, as compared to other humans, is your reliance on things you can taste and touch.”

“Oh, I see, you’re a giant guru, hippie warrior.” Now it was the strangers’ turn to scoff. He waved air away with his left hand, “Who says I’m a warrior?”

I rolled my eyes, “You just said you commanded some great army thousands of years ago.

I'm assuming that means you know how to fight."

"True, but a true warrior wins by allowing the Champion to do his work."

"Were you raised by Confucius?"

The giant stopped, "Is that a racist remark?" He leaned over me and glared.

"No, I would never!" I snapped back....and cowered away with defensive hands up.

The giant straightened up, grinned, and continued walking, very pleased with himself. "I know... I just wanted to see what you would do."

I ran to catch up, "That's not very nice, you just threatened me, and with your size and power, I would think you should be more careful about not bullying people."

"That's rich coming from you, surfer boy!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I was indignant.

"You're so blind." The giant shook his head. "You sold your soul to work for a law firm, defending corporations from legitimate lawsuits. Lawsuits meant to bring justice against soulless companies crushing small businesses and taking advantage of their employees. In other cases, your firm is used to attack weaker competitors. Your fellow officers of the court don't even dare face their opponents in court. Instead, they bury their competition in paperwork. Then one of their buddies buys the company for pennies on the dollar after the plaintiff is forced to file for bankruptcy."

He stopped and faced me and raised an eyebrow, "Are you sure being fired from that firm was the worst thing that could have happened to you?" The giant turned left into a shop and held the door open for me as he said, "No matter; because that's the least of your problems."

"Wait, why are we in another coffee shop? Didn't we just have coffee?" We had just walked three blocks from one coffee shop to another.

"The 'bucks' coffee is ok, but I love these folks' java. As a California boy, you should appreciate quality, strong coffee more than New Yorkers."

We sat down at a table, and I glanced around the cafe. It was bordered in blue, and the waitresses, cooks behind the counter, and hostess at the cashier all looked alike with tan features and impossibly dark curly hair, "Did you drop me into the world of 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding'?"

"There you are, being racist again. So much for woke California and all its tolerance."

"What can I get you two?" A cute Greek girl with a thick New York accent asked.

I didn't know anything about the place, so I looked back at the giant for a cue. To my shock, a handsome average-sized Greek teenage boy smiled back at me. "Two coffees and baklava, for my dad and me, please."

"Ah," I snapped up out of my chair, knocking it backward.

The waitress stepped back in surprise while the magical Greek boy smirked, and fire flashed through the iris of his eyeballs.

I sighed, rolled my eyes, brushed off my clothes, and tried to cover my actions, "Spiders, I hate'em." As I picked up my chair and the waitress left to put in our order, I leaned towards the 'boy' and hissed, "Why didn't you warn me?"

"Cause it's way more fun to freak you humans out! You should have seen yourself - classic!"



The teen burst into laughter but calmed as he mused, “Ah, it’s so good to laugh.” He wiped tears from his eyes.

I glowered a holed straight through the little brat, “So happy I could amuse you. What should I call you, by the way? Loki?” I smirked.

“Pish posh, as a major closet fantasy nerd, you should be able to find a better insult than that derivative “god” turned comic book character. However, as a matter of fact, Loki was a bad spirit, 2,800 years ago.” He stopped and counted on his fingers, “Yes, that’s right, 2,800 give or take a century, but he’s been in a supermax prison for over 2,000 years now.”

“There’s a prison that can hold beings like you?”

The fake teenager scoffed, “Sure, there’s a prison for every being created. However, most are created by the individual beings themselves, and those cages are similar to the one you choose to live in.”

I sat back and sighed, “Here it comes, the rub.”

“What’s the rub?”

“Yeah, you know, the Shakspearean quote turned into a euphemism.”

“Yeah, I know about the playwright. My assistant was there when Bill wrote it. But do you think this is anything but charity? Any help I give you is way more than you deserve, meat sack. So, sit there, quietly, and listen, if not, leave me alone, so I can drink my coffee and eat my baklava in peace!”

I stood up, “Fine, you arrogant little ass-in-ick punk. Go shapeshift yourself into oblivion.” I stormed towards the door but stopped short at the handle. Dang, it! I need this guy. I admitted to myself. I slowly turned, just as the waitress brought our coffee and pastry. In frustration and defeat, I drugged my feet every step back to the table and plopped down onto my chair.

“I’m Michael, by the way, but my friends call me Mike.” The young, powerful punk said with a mouthful, “You can call Michael” He grinned and winked at me.

I looked away.

“But I also go by Whos-like-G7.”

Wait, what? That’s the guy who hacked me and stole my....“Son of a gun, I’ll kill you!” I leaped across the table at the pubescent punk’s throat, and everything went black.

## FRESH JINGLE HELLS

I awoke on a park bench in Central Park. I grabbed at my head as I sat up, “Ouch, you jerk!”

“Hey man, you jumped me. It’s not my fault I was built huge, more powerful, and smarter than you, or everyone, actually.”

“Well, someone is responsible, and I think they need to know about you, psycho!”

“Yeah - you’re not ready for that conversation yet, pumpkin?”

Michael was back into gigantic form and had a massive right arm across the top of the park bench backrest.

“Why me?” I asked.

“Well, I didn’t want you landing on the baklava. I hadn’t tasted that in thirty years! The only good part of this assignment has been the food.”

“No, I mean, why are you stalking me? You have been messing with me online for months before all this happened.”

He shrugged and thought for a moment and looked left into the distance, “Well, I liked that game, way better than the naked monsters game and the one simulating crime for fun. So, at least you picked a game that wasn’t completely bankrupt of morals, and you know, it’s a classic light versus darkness, good versus evil. I think....”

“No, you smart a...alec,” I growled and composed myself. “Why me!?”

“I told you before.” He leaned in and whispered. “I don’t know. I just follow orders.”

“So you did that for fun?”

“Think of it as me meeting you before I met you. Also, I’ve been stuck in this assignment with you for almost two years now!” Michael set his jaw and glared at the ground. “Two years for one man. And I’m one of the most powerful and smartest beings in the universe.” He looked at me with desperate eyes, “Do you have any idea how slow and simple your life is?”

“Ah, come on, it’s not that bad!” I defended myself.

“Oh, really?”

Now, what happened next, I can not quite understand, and I’ll do my best to describe it, but honestly, it’s impossible. Michael reached up with one hand and pulled at the molecules in the air, which then followed his forefinger and thumbs like plastic wrap from leftover chicken. He then tapped the wrinkled spot twice, and a holographic touch screen appeared from thin air. He tapped on a few buttons then said, “Ahha, here it is. Now, listen. Since reliving the same day over the past year and a half, you have tasted almost every expensive food in the city....twice.”

I rolled my eyes, “Big words coming from baklava boy over here.”

Michael continued, “Visited exotic and fun parts of the world: Rome, Macau, Paris, Vegas.... Then you went on a substance binge, and it seems you experimented with almost every legal and illegal drug on the black market.”

“Yeah, but hey, listen.” I cleared my throat, looking for an excuse. “Now I know how dangerous and horrible....”

The giant, with his holographic report, cut me off, “You’ve been skydiving twenty-two times, paintballing twelve times, and....”

“Common, good clean fun, can’t blame me for that, can you?”

“You paid for ladies to come over....”

I quickly cut the narc off. “...and those ladies came over to clean my house, God bless those middle-aged single moms I employ!” I grinned nervously as an elderly couple, and their standard white poodle walked by. The couple eyed me nervously as they passed.

Michael looked at me sideways, “Dude, they can’t see me, only you can.”

“What! Why man? Can’t you just tell me these things?”

Michael smirked, “And you can stop paying for....”

“Easy...please?” I begged.

“...For company, and I’ll try to communicate a little sooner.”

“Thank you.”

“But no promises.”

“Fine, but what’s the point of keeping this list?”

The giant tapped a few buttons and sighed, “Heathen. You know nothing. Your entire life is listed, bro. So is mine. To every action, there is an opposite and equal reaction.

“Yeah, so? What does Newton’s third law of relativity have to do with keeping track of the number of times I’ve been paintballing?”

“Because there are consequences, genius. A law degree from UCLA Law, and still you can’t think further than your fingertips ability to play video games.” He turned to look me in the eye. “Look, it doesn’t matter whether you play paintball, go skydiving, kill someone or save a life. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. If you save a life, it vibrates through time, space, and several dimensions you’ve never heard of. If you kill someone, that vibrates through time and space. If you ignore someone needing a helping hand, if you choose to run from your problems, if you bury your head in the sand with women, drugs, booze, and video games...there are consequences, Mark!”

“Ok, ok, I guess that makes sense, but I didn’t kill anyone, shoot, I didn’t even hurt anyone.”

Michael threw his hands in the air and looked up, “It’s like arguing with a spoiled five-year-old on a sugar high!” His eyes remained skyward, simulating hearing someone say something.

I thought a screw had come loose in his brain. I tried to ask what was going on, but his massive paw clamped my mouth shut. He leaned over and whispered out of the corner of his mouth, “Don’t speak when the Boss does, just listen.”

“But I don’t hear a...ouch, alright!” Michael’s massive paw clipped the side of my head. The huge man winced, “Are you sure, Boss? He’s really stupi...sorry, umm....not the brightest one you made. We can just...” The imposing giant gulped hard out of fear and diverted his eyes down, “Yes, Boss, right away, Boss.”

Standing in the middle of a busy Manhattan sidewalk, we stood in silence for a good thirty seconds. Finally, I spoke up, “Well, it seems like the commander of the most terrifying army in the universe just got spanked.”

“Shut up,” Michael growled, “Come on!”

Ten minutes later after walking several blocks, the big man tapped his ear twice and spoke up, “I’m here, standing by for dimensional time shift.”

“Dimensional what? Wait!” Michael snatched up the back of my collar, almost lifting me off my feet.

At first, I thought my eyes were straining from a stroke or lack of oxygen. But when I glanced over at the giant, he was still in focus. It was almost like someone had pulled the power source from a computer, but instead of going black, the world’s screen pulled light particles apart. The tiny light dots went white, then gray, but then shifted back to white, and then the particles reorganized back into focus.

“Whoa...that was nuts.” I exhaled.

Michael leaned in and grinned, “If you think that was crazy, you should try shifting up into the next dimension; it’s like getting your brain sucked...”

“Mikey.” A voice called out to us from down the block. The voice belonged to a guy sporting an out-of-date leather jacket, which he seriously pulled off. He looked to be trying to downplay the size of his shoulders—no matter what, those giant boulders would not be denied. The guy was jacked! Of course, Michael was big, but this guy was massive!

“Holy-moly, Michael, this dude is even bigger than you are!”

Mike rolled his eyes as his associate approached, “Just barely.”

I stepped up to the approaching giant, “Hi, I’m Mark.”

The giant looked down at my extended hand and raised an eyebrow, “Yes, sir, I know who you are. That is why we are here.”

“Ok,” I raised my hands in the air, “Jeez, is it impossible for you and your little brother over here to have any social graces?”

Michael snapped back at me, “First off, we were not created for social grace, only obedience. Secondly, he’s MY little brother and not the other way around.”

“Well, Mikey, I am bigger, so, I think....”

“And I am older, so....”

Gabe rolled his eyes, “By one-millionth of a second.”

Mike’s reply was defensive and sarcastic, “Yeah, of course, but do you have any idea how much can be done in only one-millionth of a second?”

Gabe growled back into Michael’s face, “Yes, the creation of your ability to reason in logic, apparently.”

“Ok, looks like Mr. Spock over here is still thinking he is the world’s gift to intellect.”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I could have advanced science by thousands of years, but I restrained myself as instructed to.”

Mike’s face flushed red, “What? Are you implying that I don’t obey?”

Gabe raised both eyebrows this time, “Sure, you do. But only after a myriad of debates.”

“Why can’t you just say ‘A lot of arguments’ like a normal being?” Michael moaned.

“Because I enjoy a robust vocabulary.” Gabe retorted.

“And a robust head size!” Mike muttered under his breath just loud enough to be heard.

Gabe snapped back, “Philistine!”

Michael jabbed, “Snob!”

Gabe parried, “Barbian!”

Michael paused, then snarled, “Politician!”

Gabe’s eyes went wide in shock as he gasped in disbelief, “How dare you!”

As this nuclear family feud grew in intensity, I tiptoed back from the arguing giant siblings. My muscles tensed just a little more from each exchange, and I was about to make a run for it when both Easter Island-sized heads jerked skyward in unison.

Sudden sonic booms sent literal earth-shaking ripples through my body, asphalt under my

feet, and the lamp post I tumbled into. The entire city stopped, and held its breath. Cars rolled to a stop, a pigeon on the park bench next to me stopped pecking at food and laid down. It was as if for a few seconds, nothing in the “Great, City of Cities,” the great and powerful New York, was that impressive or important. The shock wave was followed by a voice that melted through my soul (or into it, or something metaphorical I can’t explain....whatever, it was nuts, ok!)

Michael, Gabriel! Knock it off, and get back to work.

After a moment of stunned silence, the embarrassed giant employees composed themselves. Michael ran his hand through his hair and cleared his throat while Gabriel pulled tight on his leather jacket lapels and cricked his neck nervously.

“Sorry, Gabe, it’s good to see you.”

“Yes, Mikey, it is good to see you too, and I too apologize.”

## A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS

“That was...that was...” I could barely see straight.

“Something that doesn’t exist, right?” Michael sneered.

“Huh?” I couldn’t comprehend this feeling. The odd Doctor Suess meets Neo from the Matrix sense of reality I’d been thrown into was more than my mind could even let in, much less comprehend. It was as if I had been living my entire life in a desert, drinking from an eyedropper, dripping one bit of water into my mouth at a time as needed. Then suddenly, I’d been thrown into a lake and expected to drink it up or drown.

“You just heard the voice of a God you do not think exists.” Gabe interrupted my metaphoric imaginings.

Michael stepped to my rescue as my pounding heart and sudden eternal terror swirled in my veins, soul, and world around me. “He’s not really an atheist.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I jumped onto that line of thinking, but my time loop keeper was not done yet, “You have to actually believe in something and take time to think about it, to be an atheist.”

Gabe led the way down the sidewalk as they continued to discuss me as if I were a subject in an experiment and not actually there. Maybe a character being developed for a family-friendly drama, or one of those faith-based ‘B’ movies, “A nihilist then?”

Michael pulled me along by the arm, “Oh no! Trust me; this guy wants to live, have fun, and definitely thinks he’s more important than he is.”

A sudden thought hit me, “I do live in a matrix!”

“Is he only discovering that at this moment?” Gabe tisked at me, the tiny human with its tiny brain.

“Yeah. But it’s the least of his worries, bro. I’d go with the laziest agnostic ever, who then married a hedonist and had a baby.”

Gabe shook his head, “Sounds horrible, and you have been with this guy for how long?”

“Two years and counting, I don’t know why the Boss even bothers.”

I shook out of my stupor long enough to snap back, “Hey, guys, I’m right here, you know.”

Gabe winced as we turned a corner on the sidewalk, “I am really sorry, brother. I thought four months with Jezebel was bad; I would have been nicer if I had known. Who is the go-between for this guy?” Gabe enquired as we turned a corner.

“An aunt in Vermont.” Mike sounded almost regretful.

Suddenly recognizing myself in the conversation, I blurted, “Wait, I have a crazy aunt in Vermont. She used to send me all this weird religious crap which would make my mom freak out.” I shrugged my shoulders, “I always thought she was just one taco shy of a fiesta platter.”

“Yeah, well, you owe your auntie’s fiesta platter more than you’ll ever...”

“We’re here.” Gabe interrupted Mike and pointed.

I followed his finger towards an incredibly awkward scene. A madwoman in scrubs was stooping down and trying to force a homeless man to taste her cheeseburger. I stepped closer as something about the woman seemed eerily familiar.

Realization hit me like a ton of bricks, “Penny!”

The woman stood and turned towards me. Her hair was a mess, and ketchup stained the corner of her mouth. Bits of food flooded from between her teeth as she exclaimed, “Mark! So good to see you!” She ran up to me, cheeseburger still in her hand, threw her arms around me, and squeezed. From the moment I recognized her, I knew this was Penny, but this was not the same woman I had been with only “13 hours” earlier. I pushed her far enough away to ask, “What the heck happened to you?”

She smiled back and replied, “I finally ate a fricken cheeseburger, and it’s fantastic!” Penny rocked back onto her heels, took another huge bite of her burger, and giggled as she munched away, staring at me.

## **HAVE YOURSELF A PENNY LITTLE CHRISTMAS**

“Are you sure I can’t interest you in some of these: fries or shake?” Penny extended her half-eaten food with honest sincerity; I just stared back in disbelief. So the Penny replicant continued, “I know - I know, to you, I was this mean control freak obsessed with herself. I mean, technically, last night we just..umm, well, you know,” she sucked on her straw for a moment.

Atlantic white cedar trees towered overhead. I leaned back into an iron armrest, seated on the wooden plank park bench Penny and I shared. Gabe and Mike were nowhere to be seen, and as far as I could tell, the scourge of the Manhattan law community had lost it. My right hand gripped the park bench backrest nervously, and I kept my left in my lap, ready to defend myself.

Penny continued, “But I’m telling you, I had the afternoon from hell leading me straight to Heaven!” She peered skyward and sighed with a smile. But then her brow furrowed. She looked down, deep in thought, “At least, I think I am on the journey in search of Heaven or having a good place to start.” She shook her head and returned to the topic, “But honestly, you would not

believe me if I told you.”

“Told me what?” I relaxed a bit.

“No, trust me, it’s too crazy. Just know, there’s a lot more out there than we can see with our eyes, and if you ignore it...” Her voice trailed off, and Penny looked like she peered too deeply into a spinning vortex, mesmerized by something she imagined....or remembered?

“What, Penny, or what?!”

She snapped out of it, “Sorry, what was I saying?”

“You were going to say what will happen if I ignore the things I can’t see!” I pleaded with my eyes.

She sighed and shrugged, “Honestly, I’ve been on this journey for like an hour and fifteen minutes; you shouldn’t take advice from a NUBE like me.”

“But tweedle-dumb over there, brought me all the way over from another reality just to talk to you!”

“Don’t call your sexy giant tweedle-dumb; it’s rude, and he’s probably the only thing standing between you and oblivion. As someone who has stared down the abyss, I am telling you, just don’t go there!” She snapped up her fingers valley-girl style and pursed her lips. Then she leaned forward and whispered, “And don’t tell Gabe I said your guy is sexy. He’s WAY more sensitive than he’ll admit.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Honestly, I think their priorities are a lot different.”

“Hey.” We both followed the sound of a voice belonging to an old Asian man playing chess with an Indian youngster. They both glared at us and shook their heads, “We are here for a limited amount of time,” the Asian chess master continued as fire flashed through his eyeballs, “Hurry it up!” Mike demanded.

“Overgrown, impatient horses a....”

“Wow, your dude lets you get away with murder.” Penny moaned, “Mine set up my death by a silver sedan like a real-life 3D recording and made me watch it over and over.”

I tisked and waved at Penny, “Mine hit me so hard I think I lost a day!”

She chuckled back at me, “I had to live through all my childhood dramas, including my abusive father and freaking high school!”

I leaned forward, and I set my jaw in frustration, “I’ve relived the same day 550 times, which includes being manipulated into bed by you, waking up hungover, and being fired for something I didn’t do!”

Penny leaned back and whistled, then turned and called over her left shoulder at Michael, still playing chess with Gabe and looking like they had morphed into the big brother program. “Nice work, Mikey! You really stitched our boy up.” She chuckled.

“This isn’t funny, Penny!” I exclaimed, shocked at her levity.

“Look, I know where you are at; I died! OK, I mean, I was physically and emotionally killed.”

“I shrugged my shoulders, yeah, me too, thirty-seven times. But it doesn’t work.”

I pouted.

She furrowed her brow at me, “Wait, what? Oh, right, time loop. Anyways, Mark, I

didn't have a choice. I had one life, and it was taken, and I saw everything that resulted because I was so bitter at the world and afraid of being weak. I had hurt or pushed away anyone who I thought was strong, and I pushed them away before they could hurt me."

"I get it." I snapped my fingers and laughed, "You were Scrooge!"

"Yes," she rolled her eyes and sighed, "I was Scrooge."

"But with a little George Bailey thrown in for good measure," Gabe added from the sideline.

"So that would make me...." I put a finger to my chin.

"Phil Connors." Mike blurted out while moving his knight to attack a pawn.

"Hey, Gabe," Penny asked, "Was Phil Connors a true story?"

Gabe didn't look up, "Kind of. It was based on a true story. Real name was Bill Meyers. He was a sports reporter, not a weatherman."

"And he was stuck here, in New York City on Saint Patty's day." Mike added.

"Doesn't sound too bad," I shrugged my shoulders and turned back to Penny.

Gabe stood and took a step at me as he snarled, "Do you have any idea what it's like to be surrounded by green and thousands of drunken Irishmen for over three years? You pea-brained tiny Homosapien!"

Mike grabbed the little Indian boy by the shoulder and held him back, and he winced at me, "Touchy case, we don't like to discuss it around Gabe."

Gabe shrugged his older brother's hands off his shoulders and plopped back into his seat pouting. "Three years for a man who reports on the lowest form of human communication, sports!"

I turned back to Penny as Mike consoled his brother and whispered, "You're right, a little touchy."

Penny and I sat in silence for a few minutes as she finished her food. I did not want to leave. She was the first person in a year and a half I could talk to.

After a while, Michael cleared his throat, "Come on, pretty boy, it's time."

"Five minutes?" I begged.

Mike nodded his head.

"So, Penny, what do I do?"

"What do you mean?" Penny asked with a shrug.

"Oh, I don't know, how do I multiply the stars in the sky with all the tea in China? What do you think? How do I get out of this....this....this thing?" I folded my hands, begging for any ideas or help of any kind.

"Ok, first relax. Take a deep breath." "Ok, ok, I can do that." I breathed deeply.

"Next, understand, I have different issues than you, Mark. Ok, I was always doing something to escape my feelings and running over everyone and anyone in the process...You have to discover your own journey."

"My own journey? Now you sound like Confucious too."

Penny chuckled, "I'd imagine that everyone's path to happiness ends in the same destination, yet is unique for each person."

I sighed, "This metaphoric, spiritualist, new-age, hippie, religious, mumbo-jumbo makes



no sense to me.” I was only half sarcastic, “When I was little, I learned that if you can’t touch it, it doesn’t matter. Faith is something children use to hope for impossible fantasies.”

“Ok,” Penny scooted forward at me and took my hands in hers. I had touched Penny more than I ever wanted to in two lifetimes, but this was different. Her hands-on mine felt different. She was a friend, encouraging a friend. “Try this, when you get back to your loop, go through the day, but ask yourself this one question,”

I leaned forward and sighed, “Fine, go on.”

“What am I not seeing?”

“That’s it?” I was disappointed. I needed a real answer, an equation....a silver bullet, or a treasure map with X marking the spot. Not more platitude bull crap!

“That’s all I got.” Penny leaned back and burped, “Excuse me.”

“What happened to you?” I sneered in disgust as a huge hand draped itself over my shoulder, letting me know my furlough was officially over. I stood up to accept my fate.

Penny smiled, “Only you can take your journey, Mark. Stop avoiding it. Remember to look for what you are not seeing.”

I shook my head, “Whatever,” I muttered under my breath as Mike and I turned to the middle of the sidewalk and faced Penny and Gabe one last time.

Just as the particles making up the scene Mike and I stared at began to pull apart and shift, Penny waved and yelled, “Mark, it’s worth it...See you on the other side.”

As we shifted back to my assigned reality, I felt some hope that if bat-crap crazy Penny could navigate this mess, I, too, had a shot.

“OK, Mike, here’s the plan. From now on, I will do everything differently. I will start from the beginning and cover every part of this day inch by inch. I will find what I don’t see? Right, big fella?” No one answered. I looked all around me, but I stood alone, strangers brushing past me. I was still on the sidewalk next to Madison Park. I was alone, but something told me it only looked that way. “What can’t I see?” I asked myself again as I made my way back to my flat.

## **THE BEGINNING OF THE LAST NOEL - TODAY # 551**

“YAAAAHHHHHHOOOOO!” An explosion of pleasure burst from my lips. I screamed over the techno Christmas carols blasting on loudspeakers as reality sunk my head into my heart, “Joey, I must have more...oh, whatever.” I shoved my red plastic cup at Johnny and moved off. I was about to head towards the right, as I always did, but I stopped. I switched it and went left. I had to do something differently; I had to discover what I wasn’t seeing. The ambiguity of it all still pissed me off, but that stupid phrase would not leave my muddled thoughts for some reason. I pushed my way through the crowd, looking up, then down, looking left then right, searching for anything that made sense. Gradually, I found myself alone, quiet, and standing on a plush red carpet. I swiveled my head back and forth, walking deeper into one of the hotel venue rooms I did not recognize. “In a year and a half, how did I miss this place?” I wondered aloud.

“Sir, how may I be of assistance to you?”

I spun left to discover a uniformed hotel employee perched behind a kiosk. His gold name tag read “Enrique.”

I approached him as I spoke, “Huh, oh, no, I was at the party next door and needed some peace and quiet, I guess.” I said absentmindedly.

A collage of color exploded off Enrique’s desk from a massive display of flyers for guided tours of the city, helicopter flights, museums, and carriage rides through central park.

The middle-aged Latino leaned in, “Sounds like quite the rager if I do say so myself.”

“Right, the gobstopper of parties. It would have made a drunken Willie Wonka proud.” I groaned as I absentmindedly began flipping through the tourist trap advertisements.

“Whoa, buddy, what’s a gobstopper, and who’s Wonka? Maybe I should call you a cab.”

I don’t know why, but I kept flipping through all of the fliers. There had to be at least fifty of them. The more I looked, the more I felt the answer was there.

I stopped and stood up straight, no way. I thought to myself as I picked up from the display what I had been searching for. There, in my hand, was a flier for Shakespeare in the park. On the front fold was a very familiar and funky face. The sober, hippie cab driver who insisted the whole world was addicted. Maybe a little crazy is what I need.

I turned and spoke to the Concierge. “You are absolutely correct; I do need a cab.”

I climbed into the cab and excitedly recited my condo’s address to the cabby. I’d like to say at this point, I was nervous yet analytical, trying to figure out a way to get answers. But trust me, if you ever find yourself repeating the events from the day before, your brain will have a tough time reacting to the present. Should your memory store current events as another today, which would have to be thought of as tomorrow, even if it’s not, do we record these experiences as a dream if that doesn’t work? But according to modern sleep psychology....

Dang it! We’ve discussed this already...I have gone through this thought process so many times in this women’s cab; I can’t keep track!

Anyways, you get my point. Physically, psychologically, probably at some metaphysical level too, thoughts and memories can’t be....digested....for lack of a better term. So my brain was, I mean still is, experiencing major indigestion.

“Acid!” I blurted out.

My cabby, a woman with half a shaved head and an eyebrow ring, raised an eyebrow and quipped back, “Hey man, we don’t do that crap in my cab!”

You see, I had tried broaching the subject with Joanna, my funky driver, seven days in a row, but each time she had clammed up and eventually kicked me out of the cab five blocks from my flat and threatened to have me banned from all yellow cabs for a year. Out of desperation, I went back to repeating everything I had said the first time I met her, and low and behold; she cracked like an egg. That was three days ago. Since then, this was my fourth ride with her, and I still could not figure out how to get her to have coffee with me, dinner, or even a phone number.

She always claimed I was hitting on her, in which case I was not her type or a creepy stalker, and then was kicked out of the cab....again.

So, I had seven minutes and 17 seconds to find what I needed. It was really like speaking to an NPC. (Non-Player Character in a video game for those of you who were born last century.) She was almost a character programmed to only react in one way, my inability to get any more information from her was driving me nuts!

“No, lady, not now...someone must have dropped some acid in my drink last night. Has to be! Only way to explain this insanity.”

The lady driver sighed, “Do you have nausea, cramping, diarrhea?”

“Nasty headache, just a hangover.” I had shortened my pitch, giving more time for her to talk.

She smirked, “Then, sir, you didn’t get slipped a dirty mickey.”

“How would you know?” I winced after the comment; I had spoken just a little too happily.

She didn’t seem to notice, but pulled a large bronze coin from her front pocket and held it up behind her. Around a pyramid shape was the inscription, *se suis tuo verum est*.

“To thine own self be true.” I read aloud.

“What, you a professor?”

“Nah,” I sunk back into my seat and pouted at the box of junk in my hands, “I used to be a lawyer.”

“Well, I’m five years sober.” She pulled the yellow vehicle up to the curb in front of my building and turned in her seat, “And two things I can tell you. First, if you did acid, on purpose or not, you’d know it! Secondly, if you thought someone might have dropped something in your cup, but you don’t know, you should join me for a meeting.”

“Psssst.” I rolled my eyes, “Nah, it’s not like that.” This was where I had made a mistake last time, suddenly rambling off a bunch of eager questions and spooking her. This time, I scowled and stayed silent.

She laughed and turned back around to her meter, “Ok, pretty boy, whatever, just pay me....”

“I’m serious. I’m not an addict!” I insisted.

“The man doth protest too much, methinks.”

“Wait. Now you do Shakespeare?” I rolled my eyes.

She smirked, “I used to. But, unfortunately, I couldn’t admit to needing help until it was too late. I got myself blackballed from Broadway.”

She turned back and stared me square in the eyes. This was the eighth time I had this conversation, ninth if you count our first encounter on Today #2. Her confidence still took me aback.

“Everyone is or has been addicted to something. Maybe it’s not weed or alcohol, but it could be cigarettes, new clothes, or the feeling of power and money.” She looked down and sighed. Reminiscing to a sad part of her past life she still felt shame for, but then glanced back and up and stared into my eyes. “Until you figure that out, sir, you’ll be a slave to something you

refuse to look for.”

My face went flush. I knew this was my only shot at getting something new from her. I kept my voice defensive and angry and looked out of the window as I asked. “So let’s say... um hypothetically.” I took my time, again avoiding being too eager. “If I were to know someone who had a problem, but they couldn’t quite put their finger on it...like, for instance.” I cleared my throat, genuinely feeling embarrassed.

You see, I had practiced this part alone but hadn’t gotten this far before; this was the first time I had admitted to having a problem to another human being. To be honest, if I was not as desperate as I was, I wouldn’t have said anything to anyone, ever. The following statement was like coughing up a softball. “Let’s suppose this guy doesn’t drink every day, or play video games for long periods every day, or sleep with women every night, but he kind of feels like he has to be doing something along those lines every day.” I cleared my throat again, trying to rid my chest of the heat traveling up my throat as a lone tear dripped down my left cheek. “What, um...hmmm... what would you suggest for that guy?”

Joanna turned and looked me in the eye and smiled. “That’s simple, Jack, just be present. Your addiction isn’t about feeling good or having fun, thrills, or even winning. It’s simple avoidance. Just stop. Feel how you feel, be where you are, and accept your place on this earth, man. If you learn to do that, then you’ll be golden.” The hippie turned back and clicked a button on her meter, “Now, give me thirty bucks for the ride...Oh, and get counseling.”

I don’t know what I expected. I guess I was still looking for that mythical silver bullet or a treasure map with ‘X marks the spot.’ But for some reason, the tripe, hippie, new age mumbo jumbo answer just irked me the wrong way. “That’s it!” I clawed through my wallet and threw all the green bills I had at the funky cabbie’s head, “Fine, here!” I snapped, “Be present, feel how I feel, do what I do...should I also poop when I poop? I thought you were like Yoda driving a cab, but I guess you’re just a giant fortune cookie! I am so disappointed...and after baring my soul!” Then my language and ranting devolved from there and didn’t slow down for a while.

Well, you can guess the next part. As the cell door clanked shut in the drunk tank and I found myself surrounded by fellow slurring, vomiting occupants, I slumped in defeat and looked up and stared. After a moment’s pause, I shrugged my shoulders - tried everything else - I thought.

“Listen, Bossman, I really am trying here, but honestly, I don’t even know what you want, so even a little hint right now would help. Thanks.” I bowed my head, crisscrossed my chest, and kissed my hand as I’d seen in the movies.

A wafting smell of sick and stale beer smacked me in the face as a tallish drunk with a scraggly beard sporting a crusty tan coat almost sat on top of me. “Don’t do that cross thing. You suck at it.” I stood up to avoid trouble, but the drunk was insistent and pulled me closer, “Besides, the Boss doesn’t really like it...pumpkin.” The drunk winked as fire flashed through his iris for a brief moment.

“Michael!” I exclaimed and wrapped a bro arm around his shoulder, hugging him close, “I am so happy to see you; you have NO idea!”

He shoved me off, “Mark, dude, be cool...the other drunks are watching.” He flipped his

collar and grinned, breaking character for a brief moment. “You too. It’s not bad seeing you, kid.” The disguised giant’s face snapped back to business, “Ok, Nancy, enough tea parties for one day, listen up. Boss says that you’re on the right track, so whatever you do, don’t quit. You’re closer than you’ve ever been before.”

I took a deep breath to speak, but Mike cut me off as he gently took my collar with his left hand and stretched his right hand out, peering at his fingernails. “And to save you the hassle of trying to pry more info from me and so I don’t have to watch you in this drunk tank for another sixteen hours until the next time loop begins.” His grip on my collar snapped tight as his right hand made a fist, which he brought down hard and fast against the side of my head.

## WINTER WONDER DREAMS

I must not have died. I got the feeling that Michael hadn’t been permitted to end my life, so he must have conked me, so at least he could observe me in the hospital. Or, maybe it was a crazy smart, devious plan on his part. Either way, I slept and dreamt.

I fell through a dark vortex, with swirling black clocks spinning with me; randomly, a Jersey cow flew past, going the wrong way. The cow was possibly a fragment of a movie I’d seen, maybe? No matter, I continued spinning and falling...falling and swirling, until a pinprick of light appeared. The light drew closer and grew brighter. I swam in the empty darkness, desperately trying to get my feet under me. It was no use; I slammed into the world at an impossible rate; death had to be instantaneous. But instead, it was more like a metamorphosis.

I was now shorter, a lot shorter. I felt something bulky but not heavy hanging on my back. I looked down, and a green backpack strap printed with Ninja Turtles was draped over my shoulder. I had a backpack just like this when I was like five! I thought.

I looked down at my left hand; it was soft and small, really small. I looked at my other hand; in it was a watercolor-painted picture. Even though a youth had painted the scene, it wasn’t bad. It was a beach scene with a ship on the horizon and an orangish/red sun in the corner finishing off the artwork. “What the hell is this?” An alto’s voice I hadn’t heard in over two decades asked. I looked around desperately, terrified, as the more I saw, the more my suspicions were confirmed. I ran down a hallway and stopped at a large family portrait hanging on the wall: Mom, Dad, and I. Grinning happily and wearing cheesy, matching pastels.

I turned around to face a mirror hanging on the wall. Staring back at me was the reflection of a six-year-old, missing two front teeth, a mop of blond hair falling into my eyes. Shock registered across my face. “Six again? Come on, man? Michael, you suck!” I stomped my feet.

“Mark, what’s going on out there?”

“What? Dad?” I walked further down the hallway and turned a corner, and there he was, the coolest man on the planet: My dad. He was smoking a Cuban and sipping on vermouth. I don’t know why he drank vermouth, but he always did, and it made me love him that much more.

He popped the cigar out of his mouth for a moment to ask, “You ok, son?”

“Yeah, Dad.” My high-pitched voice was so annoying! “Just, uh here, what do you think about this?” Changing the subject, I handed my painting to him.

“Oh, what you got there, son, another masterpiece, huh?” He stuffed the cigar between yellowed teeth as he took the painting with his left hand and scuffed my hair with his right. “Wow, Marky-Mark, you’ve really got talent. I’m keeping it for my collection!” He turned around and pulled out “our” album. Opening it up, he put it in with the rest of my artwork; pictures from when I drew my first circle, well, more of an oval, at 22 months. “When you’re famous, I’ll have the greatest collection of lost art the world’s ever known.” He reached down and kissed me on the head, “Proud of you, son.”

“Proud of what?” Mom stepped into the study; I immediately straightened up and looked for something I should be doing.

“Oh, Marky-Mark had another fine day of painting.”

“Let me see.” She peered into the book, “Wow, you are doing well, sweetie” She smiled warmly at me and bent down, kissing me on the cheek. “Just don’t forget to read and do well in math too.”

Was this the same woman? Where was the lecture? What about the wasted space that is anything art or performance? Since when did mom smile?

Darkness beset the edges of my vision as I realized this fantasy/dream must end. Tears poured from my face as my little arms grabbed at my dad. “Daddy, please don’t go, please...”

I felt his big arms around my shoulders, and his lips kissed my head once more as the scene melted away and changed.

I was seven. I was dressed in a suit, a portrait of dad stood perched alongside a sinking coffin. If this were a movie, rain would pour on us at that moment. Instead, much worse, it was hot. A very hot, August California sun. Everything about this day I hated. I hated the clothes and the beads of sweat dripping down my back. I hated the religious “see you again” crap. I hated the way my mom actually smiled and hugged people as if she were happy. I hated that my friends tried to play with me; what jerks! And I hated my dad for leaving me and God for taking him.

One of my paintings had been laid on top of the casket to be buried with dad. At the last moment, I ran up and snatched the paper off the coffin, tore it in half, and threw it in the air. Next, I turned on the portrait of my dad, swept the tripod the portrait of my father rested on, then with a swift kick, my foot hit my dad’s face with a perfect tae-kwon do roundhouse. That was courtesy of martial arts lessons over the past two years due to my Ninja Turtle obsession.

My mom’s hands snatched me up as she dragged me away from our gawking friends and family, “You are embarrassing me and the memory of your father!” She exclaimed.

“I don’t care. I don’t care; I hate ‘em. I hate ‘em all!” I screamed in pain, I screamed in anger, I screamed in fear.

Everything faded to black. Again I was still small, this time post-pubescent.

I was lined up in front of my mom, wearing my first school uniform ever, as she combed through my hair one inch at a time.

“Why do I have to go to some dumb Catholic school?” I whined.

“Because it has the best academic record this side of the country.” She straightened my collar. “And besides, your old friends will only hold you back. It’s time you get challenged. If you want to get into UCLA Law as I did, you have to be more than good, right? What do you have to be?”

“But, what if I don’t wanna go to UCLA or study law, mom?”

Very stoically, mother pushed past my question, “That’s not what I asked. What do you have to be?”

I sighed and rolled my eyes as I repeated her motto, “Good isn’t enough; only perfect is.”

She was about to snap to her next task when she stopped short and looked into my eyes, “So handsome, just like your fath...” Mom stopped short, cleared her throat, and stood tall. “Ok, get your lunch, and go to the car.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I complied and then thought, why don’t I remember that about mom?

The scene went dark again....and never returned.

I awoke with a start, “Yahoooooooo.....” Back at that same stupid party.

Waking every day in the throes of an upper class, Manhattan drunken party was bound to have its own PTSD attached to it. I shook my head with vivid dreams of my childhood swirling in my veins as Johnny almost forced rum down my throat. My jeers morphed into sobs. Tears streamed down my cheeks as dark forgotten feelings erupted from my guts. For the first time in over two decades, little Marky-Mark was allowed to be present.

## WHO’S NAUGHTY OR NICE?

Possibly the most underrated thang in this city is the Chinese and their baking skills. Sam thought to himself while tilting his daily complimentary coffee down his gullet from the Chinese bakery down the road. But they sure make a horrible cup of coffee. That being said, every morning, Mr. Chang had a cup of coffee waiting with a donut and a smile. Sam tried to pay the first few times with handfuls of greasy nickels and pennies, but Chang always smiled, bowing slightly, then shooed Sam away. The truth was, Sam had found much better coffee from the Catholic’s downtown, but as a professional charity case, he felt loyalty towards the kind baker.

It was 10 am, and Sam set up in a nice spot right in front of a massive law office. Before the cops showed up, he hoped he could squeeze thirty bucks from the passers-by as they scampered past like ants stuffing their nest for the winter. This was the best and worst of times for homeless drunks in New York City. Best, because Christmas and New Year’s brought fun and generosity to the surface unlike any other time of the year. The worst of times because more of us drunken bums die on the street from the cold than almost anything else. Sam thought to himself. “Welp, let’s take today’s lemons and make lemonade,” Sam muttered under his breath and got to work.

He laid his usual red sleeping bag down, got out a shiny tin can, set it at his feet, and began waving and smiling at the passersby. During the first five years of begging, Sam had been

the classic two-bit street hustler. Convincing folks his kid was in the hospital, or he just needed fifty bucks to get a bus ticket home to Ohio, and so forth. Every New Yorker over the age of twenty had heard it all and had become very cynical and impossible to separate from their cash. But after some trial and error, Sam realized there were people out there who did like to help but just didn't think about it all the time. So, instead of tricking them out of their money, why not become a service. Sam's service is simply a smile and a wave, a good morning or good afternoon, and a place to be generous which helps his 'clients' feel good or warm inside or ease their guilt, you know, whatever. The point was, Sam had figured out that he wanted to be more than a beggar; he wanted to be a business. Sam now had regulars, like Mr. Chang, or the deli owner, Sally, down the block. One of his favorites was Officer Pete Briggs out of the 5th precinct, always making sure he had clean underwear and a warm enough coat. In turn, Sam kept an eye out for creeps and drug dealers.

"I wonder if Pete is walking the beat today?" Sam muttered aloud as a pair of Italian loafers shuffled up next to him. Loafers that belonged to me.

"Can I sit?" I asked, still holding my white office box of personal items I was carrying after being fired.

Sam shrugged his shoulders, "Sure, man, take a load off. I dunno if you wanna risk those slacks on the ground with me, though."

I plopped down to the ground, dropped my box next to me, and chuckled, "This suit is one of about two hundred horrible purchases I've made." I leaned into Sam and opened up the inside of my jacket, "Italian made, as in made in Italia. This is a four thousand dollar waste of material. It hugs and slims every part of my body, as it's fitted to my specific body type. Do you know what 'fitted' really means?"

"Umm...no?" Sam looked nervous,

"Uncomfortable and tight! I hate it so much!" I flipped my fingers at my lapel.

"Ok." Sam chuckled nervously.

I bumped my head against the back of the marbled retaining wall we shared and sighed, "Ugh, just be present. I don't know what that means." I muttered.

"Hmm...is that what's bothering you, son?." Sam asked, "That's all a middle-aged homeless guy knows how to be....present."

"Yeah, I suppose that's true." I nodded my head in agreement, then leaned closer, gnawing my lower lip, deep in thought. I took a breath, then I spoke, "It's just that every time I try to focus on what's going on right here, right now, I get distracted by what else I could be doing, or should be doing, you know?"

Sam chuckled, "Yeah, course I know, it's called programming." He lifted his forearm and pulled back his sleeve, revealing a tattoo of a bald eagle and the word's Semper Fi. He pulled his sleeve down and continued, "That's why when I joined the Corp, my sergeant kicked the crap outta me for three months straight. I had to clean floors with a toothbrush, march for hours in the rain, hold a push-up position for forever while reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and the Rifleman's Creed. The Corp did that cause I'd been programmed by television, pop-cultural and school, even



my parents. Since I was a toddler, I'd been told what I couldn't do. To be a Marine, you have to know there's nothing a rifleman cannot do, as long as he's ready to die trying."

"Wait," I interrupted, "I don't get it. Are you saying I can't focus because of what? Only bad habits? I thought if I can't focus, it's because I don't have any habits to fall back on?"

"Hell son, everybody's got habits. You could have a habit of not paying taxes, or not eating right, or drinking too much or smoking. I mean, habits are just things you've done over and over again until your brain creates a specific pathway in your head, so every time you repeat that action, your brain will be quicker to fire the neurons responsible for completing that action."

"Uhhhh, ok." My mouth opened a bit as I thought, "How do you know so much about this stuff?"

"Ha," Sam scoffed, "Ain't nobody in this world that knows more about pop psychology than addicts and homeless people. I be both!" He laughed aloud.

I sat back, thinking about what he'd said, about habits. If what he said was true, this "addiction" I was fighting, of not being present, was just a big channel in my brain, not wanting to be present...It doesn't have to do with desire. Because for the first time since I was a kid, I actually did want to be present! I looked down at my attire and thought. I hate this suit so much. I hate this dumb white box of office crap. I hated my life! I only want, wait, what do I want? Man, I don't even know what I want? A crazy thought occurred to me, and since I hadn't tried it before, I thought, why not?

I turned to Sam, "Wanna come over and hang out at my place?"

Sam's face hardened as he shifted his body weight away from me.

I smiled and stood up, offering him my hand, "Seriously, I have cigars and food, and a very nice whiskey..." I sighed, "Buddy, I just got fired from my job, and I don't wanna drink alone. Come on, what do you have to lose?"

A smile grew on Sam's face, "Did you say cigars?"

Sam certainly knew his way around a fine cigar. After a meal and a shower, we started on my scotch and another cigar. It took us three rounds of drinks to catch Sam up to my dilemma. Well, he had three drinks. I was so worked up and sick of booze; I just carried my whiskey around as a prop to ensure Sam didn't feel uncomfortable. Being a homeless guy with a warm belly full of alcohol, Sam took the information semi-seriously and said nothing for several minutes.

I had told my epic sci-fi tale while pacing for more than an hour. My legs suddenly felt tired, so I plopped into a chair across from Sam. Eventually, I shrugged my shoulders and settled into my chair, just happy for some company. I was about to ask Sam about himself and where he came from, but Sam spoke up first.

"Who set you up?"

"Huh?" I replied.

"Who set you up, Mark? I mean, if all this insane time loop nonsense is true, it seems like you got a good shot at finding out who stabbed you in the back and why. Unless..." Sam stopped himself short.

“Unless what?” I demanded.

“Unless you did leak that information?”

I stood up, indignant, and pointed my cigar at Sam, “I would never!”

Sam leaned back and grinned while puffing on his cigar. He pulled the tobacco tube from his mouth, and smoke chased his words, “Then there is only one thing for it, son.”

“Yeah, what’s that?” I asked, still irritated at the insinuation.

“Prove it, and make those backstabbing traitors pay.” He grinned and raised a glass at me, “Hoorah!”

Thus launched operation, ‘Jolly Saint Nick!’

## **OPERATION JOLLY SAINT NICK - JUSTICE WILL BE PRESENT!**

When I launched my stealthy covert operation, I had envisioned a 90’s action movie. Bloodied and greasy, our hero, Mark, has to crawl over broken glass to overcome impossible odds. Eventually, my story should crescendo atop the Nakatomi Tower, with an exploding helicopter framing my last-minute escape.

Instead, it was just a bunch of mind-numbing reading of invoices, depositions, and legal briefs. Paper filed in a room with 75 rows of eight-foot-tall filing cabinets - one thousand feet long! Do you have any idea how uncomfortable and tedious it is to sit in a suit with a flashlight between your teeth on the ground for months at a time? I read through almost every single piece of paper filed in every active case that the third-largest law firm in New York City was litigating. Let me just venture a guess and say “NO.” You have never reached this level of boredom in your life.

The worst part was, what could I show for my troubles? What incredible conspiracy have I uncovered that would warrant framing me? Maybe over-billing? Our clients are all getting taken for a ride. I know for a fact that it should never take more than an hour to get the clerk’s office to file paperwork even on the worst day of traffic, but my firm is charging for ninety minutes, one way. Also, I notice quite a lot of two-hour sessions billed between the hours of 11 am and 2 pm. So everyone but me is billing their clients for lunch, are they? I thought to myself. Even before my time loop began, nickel and diming our clients would have really bothered me; now, I was both embarrassed for my company and ticked off!

I had also found evidence of several condos used exclusively by senior partners but owned by the firm. After researching each unit, I determined that the real estate had nothing to do with business. Some other company expenses indicated affairs with Jr partners, secretaries, each other....and the list goes on. “This place is a cesspool!” I exclaimed out aloud after digging up evidence of yet another tryst.

“Hey, who is that? Who’s there?” A voice shouted at me, followed by a hunting flashlight beam. I took off, and Jimmy chased me.

## A CHRISTMAS CASUALTY

Jimmy, the night guard, really wants to be a cop. But at thirty years old, he'd already been rejected outright three times, failed the physical exam twice, and then finally, after five years of trying, made it to the final oral interview only to be rejected for being 'too likable.'

I'd been caught, I'd outrun Jimmy, and other times I'd talked Jimmy into letting me go. Anyways, I'd done this so many times we became good friends. Well, at least he had become my friend. I always just had picked up where I left off on the next time loop, in the football field sized filing room. Every day, Jim once again had no idea who I was and if I should be there.

At one time, I had created a choreographed dance around Jimmy's rounds to avoid him. There were several problems with this: It took too much time to stop, put things away and slink into the shadows. It also took too much focus away from reading. Plus, I got really, really lonely. In the end, it was most efficient and enjoyable to be caught. Depending on what I said, the night guard would sometimes let me go, and other times call the police. The senior partners would then get involved and resolve the situation just long enough to receive "new" information. New information they would only share with me in the form of "You're fired!" At this point in the loop, I didn't mind either option.

The best I could do was read files for five hours, twenty-two minutes, and fifteen seconds. Around three in the morning-ish, I was caught and then eventually fired, and the next day I would start the loop all over again, planted in front of a filing cabinet, desperate to focus or even care.

But this time when I was caught, I ran! I don't know why; probably just frustrated and bored. Besides, the poor guard never got any excitement; this was always a thrill for Jim. The night guard was short and stocky, not the athlete I was, but he had determination! Papers whooshed from arms as I dodged from row to row and then scampered upstairs.

"Stop!" Jimmy shouted again, then said something into his walkie-talkie.

I smashed against the far wall of the first-floor row of legal secretary offices, then slid down six feet to the left as I rapidly tapped my fingers, searching for the elevator button. The up arrow lit up as I made contact with the switch. When I turned around I was met by Jimmy's bouncing beam from his flashlight barreling down on me through the dimmed rows of office cubicles. "Come on, Jimmy, you're slow today, not gonna make it!" I chided him as the elevator doors dinged. I took a big step back into the elevator and hit the close button, "Hmmm...let's go with floor seven today. I think I'll give Jimmy some exercise" I chuckled aloud.

The elevator doors opened, and I strolled out, still catching my breath and getting ready for the next round of 'tag.'

However, my favorite game of 'tag' was not to be, as I felt the earth tip to one side then shudder back and forth. After a moment of shock, I realized I had been taken down to the ground, hard. I was the one who tipped over and bounced. "I got him, Jimmy, floor seven." I overheard a voice followed by the squawk of a microphone as my hands were forced behind my back and handcuffs slapped on my wrists.

"Dang it, Phil, that freaking hurt!" I shook cobwebs out from my head as the guard hefted me to my feet.

"Do I know you?" He asked, trying to act like he did not care what the answer was. But Phil

did; I felt the tough little night guard secretly liked me.

“Yeah, you know me! You’ve cold-cocked me, tazed me, and hit me linebacker style like a dozen times already!” I exclaimed as he loaded me back into the elevator and hit the “lobby” button.

“Yeah, I played safety in college, so you’re welcome. If you want to make an excessive force case, buddy, we got cameras everywhere. That’s the first time I’ve hit you!”

“Well, you didn’t have to be so rough, that’s all I’m saying. Next time, just wrestle me to the ground.”

He turned and looked at me like I was crazy, “There won’t be a next time, blondie, and you’re a head taller than me; I’m not gonna risk being killed by taking it easy on anyone. You prefer I taze you?”

The door dinged as it opened on the ground floor. Jimmy was waiting for us. “Yeah, Phil, I seriously would prefer you taze me, bro!”

“What? This guy knows you?” Jimmy asked Phil as he took my other arm, escorting me to the front door.

Phil snorted, “He’s trying to act like he does. It’s just some stupid con that won’t work.”

I shook my head, “Whatever, Yankees fan.”

Phil lifted my arm up high with a tighter grip, and his Jersey accent showed through. “Hey, you watch your mouth! Don’t tie me in with those cheat’n bums!”

Jimmy chuckled but changed the subject. “What’s with the file room today, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Phil said, “Seems like the day for crazy people trying to steal something.”

My heart skipped a beat. After almost 100 interactions, neither Jimmy nor Phil had ever mentioned this before!

“Yeah, well, that little Canadian cutie will probably only get a slap on the wrist, in which case I am going to ask her out.” Jimmy grinned and blushed a bit.

“Noice.” Phil agreed.

“Wait, Canadian cutie?” I swiveled my head back and forth as we stopped at the front door, waiting for officer Pete to take me into custody. (Have I mentioned I had acted out this scene before: Pete Briggs, who I learned later was friends with Sam, had arrested me fifteen times to this point.) “Did she have an ink smudge on her face, dirty blonde hair, kinda nerdy, and a pen stuffed in her hair?”

“Yeah, guy.” Jimmy replied with a puzzled look on his face, “Wait, how’d you know?”

I ignored the question. Instead, I groaned aloud at my stupidity, “Amber’s been under my nose the whole time, and I missed it because I haven’t been present!”

## **TWO YEARS OF NOELS - TODAY #656... OR SOMETHING**

“YAAAAHHHHHHOOOOO!” An explosion of pleasure burst from my lips. I screamed over the techno Christmas carols blasting on loudspeakers, “Joey, I must have....” My voice faded away

as I looked around me. Where was Amber?

Joey responded with a tip of the rectangular glass bottle into my red Solo cup. “My command is your wish, Captain.”

I took the refill absentmindedly, “I think you said that backwards, Joey. Throw that bottle away; you’ve had enough.” I snapped. I handed my drink to a passing waiter and continued to search for Amber.

“You know what?” Joey agreed with childlike wonder, “I think I have.” He raised his glass, “Too enough!”

He toasted and drank again.

I really, really hated this Christmas party! My assistant and I decided the day before (which to me was almost two years earlier) we should be partying for two reasons: booze and ladies! Now, I had to search through a drunken mess of backstabbing, lying, unfaithful lawyers. And I know about every single one; I’d read through all their files!

As an L.A. kid made good in the Big Apple, I used to be so confident and cocky. But now I was desperate, sick of this work-hard, party-hard facade I woke to every day. Not just in the time loop, but even before I found myself stuck in this horrendous day, I had begun to be disillusioned. While spending more than 100 days digging through files, I had a lot of alone time on my hands. I began to ask, why did I need to play video games until three in the morning? I like ’em all, but they are not that fun. Why did I want to hook up with a different woman every weekend, half-drunk? What was I avoiding? Besides myself, I was numbing myself for my job. I HATED IT! I hated the arguments I made, the semi-truths and loopholes I had used to squash legitimate lawsuits. Legal complaints with real merit, brought by desperate people against my clients, multinational corporations worth hundreds of millions, if not billions!

I also hated working alongside the type of people it attracted. I hated myself for not being man enough to put my foot down and say “NO” to squashing the little guy or saying “NO” to taking this job out of law school just because it paid more, or even “NO” to my mom when she forced me to go to UCLA for law school. That’s why I never thought about dad these days; I felt he’d be so ashamed of me. Not for screwing up and getting drunk here and there, or for not settling down with the right girl, but he’d be ashamed that I would not do what I thought was right. He’d be ashamed that I was content to live in a world of compromise. He’d be ashamed that I never grew up enough to stand up like a man.

When that last thought first hit me, I was in my personal hell of filing cabinets, searching through the case files of Mr. Hoskins, the CEO and longest-serving partner of the firm. I thought I had sobbed my last tear after that insane - vision/dream/fantasy thingy when I relived my childhood. So, when this emotional eruption cleared my throat and made it to my tear ducts, I was taken totally by surprise. I tried wiping tears and snot from my face using legal copy paper, but it just smeared all over the place. By the time Jimmy found me, I was inconsolable. He helped me up, and I hugged him and cried as he begged Phil for back-up over his walkie-talkie. I spent that night in the hospital on psychiatric watch. Looking back, the situation was both hilarious and embarrassing, which summed up about half of the past two years of time glitching.

Joey elbowed me in the ribs, shaking me from my thoughts, and nodded over my left shoulder. “Mark, there she is!”

“Really, you see, Amber?” I turned and got on my tip-toes, craning my neck as I searched the crowd.

Joey sneered, “Eew, gross, Boss. No, I mean Susan.”

“Hey, be nice, Amber does half our job for us, and she’s a good person, don’t be a tool!”

“You ok, boss? You don’t seem like yourself.”

“Listen,” I got close, “Right now, I need you to help find Amber or stay out of the way. Ok?”

“Ok, ok, I’ll find her.” Joey drifted off, still dragging a rum bottle behind him in search of Amber, or more likely to find another drinking partner.

I pushed forward in the crowd, dodged left, looked right, then went right and looked left. Oomph! “Not again!” I moaned aloud as my right foot suddenly wouldn’t move. My left toe caught the carpet as I tumbled to the floor. Like every other time I had done this, it wasn’t a bad fall, and I don’t get embarrassed easily; but the good news was I found her!

“I’m so sorry, Mark.” Amber apologized.

“No problem, let’s go!” I brushed myself off as I stood. I took the little woman’s arm, and headed to the nearest quiet spot, Enrique, the concierge’s lobby. Amber, my paralegal, glanced at me with a shocked look on her face. She was a few years younger than me, a nerd if I ever saw one, and she never EVER stopped working. But, dang, Jimmy was right. The little Canadian was good-looking; I had no idea why I’d never seen that before. Probably because she was always holding at least three file folders in her arms, sporting conservative business attire, and like now, an ink smudge adorned her cheek, ear, or sometimes the right side of her forehead. A black pen was always wrapping her dirty blonde hair into a makeshift bun.

“Sorry to interrupt your party, boss; I just need you to sign these before I go home for Christmas!”

I slowed as things got quiet and faced her, “First off, it’s your party too; why don’t you ever come out with us?”

“Oh, wow, um..” She stammered a bit. So I went on.

“Second, why were you trying to get into the records room today at the office without permission?”

Amber’s face dropped along with the paperwork she was clutching. She went pale. “You know about that? Are you going to fire me? I’m so sorry. I was just trying to make sure....”

“You’re sorry? Amber! We can both go to jail! Leaking confidential files? Giving information to an opposing side is more than grounds for disbarment. We are held liable if anyone gets hurt or loses anything.”

She looked at me confused, “Wait, what are you talking about? I did not leak anything. You have to believe me, boss. I only wanted to know which files were being looked at from that cache file.”

“What cache file? What are you talking about?”

“On our server account. Yesterday, I lost a file I was working on due to some hacker.”

I interrupted, "Wait, what hacker? How come I don't know about this?"

She shrugged her shoulders, "I've tried to tell you three times, but you always said you were too busy, so I just thought you wanted me to take care of it and not bother you."

I moaned a bit, "Yeah, that sounds like me, sorry. Sometimes I really am a putz. Anyways, then what?"

"Yeah, well, Marquez down from IT finally got this hacker out of our system. Supposedly some white hat hacker that's gotten famous over the past six months called 'Who's-like' something or other."

"Wait," I stopped her, "WhosLikeG7?"

"Yeah, that's right. How'd you know?"

I grinned, "That giant minx, what the hell," I furrowed my brow and grinned, "or what the heaven, in his case, I guess."

"Boss, you ok?" Amber looked worried.

"Amber, you and Joey need to start calling me Mark when this is all over."

"When what is over?" Now, she was really confused.

"Ugh, never mind." I sighed as it hit me why Michael would be hacking my computer. "Amber, let me guess what happened next. When looking for a file you had lost - the hacker had probably buried it in a very specific spot. You happened upon a cache file with a bunch of leaked information from various cases I had nothing to do with, yet, somehow I was the one leaking it. However, I was too stupid to use a dummy account or properly erase the evidence?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

I ignored the question. Instead, I shook my head out of disgust, "I'm such a blind fool." I sucked air in through my teeth as I braced myself for the answer to the next question. "So, what was it you wanted me to sign?" I reached down and scooped up the scattered papers and scanned them as Amber explained.

"I prepared an interoffice brief with printed hard copies of the mystery cache file for you to sign. I already signed it, as did Marquez from IT. After you signed, I was taking it to Mr. Hoskins to sign, so it would be acknowledged and investigated before anyone could accuse you of hiding anything."

I stopped sorting and looked at the little Canadian and couldn't help myself. I wrapped my long arms around her and squeezed tight; her glasses pressed so hard against her face they almost broke.

"Bosh, bosh, yo soofucat'n me...." She tapped on my back to let go.

I let go and backed off, "I'm sorry, but you have always been and are the best freaking employee EVER!" I put my hands on her shoulder and stared intensely into her eyes. "If I don't go to jail and ever get to see tomorrow, I promise to get you a huge cash bonus if you PROMISE never to work here or for anyone like this place or me, again. You have to find someone who appreciates you and is honest. This is a cesspool of ....." My voice trailed off as one of the papers caught my eye. I knelt to examine it closer. "Everybody in the office is a selfish party animal or conniving fiend," I looked up, "Present company excluded." I looked down, again at the papers,

“Before I met Michael, I tried several times to “seal the deal.”

“Who the heck is Michael? What deal?” Amber was lost.

I continued my train of thought as I worked through the scattered paper. “But for some reason, no matter my strategy or charm, she would flirt, hang all over me, but always find a reason to get home or see someone else in a hurry.” I chuckled at my gullibility, “Susan would distance herself? But why, why would she set me up?”

“Did I hear that you just made partner, sir?” Enrique piped in from behind me. I’d forgotten that anyone else was there. “Yeah, so,” I replied.

Apparently, the concierge had been eavesdropping this entire time. He stepped around his desk and drifted forward to me as I continued looking for a piece of paper from these mystery files that would make sense. Enrique continued, “Is she a partner? If not, has she been at your office longer than you?”

I shrugged as if it were no big deal, “Sure, all the senior associates have been here longer than me.”

“Well then, it seems possible that you were both up for the same partnership, so she got rid of you...” He didn’t finish his sentence but let the words hang in the air as he snapped up a handkerchief and handed it to Amber. “Ma’am?” She was looking at all the smudges on her glasses, which I had caused with my bear hug. I sat back and sighed, “Done in by my own arrogance over a job I don’t even like.”

Enrique shrugged his shoulders as he turned to walk away. “Don’t forget to look for what you can’t see, pumpkin.”

I sat up quickly, “Pumpkin?” I repeated.

“What you can’t see...” Amber repeated.

Then we both looked over in his direction, and the concierge was gone.

I rolled my eyes and grunted, “Michael, that little troll.”

Amber squatted down next to me, “Who is this Michael guy you keep bringing up? Do I have him on file?”

I smiled and shook my head, “Never mind.” Then I lifted a piece of paper, “This is what we focus on. The only other thing I keep seeing but don’t understand are these labeled phone numbers, no names.”

Amber glanced over my shoulder, “Oh, yeah, those are confidential witnesses. Probably a case the feds are involved in. See these numbers; they have something to do with WITSEC.”

I looked up at Amber in horror, “Amber, do you realize what this means? Susan was paid to leak a list of key witnesses! That’s organized crime. People could die!”

At that moment, Amber had never looked younger. I suppose the discovery of something so sinister which only minutes earlier seemed so mundane and harmless took her off guard. The modern TV fan would never have caught it. There wasn’t a hard-nosed detective with a thick, brown leather shoulder holstered gun being fed info by a gorgeous secretary, who would eventually be kidnapped. Instead, Amber had happened upon something that could have gone unnoticed.



“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know....” I started, but then, I think the Boss upstairs shook a brain cell loose because I had an insane but genius thought! I grinned as I glared lasers at the party still raging down the hall then grinned. “Idea!”

## **SANTA’S GOT A BRAND NEW BAG!**

“Susan!” I pushed my way through the crowd. “Susan!” In response, the crowd parted like the red sea. Although, I suspect not as the waters did for Moses. As far as I know, Moses did not have a torn, stained suit, blood dripping down his forehead, and wreaking of cheap booze. As if that weren’t enough, I was also waving a Beretta. “Susan! Where are you, doll? I am here for my pound of flesh.”

“Boss, what the hell are you doing?” Joey boldly stepped in front of me.

“Out of my way, Choey,” I slurred my words. “You can’t help me this time.”

“No way, Boss, I can’t let you....”

I cut him off with the butt of my gun, chopping the side of his head. He crumbled to the floor as the rest of the half-drunken party sobered up very quickly and took a step back.

“There you are.” I pointed the gun towards Susan, trying to escape, but I caught her by the hair and pulled her back towards me. I shoved her to the ground. “Why’d you do it, Sue...why?” My eyes went wide as I scratched my head nervously with the barrel of the gun. I spun around suddenly and pointed it at the crowd, “No one try anything.” Then I turned and peered down at Susan. The pretty lawyer cowered on the ground. “Only myself and my good friend, Sue, need to die.” I pushed her head to one side with the gun barrel, “Isn’t that right, Buddy?”

“Boss, Mark...please stop!” I turned on the voice.

“Oh, the sweet little Canadian, aye, just in time for the party, aye.” I swung the gun back and forth, drifting towards her but looking back at Susan so that she wouldn’t escape.

“Why are you doing this?” Amber pleaded.

“Haven’t you heard? I’ve leaked information about key witnesses to the other side.” I stepped back quickly to Susan and pressed the gun against her cheek, “In a Federal case tied to the mob! I’m going to prison!”

“Please, Mark, wait,” Susan begged.

“Why would I do that, Susan, the same day I was made partner. It seems a bit counterproductive, don’t you think? Bombing my own firm’s case, going to jail for conspiracy murder. Does it almost sound like I didn’t actually want to be a partner? Hmm, let’s think about this for a bit, Susan.” I squatted on my haunches next to her and grinned sadistically, “Look at me,” Then I scowled and screamed, “Look at me!”

“Mark, please, just hand me the gun, ok?” Amber cautiously walked closer and extended her hand.

I stood up and stared, then spoke with little emotion, “You were the one who narc-ed in the

first place, right? Little Miss busy-body, goodie-two-shoes.” I raised the gun.

“Mark, please.” She pleaded, but it was no use; I decided we all had to die.

“I liked it better when you called me boss.” I shot her three times in the chest. She crumpled awkwardly in the middle of our semi-circle of onlookers. “Get back,” I screamed again. “I’ve got plenty more for any heroes!”

“Mark...I, I” Susan was sobbing now. Streaks of mascara ran down a thick layer of base, mixing with mucus as it dripped off her chin. It was all I could do, not to hurl.

“Why’d you do it, Sue? Why?”

“What do you mean, why?” Susan exclaimed, confused. “You know why; you’d do the same thing. I did it to win!”

“That’s it?” I asked, taking a step back.

She looked up at me and sneered, “You’ve been here less than five years, and you make senior partner?” Forgetting that her life was in danger, she stood up and fixed her skirt, “I’ve sacrificed everything for this firm, and after nine years, I get passed over by some beach bum who’s so charming and likable?” She stopped and took a breath, “Oh, and let’s all not forget your California connections, a mommy who’s friends with the board.” Susan scoffed at me.

I took another step back, giving her more rope to hang herself.

“Of course I did it, you weak little sap. So what? You always have to break a few eggs to make an omelet.”

I overheard mutterings in the crowd around me as she continued her rant, “When Vic Costello fixes things,” She smiled, so pleased with herself, “Nothing will be left to litigate, much less prosecute. And I would have the firm’s biggest client of the year.” She flipped her hair and wiped at her face with a cocktail napkin she found in her handbag, “Tis the season, Marky.” Then she had the nerve to blow a kiss at me.

“Wow,” I chuckled, “You are a piece of work!” I dropped the gun to my side, “But you are done! I opened my lapel to show a wire and mini mic pinned against my collar. “That’s right, you psycho!” The bloodied corpse of my paralegal, Amber, stepped up beside me. “By the way, boss, those training bullets REALLY hurt!”

I grinned sheepishly, “The night guard, Jimmy, swore you’d barely feel them. Besides, maybe if you stop calling me boss, we won’t have to use them anymore.” I chided Amber as her brow furrowed, unsure of what to make of my comment.

Susan stepped back in shock, at first. But then she shrugged her shoulders. “Oh, well.” She broke into bouts of haughty laughter. “So, is this supposed to scare me? You are a horrible lawyer. I mean, Do you really think that a confession while under duress will hold up in court?” She pulled out a compact mirror to fix her makeup; the conniver continued, “After you fake shoot some nerdy secretary. Eew, I mean, bravo, I was so scared. But that means it’s all inadmissible. No matter what. Marky-Mark and his ugly bunch lose.” Susan paused to peer deeper into the small compact mirror and pursed her lips together before looking over her shoulder at me, shooting me a practiced alluring smile and wink, “I win.”

I clenched my fist and scowled, “If you weren’t a woman, I’d break your jaw.”

“Well, I don’t mind!” A right cross flew in front of my face, catching Susan on the left side of her mouth. The blow also caught the makeup compact, snapping it in half. I glanced to the right just in time to witness Amber completing a follow-through with a lightning-fast heavy right hand that would have made any boxing coach happy. The contact made a satisfying crack. Susan went down hard, holding her jaw.

Amber relaxed her classic boxing stance enough to step up and lean over Susan, “Stay down, hoser!” She demanded.

“I should marry this girl,” I muttered under my breath.

“What did you say, boss...I mean, Mark?” Amber asked as she stuffed her glasses back onto her face.

I was about to ask her out when a hand draped over my shoulder. “Yippee-Ki-yay! Amber, remind me to never mess with little Canadians!” Joey peered down at Susan, fake blood staining the side of his head. “So, how’d we do, Boss...I mean, Mark.”

I grinned. “Good, bro, super good. Best one yet.”

“Best one of what?” Joey asked.

“Never mind.” Most of the drunken partiers in suits felt it was the best time to get away and slipped out. Half of them undoubtedly called the cops, and the other half called their own defense attorney to sue me or protect themselves from liability.

“But now’s the tricky part.” I was about to explain the next part of our plan when I was interrupted.

“Sir, can I have a word with you?” Enrique, or should I say, Latino Michael, motioned me over to him.

I glanced back at Amber and Joey, “Hold on a second, guys, stay put, be right back.” I stepped over to the ‘concierge.’

Michael leaned in, “Congrats, Mark. You made it. Finally, you figured it out. You learned your lesson. Tadda...you’re out.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “Wait, what?”

He smiled and grabbed me by the shoulder, shaking me, “You are done, pumpkin. You are free. You learned what you needed to learn, and it’s time we both move on with our lives.”

I sighed and looked up, “Thank you.” I looked back at Michael, tears in my eyes, “I just never thought I would see tomorrow.”

“You will now, with your eyes wide open.” Michael grinned.

“Wait.” A thought hit me. “What about the witnesses?”

Michael’s brow furrowed, “What about them?”

“The past five-time loops, I’ve watched two people die before the SWAT team can stop Costello or the hitmen he hired. Even if I call the right people, right now, the cops still don’t have enough time. Now, if you could help me....”

Mike held up his hands. “Nope, sorry, pal. Those aren’t my orders.”

“Well then, give me one more time loop. Let’s do it one more time; I promise this time....”

“Listen, Mark.” Michael’s eyes turned a soft hue of pink as he empathized with my plight, “I

understand you want everyone to be okay, but this is an imperfect world. You can't save everyone, and these people's deaths won't be on you. Ok?"

I hung my head and swallowed hard, "I just can't do nothing."

Mike shrugged his shoulders, "Hey, do what you want. Thanks to the Boss, it's a free world. Just know, I can't reset the clock. Not this time."

I looked back at my team, chatting and joking as Susan slinked away. "But we can't leave 'em to die; it ain't right!" I turned back, but Michael was gone; I was on my own.

"No! Not this time!" I gritted my teeth and clenched my fist as I felt heat surge through my spine, "No more compromise!" I declared aloud.

"Boss, you ok?" Joey asked.

I motioned for my team to follow, "Joey, I need you to take the recording to the Feds first thing in the morning. Camp out in front of their building if you have to! Here's the number of an agent who won't blow you off." It took me three time loops to find an FBI agent that would act fast. "Tell them everything you know. Go right now, before the cops get here and detain anyone hanging around." That would take everything off schedule.

"Got it, boss. I'm on it!" Joey peeled away.

"Amber?"

"Yes, boss,...Mark."

I handed her a disposable cell phone, "I have programmed one number in this phone; it's for the Federal Marshals Service, the agent in charge of our witnesses. Saved in the contacts is one address, give the marshals the address and tell them this script, word for word, and hang up, destroy the phone and throw it away, discreetly." I handed her a folded paper from my pocket. "Then, first thing in the morning, get those signed documents to Mr. H and a second senior partner, maybe Hellen or Lane. Tell them everything that is happening, but take someone to witness for you. Someone who can't be bullied or allow them to bury this debacle."

A sly voice cut in, "I can help with that?" Amber and I both turned to see Penny sporting a Cheshire grin. "Besides, little George Foreman over here is going to need a good attorney."

I was stunned; this was still "evil Penny," and she'd never offered to do anything nice for anyone. "I don't know what to say...."

"Oh shut it, you pansy. You know how much I hate that phony witch. This will be pro-bono, all my pleasure." She took Amber by the arm. "Let's go, champ."

"One more thing, Penny." I pushed my luck with her, "Here, please take this."

I pulled out one last item, an envelope that read Last Will and Testament, and put it in Penny's hands, "Just in case."

"Mark, what are you doing? How did you know to set this all up?" Penny eyed me.

Amber grabbed my hand, "Wait, boss."

I stared down at the tough little Canadian and smiled, "Please, don't forget to call the burner phone and to make that call as soon as you are clear of this building."

Amber pulled on my arm and searched my eyes, "But, what are you planning on doing?"

I grinned, "Something pretty dumb," I bent down, kissed her on the cheek, then chuckled,

“I wish I had more time.” The irony was not lost on me.

Before either woman could object, I nodded my thanks to Penny and jogged out the lobby door. After I cleared the crowd of gawkers, I started to run hard and fast. I muttered to myself, “This is such a bad idea!”

## **MARK, THE HERALD ANGELS SING**

So, here I am, falling at two hundred feet per second, wind tearing at my face. I had felt the exhilaration of a free fall when I had begun skydiving, all day, every day for three weeks. But now, cutting through puffy white clouds as thick as marshmallows and then plummeting towards the ground at 120 miles per hour bored me.

I’d jumped out of this particular airplane in the exact same spot, caught the identical wind current in precisely the same weather seven times prior. But, this time, it was different. This time, I wasn’t here for fun. I’ve had all the fun and all the thrills already. This time, I was here for someone else.

I’d shown up to the airfield wearing the same slacks and long sleeve dress shirt I wore the night before. I must have looked like hell, but I couldn’t care less. Besides, I had a different jumpsuit to change into now.

Jim was the pilot, and he didn’t like the look of me, probably smelt the booze from the night before (I couldn’t help that), but when I stuffed a wad of cash into his hand, he shrugged his shoulders and waved me on.

As we taxied for take-off, I ripped off my tie and shouted at the pilot, “17,000 feet!” He was about to argue when I tossed another roll of bills at the cockpit.

The middle-aged pilot shrugged his shoulders and readied for take-off.

I walked back to the rear of the Stalwart Cessna 182 and dropped into a jump seat. If I had any hope left, I’d ask a stupid question like, “How did I even get here?” But I was too smart for that now. A series of selfish choices, disguised in indecision, had gotten me here, and I was about to pay for it with my life. Also, maybe it was a chance for redemption or for once to be the hero in my own story. No matter the motivation, someone needed to do what was right, no matter the cost. That someone might as well be me.

I told you before that I attended that stupid Christmas party more than 650 times in a row. But, I think it was closer to 685 because, as I put on my jumpsuit, goggles, and crash helmet, I remembered that it was more than 650 when we first figured out that Susan set me up.

Anyways, I pulled out a portable altimeter, checked the altitude and coordinates, “Thirty seconds.” I muttered under my breath as I opened the door and shouted at the top of my lungs, “Thanks, Jim!” and jumped.

“Wait, your Par...” I heard behind me, but I didn’t care. Of course, I didn’t have a parachute. I had only one shot at this, and I was all in—no time to deal with the temptation to chicken out.

I opened my arms, revealing a winged flying suit. I caught a huge updraft that slowed me

so much I thought I might be going back up for a second. I rechecked my location on my watch, locked my arms and legs into place, and free fell as I counted “One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi,” all the way to seven. I opened my arms and legs wide, slowing me down again, and checked my location. I was close but still off course. Not good! I had no room for error.

I repeated this process several times until an apartment complex next to an old abandoned factory came into view. “Oh crap!” I banked hard left, then right, narrowly avoiding a smokestack. I glanced down, “Right on time,” I muttered under the sound of rushing wind and air flapping through my nylon jumpsuit. A team of black-clad police with the words ‘SWAT ‘ were making entry on the first floor. I looked up and spotted my quarry. “There you are!” I grinned as a lone gunman peered out the window. I knew I had seconds before he would see the tactical team making entry, alerting the others, ultimately leading to the witnesses’ deaths. So, I locked my arms to my side one last time and screamed a war cry of determination as I smashed through the apartment building window at 120 miles per hour.

Beep....Beep....Beep. Turn it off, just ten more minutes. Beep....Beep....Beep. Ten more minutes, I screamed in my mind. Beep....Beep....Beep. My eyes would not open, not at first. I spoke, but gargled words only came through what felt like sandpaper in my throat. A small stream of water was squirted into my mouth. It gave me enough moisture to get a few words out. “Where am I?”

The sound of Penny’s voice made my heart sink, “Take it easy, sweetie.”

I was still in the time loop, “Michael, you lying sack of crap!” I groaned.

“Who is this Michael, you keep bringing up? I’ve been checking my files, but I can’t find his information!” My eyes snapped open at the sound of Amber’s voice.

“What day is it?” I croaked out.

Penny replied first, just as her face focused into view, “December 31st.” She patted my hand and winked, “Gabe says congratulations.”

I looked over at Amber, “I don’t believe it; it’s been a week.” I closed my eyes as tears streamed down my cheeks.

“I’m so sorry, Mark,” Amber placed a small hand on my shoulder, “You were extremely hurt when they found you, lucky to be alive, much less awake after only a week.”

I interrupted Amber’s consoling by bursting out in laughter, “Yes, yes, yes! It’s tomorrow! More than tomorrow, it’s next week....my Christmas-hell is over!”

“Maybe we should have the doctor check his medication?” Amber suggested as she grabbed for the panic button.

Penny came alongside her and took the red panic button away. “It’s ok, kid, trust me. Old Mark is going to be just fine.”

I calmed down enough to ask, “What the heck happened to me?”

Penny cocked her head to one side, “What is the last thing you remember?”

“I remember someone set me up,” I closed my eyes as images flashed back and forth, “It was Susan!” I opened my eyes and tried to sit up, “Quick, the witnesses, we have to warn the

Feds!”

“It’s ok. Calm down, boss. They are safe,” Amber sat next to me and gently pressed my shoulders down. Amber grinned, “Little runaround Sue is going to jail for a while, as is Mr. H!”

I was shocked, “What! Hoskins? How’d he get mixed up in this?”

Penny added, “Yeah, as it turns out, the mob found out about his affairs and hiding income from the IRS, and it was enough to blackmail him into cooking up this scheme with Susan.”

Amber winced as she dabbed my forehead, “Apparently, that hoser, Susan, was going to be made senior partner after you went down.”

I sighed and tried to move, “I hate my job so much.” I could hardly budge. “Um, ladies, why can’t I move? What happened to me?”

“So you really don’t remember anything else?” Penny probed and snickered slightly. “Maybe a little sky-diving accident?”

I focused hard, “Wait, that wasn’t a dream?” My mind raced, “But, how did I survive?”

“It wasn’t easy.” Penny took a seat at the foot of my bed, “When the SWAT team made entry, they found three bad guys, who had all been lined up and driven clean through one wall, into the next wall. A dumb blonde California kid in a winged jumpsuit and helmet was clutching one of the bad guys with a death grip.”

“Really?” I chuckled, “I don’t remember what happened after hitting the glass.”

“I never knew you were insane, boss,” Amber interjected as she smiled, “But it was very brave. How did you know they would be there? How did you know any of this would happen?”

I smiled, “Maybe one day I’ll tell you.”

“Yeah-yeah, real comic book hero crap,” Penny interjected dryly, “When the cops found you, you were muttering, ‘Not this time.’”

I blurted out the one question that scared me, “Will I walk again?”

“You bruised every muscle in your body.” Joey spoke as he stepped up, “Peeing should prove to be impossible!” He teased me. “But eventually, you’ll be able to go on your own again... after some intense potty training.” He frowned, “Or so I’ve been told by the doctors.”

“There’s my boy!” I grinned. He had balloons and a box of our favorite donuts. “That’s kind, Joe, but there’s no way I’m going to be able to swallow donuts right now.”

“Are you kidding me?” He laughed, “These are to bribe the nursing staff to let me take embarrassing photos of you, so I can get away with anything I want to after we get back to work.”

“Yeah, I think that ship has sailed, Joey. I’m not going back to work at that place ever again. Sorry.”

“You didn’t tell him?” Joey was looking at Penny.

“He just woke up. Give him some time to adjust,” Amber demanded.

“Well, now you have to tell me?” I pleaded.

Penny stepped closer, “I’ve started my own firm; we only take clients we want to represent and charge what they can afford,” She shrugged her shoulders, “To heck with the rest.”

“To heck?” I chided the sassy lawyer.

Penny leaned in and whispered, “I don’t know where the line is with language, so I’m

taking NO chances!” Then she cleared her throat and changed the subject, “Anyways, Cheri, my legal assistant, is in. Amber and Joey say they are both game. So that just leaves us needing a second vampire, oops, I mean lawyer.” She chuckled and grinned, “What do you say?”

“I say your timing sucks.” I moaned, but my groans evolved into a smile, “Sounds like a plan, partner.”

“Ok, ok!” A tall, handsome female doctor demanded. “Our hero needs rest; come back tomorrow.”

“Joey and I are here for anything else you need.” Amber smiled as she sat up, readying to leave.

Joey slapped his hands together and rubbed them teasingly. “Yeah, boss, you need help with your catheter; my hands are warm, and my skills have been said to be legendary.”

“You are so lucky I can’t move,” I laughed out loud, “I’d kill you...ouch, don’t make me laugh.”

When the crew finally said their goodbyes and left, the doctor turned to me and began checking my vitals, asking routine questions about memory and pain levels. “Ok, well, Nurse Cindy is in charge here. So, after you take a nap, she will send someone to help you change and make sure you are comfortable. Also, we need to get you drinking some fluids. Does all that sound okay?”

“Thanks, Doc, and happy new year.” I closed my eyes as she dimmed the lights.

The doctor spoke over her shoulder as she left the room, “Your welcome...and happy next week, pumpkin!”

I chuckled but didn’t bother opening my eyes. “Thanks for the save, Mike.”

“You owe me, Kid,” He hollered back at me from outside the room. But He couldn’t hide the chuckling behind his words. “Because catching you hurt!”

I chuckled a bit, then breathed deeply, finally at peace.

I knew my real journey had only just begun.

But it was a journey I wanted to be present for,

and a journey little Marky-Mark wouldn’t mind showing off to his Dad.



A  
Christmas  
Conspiracy

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