

## An Unexpected Encounter

Mrs. Morrison was too busy to die. With each click of the ancient grandfather clock's gnarled second hand, her mind careened from thought to thought on a wild mental rollercoaster. She first thought of Rae, her beloved daughter, then of the interior design business she had worked so passionately to build, and finally of the fact that in but a few moments everything she ever knew could be wiped away. *Where is he? Harold said to be here at exactly 3:25, and he's never been late before. Its 3:45 now – much longer and it'll wear off...*

The serum *had* to be administered at very specific times – any disruption in the delivery of the dosage could lead to a complete collapse of the client's respiratory system. All too aware of this fact, Mrs. Julia Morrison's concern quickly matured into full-fledged panic.

The seconds continued to tick by, and each one seemed to echo throughout the cold room until it somehow managed to create a brand new pulse of pain in the base of her skull. *Why oh why did I ever agree to this?* The brilliant crescent moon shining through the old home's single glass window seemed to laugh at her utter helplessness. *3:52 – if the papers were correct, I've got 8 minutes left to live.* For the last 22 weeks, the man known to Julia only as "Harold" had faithfully provided her with \$12,000 cash and with a fresh dose of what was known to her only as "Serum 022M."

As a widowed mother with a love for interior design, the offer had been irresistible. Her 10 year old daughter, Rae, constantly required medical attention for her sickle cell anemia, and with Mr. Morrison's passing six years previously, the financial burden now on Julia's shoulders was beyond staggering. Add to that the natural instability of her small design business, and Mrs. Morrison's hope of ever paying off the mountain of debt she had accumulated over the years seemed impossible. That is, until Harold showed up.

A clean cut, attractive young man in his late twenties, Harold was a mystery to Julia from the start. Late one mid-September night following a particularly draining day dealing with several new complaints, Mrs. Morrison's doorbell rang. She somehow managed to drag herself to the door and mustered what little remaining energy she had to pry it open. "Good evening Mrs. Morrison, I'm Harold. Read over this - it's your only way out. Be early, and come alone." He then proceeded to hand her a sealed envelope with her name printed in block letters across the center. Stunned, Julia stared as he turned away and marched down the hall of her apartment complex, taking each step with a peculiar stiffness that seemed to reflect a calculated precision.

As her front door swung shut, she collapsed onto her single couch feeling an unexplainable combination of nervousness and expectation. The contract that she discovered within the strange envelope laid out an overwhelming opportunity that indeed seemed to be a way out for Julia and Rae. Payment of \$52,000 cash was guaranteed the first week, and \$12,000 was to be delivered each successive week; all she had to do was receive a weekly shot of something referred to as "Serum 022M," which was created by a company called "The Moonlight Corporation." At the time, it hadn't mattered to Julia what was in the serum – with that kind of pay involved she would do just about anything. Now, however, she was seriously regretting her enthusiasm.

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Mrs. Morrison had happily followed Harold's advice. She came to the address noted in the contract, and found herself standing at the door of an ancient single story, single room home in the outskirts of town. *Ok, so clearly this is entirely illegal and more than just a little bit sketchy, but I don't really have any other options at this point, so here goes nothing.* The contract had said to arrive at or before 6:30pm, so she promptly raised her hand to knock at exactly 6:25, but just before her knuckles connected with the old door, it swung open and Harold quickly ushered her inside.

"One more contract," he said as he traded the contract she had already signed with a new one he produced from his coat pocket. Reading by the dim light of the room's single working bulb, Julia's jaw quickly found itself just a bit closer to the ground. The entire contract detailed the benefits and risks associated with "Serum 022M," and she couldn't decide whether she was more impressed or more terrified by what she was reading.

The contract detailed the exact dosage that she would receive, and noted that it must be delivered at exactly 3:45am each week with a cushion of no more than 15 minutes before or after that time. It went on to explain that she would be required to note any and all changes, alterations, or abnormalities that she noticed in her body through the duration of the serum's 40 week administration period. What stopped her dead in her tracks, however, was when her eyes landed on the "risks" section.

\_\_\_\_\_I acknowledge that I have been fully informed regarding the following potential risks associated with the use of Serum 022M: amnesia, heart attack, stroke, stomach pain, altered sleep patterns, increased blood pressure, kidney failure, vomiting, hallucinations, brain damage, dizziness, partial/complete paralysis, and/or death.

\_\_\_\_\_I understand that the participation in this program is voluntary. I release and hold harmless with respect to injury, disability, or death the following entities: The Moonlight Corporation and any/all associated personnel. I also understand that any discussion regarding this contract and all pertaining information with anyone other than associates of The Moonlight Corporation will result in the immediate termination of further payment and serum administration.

\_\_\_\_\_I understand that, prior to the full completion of the designated administration period, failure to receive the serum injection within the allotted time frame can and likely will lead to a serious failure of my respiratory system ultimately resulting in death.

*WHAT AM I DOING? This is insane, there's no way I can do this, it doesn't matter how much they pay me, no way no way no way!* Her heart felt like it was on the verge of exploding into a million pieces. *But... as long as I'm on time every week, it sounds like I should be okay...* "So," she began hesitantly, "what this is saying is that as long as I show up and get the shot *exactly* on time every single week for the next 40 weeks then I'll be totally ok?" "That's correct," Harold replied with controlled stoicism. "Alright. Give me the rest of the details and show me where to sign."

Later that evening, as Mrs. Morrison flopped onto her rickety old mattress, her mind raced with the opportunity lying before her. Every 15 minutes or so she would get up out of bed and make sure the humongous wad of cash was still in the sock drawer where she had hastily stashed it. The small bandage on the inside of her lower left arm seemed like such an insignificant price to pay in exchange for the key she'd just been given to a kingdom of endless possibilities. She slowly drifted into a blissful state of rest as she dreamt of the bright future now laid out in front of her family.

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Here she found herself, almost halfway through the program and just over \$300,000 richer. The extra income had finally allowed her to pay off her remaining medical bills and business loans with thousands to spare. She had felt freer and more alive over the last few months than ever before in her life, and she had hardly noticed any side effects from the serum. She was finally able to quit worrying about finances and fully immerse herself in her work and in her daughter's life. Her business had completely taken off – she had finally been able to purchase the desperately needed custom design software that she'd had her eye on for months, client satisfaction and referral rate was through the roof, and she was currently in the process of hiring another project coordinator to handle the onslaught of new customers.

Mrs. Morrison had only noticed two abnormal health conditions over the last few months, and they were, in her opinion, relatively insignificant. Each morning, just as she was getting out of bed, the world would spiral all around her in a very erratic and disorienting manner. However, the dizziness would never last more than a few moments, and she never noticed any issues beyond that point in the day. She mostly attributed the second issue to the fact that she'd been ridiculously busy nurturing her business, and figured that the stress was finally starting to get to her head. Every few days, as she was working on creating or updating a design for a client, Mrs. Morrison would experience strange moments where all she could see was a white popcorn ceiling with a "No Smoking" sign in the corner. She would usually dismiss the picture with disgust, as she had always found the popcorn texture to be cheap and unappealing. Neither of these issues were a big deal to Julia – her life hadn't been this fantastic since long before her husband's death.

That is, until now. The seconds ticked mercilessly away, and as 4am drew nearer and nearer, a roiling pool of fear erupted within Julia, setting off an avalanche of anger and resentment that eventually collapsed into a regretful, pained acceptance. She was deeply grateful she'd had the foresight to prepare a will in which she placed Rae under the care of her sister, Alice, and through which she guaranteed everything she owned to Rae. *I suppose this is what I get for trying the easy way out. Maybe I should've listened to that old saying: "if it seems too good to be true, it probably is." I hope Rae knows that I did all this for her, and that Alice takes good care of her.*

As the old grandfather clock ticked past 3:59, Julia began to feel the dizziness she'd been noticing every morning. *Well, I suppose that if I'm going down, I might as well look good doing it.* She managed to lower herself to the ground, cross her arms over her chest, and close her eyes, assuming the most regal position she could think of. Even with her eyes closed, Julia saw a panoply of colors and images that slowly faded into the same image she'd been seeing for the last week – the white popcorn ceiling. The clock's hourly chime reverberated through her entire being, and her awareness of the house around her quickly faded into nothingness.

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*Beep – beep – beep – beep – beep* – she became increasingly aware of the faint noise as it repeated itself over and over again. *What the heck? There was no beeping in the room just a second ago, what's going on? I should be dead, right?* All at once, she realized her eyes were open, though she didn't remember opening them, and the only thing she could see was her vision – the white, popcorn textured ceiling. This time, however, it had a sharpness to it, a *realness* that she hadn't noticed before.

*Where am I? What's going on?* Suddenly, she realized that a hand was lightly shaking her right shoulder and that someone was saying “Mrs. Morrison, can you hear me? Mrs. Morrison?”

“Yes,” she croaked with a difficulty that took her a bit by surprise. “Where am I?”

“Mrs. Morrison! You don't know how wonderful it is to see you finally awake.”

“What are you talking about?” Julia felt a growing sense of dread as she continued, saying “I was asleep?”

“Yes, you've been unresponsive for just over 22 hours.” The world suddenly began spinning again, but Julia knew this time it had absolutely nothing to do with the serum.

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A few days later, after being cleared from the hospital, Julia made her way home. The doctors were completely baffled, none of them had any idea what could have caused her strange lapse in consciousness. However, they couldn't find any reason to continue keeping her under their care, as she appeared to be in perfect health. Of course, Julia couldn't tell them what really happened, else her payment (and life) could be forfeit. She really had no idea what was going on, but there was no way she was going to risk spilling the beans until she could be sure it wouldn't result in her own demise.

As she opened the door to her apartment and stepped inside, her eyes were immediately met by the impassive stare she had come to know so well. “I know you're very confused. Please have a seat, and I'll explain everything.” *Oh please let this make some sense, I'm about three seconds away from unloading an entire can of mace into this dude's emotionless little face.*

“We apologize for the confusion, but as you will see, it was absolutely necessary. We at The Moonlight Corporation have been watching you very closely for the last several months, and we determined that you were the ideal candidate to test our new product. The serum that you received was actually designed to induce a comatose state in the client's body, but to maintain and accelerate the activity in their mind. It works sort of like a dream – have you ever noticed that time can seem to work differently when you're asleep and experiencing a dream?” “Yes, I have actually,” she replied hesitantly.

“As you yourself recognize, sometimes, during a nap for example, a dream may not seem to conform to the standards of ‘time’ as we know it. In one minute of sleep, your dream could go on for an hour, or in a whole hour of sleep, only a minute or two might pass. While this strange phenomenon is normally completely out of our control, the serum you received was created specifically for the purpose of compressing an entire week of ‘dream time’ into a single hour.

Within three minutes of signing the contract and receiving the injection, you passed out, and we delivered you to the hospital, knowing that they would be able to care for your basic needs. Most of the risks you read about in the contract were highly unlikely, as we worked very hard to ensure that you were the perfect match, but there was still a fraction of a chance that your body would reject the serum. We unfortunately had to keep the real intentions of the program a secret from you as a safety precaution, in order to prevent your mind from expecting, and thus rejecting, the serum.”

“We set the 40 week administration period as a test to see how well your dream would synthesize information from both short term and long term information. The serum was designed to last exactly 22 hours, the weekly required serum refresh was brought about to provide an outlet for your brain to have a reason to essentially wake itself up. This was intended to reduce the confusion and potential negative effects of the serum wearing off – we hope that your ‘death’ was brought about and timed perfectly with the final moments of the serum’s potency.”

“Now, all of that said, you have yet to receive your money, on account of your passing out immediately.” Harold pulled out two manila envelopes that appeared to be quite full, and handed one of them to Julia. “This envelope contains exactly \$304,000, the full price we guaranteed you in our contract. As your mind has experienced the entirety of 22 weeks, this is what The Moonlight Corporation believes you are owed. This second envelope contains another \$216,000, the compensation you would have received had the administration period been completed. This will be paid as soon as it is convenient for you to meet with me again to describe, in as great a detail as you can manage, the entirety of your experience.”

“Again, on behalf of The Moonlight Corporation, I offer my deepest apologies for withholding all of this from you previously. We hope that you will agree to share the details of your experience, as this could greatly benefit you financially and would provide us a fantastic wealth of knowledge. Thank you for your time. Here’s my card, give me a call when you want to talk again.” Harold handed her a business card that was, of course, completely bare besides the name “Harold” and a single phone number. Just as the door was closing, Harold stuck his head back in the room, and with an uncharacteristic grin said, “by the way, you performed far more perfectly than we ever hoped. I’m glad the Corporation named the serum after you. Because of your help, ‘Serum 022 “Morrison”’ could become the greatest scientific achievement of our time. I’ll see you soon, Julia.”

Less than two weeks later, as Julia sat in the car waiting for Rae to finish school, she glanced at the special new item occupying her passenger seat. Reminiscing on the happenstance of the previous two weeks, Julia couldn’t help but grin. She and Rae were going to make it. Sure, she was extremely confused and somewhat traumatized (living over five months in less than 24 hours will do that to a person) but to her it was all worth it. As Julia watched Rae skip happily towards her, her grin blossomed into a full grown smile, and her heart filled with an overwhelming peace as she dreamt - for the second time - about how to use this strange and unexpected gift.