

Prologue:

Monday, December 7, 2015

The 24-hour convenience store is a beacon of light in an otherwise darkened neighborhood. It faces Route 31 in Roseland, Indiana, a northern suburb of South Bend. A gentle snow falls around the structure, the flakes drifting lazily on the westerly breeze that sweeps across the parking lot to swirl the accumulation of white.

Zak Tyler sits alone in the store, perched behind the counter on a high stool. To his left is the cash register, a display of astrological scrolls sticks out from a cardboard holder on his right, and behind him a backdrop of lottery tickets lines the wall. The clerk's attention is focused on his cellphone, his fingers manipulating the tiny creatures on the screen as they cavort through the world of the video game he plays. The store is quiet save for the pings and beeps that accompany the animated action.

At 2:53 AM the sapphire blue Camaro pulls into the parking lot. For thirty seconds no motion follows, then the driver steps out to enter the store. A blast of wintry air follows closely on his heels, to be snuffed out with the slamming of the door behind him. A small bell sounds as the glass panel vibrates shut.

Zak looks up briefly, acknowledging the customer with a brief nod of his head, then returns to his game.

The new arrival appears to notice none of

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it as he walks leisurely toward the back, his eyes surveying the layout of the store. He stops at the pyramid of Budweiser 12-packs rising in the corner. The display is decorated in bold red ribbons, as an apparent reminder not to forget the spirit of the holidays. He spends less than twenty seconds deciding on his purchase, grabbing one of the cartons and taking it with him to the front counter.

Zak, once again engrossed with his cellphone, looks up from his gameplay with a bothered expression on his face. "Will there be anything else, Sir?" His tone fails to match the politeness of the words.

Pausing for a moment, pondering the question, the customer fumbles in the pocket of his coat. "Yeah," he says at last. "Gimme a pack of Marlboros. Regular."

A shelf along the back wall, conveniently located beneath the lottery tickets, holds the cigarettes and tobacco products. With a minimum of effort the clerk spins half-around on his stool to grab the item. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. All the cash from the register."

Zak looks up, his eyes opening wide at sight of the .45 automatic leveled in his direction, the blue-steel of the barrel gleaming dull under the bright lights.

"No funny moves," the gunman prompts. His arm holds steady as a rock, the features of his face impassive and uncaring, his gray eyes disturbingly emotionless. "Just hand over all the money. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

Zak becomes more animated. He jumps off the stool, punching open the cash drawer and removing the tray of bills, which he places on the counter.

There isn't much. The gunman counts as he

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withdraws the money. "There's only sixty-seven dollars here. This can't be all of it?"

"Sure it can. I mean.... That's all of it. Honest."

"Cut the crap." The gun motions to the left. "Back away from there, so's I can see for myself."

Zak allows him plenty of room as the gunman slides behind the counter, running his free hand beneath the shelf, searching. A disbelieving expression crosses his face. "What the hell? There's got to be something else."

He twists around, examining the wall behind the counter. His search stops at sight of a small panel near the floor, secured with a lock. "Open it!"

Zak shrugs. "I don't have the combination."

"Wrong answer." The gun lifts, swinging in a deliberate arc.

The movement is half-completed when Zak takes his cue. "Don't shoot!" He lunges toward the knob. "I'll see what I can do."

A sound, of a car slowing down, drifts in from the street outside. The gunman takes a step toward the front window, holding his breath until the vehicle resumes its motion past the store.

A metallic scrape sounds from behind him. He turns, watching as the clerk pulls a silver-plated .38 revolver from a drawer beside the safe. Zak fumbles with the mechanism, his thumb slipping on the hammer. Fear controls his motions. His movements are erratic. Anxious.

There is no hesitation from his assailant. The automatic in the robber's hand barks three times in quick succession, the explosive blasts blending to a single deafening burst.

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The youth's chest develops a pulpy cavity, the force of the blast spinning him about and hurling his body against the wall. A red spray ejects from his back, the blood showering a glass display case holding deli items. The body thumps to the floor as rivulets of red run slowly down to blend with potato salad and coleslaw and cold baked beans, the deep red diluting to a pale pink at contact with the food.

The customer kicks the .38 from lifeless fingers and spits on the floor. "Bad move, asshole."

The body is discovered eighteen minutes later. By then the blue Camaro is cruising down the highway, seven miles away, the driver swigging his second can of beer.

Chapter One:

Wednesday, December 9, 2015

"I tell you, Danny Boy, the world's going to hell, and there ain't a damn thing we can do about it."

Daniel Jameson looked up from his desk. "What's that, Ed?"

"World's going to hell," Eddie Boyd repeated. "Take that thing the other night. You know. That kid shot in the convenience store."

His mind preoccupied with the figures on the requisition form on the screen in front of him, Daniel found it difficult to follow what was being said to him. He knew an answer was expected, so he offered a meek reply. "I'm not sure I follow you."

"Sure you do, Danny Boy. Over In Indiana. South Bend. Young kid. Only twenty-one, the papers said. Snuffed out. Bam!" Boyd slammed the fisted knuckles of his right hand into the open palm of his left to emphasize his words. "Just like that. One minute he's here. The next...."

Boyd stopped in mid-sentence, a startled expression on his face as he continued. "Hell, Jimmy will be twenty-one next July. That could have been *my* son."

Daniel remembered it, then. The story had been all over the front page of *The Toledo Blade* on Tuesday, with additional coverage this morning. Daniel hadn't paid a lot of attention

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to the item. It just got too depressing to follow all the bad things going on in the world. Sometimes it just seemed easier to ignore what was happening around you. He had enough problems in his own life without getting involved with somebody else's.

"It's a shame, all right," Daniel finally agreed, feeling it was necessary to say something. "Think they'll catch the guy that did it?"

"I sure hope so. And I tell you what. If that had been my son, I'd be out right now, buying a gun, goin' after the bastard that done it. Know what I mean?"

"That won't bring the boy back."

"Maybe not, but it sure as hell might save some other poor kid's life. I tell you what. When they do catch him, they should just haul the son-of-a-bitch off, stick him in front of a wall, and plant a bullet right here." Boyd tapped the center of his forehead with a beefy finger. "Right between the eyes."

"And who would they get to do that?"

"I'd do it. Be glad to. Hell, they could probably even sell tickets for it. Now there's an idea...."

Boyd wandered off, muttering to himself.

Daniel shook his head and returned to work. He could never understand the Eddie Boyd's of the world. He hoped he never would.

The sharp tap-tap of heels crossing the room intruded on Daniel's concentration. He tried to ignore it, but as the sound drew closer his hand stopped in its motion and his head lifted. His eyes took in the approaching figure.

He noticed the legs first, or at least what was revealed of the legs between the top of the no-nonsense shoes and the hem of the

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mid-length skirt, and realized it had to be Teri Stone. No one else in the office had legs like hers.

"Morning, Dan," she smiled.

He assessed her body, not for the first time, in the few seconds it took to lift his head. She had a Barbie-doll figure, thin-waisted, with a more than ample bust line - a fact most men found not-at-all unattractive.

"How's it going, Teri?"

"Couldn't be better." Moving aside a stack of reports, she sat down on the edge of his desk before continuing. "Finally got my Christmas tree up last night, and all the outside lights."

"Wasn't it sort of cold for that?"

"Actually, it was kind of nice. The snow made everything feel sort of comfy. The kids tried to help, the little darlings, but didn't manage to do much more than get in the way."

"I know what you mean." Daniel slid his mouse forward, removing the cursor from the screen's image, then swiveled around in his chair. It was obvious he wasn't getting any work done in the next few minutes, anyway. "Lisa and Jeff were the same way when they were younger," he remarked. "It's not too bad now, of course."

"How old are they?"

"Lisa's thirteen. Jeff will turn ten in two months."

"Lisa's a teenager already?"

"Oh, yeah! Just try calling my home sometime. I swear that girl spends more time on the phone than you do."

"All part of the job, Dan." She leaned forward, depositing a folder on the desktop.

"What's that?" Daniel asked.

"Shippers for the Berkley order. Three hundred fifty parts. Jack says they have to go

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out by Friday."

"Tomorrow?"

She nodded.

"He's got to be kidding. Hell, we'll be lucky to have half that many by then."

She merely shrugged.

Daniel lifted a corner of the folder, glancing at the forms inside, then turned back to Teri. "If Jack wants those parts that bad, let him go out and run the molds himself."

"That will be the day!" Her laugh was infectious, and Daniel found himself chuckling along with her. "Just see what you can do. Okay?"

"Alright. I'll get on it in a bit."

Teri shook her head. "Sorry, Dan. Jack wants to know right away how things look. He's waiting for an answer."

She shrugged in resignation and turned away. After two steps she turned back toward him, a mischievous grin on her face. "And Dan. Quit being so old-fashioned. Get Lisa a cell phone, for heaven's sake."

Daniel sat for a moment, watching her cross the office to return to her cubicle by the front windows, before pushing himself away from his desk. Grabbing the folder Teri had left and his safety glasses from the top right hand drawer of his desk, he headed toward the door. A row of wooden pegs on the wall beside the shop entrance held an assortment of hard-hats. Daniel latched onto one on his way out.

Stepping into the shop was like entering another world. The first thing Daniel noticed was the change in temperature, easily a twenty-five degree variance within a few steps. It was like walking into a sauna. As the heat assaulted him Daniel had to remind himself it was the second week of December. Outside snow

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lay on the ground, while the wind-chill factor hovered in the single digits, but winter weather seemed like a world away at the moment.

The odor of the foundry no longer disturbed him. At one time it had. The nauseating mixture of sand and reactant agents and molten metal and, of course, human sweat, lingered everywhere. The smell was so ingrained into the structure that, even during the annual shut-down in August, the place still reeked. Daniel Jameson had no idea what brimstone smelled like, but he was certain it couldn't be any worse than this.

Just a typical day at CONSOLIDATED CASTINGS, INC.

Across the vast room the furnaces blared with heat and noise, the light from the molten metal bathing the entire building. It was nearly time for the pour, the iron having been heated to well over a thousand degrees by now. He could see faceless men in metallic, heat-resistant overalls, directing the ladle supported by the overhead crane.

It was always interesting to watch the pour, to experience the raw energy of the molten metal as it was being tapped to serve man's needs. Often he found himself pausing, mesmerized with the sight, witness to an event that had been going on for centuries now, dating back in its simplest form to the start of the Iron Age.

Too much to do. Daniel forced himself away from the sight as he circled the last row of conveyor belts and approached Michael Blake. Blake had been a molder at CONSOLIDATED for over twelve years now, and he was good at what he did.

Daniel paused to watch as Blake finished scraping the top of the mold level, then lifted the cope to reveal the dingy aluminum match-

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plate that seconds earlier had been covered in the black, sticky sand. The metal pattern was removed next, which left the drag, or bottom half of the mold, exposed. Replacing the cope completed the job, comprising a block of sand with a cavity in the shape of the part to be cast. A wooden jacket held the two halves in place. With a casual push, Blake sent the finished assembly along its way down the conveyor system.

Blake turned around, brushing sweat-drenched hair from his eyes, and noticed he was being watched. Only then did Daniel step forward, waving with the folder in his hand at the tail of hair draping halfway down the other man's back.

"When you going to get a haircut?" Daniel asked, his voice raised above the ruckus about them.

It was a running joke, and Blake answered as he invariably did. "Go to hell!"

Both men laughed as Daniel stepped forward. "How's it going, Mike?"

"Can't complain. Wouldn't do any good if I did."

"Probably not."

"So what brings you out into the real world? Don't tell me they're gonna make you work for a change?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it. It's Baker again. He wants to know about the castings for the Berkley order. Says we need three hundred fifty by tomorrow."

"Can't you find somethin' to keep him off our backs?"

"Hey! My hands are tied! So how about it? How many we got so far?"

"I don't know. Paul's been taking care of that one."

"Where can I find him?"

Blake looked around as he rubbed his hands on his shirt. They didn't look any cleaner when he was done, the motion accomplishing little save to redistribute the dirt. "I don't see him right now. How soon do you need to know?"

"Baker's waiting."

Blake lifted a hinged section in the conveyor behind him and passed through to the other side. "Wait here. Be right back."

"Gotcha."

Daniel opened his folder as Blake walked away, looking again at the figures Baker had requested. The guy was nuts. That was all there was to it. There was no way they could get that many parts by Friday. If it was a simple squeeze mold, that would be different. But the parts he was talking about required a three-part mold, with nearly a dozen cores. It just couldn't be rushed.

There was always a great deal of noise in the foundry; of necessity, foundries are not quiet environments. But something about the sudden metallic grinding sound, something unusual, caused Daniel to look up. The ladle of molten metal dangling from the overhead crane groaned a second time, shifted further, and revealed a white-hot flow that began to pour from the container.

But something wasn't right.

The ladle wasn't anywhere near the proper location.

Even from the other side of the vast room Daniel felt the searing heat. He held his hand up as protection against the glare. It was only then, with his eyes shielded, that he could fully take in the present situation. It was only then that he could detect the figure of Michael Blake, less than forty feet from the

spot the pouring metal sought as it slipped from confinement. Already the flow had struck the dirty floor, splatters of molten liquid coagulating in random splotches wherever they landed.

Blake spun about, took two panic-driven steps, and slammed against a section of conveyor belt. He went down hard, but only for an instant, managing to drag himself back to his feet. Blood flowed from the gash in his right leg as he hung on the railing and stared behind in horror.

Slowly, like a flow of lava from some primeval crater, the metal oozed toward him, hissing as it spread across the floor. Occasionally something in its path would explode, emitting a jet of moisture or a plume of smoke. But nothing could stop its progress.

"No!" Daniel Jameson screamed the word without realizing it, bolting into motion at the same moment. Perhaps, if he had stopped to think about it, he wouldn't have acted so swiftly, but by that time the adrenaline coursing through his system had taken effect. He could no sooner stop his present actions than he could the advancing metal.

His folder fell to the ground, pages scattering in all directions, as Daniel vaulted over the first row of conveyor belts. It was an ungainly maneuver. He nearly lost his footing in the process, but he recovered sufficiently to continue in his dash.

Running parallel to the rows of molds stacked upon the conveyors, he could feel the heat increasing with each step he took. He kept his eyes locked on the figure ahead. Michael Blake dragged himself along inches at a time using only the strength in his two arms, the ragged tear in his leg leaving a trail of blood on the dirty shop floor. The agony on

his face was obvious even from a distance.

Daniel's gaze locked on the stricken man, and for an instant eye contact was achieved.

Blake stopped. For a moment the pain seemed lifted from his face. His eyes turned soft. The corners of his mouth relaxed.

But then the instant was gone.

"Get out of here!" Blake motioned with his left arm as he yelled.

"The hell I will!" Daniel countered.

"You damn fool...."

His next words were lost in an ear-splitting scream of pain. The molten metal had found him.

Daniel lunged forward, landing on top of the conveyor inches from the stricken man, flailing his arms wildly to grab anything he could find. His fingers clenched material and Daniel yanked with all his might. It was like pulling against a dead weight. There was no movement, no help, no sign of anything from the figure sprawled against him.

Daniel continued with his struggles, dragging his arms across the metal railing of the conveyor belt. He felt the ripping of skin. Part of him was aware of the blood that began to flow from his left elbow, but there was no indication of pain. He felt detached. Distant. The red flow running across his skin could have been an image on a screen, and not something leaking from his own body.

Oh, God, no! Oh, God, no!

The same three words kept repeating themselves in Daniel's head. He was uncertain where they came from. Were they Michael's? Or his? Or merely thoughts flashing through his head?

It was difficult to see. His eyes ached from the glare of the molten iron. Perspiration drenched his body. Several of the

wooden mold jackets, ignited by the hot metal, burned nearby, adding an offensive black smoke to the surroundings. The vapors hurt his nostrils. His chest stung. His throat was inflamed and raw, and repeated coughing only prolonged the agony.

"Hang on, Mike! Hang on!" Daniel failed to recognize the raspy voice shouting encouragements as his own, his body by now performing in automatic mode. "You're gonna be okay!"

Still Daniel continued to pull.

By this time Blake was off the ground and onto the conveyor belt. Daniel could feel the heat beneath him. Could smell burning shoes. Singed hair. Incinerated flesh.

Then he felt it. A definite pull against him. The first sign of resistance.

Daniel forced his eyes open.

A giant metallic figure, like some otherworldly creature, stood motionless in front of him, staring down at them. Daniel blinked, forced his mind to reason properly, and came finally to the realization that it was one of the furnace attendants.

"Get out of here!"

Daniel stared at the speaker, his mind failing to comprehend the words.

A hand clasped his shoulder. "Get out of here!"

What did he mean? What was he trying to say?

"Are you deaf! Get the hell out of here! We'll take over!"

Finally understanding came to Daniel, who slowly nodded his head, acknowledging the wisdom of the advice. His hands went limp as he felt a weight being lifted from him. Rolling onto his back, he lay for a moment, taking in a deep breath, aware for the first

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time of the exertion he had gone through. The gulp of air brought searing agony to his lungs, and he coughed as he forced himself to a crawling position.

He knew he couldn't step onto the floor, the metal beneath him sending shimmering waves of heat which warned of the foolishness of getting off the conveyor system. He pushed himself along on hands and knees, favoring his left arm, which was beginning to ache fiercely now.

Several times he encountered molds in his way, stacked upon the conveyor and awaiting the pour. He bypassed the objects in the most simple and straight-forward manner he could conceive of, pushing each mold off the edge. In his wake he left a series of mounds of black sand on the floor.

Realizing at last that it was safe to step down, he slid off the conveyor belt and began trudging along, heedless of where he was going other than the fact that he was leaving the molten metal, with its awesome heat and glare and destructive power, behind him.