

# Chapter One

Donnell Shepherd measured the distance from the register to the cooler of milk in a short list of pros and cons. The overwhelming pro involved the Peanut Butter *Cap'n Crunch* at home, a dinner he had been holding out for close to a week to have. The clear cut winner on the Con Ledger rest in the six pair of eyes staring his way, looking anything but patient about the delay. A quick check of his phone told him the approximate three minutes and nineteen seconds it would take to get the milk, fall into the back of the line, and pay would leave him little hope of catching the train to get to work by eight. One more time, the foreman had said. Just one more, and he'd be another stat for the politicians to rally behind.

He didn't want to be that kind of stat.

"Hey, buddy!"

Donnell eyed the heavyset man at the back of the line, the intent in his gaze, the way his blue vinyl coat swelled his arms to the size of tree trunks. Several others in line ahead of him nodded, voicing agreement, prepared to spell out the meaning of the two words if Donnell failed to understand.

Avoiding another glance at the cooler, he set the soda and pack of mini-donuts on the counter. The milk would have to wait. He still had a mountain of Ramen noodles left in the pantry anyhow. The old man at the register, Chen or Jinn or maybe Lin— even after seven years as a customer, Donnell wasn't sure—rang the items up, thick lens of his glasses magnifying his dark

pupils. He indicated the total, hand offered to the digital screen as if generating it by way of magic.

Setting his phone aside, Donnell dug into a pocket, producing a few balls of wadded bills. He rolled them forward, waited for his change. The balls of money sat there for a few seconds as the men exchanged looks. Donnell pushed them further. Chen Jinn Lin grumbled, muttering as he unfolded the bills, landing a handful of coins on the counter in a rattling clutter. Several pennies bounced off Donnell's work boots, scattering across the floor.

"Your change," the old man grinned.

Donnell gathered what change he could, snatching his phone from the counter as the woman next in line pressed forward, ushering him away. "Thanks," he said, hustling off without a look back.

The donuts fit snug in the interior pocket of his coat. Hungry though he was, he could eat them on the train. Donnell tugged at the coat zipper, getting nowhere, cold air drafting along the dark skin of his arms, a biting chill cutting to the bone. He gave up, unsure why he even bothered trying. It had been one year, six days, seventeen hours and twenty-three minutes since the zipper last worked. Donnell checked the sky as if hunting for storm clouds, finding only blue clarity staring back, drove his hands into the outer pockets to force his coat shut, and made his way down the crowded sidewalk, head down. The station for the B train out of Flatbush was only a few blocks. As long as it was on time, he could still make it.

"Ten minutes, sixteen seconds."

The man turned slowly, clearly confused, jade eyes set against his pale skin and neatly combed black hair. He studied Donnell, casting a wary look around the cramped train. "I'm sorry?"

"It'll take me ten minutes and sixteen seconds to get from the station to the site. We're still five minutes and fifty-two seconds away. I have fourteen minutes and ten seconds, or I'm fired." Donnell focused on his phone, tapped the time as if hoping to knock it backward. "I shouldn't have gotten donuts. I didn't need donuts." The train bucked, Donnell edging into the man, settling back into his seat with a forced smile.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"You asked," said Donnell, one eye closed, counting aloud, fingers displaying the result.

“No, I didn’t.”

“You did. Yes. When I kept looking at my phone. You asked why I was doing that so much.”

Again the man analyzed Donnell, arm pulling away to avoid contact. “Did I?”

Donnell nodded. “We’re making good time, though. I think the conductor is driving too fast, but I won’t complain, you know? Maybe I can run.” The fingers danced again. “I can make it to the site in seven minutes and thirteen seconds if I run. I would have approximately two minutes to spare. It’s possible I make it. One more stop.”

The train slowed, drawing to a stop at a crowded platform. The doors opened, several people pressing their way out, a dozen more entering. The last, a haggard looking young man, tattoos covering his neck and hands, leaned into a pole, green standard army jacket pulled tight, bloodshot eyes darting from Donnell to the remaining passengers.

“If I get fired, I don’t know what I’ll do. The Super’s a stickler about rent. He doesn’t take excuses. That’s what he told me. No excuses. I’m forty years, five months and ten days old. I can’t lose my job.” Donnell eyed the man, wagging a finger at his suit. “You’re dressed nice. I wish I could dress nice. Never had the money.”

Army Jacket Guy had a hand buried out of sight, as if holding tight to something of which he had no desire to let go. Donnell attempted a smile when their eyes met, but quickly withdrew. The man to his side stared at him. He tried to look past, to survey the cityscape as it zipped by, drew together another fractal grin, then busied himself watching the clock on his phone.

“You have an affinity for time.”

Donnell nodded. The man’s voice tickled his ear. He twisted a finger in the canal, offering some relief. “Time is important. How can you be anywhere you need to if you don’t know what time you need in which to be there? Not that I’m always on time. I used to wear watches, but they always broke.”

“You damaged them?”

“More or less. They just stopped working. I don’t have that problem with the phone. I suppose because I can turn it off.” He demonstrated with a touch of a button, shifting the phone to a pocket. He managed a few seconds before retrieving the phone and powering it back up. The man stared at him, unblinking, impassive.

The train bucked. Army Jacket Guy nearly bowled over, his hand dropping free to brace on a rail, coat opening enough to display a silver gleam alongside a grooved black casing tucked in the waist of his jeans. He met Donnell's gaze with a shake of the head.

He needed no coercing. Any interference would only add time. He had none to spare if he was to keep his job.

"You believe you are responsible for breaking your watches because you were able to observe them too frequently?"

"Maybe. Like I said, they all just stopped working. What does it matter?"

The man tilted his head, squinted. "The only reason for time is so that everything doesn't happen at once. Einstein."

The words had no more than found his thoughts when something responded. Donnell had no choice but to believe he had thought them, as they had happened in his head, but he had no idea where they had come from. "Time isn't precious at all, because it is an illusion? Who is Eckhart Tolle?"

In a flash, the man drew a cylindrical silver object from an inner pocket of his jacket, red light pulsing from the tip, a piercing whine emanating from within. He gripped Donnell by the arm, drew him close, leveling the tip just above his ear. Something clicked in his ear, loud, pain quickly following as several sharp points—he wasn't sure how many—drove into his scalp.

"Do not struggle."

"Drop it!"

The car erupted in screams, people scuttling to move clear, the steady clack of the train cutting through the remaining whimpers and cries.

The man paused, device driving harder into Donnell's skull, angled his head enough to stare upon Army Jacket Guy and the gun pointed in his direction. He blinked several times, locked on the gun as if analyzing its capabilities.

"NYPD." He moved his jacket enough to flash a badge. "Put that ... thing down. Then hands in the air where I can see them."

"I cannot. I would advise you against rash action. You will not survive it."

The whine on the device heightened. Something popped and Donnell lurched, his skull numbing as if pierced by an icy needle. He closed an eye, his other watering until the officer was but a blur.

“One last warning, bub. I don’t wanna have to take you down. Not here. Not in front of everyone. But I’ll do it. Drop it. Now.”

“You do not understand. He is the progenitor. I must complete my task. Everything depends on it.”

It happened fast. First the whine, rising as if coming from inside his head. Then unbearable, searing pain, setting him rigid as it bolted the length of his spine. A shout. A gunshot. Screams all around. The train braking to an emergency halt. The pain subsiding, his head clearing. Donnell opened an eye, spot on the man in the suit, hand over his chest, something close to curiosity drawing across his pale face. His shirt pooled in blood, he relaxed, the device freeing from Donnell’s head and clattering onto the floor as he fell against the window and died.

For a moment, everything stilled. Then the man’s body convulsed, ripples distorting his suit, rising to his face. His skin glowed blue, the distortion becoming more pronounced. Donnell made it to his feet, backing clear, as everything exploded in light. A wave captured him, tossing him into the door, his body blistering in pain, the collapsing sound of bodies followed by silence filling the car. Warmth coated his head and neck as he slid to the floor, unable to feel his legs, breath short and difficult to come by. His vision hazed, darkness intruding on light, images fuzzy. The world flickered, like the invasion of static on a television screen, then settled. Pain trickled free, leaving him numb, disoriented, the distinct smell of smoke the only thing to convince him he was not dead.

The door opened, spilling Donnell onto his back, halfway out of the car. Figures shuffled past. Voiceless activity. Blurs of movement that might or might not have been people. Something went by, dragged over top of him. It was the man in the suit, carried by two more suited individuals. Donnell tried to follow them, his eyes drawn as far to the side as possible, but they seemed out of focus. Then they were gone. His head hurt.

“What was he doing here?”

“We do not know,” replied a second voice.

“They are all dead,” said the first. Two suited men stood above him, pale, dark hair.

“Not all,” said the other, staring down at Donnell. “This one is still alive.”

The other man peered closer, scanning a palm-sized metallic object he held close to Donnell’s chest. “He will not survive. Time will take him.”

“We must leave. We must take no chances. Kill him.” Before the other could respond, he walked off.

Donnell could feel his heart race. He really should have gone without the donuts. If only he had left himself more time. Now he would die, which was worse than being fired. He had no idea what would happen after he died.

The man stared at him, a sense of unease teasing his expression. A gun pointed down, the bulbous weapon looking more like a tiny silver blimp in the man’s hands. But there was no mistake.

“My apologies,” the man said, then pulled the trigger.