

**The Good People**  
**by**  
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## Chapter One

They say you are seeing sideways when you look outside the world you know. That's when you see the monsters.

The room was filling up with police officers, people in plainclothes who nevertheless still looked official, and a medical team. The front door of the coffee shop had small bells attached at the top. They rang jarringly with the entrance of each person. The Bohemian themed little shop with its Ohm symbols painted in gold on the whitewashed walls, the old, scuffed wood tables and chairs, the curved, thick glass of the pastry display case nestled between old, wormwood eaten counters, the bookcases filled with old books to read with your coffee, the shirts, hats, and bumper stickers with the store logo vying for space on the narrow counter with handmade *boho* necklaces, rings, and braided bracelets, and the silk, multi-colored prayer flags that hung by the hundreds from the ceiling looked as if it was suffering an invasion from the mundane world. Not that it mattered. It had already been invaded by death earlier in the morning.

James Gouligan stared at the corpse on the floor of his favorite coffee shop with glassy blue eyes and with his usually neatly combed black hair in disarray. His skinny latte with a sprinkle of cinnamon was sitting on the small café table in front him and he was nervously turning the 100% recycled paper cup around and around, counting each revolution when he reached a blemish on the faux wooden top. He had counted 1,560 turns. At roughly one second per turn, he numbly calculated he had been sitting for twenty six minutes; almost as long as the corpse had been cooling on the floor.

The spit and polish police officer was standing over James, ready to write his statement. His pencil had been poised over his pad for 300 hundred turns of James' coffee cup. The officer's voice asked questions patiently, his tone low and soothing. His hair was dark and his eyes were deep brown. His array of weapons: a taser, a no-nonsense service weapon, a baton, and radio, vied for space with mysterious pouches on his thick, black belt. His name badge was gold, as polished as the rest of him, and read Michael Perez.

Officer Perez had been the first to appear at the scene, entering the coffee shop to buy his favorite brew. Those brown eyes had gone wide when he had spotted the corpse. His gun had come out of his holster in an awkward move. It had almost turned into a fumble, but he had regained control of his weapon with a frantic effort and had pointed it at James, the only living person in the shop.

What followed had been his shouted commands to '*Freeze!*' and '*Don't fucking move!*' followed by, '*What the fuck happened here?*' and '*Where is everybody?*' For

once, James was glad he looked like a low level data entry clerk who never exercised and gave his spare change to social causes. His tall, slim frame in his immaculately pressed black and white business suit was clearly no match for the tattooed, bald corpse, who looked like he could have bench pressed a bus and was no stranger to penitentiaries. The mode of death, the corpse's head twisted at a sickening angle and the blood on its crushed forehead, was obviously outside the range of James's abilities.

"It was a robbery," James said. His voice sounded weak and shaky. He *felt* weak and shaky. "Maybe I should go to a hospital? I don't feel well."

"I can have you checked out after you give me your statement," Perez told him firmly as if it was a prize for good behavior.

"Okay." James wondered why a corpse was getting medical attention and he wasn't. When he saw them take samples from the corpse's nostrils, inside his mouth, and look under his fingernails as if they held the answers to the questions of the universe, he understood. They were forensics.

"It's better if you don't look," Perez suggested to James kindly. The officer's back was turned to the corpse. His teeth clenched, making his jaw muscles bunch momentarily. James wondered if Perez was as new to violence and death as he was. He looked young.

"Okay," James said again. He looked down at his coffee cup and realized he had lost count of how many times it had turned to reach the blemish on the table top. He started over.

"I could... get you hot coffee... I'm sure..."

"No!" The refusal came out of James harshly and his eyes widened in panic. He couldn't drink the cup of coffee in his hands. He certainly couldn't drink coffee from a decanter near where a corpse was stretched out on the floor with one hand plastered against the bloodied glass on the display case as if he was frozen in the act of picking out a fresh bear claw on the bottom shelf.

A fly, probably let in by the influx of officers, buzzed the blood, the hand, and then tried to settle on the corpse's mouth. One of the forensics team waved it away and continued to work.

James felt like throwing up.

"I would like to go." It was a desperate plea quickly denied.

"It's better if you give your statement now," Perez insisted.

"Work will be wondering where I am."

"You should probably call in," Perez suggested. "Do you have a cell?"

Of course he did. Didn't everyone?

James wasn't certain what he would say to them. *Hello, Human Resources? I witnessed a robbery...and a murder. Obviously, I won't be coming in today.* They would want details, details he hadn't yet told Officer Perez. Those details were becoming more fantastical the longer James thought about them. He was almost

convinced it had all been a hallucination and that the elderly owner of the coffee shop, Peace by the Cup, had slipped some *special herbs* into his cup of morning coffee. The corpse, and the tiny shop, now filled to capacity with law enforcement officers mostly appearing to *rubberneck* the crime scene, wouldn't believe his story. They might even drug test him or take him into custody. How would he prove he'd been given illegal drugs against his will?

"He was robbing the shop," James said abruptly, surprising the officer and himself. Perez leaned in to catch every word, his pencil scribbling on his pad.

Why was he using paper? Why wasn't everyone using I-pads or cell phones to record everything? Inefficient and wasteful; thy name is government, James thought. He almost chuckled, but stopped when he realized it was a byproduct of rising hysteria. He throttled it down and swallowed hard. He could feel a trickle of nervous sweat run down the side of his face. It made his skin itch. He wiped it away with the back of his hand with a quick, jerky motion, as if he too was swatting at the fly.

"We should start with your name, address, and phone number," Perez suggested tensely, as if he was afraid James might stop speaking.

"I lost count again," James said when he realized it and he stopped turning his coffee cup.

"What?"

James frowned and felt a headache growing. It was blooming behind his eyes.

"The turns of the cup; I lost count of them."

"I don't understand, sir."

"Every morning I order my coffee, sit here, and count exactly 1,200 turns of my coffee cup. I take a sip every 5<sup>th</sup> turn. By the time I finish my coffee, it's time for me to walk to the station to catch my train."

Perez looked confused. "Why don't you set the timer on your cell or wear a watch?"

"They might fail. Watches are very unreliable. So is technology."

"Oh."

"I've never been late."

He was today. The realization made James' headache almost unbearable. He needed to go if he was going to catch a later train to work.

"I want to go to work."

"Then all the more reason to give me a quick statement," Officer Perez said logically.

"2432 Northup Lane. The man tried to rob the shop. He tripped, hit his head on the case, broke his neck, and died."

James gave the facts in a rush and then stood up.

"I'm going."

Perez was furiously scribbling. When James started walking towards the door, threading his way through the crowd, he followed as he scribbled, asking James anxiously, “Your name and phone number, sir? I need more info. You can’t just leave. You haven’t told me where the employees of the shop are. Did they run away from the scene?”

“What happened? Where’s Clare?” a feminine voice demanded and a young woman ran full force into James as he attempted to go through the door. Bells jangled loudly as they tangled and almost did a Tango step as they turned, squeezed, and were abruptly free of each other. James was facing the door on the outside and she was facing him on the inside as the door began to close. As if frozen in time, he saw her loosely curled pink hair, her big blue eyes wide with worry, and her pixy like face suffused with confusion. Then her purple yoga pants and her black tank top, with the coffee shop logo of a tie-dyed peace sign, and the name Peace by the Cup emblazoned over it in gold, were swallowed up by law enforcement as everyone tried to speak to her at once, including Perez.

James made a hasty retreat down the sidewalk wondering how long it would take Officer Perez to realize he had lied about his address and about how the robber had died. Lying to police officers bothered James as much as not being able to turn his cup the required amount or not showing up on time for work. It wasn’t done in his tightly organized world. The alternative had seemed much worse, though. He was a man who dealt in copious amounts of information about individuals. He knew, more than most, how information never went away, how it was accessed by employers, loan officers, and the government. The last thing James wanted in his perfect file was a police report doubting his sanity, or a form saying he had been given a drug test.

The collection of shops along a tree lined thoroughfare had a distinctive Art Nouveau quality to their front facades. Joey’s pizza shop looked as if it hadn’t changed since immigrants had streamed through Elis Island. The Pâtisserie, selling French pastries, had stained glass windows depicting Alphonse Mucha type ladies striking ennui poses. The Silver Spoon café had swirling bronze and clouded stained glass designs. Through the front windows, James could see the elegant interior of black tables and chairs, white table cloths, and red painted walls decorated with local art in gold frames. Even the small market had an old world, 1920’s façade, a wooden front door, wood floors, and an inventory promoting healthy eating. Surrounded by townhouses and small apartment walkups filled mostly with professionals with no dependents other than dogs or cats, it had always been a quiet, clean, well ordered haven from the chaotic madness of the business section of the city. Now James felt as if it had betrayed him.

James reached the train station, a red brick building with a glass arch over the doorway. His hands were shaking as he checked for the arrival time of his train. A voice in his head kept repeating, *you’re late*, like an endless mantra. His heart was pounding

and he felt like he couldn't catch his breath. When he stood on the platform, anxiously looking for his train, his vision doubled and he wondered if he was going to pass out.

Suddenly an arm stretched out in front of James and pushed him back a step. A firm voice said, "Watch out!"

The black metal blur of the train coming into the station, the windows filled with passengers, and the turning wheels roared past James within inches of his nose. His black hair, coat, and tie were whipped into frenzied motions by the wind of its passing. When all motion ceased and the train slowed and then stopped to let on passengers, it was a few moments before James could do anything except stare. When he finally turned to shakily thank his savior, there was no one there. People were getting on the train. Whoever owned the arm, sheathed in a gray business suit and a fashionable brown glove, hadn't stayed for medals or simple gratitude and no one else appeared to have noticed his rescue.

James was on autopilot when he boarded the train. He found his usual seat by the door and sat down. When the train pulled out of the station and eased down the tracks whatever had sustained him until then was gone in an instant. As they traveled through the neighborhood and started the five mile journey to the business district, James put a hand firmly over his mouth to keep his sobs from becoming audible. He shook as if he was suffering from frost bite. He leaned against the back of his seat and planted his feet wide, afraid of passing out as his head spun.

Luckily there were few people in the train car. The larger morning rush was over. These were people who had business downtown, or who were lucky enough to have jobs with later start times.

A Hispanic woman sitting across from James had copious amounts of hair dyed a brassy gold and a professional tan. She was squeezed into a too tight salmon colored business suit. Her long manicured nails were on display as she held her cell phone to her ear and spoke rapidly in Spanish into it. James understood enough to know she was complaining about her car breaking down and then a court case and having to deal with a crazy client. When she said the word diablo several times, James changed his translation. She was calling her client a devil. James felt he could have confirmed or denied her claim. He was becoming convinced he had seen a devil.

Three men sat clustered together behind James. One was dressed in casual street clothing, another in a blue uniform with a company logo on the sleeve, and the third was wearing a button down tan shirt, a tie, and dress pants. They were all looking down at their phones and scrolling idly with their thumbs.

Pre-occupied with their own affairs, none of the other passengers witnessed James' breakdown, or, if they did, they were playing the avoidance game; never meet the eyes of a person with questionable sanity. Either way, James was grateful. Sitting with his head in his hands, they were almost at their destination before he could get his shaking and nausea under control.

As the train approached the downtown terminal, it was engulfed in a cement tube with intermittent lighting. James raised his aching head as the lights flickered. In the weird strobe light effect, James suddenly saw Clare from Peace by the Cup standing in front of him in the aisle of the train car. The elderly black woman, dressed in her tie dye apron, her cream colored, natural fiber dress, and her Birkenstocks, had her gray hair tied in foot long dreads and held back by a blue bandana. Those dreads sparkled with small beads and a little silver peace sign. Her face was peppered with small moles and her brown eyes were grim. She had poured James' morning cup of coffee for two years. He would know her anywhere, except now blood was dripping from her fingers and her expression was grim.

Light began to engulf the train car again and in the instant between dark and light, Clare's eyes blazed a turquoise blue as if they were twin suns going supernova and she lunged towards James with her bloody hands outstretched and her fingers curled like the claws of a tiger. James gasped, started back, and involuntarily blinked. When his eyes opened again, Clare was gone and the train was full of light and coming to a stop.

James kept staring at the spot where Clare had stood as the doors of the train opened and people disembarked. His mind was telling him he was suffering from some sort of post-traumatic stress syndrome and Clare couldn't have been there. His sweat was cold and he shivered from the chill and the adrenaline pumping through him. His heart was racing, pounding hard enough to hurt his chest.

The Hispanic woman gathered up her briefcase and purse and stood up, swaying a little on her high heels as she continued to talk on her cell. She passed James and exited. As if it was a signal, people began boarding.

James stood, feeling weak at the knees. He used the back of a seat as a support as people pushed past him. He looked down at the floor. It was conspicuously absent of blood stains, proof positive Clare hadn't really been there. Before his stop to Peace by the Cup, James wouldn't have needed confirmation. Now, he wasn't sure about the time honored list of things he knew were impossible. Before that morning, he wouldn't have entertained the slightest belief an elderly, short, slightly overweight, and unfailingly pleasant owner of a coffee shop could kill a poster boy for Thug Life with her bare hands. The police certainly wouldn't believe his story.

There was a lull in the stream of people boarding the train and James used it to slip out. The train station was connected to a two story mall. Most of the shops weren't open yet, but a few that were, catered to the morning crowd. The restaurants, smelling of coffee and breakfast food, and the newsstand with its gathering of people looking through magazines, newspapers, and picking out breath mints and gum, lined the way to the front doors leading to the business district. The commercial plainness and the facelessness of the crowds soothed James' nerves and he was almost not shaking by the time he threaded his way through the bottle neck at the doors, exited, and turned left towards one of the taller buildings on the block.

Bumper to bumper traffic, a slight chill to the air, an endless stream of humanity, the monolithic buildings almost cutting out the gray sky over head, and the usual collection of indigents begging and people shouting to get attention to their various causes surrounded James. He kept his eyes on the pavement and curtly waved off anyone trying to approach him for a handout or to deliver a flyer with fanatic zeal. It put James' feet firmly back into the familiar. He had seen something traumatic at Peace by the Cup, he reasoned. The shock had skewed his interpretation of events. It was possible brave Clare had grabbed for the thug and the sudden move had made the man slip and fall. James's version of events might not be a lie after all. It was the only explanation that made sense. Eventually, Clare, who had obviously panicked and ran, would return and give the same account to police. They wouldn't be instigating a man hunt for him as the only witness, or worse, as a possible killer of old baristas he thought with relief. He could put the unsettling events behind him and try to salvage his day.

A small part of James' mind pointed out he was engaging in avoidance behavior, but he ignored it. He was too busy trying to formulate an excuse for his tardiness someone couldn't debunk with a few keystrokes of a computer. He wasn't a practiced liar and he didn't enjoy attempting to formulate a lie now. When his right foot stepped into the familiar divot in the cement sidewalk in front of his building, he pivoted right to face the electric doors. As he walked through them, he settled on a simple excuse not involving an elaborate story he had to remember. When he took the elevator to the 14<sup>th</sup> floor, to Westlyn Data Entry Solutions, and stopped at the cubicle where his immediate supervisor sat, the lie rolled off his tongue easily enough.

"I'm sorry I'm late. My alarm didn't go off."

Holly Reid, a large woman with her bleach blonde hair in an up do and dressed in a pink business suit, glared at him over the rim of her coffee mug. It was pink and it had stylish white script that read, *Queen of Everything*. Her cubicle was decorated with pictures of two white teacup poodles, presumably hers, and her departmental productivity awards. She had been in the act of taking a sip, her pink lacquered fingernail hitting a return key on her keyboard with purpose as she spaced to a box in a form on her computer screen. Her eyes narrowed and her pink lips pursed. She was obviously mentally calling *bullshit* as she stared at James for what seemed like a full minute. Finally, she said, "You're never late."

James was quick to explain, "I purchased a new clock. I programmed it wrong."

She gave him another long look and then said, "I expect you to call in the future. Your assigned accounts will be completed by the end of the day, even if you have to work late."

"Of course. I'll make sure they're completed."

"Good."

It was a dismissal and James made a hasty retreat.



The carpeting was gray, the walls were white, and the huge room was a maze of hundreds of gray cubicles. Hearing the constant sound of rapidly clicking keyboards as James made his way through the maze to his cubicle made him feel guilty. Everyone was hard at work except him. The four white bins of categorized accounts placed near his chair in his plain, but well organized cubicle, was silent condemnation as well. He decided to forgo his usual trip to the coffee maker to begin work immediately. He took off his coat, placed it on the back of his chair, loosened his tie, and started to sit down. It was then he noticed a few small spots on his coat sleeve. He bent to look more closely, fingering the material with a frown of annoyance as he examined the spots. What else could go wrong?

It came to James suddenly what those spots might be. They were dark against the black of his business jacket and they didn't feel wet. How long did it take blood to dry? James broke out into a cold sweat. His hands trembled as he picked up his coat and looked even closer at the spots. Did they seem red?

"James?"

James started violently, his hands knotting in the material of his coat as he gasped and looked up. His cubicle neighbor was looking over their shared wall at him in concern. A few panicked heartbeats passed before he realized he didn't know who she was.

"W-Where's Bob?"

"Bob's gone." She had large black eyes outlined with black liner and framed by black, thick lashes. Her straight black hair was cut straight across at the bangs, but then allowed to outline her face in a short bob reminiscent of a hair style from the 1950's. Her mouth was a cupid bow with bronze lipstick. She was wearing a black turtleneck and it was hugging her slim upper body tightly. She had a faint look to her features. It made James wonder if she had any Japanese in her gene pool.

"Bob's gone?"

"He retired. Let's start again. Hi, I'm Patricia Cruller. It's spelled like the doughnut."

"Doughnut?"

She grinned and her hand appeared from behind the wall. Numerous stacked silver bracelets on her wrist chimed together and clattered on the top of the wall. Her hand was holding a small, mauve pot with a stick of leafy bamboo stuck in it. The silver rings on her fingers were just as numerous and eclectic in style as her bracelets. On her fingers and wrist Tibetan chakra symbols vied for space with coiled snakes, ankhs, a blue marble eye, moonstones, rosary beads, running wolves, feathers, and an entire school of silver fish. When her other wrist appeared when she gripped the top of the wall for balance, it was strikingly bare in comparison.

"New cubemate gift," she explained with a friendly smile.

James took the plant in confusion and put it on his work table next to his computer. Its bright green leaves broke up the bland, efficient, décor. James wasn't certain he liked it.

"Thank you," he said automatically.

She looked concerned. "I gave Peter a coffee cup warmer and he had the same expression as you, weirded out and underwhelmed. Would you rather have the coffee cup warmer? Maybe he'll want the lucky bamboo shoot instead?"

Peter Wiggins had the cubicle on her other side.

"You can call me Babs."

"Babs?"

She chuckled. "You keep repeating everything I say. Am I making you nervous?"

"Yes...No...I mean..."

James tried to take back control of the situation. He said firmly, "The plant is fine, thank you."

"Babs," she insisted brightly.

"Babs."

She held up a black coffee cup with a multi-colored sugar skull hand painted on it. "I'll ask one question and then let you get back to work."

"Down the hall, left, left, right."

"Thank you, James."

She disappeared behind the wall. James heard soft footfalls on the carpeting and the jingle of her jewelry as she went to find the coffee maker.

James sat down in his chair heavily and shoved his stained jacket into the wastebasket under his desk. He stared numbly at his new plant. He didn't think he could take one more shock to his routine-to his life. There had to be a way to erase the entire morning and start over as if it had never happened.

James grabbed a file from its box and opened it next to his computer with dogged determination. His job was to turn paperwork into computer records; to make order out of chaotic slips of paper filled with information. His personality was tailor made for the job. He was a top performer, with the least errors. He was never late, unorganized, or failed to complete his work load. He had failed the first two. He didn't intend to fail the third. James shut out the world, refused to acknowledge the morning had ever happened, and began working.

## Chapter Two

James put the last folder on top of his mountain of 'to be filed and never seen again'. The sound of typing in the room was almost non-existent. There were a few still working on special clients and other things, but James didn't want to acknowledge that he was the only one still working on data entries.

James logged off of his computer and stood. He couldn't help a groan and a stretch. His back cracked loudly, as if each of his vertebrae were separating.

"Done?"

James started violently and exclaimed something that was a cross between a curse word and something inarticulate as Babs suddenly appeared over the top of the cubicle wall. She was holding a folded over magazine, popping gum, and listening to something on overlarge, black headphones. They were shaped like cat ears. The 'ears' glowed with a blue light.

James took a deep shuddering breath as his heart threatened to do something tragic and final.

"Are you all right?" Babs asked in concern. Her bracelets clashed together as she tossed the magazine aside, probably onto her desk, turned off her music, and added brightly, "I hung around to see if you wanted to go out for coffee—or tea—not a drink, though. I don't drink. I could watch you drink. That wouldn't be as much fun as getting coffee. If we get coffee I could get a dessert to go with it. I know this place that has really good tiramisu—"

"No!"

"No? No tiramisu?"

James took another steadying breath. He tightened his tie deliberately and smoothed down wrinkles on his coat with both of his hands as he said evenly, "Thank you, but no. It's been a long day. I'm going home now."

Babs looked enlightened. "You probably have a little dog at home that really needs his walkies, am I right? That's okay. I can come with, we can walk him, and then we can go have coffee."

"I don't have a pet."

"No? I have a raven. He fell from his nest. I climbed all the way up this huge tree, with him in my coat pocket, to put him back. I ripped my favorite purple crinoline skirt, too, with the skull and crossbones, but saving a little life's more important, right? Anyway, I reached the nest and found his siblings all dead. I think mom and pop took off for Tahiti, or something, and left them to starve. I guess Warhol was tougher than them. He wasn't going to wait for death to come knockin'. He bailed to find his own food."

"Warhol?"

"That's what I named him." She giggled. It sounded odd, like an animated character in a cartoon. "He looked just like Warhol when he was a chick."

She didn't elaborate and James found himself trying to imagine a raven chick that looked like Warhol. He shook his head sharply to clear it and said, "I'm very tired, maybe some other time."

She sighed, popped her gum, and regarded him with her dark eyes long enough for James to become uncomfortable. Finally, she blinked. He felt as if he had been released from captivity. “Tomorrow.”

“What?”

“I choose tomorrow. I’ll meet you at Peace by the Cup at seven a.m. tomorrow. That’s by the tracks near your place, right?”

“Tomorrow?”

She grinned at him. “If you’re not a night person, you must be a day person, am I right?”

“Wait, how did you know where I live?”

“Internet; everyone’s on it; names, addresses, coffee shops—”

“You’re invading my privacy!” James accused her angrily, but then lowered his voice and looked around nervously. He saw a fellow employee at the end of the long line of cubicles look over his wall at them.

Babs said cheerfully, “I’m new in town. I’m starting a new job. I’m trying to make friends. That’s called ‘normal behavior’ James.”

“You’re not normal!” James shot back and then instantly regretted it. He was never rude or thoughtless. It didn’t excuse his behavior when Babs only laughed at his remark.

“I’ve always been different,” she admitted. “It’s not a bad thing, James. Look, if you don’t like me after our morning cup of coffee tomorrow I’ll not only stop bugging you, but I’ll ask to move to a different section. I’ll say I’m under a cold vent or I’m allergic to the starch in your suits.”

“I’m *not* having coffee with you.” James was adamant.

Babs suddenly upended herself over the wall as competently as an acrobat. James had a front row seat view of her rounded ass in her deep purple silk skirt, her black hose, and her black stiletto heels with white skulls on the backs of the heels. She grabbed his bamboo plant and brandished it in the air as she balanced there.

“Meet me there or the bamboo plant gets it!”

“B-but *you* gave me that plant!” James protested and then closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose tightly. “Fine! I’ll meet you there!”

Babs put the plant down on his desk with care and then easily pushed herself back to her side of the wall. She laughed and winked at James. “I knew you were a plant lover.”

Babs bent out of sight. There was rustling on her side of the cubicle and then she re-appeared with a very large purple purse slung over her shoulder. She snapped her gum one last time, gave James a candid once over, and then turned smartly on her heel and walked out of her cubicle. She took a right and walked towards the elevator doors and the exit.

James watched her go in a daze. It was a long moment before he realized the person from before was looking over the wall of his cubicle again, watching the spectacle like a person rubber necking an accident. James glared and he went away.

Rubber necking; James felt a queasy feeling in his stomach as he suddenly recalled a reason to avoid his dubious commitment to have coffee with Babs at Peace by the Cup. There was the matter of an attempted robbery and a dead man.

How could he have forgotten? James felt himself break out in a cold sweat. His hands began shaking. He looked down at them as his stomach churned with anxiety. Of course he wouldn't go in that coffee shop ever again. He wouldn't be able to sit and drink his favorite coffee without seeing that corpse in his mind's eye. When he gingerly poked at the memory, expecting a PTSD moment, he found it fuzzy around the edges. His brain was already altering it to fit his parameters of reality. The thug slipped and hit his head, thereby breaking his neck; karmic justice protecting a little, old barista who always talked about peace, love, and the beauty of meditation. If he had imagined a different version, James reasoned, it was because of his shock at the suddenness of the attack.

James headed for the elevator. He still felt emotionally strung out, but he was convinced it was nothing that a good night's sleep and a few days of routine couldn't cure. He lived in a large city. He was thirty two. It was unusual that he hadn't witnessed any violence in all of that time. It was a matter of odds.

The business section of the city was very different after the sun went down. Even though a bar or two was open for an after work drink, it seemed a veritable ghost town. The usual bustling crowd was greatly diminished. There were only a few souls like him going in different directions under the scrutiny of the numerous skyscrapers with lighted, empty offices.

As James passed dark alleyways and walked in areas where lighting was sketchy, he couldn't help feeling anxious. While he had always known that cities could be rife with criminals, his mind had ignored it like the fact that even a clean house can have a roach. He didn't spend his nights with a flashlight looking for them. Now, because of the morning's events, he was hyperaware of the possibility that he could be the next victim of a crime and the sound of footsteps behind him.

He tried to ignore them at first, but the tread was heavy and he imagined a large man. He reasoned that he wasn't alone and that a person would have to be crazy to attack him on a main street where there were people, albeit sparse, and street cameras. Barely a block away, a small crowd had bottled up before the doors leading into the train station. They were more potential witnesses.

If he turned and looked he would embarrass himself, James thought, but his imagination was turning the unknown person into a twin brother of the deceased thug. At first that was logical. If he had a brother, he might have heard that James was at the coffee shop that morning. He might suspect that James had meted out final justice,

rather than his brother suffering a freak accident. It was possible he was looking for revenge. After a few more steps though, and hearing that heavy measured tread behind him, logic went out the door. Now James was imaging the actual thug behind him: dead white, rolled up eyes, dried, black blood on his face, crushed forehead, and wearing a toe tag from the morgue.

James hurried his steps as he felt his heart begin to race. He didn't want to look. He didn't want to confirm, as fantastical as it would be, that a corpse was actually following him. Halfway to the doors of the train station he couldn't stand not knowing any longer. As he passed the darkened glass windows of a shop he glanced at them to see who was behind him.

Reflected in the glass was the blurry image of a very large, bald black man in a gray business suit.

James couldn't help a sigh of relief. He felt like a fool. As he joined the crowd at the doors to the train station and began to go through them, the black man passed by. James gave him another brief glance. The man had huge shoulders, but they looked natural rather than a byproduct of long hours in the gym. His grey suit was obviously tailored and expensive. He wore a gray long coat that fitted his large frame perfectly. His shoes were Italian. His black beard and mustache gave him a Middle Eastern appearance and the bluish neck tattoos peeking out from the collar of his white dress shirt looked tribal. He was taller than James by at least six inches. When he took a puff from his cigarette and exhaled, the smoke curled around his face in a way that made him look almost mystical. It was an odd thought to have as James passed completely through the doors and concentrated on navigating through the crowd to the train platform.

It was possible he needed a therapist, James thought as the train arrived and he boarded. As he found his usual seat by the door, he decided he would if his nervousness didn't dissipate in a few days.

The people on the train were quiet, most on their devices or staring out at the night through the windows of the train, lost in their thoughts, but one man stood out. He looked in his early thirties and a little drunk, sprawled in his seat with his black coat open and the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His bare arms and hands were covered in a dizzying number of colorful tattoos. He wore large skull rings on every finger and his overlarge white shirt had a 'Punisher' type of skull in black. His skinny jeans were ragged at the knees. His beard was brown and his brown hair was cut in a fade that was long and styled on the top. He was dozing, head nodding to the motion of the train. James wondered which stop was his and whether he would sleep through it. It made him anxious for the man all during his short trip to his stop. As he disembarked, he glanced back, wondering if he should wake him. He found the man's eyes were open and watching him with an intensity that made James start. Those eyes seemed all pupil, like a cat's right before it springs on its prey. Then the man was blinking, stretching, and

looking elsewhere. The doors closed and James hastily stepped away as the train began to leave the station.

James stared after the train for a long moment and then turned and hurried out of the station. He needed to get home where it was safe and normal, where he could forget about the entire day.

It had rained in his neighborhood. It was cold and the streets were slick and shiny under the street lights. The shops were mostly closed and their windows were dimly lit. The pizza shop was still open and light spilled out into the street as someone came out holding a boxed pizza. The man juggled the box one handed as he pulled up the collar of his coat with his other hand and hurried towards a car parked along the sidewalk.

Peace by the Cup was closed and its windows were dark. That was unusual. Its business hours were 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., 7 days a week. A strip of yellow crime scene tape on the door was hanging down and trailing the ground. The words under the store logo on the glass front door read "*Let all-embracing thoughts for all beings be yours.*" *The Buddha.*

James stopped walking and stared at it as he put his chilled hands in his jacket pockets. It didn't help much. A business suit was an anachronism of fashion not meant to keep a person warm, dry, or comfortable.

It took a long moment for James to force himself to look beyond the words on the door to what lay beyond it. He could feel himself shivering in anticipation and his mouth went dry. He wasn't sure what he was expecting and he felt foolish when he saw the light from the empty display cased illuminating a bare floor. Of course the corpse was gone. Of course everything had been cleaned up. Tomorrow morning he was certain the crime scene tape would be removed and the shop opened for business.

There was a divot in the sidewalk. James stepped on it, just as he had for years, made the turn towards his street, and began walking.